

THE ROLE OF MASCULINITY ON THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-COMPASSION AMONG
MEN VARSITY ATHLETES

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Myriam Tremblay

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

THE ROLE OF MASCULINITY ON THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-COMPASSION AMONG MEN VARSITY ATHLETES

Submitted by Myriam Isabelle Tremblay in partial fulfillment of the requirements for:

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in Kinesiology

Examining Committee:

Dr. Peter Crocker, UBC Kinesiology
Supervisor

Dr. Erica Bennett, UBC Kinesiology
Supervisor

Dr. Moss Norman, UBC Kinesiology
Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. Amber Mosewich, University of Alberta Kinesiology
Supervisory Committee Member

Abstract

Self-compassion is a positive way of relating to the self, which can be used by athletes to facilitate the management of stressors and foster high sport achievement (Mosewich, 2020). Research with women athletes suggests that self-compassion is positively related to flourishing, motivation, well-being, and adaptive coping (Mosewich, 2020). However, men athletes' experiences of self-compassion are relatively absent from the existing research (Reis et al., 2019, 2021). Self-compassion research should focus on men athletes and how masculinity shapes self-compassion to better understand if self-compassion is a viable coping strategy for this population. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 men varsity athletes (20 interviews total) to i) examine competitive men athletes' perceptions and experiences of self-compassion in relation to sport-related challenges and ii) explore how masculinity shapes experiences of self-compassion. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019a) and five themes were identified from the men's accounts. Firstly, *being a student athlete is challenging but I wouldn't change it*: participants identified unique challenges and stressors associated with pursuing both varsity sport and university, which required them to cope in adaptive ways and led many of the men to utilize self-compassion. Secondly, *balancing act: the relationship between self-compassion and self-criticism*: participants expressed that while self-criticism is imperative for improvement in sport, it should be countered with self-compassion to maintain motivation, mental well-being, and self-confidence. Thirdly, *self-compassion is a very helpful coping strategy*: participants identified self-compassion as an effective coping strategy for sport and other life domains. Fourthly, *reluctance: self-compassion is a contentious topic for men athletes*: participants denoted that self-compassion may promote complacency, demonstrating the embodiment of dominant masculine narratives of emotional

stoicism. Finally, *the dichotomous existence of inclusive and hegemonic masculinities*: athletes described experiencing contrasting masculine ideologies, which promoted or constrained their implementation of self-compassion. Findings highlight how men varsity athletes implemented self-compassion to cope with poor personal performances and maintain motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the dominant narrative of emotional stoicism engendered some hesitancy towards self-compassion. Findings contribute to empirical research by highlighting men athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport-related challenges and masculinity.

Lay Summary

Competitive men athletes were interviewed to gain understanding of their perceptions and experiences of self-compassion in relation to sport-related challenges and how masculinity shaped experiences of self-compassion. Findings indicated that men athletes are accepting of utilizing self-compassion to manage sport-related challenges and found it to be a useful coping strategy.

Participants described using self-compassion and constructive self-criticism simultaneously to achieve optimal athletic performance and well-being. The expression of inclusive masculine values, which differed from the dominant traditional values of being emotionally stoic, dominant over women, and physically and mentally tough appeared to be related to the men's positive reactions towards self-compassion. Findings suggest that self-compassion is a useful coping strategy for men athletes to mitigate sport-related challenges and is compatible with the expression of inclusive masculinity. Finally, findings suggest that men athletes can benefit from using self-compassion to manage sport-related challenges and stressors and support continued research with this population.

Preface

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (H20-03078). A version of this work will be submitted for publication. I conceptualized, designed and carried out this research with the support of my supervisors, Dr. Peter Crocker and Dr. Erica Bennett. I was responsible for developing the research questions, participant recruitment, data collection/interviews, transcription, analysis and thesis preparation. Dr. Peter Crocker, Dr. Erica Bennett, Dr. Amber Mosewich and Dr. Moss Norman 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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Dedication

Dedicated to those who know the crushing depths of depression and anxiety; may self-compassion illuminate the way to better days.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“I struggled with anxiety and depression and questioned whether or not I wanted to be alive anymore. It was when I hit this low that I decided to reach out and ask for the help of a licensed therapist. This decision ultimately helped save my life. You don’t have to wait for things.”

Michael Phelps (2019)

Although participation in sport can provide numerous benefits for individuals, athletes can experience challenges such as negative evaluations by others, injury, negative basic and self-conscious emotions, emotional pain, and dropout (Mosewich et al., 2011; Reis et al., 2019). It is crucial that athletes develop the skills to effectively cope with sport-related challenges which serve to enhance their sporting experiences and decrease dropout rates (Reis et al., 2019). Within the sporting context, men’s difficult experiences can stem from masculinity, which necessitates the adherence to traditional masculine norms like risk-taking, self-reliance, stoicism, and emotional regulation (Reis et al., 2021). Therefore, it is pertinent for men athletes to utilize coping strategies that attend to their unique experiences of masculinity to better buffer against the effects of emotionally difficult sport experiences (Reis et al., 2019, 2021).

1.1 Self-Compassion

Self-compassion arose from positive psychology and is considered to be the predisposition to treating oneself in the same kind, caring way that one would approach a friend (Neff, 2003; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018). Self-compassion is comprised of three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness which interact as a dynamic system (Neff, 2003, 2021). Neff (2021) has conceptualized self-compassion through a yin yang metaphor which represents the nurturing and protective nature of the construct. The yin side is described as the healing power of self-compassion and involves being with oneself in an

accepting way, while the yang of self-compassion is the fierce side which focuses on taking action either to alleviate suffering, motivate oneself, or provide self-protection (Neff, 2021). Over the last decade, self-compassion has been studied in sport psychology as an adaptive skill or resource for athletes to effectively manage the unique stressors of sport, increase adaptive coping and social support, enhance performance, and maintain well-being (Ferguson et al., 2015; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011; Reis et al., 2019).

1.2 Masculinity

Masculinity exists in multiple forms within a social organization, which creates experiences of privilege for some men and marginalization for others (Sargent, 2005). Traditional displays of masculinity compel men to be unemotional, stoic, dominant over women, and to display physical and sexual prowess (Connell, 2006). While society's values of masculinity are beginning to expand beyond the traditional ideals, the embodiment of masculinity presents challenges for men when one does not fit the dominant form of masculinity in a given setting (Connell, 2006; Sargent, 2005). In sport, the adherence to traditional masculine norms such as risk-taking, self-reliance, and stoicism can be challenging for men athletes to confront (Reis et al., 2021).

1.3 Self-Compassion and Masculinity

The bulk of the self-compassion research in sport psychology has attended to women athlete samples with little work having addressed men athletes' self-compassion (Mosewich et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2019). Previous self-compassion research conducted with non-athlete men samples have indicated that self-compassion is negatively related to destructive emotions and behaviours such as shame, self-stigma to help-seeking, and rumination (Reis et al., 2019, 2021). The research that has focused on men athletes' experiences with self-compassion has indicated

that self-compassion may be a viable resource for men athletes to overcome emotionally difficult experiences in sport such as adversity, failure, injury, and mistakes (Reis et al., 2021). These findings are promising and provide a foundation for further research into how men athletes experience, perceive, implement, and embody self-compassion (Reis et al., 2021). It is important that research with men athletes attends to how masculinity shapes perceptions and experiences of self-compassion to better inform coaches and sport psychology practitioners how to effectively promote self-compassion amongst this population (Mosewich et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2019, 2021; Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018)

1.4 Purpose and Research Questions

Addressing the aforementioned need to study masculinity and self-compassion in sport, I conducted a study with the purpose of (i) understanding how competitive men athletes implement self-compassion to manage challenges experienced within the sporting context; and (ii) exploring the role that masculinity plays in shaping men athletes' experiences with self-compassion. I conducted semi-structured interviews with men athletes from a variety of individual and team university varsity sports. This research informs theorizing surrounding the relationship between self-compassion and masculinity, and contributes to the growing literature attending to men athletes' perceptions and experiences of self-compassion in the sporting domain. The findings from this work will inform coaches and sport psychology practitioners in how to best design and deliver self-compassion interventions with men athlete populations. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do men varsity athletes experience and practice self-compassion to manage sport-related challenges?

2. How do men's understandings and performances of masculinity shape perceptions and experiences of self-compassion?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study was informed by theorizing and empirical research in the areas of self-compassion and masculinity, as well as by the sport psychology research attending to self-compassion and masculinity in sport contexts.

2.1 Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is a positive self-attitude that has been derived from the Buddhist philosophical belief that it is essential to be compassionate towards oneself (as well as others) in order to lessen the experience of suffering and to ultimately reach one's awakened state (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion is a construct that arose from general psychology and gained popularity through the researcher Kristin Neff (2003; 2021) and has since been adopted in sport psychology to explore its potential as a coping strategy, mental skill, or an emotional regulation tool for athletes in response to sport-related challenges (Ferguson et al., 2014; Frentz et al., 2019; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al. 2013, 2019). Self-compassion is strongly related to psychological well-being through its associations with increased happiness, optimism, personal initiative, and decreased anxiety, depression, neurotic perfectionism, and rumination (Neff & McGehee, 2010).

Neff (2003, 2021) has defined self-compassion as involving feelings of kindness and care towards oneself, viewing personal inadequacies, shortcomings and failures from an understanding and non-judgemental perspective, being open to and moved by one's own experiences of suffering, and recognizing that one's experiences are not isolating but rather are part of the common human experience. Self-compassion does not necessitate selfishness nor does it prioritize personal needs over the needs of others but rather involves the

acknowledgement that all people, including oneself, are worthy of experiencing compassion (Neff, 2003).

Three components contribute to the experience of self-compassion: 1) *self-kindness*, which involves extending kindness and understanding towards oneself rather than being self-critical and judgemental; 2) *mindfulness*, a receptive state of mind that requires an individual to accept their thoughts, emotions and feelings without over identification; and 3) *common humanity*, the recognition that one's experiences are part of the larger human experience (Neff, 2003, 2021). Self-compassion was originally conceptualized as an emotional regulation strategy, where individuals do not work to avoid experiencing painful or distressing feelings but rather approach such feelings from a caring and understanding perspective, and take into account that they are not alone in their negative experiences (Neff, 2003, 2021). Neff (2003) proposed that self-compassionate individuals should experience lower incidences of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression in comparison to individuals that lack self-compassion, because they do not amplify their experiences of pain, failure, or suffering through harsh self-criticism, self-isolation, and rumination. Being self-compassionate implies that individuals prevent the experience of suffering by actively implementing proactive behaviours to promote or maintain well-being (Neff, 2003).

2.1.1 Self-Compassion in Sport Psychology Research

Due to the achievement striving nature of competitive sport, athletes are constantly faced with a multitude of challenges such as negative evaluation, self-criticism, interpersonal conflict, failure, and injury (Mosewich, 2020). The experience of these challenges can result in a diverse range of cognitive, behavioural and emotional responses, which can further exacerbate such stressors (Mosewich, 2020). Self-compassion has received increasing attention in sport

psychology research due to its potential for explaining how and whether athletes adaptively cope with and manage the unique demands sport places upon them (Mosewich et al., 2019). Self-compassion has been found to be positively associated with adaptive coping, flourishing, higher levels of social support and well-being in athletes (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2021; Frenzt et al., 2019; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011, 2013, 2019; Reis et al., 2015, 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). Self-compassion has also been negatively associated with fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation and self-criticism in athlete populations (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2021; Frenzt et al., 2019; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2015). These results support the hypothesis that self-compassion is an adaptive tool for athletes to manage the harsh demands of sporting environments, which typically involve exposure to excessive self-criticism, negative evaluations of performance, and social comparison (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2013, 2019; Reis et al., 2015).

Self-compassion and self-esteem are significantly correlated in athletes and exercisers; they have similar psychological benefits as they both reflect positive self-attitudes (Mosewich, 2020; Neff & McGehee, 2010). That said, although self-compassion and self-esteem are similar constructs, they are distinct. Self-esteem reflects an individual's competency-based evaluations of oneself, which includes perceptions of one's qualities, characteristics, attributes, roles, and how one compares to social others (Mosewich, 2020; Reis et al., 2015). Self-compassion, in contrast, is a self-attitude that does not rest on perceptions of competency and can serve as a way to maintain positive feelings toward the self and generate positive self-worth, which can boost psychological well-being amongst athletes (Mosewich, 2020). It is often situated as an alternative to self-esteem because it is not associated with narcissism, ego defensiveness, and contingent self-worth (Neff & McGhee, 2010). Self-compassion has displayed unique variance

beyond that of self-esteem on introjected motivation, ego goal orientation, social physique anxiety, and obligatory exercise among a sample of adult women exercisers (Magnus et al., 2010). Similar findings were generated in a sample of adolescent women athletes with self-compassion explaining variance beyond self-esteem on shame proneness, guilt-free shame proneness, shame-free guilt proneness, objectified body consciousness, fear of failure, and fear of negative evaluation (Mosewich et al., 2011). These results highlight how self-compassion can be used by athletes to maintain a positive self-attitude within sport milieus where self-criticism and contingent self-worth are often promoted (Mosewich, 2020)

A consensus has not been reached on how to best conceptualize self-compassion. The construct has been conceptualized through both a trait and state approach (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich, 2020; Neff, 2003). The trait approach postulates that self-compassion functions similarly to a personality trait, in which self-compassion is an innate quality of an individual and therefore unmalleable (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich, 2020). Conversely, the state perspective suggests that self-compassion can be promoted or applied as a resource or strategy where individuals adopt the approach to cope with difficult events and pursue goals (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013, 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Therefore, the state perspective implies that self-compassion can be developed and strengthened via deliberate practice in individuals regardless of their initial dispositional levels of self-compassion (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013, 2020). The state perspective incorporates a context specific application of self-compassion and lends itself to multiple conceptualizations of self-compassion such as a skill or strategy (i.e. coping strategy, emotional regulation strategy), an attitude, a mindset, a belief about the self, or an emotion. Previous research conducted with older women exercisers has suggested that self-compassion is contextual and is influenced by age, experience, social, cultural and

historical factors which are subjected to change over time and context (Bennett et al., 2017). This finding has indicated the importance of considering self-compassion from both the trait and state perspectives and to understand how the construct manifests in a global manner as well as context specific manner (Bennett et al., 2017; Mosewich, 2020). Despite the lack of unity in the conceptualization of self-compassion, it is universally accepted as an “adaptive and effective approach for individuals in a variety of life domains to manage difficult experiences, especially those related to failure or evaluation, and to support optimal functioning and goal pursuit” (Mosewich, 2020, p. 6).

2.1.2 Athletes’ Resistance to Self-Compassion

The implementation of self-compassion interventions amongst athlete populations has been met with resistance. Some athletes express hesitation in adopting self-compassion due to the belief that being kind to oneself promotes passivity and complacency in their pursuit of athletic accomplishments (Ceccarelli et al., 2019, Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2019, 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Concerns that athletes express over the implementation of self-compassion are often linked to the belief that self-criticism is required by an athlete in order to achieve success; being self-compassionate would be akin to accepting mediocrity (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2020). Some athletes also experience hesitancy to implement self-compassion to manage sport-related challenges “as doing so would be contradictory to the (supposed) formula for success of mental toughness and self-criticism when they fail” (Ceccarelli et al., 2019, p. 3). That said, self-compassion has been found to be negatively related to passivity and positively related to initiative, responsibility and perseverance among women athletes, refuting the belief that self-compassion is detrimental to goal striving (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015). These results align with Neff’s (2003) original position that genuine feelings of

self-compassion do not promote passivity because self-compassionate individuals engage in behaviours and actions that are aimed at bettering oneself and promoting well-being (Ferguson et al., 2014).

2.1.3 Current Knowledge

The majority of the current self-compassion research in sport has focused on women athletes (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011, 2019; Reis et al., 2019). This is because women tend to report lower levels of self-compassion, mindfulness, and perceived control over stressors in comparison to men (Neff, 2003; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Wilson et al., 2019). Within the sporting context, women athletes “report more coach, teammate and communication related issues than their men counterparts” (Wilson et al., 2019, p. 62). With women potentially benefitting more from interventions targeted at increasing self-compassion, it has led sport psychology researchers to investigate the challenges that women athletes experience in the context of sport and how self-compassion interventions can mitigate the self-criticism, rumination, lower body appreciation, negative reactions to distressing events and failure that women athletes experience (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2021; Frenz et al., 2019; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011, 2019; Reis et al., 2019). The disproportional evidence between women and men samples has left a significant gap in our understanding of men’s application of self-compassion to manage sport-related difficulties (Mosewich et al., 2019, 2020; Reis et al., 2019). This has led researchers to the role masculinity plays in the implementation of self-compassion, and whether the unique experiences of masculinity impact men athletes’ perceptions and experiences of self-compassion (Mosewich et al., 2019, 2020; Reis et al., 2019, 2021).

2.2 Masculinity

Research has suggested that men experience difficulties expressing their emotions and feelings and tend to verbalize their emotions less than women (Lilleaas, 2007). The inability to express distressing emotions and reluctance to engage in help-seeking behaviours is cited as a suicide risk factor for men (Cleary, 2012). It is theorized that the socialization and embodiment of traditional forms of masculinity are linked to the acceptance that emotions and pain should be concealed (Cleary, 2012). In a social organization, masculinity does not exist in a homogenous form; there are multiple ways that men present or perform their gender and a hierarchy exists whereby some forms of masculinity are privileged and given power over others (Sargent, 2005). Connell (1995, as cited in Sargent, 2005) identifies four performances of masculinity in which men engage, including; i) hegemonic; ii) subordinate; iii) marginalized; and iv) complicit. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the culturally dominant form of masculinity, which is privileged in a particular setting and culture. Amongst Western cultures, hegemonic masculinity is associated with stoicism, lack of emotionality, dominance over women, intolerance of homosexuality, and physical and sexual prowess (Connell, 2006). The presence of hegemonic masculinity within a given setting creates a hierarchy of masculinities which reflects the varying amounts of privilege held by different groups of men and serves to subordinate women (Connell, 2006). Subordinate masculinities are presentations of the self (i.e. being gay or effeminate) and engagement in behaviours that are in opposition to hegemonic masculinity (i.e. avoiding competition and traditional definitions of success, being overly emotional) (Sargent, 2005). Men who display and perform subordinate masculinities are vulnerable to abuse, ostracization, and ridicule from other men (Sargent, 2005). Marginalized masculinities describe men who have disadvantaged and unequal membership in relation to the hegemonic form and reflect men with

characteristics that do not align with those of hegemonic masculinity, primarily that of whiteness (Haywood & Johansson, 2017; Sargent, 2005). Complicit masculinities are those that do not possess all of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity but do not enact masculinity in ways that challenge hegemonic processes either and therefore benefit from the ways in which hegemonic masculinities construct the gender order in a given social organization (Sargent, 2005). Another form of masculinity which has begun to receive increased research attention is inclusive masculinity where men engage in a variety of practices that are deemed as feminine without fearing that they will be perceived as homosexual or weak (Anderson, 2009; Reis et al., 2019).

2.2.1 Masculinity and Sport

The Victorian era is credited as the birth of contemporary sport (Wellard, 2009) with the creation of sporting culture which led to the pervasive social understanding that sport is a male social space (Wellard, 2009). From this era arose the idealized form of masculinity, which continues to prevail today and is associated with being tough and heroic (Laberge & Albert, 2000; Wellard, 2009). The gendered structure of sport reinforces this form of masculinity due to some sports being labelled as masculine (e.g. football, rugby, boxing) and others feminine (e.g. gymnastics, swimming) (Laberge & Albert, 2000; Wellard, 2009). The masculinity research in sport has focused on how sporting practices construct masculinities and thereby create systems of power operating on both individual and social levels (Wellard, 2009). Feminist theories began to be increasingly employed as a method of analysis in studies of women and sport about two decades ago. These perspectives demonstrated the importance of incorporating gender as a category of analysis in sport studies and were later adopted to study men's experiences in sport (McKay et al., 2000). Many sport sociologists draw upon Connell's (1995) conceptualization of

hegemonic masculinity to understand how masculinity is constructed, reproduced, and contested in sport settings (Laberge & Albert, 2000; McKay et al., 2000). Early studies of masculinities in sport in the 1980s and 1990s focused on the extent to which men's actions in sport reproduced existing gender, racial, sexual orientation, and class hierarchies (McKay et al., 2000; Wellard, 2009).

Sport continues to serve as an environment where it is permissible to produce, promote, and normalize traditional masculine norms through acts of competitiveness, aggressiveness, and toughness. Traditional masculine norms dictate that men are unemotional, detached and inexpressive with their feelings and emotions (Giazitzoglu, 2019; Lilleaas, 2007; Underwood & Olson, 2019; Wellard, 2009). These masculine norms are perpetuated in sport where men are expected to be stoic, and experts in self-control. However, certain displays of emotion are permissible on the field of play such as triumph, aggression, happiness, pride, and even grief in the event of a lost game or match (Lilleaas, 2007). Sport provides a space where men are allowed to break certain masculine norms such as touching and holding other men's bodies; however, relying on teammates for social support and confiding personal grievances or suffering is often viewed as impermissible (Lilleaas, 2007). Some men athletes acknowledge that they interact with their teammates through teasing and humor but would never approach their teammates to discuss serious topics such as their inner emotions and feelings (Lilleaas, 2007).

Masculinity is an untethered entity which is subjective, fleeting, and context dependent whereby a hegemonic masculinity in one social space may be deemed as subordinate in another (Giazitzoglu, 2019). It is therefore pertinent that sociocultural researchers acknowledge the fluid and often contrasting nature of masculinity when uncovering the lived experiences, feelings and emotions of diverse groups of men athletes (Giazitzoglu, 2019). Previous critical masculinity

research has focused on men's experiences within highly institutionalized team sports (i.e. football, basketball, hockey, and rugby) but little attention has been given to individual and less centralized sports (i.e. swimming, windsurfing, running) (Giazitzoglu, 2019; Lilleaas, 2007; McKay et al., 2000). Findings have suggested that men athletes in more hegemonic and traditionally masculine sports engage, reward and reproduce practices which oppress women and marginalize groups of men (De Boise & Hearn, 2017; Giazitzoglu, 2019; Lilleaas, 2007; McKay et al., 2000). More paradoxical practices were revealed for less centralized sports where hegemonic masculinity was simultaneously reproduced, disrupted, or overtly resisted by men athletes (McKay et al., 2000). This therefore fostered "a mix of masculine styles, identities, and practices, ranging from highly misogynistic to cooperative and egalitarian" (McKay et al., 2000, p. 6).

It has been proposed that men face distinct challenges in sport due to masculinity and are vulnerable to negative performance and well-being outcomes resulting from experiences of rejection and failure (De Boise & Hearn, 2017; Mosewich et al., 2019, 2020; Reis et al., 2019). When men athletes fail to meet the societal expectations of traditional masculinity it often leads to negative judgement from others and increased susceptibility to subordination and marginalization (Reis et al., 2019). Critical sport sociological literature has begun to address the limitations of masculinity sport studies by investigating how physical spaces govern the performance and construction of masculinities, and how the emotions of men relate to their performances of masculinity (Giazitzoglu, 2019). Addressing these epistemological limitations will further the understanding of how men experience various forms of masculinity within the sporting context and the consequences such enactments of masculinity have on men athlete's

lived experiences, well-being, coping processes, and mental skill implementation (Giazitzoglu, 2019).

Studies that have focused on the intersection between men athletes' emotional experiences and masculinity have identified that adherence to the ideals of masculinity (or gender roles) impact the ability for men to express their emotions, something that is socialized versus the evolutionary accounts that state emotional differences exist between genders (McKay et al., 2000). An ethnographic study of English rugby players (Giazitzoglu, 2019) indicated that men assess and police the emotional performances of other men to determine whether they comply or violate the expectations of a man, which is informed by the prevalent form of masculinity in that space. Sport is an organized institution where it is not permissible for men to express their inner feelings, sufferings, and emotions and many men athletes do not confide in their teammates for support, an act that would violate the taken-for-granted rules of masculinity in that space (De Boise & Hearn, 2017; Giazitzoglu, 2019; Lilleaas, 2007). It is therefore imperative for continued critical masculinity research to reveal narratives of men athlete's experiences to inform how men's well-being and health outcomes can be improved and promoted (De Boise & Hearn, 2017). Increased understanding of how different constructions and enactments of masculinity influence men athletes' emotions can be used by applied sport psychologists and coaches to adjust their practices in ways that can best support men athletes and foster their well-being while maintaining high performance.

2.3 Self-Compassion and Masculinity

Although little research has addressed men athletes' self-compassion, encouraging findings do exist with self-compassion being positively related to adaptive coping, social support, well-being, and perfectionistic strivings, and negatively associated with shame and

perfectionistic concerns (Lizmore et al., 2017; Reis et al., 2019). To date, few studies have solely focused on self-compassion and the unique challenges men athletes face in relation to masculinity and much of the current men athlete self-compassion literature has relied on studies conducted with men non-athletes (Reis et al., 2019, 2021). These studies of non-athletes should not be disregarded as they can be used to illuminate how to implement self-compassion and whether self-compassion can be an appropriate resource for men athletes to cope with sport-related challenges (Reis et al., 2019; Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018). It is important to note, however, that these relationships may not exist within exclusive men athlete samples due to men athletes being more likely to uphold traditional masculine values and therefore reject a construct like self-compassion (Reis et al., 2019; Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018).

Findings from a notable study by Wasylikiw and Clairo (2018) comprised of a sample of men athletes and non-athletes suggested that self-compassion and adherence to traditional masculine norms were unrelated, with men athletes exhibiting higher levels of self-compassion and adherence to traditional masculine norms than their non-athlete counterparts (Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018). Interestingly, the higher levels of self-compassion in the men athletes predicted help-seeking behaviours but not for the non-athletes, suggesting that self-compassion may empower men athletes to seek support when challenges or adversity arise (Reis et al., 2019, 2021; Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018). Research in general psychology with non-athlete men samples have produced similar results, finding that self-compassion is related to lower help-seeking self-stigma, trait shame, self-criticism, avoidance coping strategies, and a significant negative predictor of self-stigma (Booth et al., 2019; Heath et al., 2017). These results suggest that self-compassion works to buffer the relationship between masculine norm adherence and self-stigma, where the self-accepting and forgiving facets of self-compassion mobilize men to engage in

help-seeking behaviours (Booth et al., 2019; Heath et al., 2017). Although the depth of the literature surrounding men and self-compassion is limited, the previous studies with exclusive men samples indicate that self-compassion is a viable resource for men (and by extension men athletes) to overcome challenges and difficulties (Booth et al., 2019; Heath et al., 2017; Reis et al., 2019; Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018). Further investigation into the relationship between self-compassion and masculinity is warranted because it will increase the understanding of how men athletes experience emotions and cope with sport-related challenges, and can inform future self-compassion research and interventions with men athletes.

Within the self-compassion and masculinity literature there is a lack of knowledge surrounding constructed/enacted masculinities and how they interact with self-compassion in men athletes (Reis et al., 2019, 2021; Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018). Reis and colleagues (2019, 2021) have recently made substantial contributions to the sport-specific self-compassion and masculinity literature. They quantitatively explored the interaction between self-compassion and diverse masculinities and their impact on men athletes' psychological well-being (Reis et al., 2019), and building on this work, qualitatively examined men athletes' experiences with masculinity and self-compassion (Reis et al., 2021). Hegemonic masculinity was associated with lower levels of self-compassion while inclusive masculinity was associated with higher self-compassion (Reis et al., 2019). These results suggest that the links between self-compassion and masculinity depend on the type of masculinity that is endorsed amongst a population of men athletes (Reis et al., 2019). In addition, participants were accepting of self-compassion, which defied the idea that men athletes may be resistant to self-compassion due to it violating hegemonic masculine ideals and promoting 'softness' among athletes (Reis et al., 2021). These findings support the previous research with women athletes suggesting that self-compassion is a

viable resource for athletes to persevere through negative cognitions and emotions that result from failure, mistakes, and injuries (Reis et al., 2021). While these results are positive for the implementation of self-compassion amongst a men athlete population, it was suggested that self-compassion interventions for men athletes should be undertaken with care, attend to men's unique experiences of masculinity, and actively address the negative preconceptions about self-compassion that men athletes may have (Reis et al., 2019, 2021). It was also indicated that the type of masculinity men athletes embody can play a role in whether men athletes are accepting of using self-compassion as a coping strategy and for sport performance improvement (Reis et al., 2019, 2021).

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

Sport psychology research has shown that self-compassion is a promising resource for athletes to implement in the management of sport-related challenges due to its positive associations with increased adaptive coping, higher social-support and well-being and negative associations with fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation and self-criticism (Ferguson et al., 2014; Frentz et al., 2019; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011, 2013, 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). Although the literature has previously focused on women athletes, there is existing research evidence suggesting that the construct is also an advantageous resource for men athletes with associations showing positive relationships between self-compassion and adaptive coping, social support, well-being, and perfectionistic strivings, and negative associations with shame and perfectionistic concerns amongst this population (Lizmore et al., 2017; Reis et al., 2019). Quantitative research studies focused on the relationship between self-compassion and masculinity have showcased that hegemonic masculinity is associated with lower levels of self-compassion while inclusive masculinity is associated with higher levels of self-compassion (Reis

et al., 2019). A recent qualitative research study has illuminated that men athletes are accepting of self-compassion as a coping resource and view it as a way to improve their sport performance (Reis et al., 2021). The purpose of the current study was therefore to add to the growing evidence of self-compassion in men athletes, to understand men athletes' lived experiences and perceptions of self-compassion in the context of sport-related challenges, and to explore the role masculinity plays on self-compassion. This research is important because qualitative narratives of men athletes' perceptions and experiences of self-compassion and masculinity will further the understanding of how men athletes cope with sport-related challenges and strengthen theoretical understandings of the relationship between self-compassion and masculinity.

Chapter 3: Methods

3.1 Paradigmatic Standpoint

A critical interpretivist paradigm was adopted to guide the exploration of the participants' experiences with implementing self-compassion to cope with sport-related challenges and perceptions of masculinity. This research paradigm combines both critical theory and interpretive approaches (Neuman, 2014). Critical theorists conduct research to reveal sources of social control, power relations and inequality that exist within society and work to empower people who are marginalized by such systems of power (Neuman, 2014). Interpretive paradigms understand that meaning and knowledge are created through social interactions and aim to understand the ways in which people create meaning in various social contexts through their everyday interactions (Neuman, 2014). Critical interpretivist approaches view meaning as a result of social interactions and critique the underlying sources of social relations to empower people (Beal, 2002; Neuman, 2014).

By adopting an interpretivist paradigmatic position, I recognized that the interviews with participants were a social interaction where knowledge was disseminated and that I, the researcher, was co-creating the data alongside the participants as I interpreted the meanings of what they said. Critical theory was incorporated to understand how systems of power are created within social structures, how social positioning either advantages or disadvantages an individual, and how individuals perceive and adhere or condemn cultural norms. In this study, I sought to understand how cultural norms surrounding the enactments of masculinity within the sporting domain influenced men athletes' experiences with self-compassion. Therefore, this study took into account how constructed masculinities created systems of power within high performance varsity sports. These systems of power advantage some men and disadvantage others and thereby

influence how men athletes perform masculinity in accordance or opposition to the dominant form of masculinity present. It was pertinent for me to acknowledge how masculinity is constructed and enacted by men athletes in order to understand how masculinity shapes their experiences with self-compassion in relation to sport challenges.

3.2 Qualitative Interview Based Study

The purpose of interviews in qualitative research “is to create a conversation that invites the participant(s) to tell stories, accounts, reports and/or descriptions about their perspectives, insights, experiences, feeling, emotions and/or behaviours in relation to the research question(s)” (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p. 103). Interviews are useful in understanding and studying “people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 51). Thus, interviews can be an effective way to understand sensitive topics, which require a degree of trust and rapport for the participant to feel comfortable divulging such information (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Interviews were intentionally selected as the method of data collection to create a social interaction and conversation in which the participants were able to share their experiences implementing self-compassion in the sporting context to cope with challenges, perspectives on how masculinity is enacted in the participants’ sport, and their feelings, attitudes towards, and experiences with self-compassion. Individual interviews were selected to allow the participants to speak freely and not feel pressured to respond in a socially desirable manner when approached with questions of a sensitive nature in relation to experiences of masculinity and emotions.

Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow the participants to drive the conversation and highlight what was personally meaningful to them while staying relatively

focused on addressing the research questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The ‘openness’ of an interview, whether it is structured, semi-structured, or unstructured reflects the expertise of the researcher in terms of their skills, knowledge and intuition (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The decision to utilize semi-structured interviews was based on my inexperience as a researcher with conducting interviews. The use of an interview guide allowed me to be well prepared in asking the participants open-ended questions focused on their experiences and perceptions of self-compassion and masculinity.

3.3 Participants

Convenience sampling involves selecting participants for a study based on their availability, suitability and proximity to the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Convenience sampling was chosen as the sampling method as recruitment was open to a range of individual and team men varsity sports to allow for a variety of enacted and constructed masculinities to be represented within the sample. Any participant that met the inclusion criteria of being a man varsity athlete 18 or older and fluent in spoken English was included in the study. Men varsity athletes were selected as the population of interest given the lack of research knowledge surrounding self-compassion in men athletes (Reis et al., 2019, 2021; Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018). I chose to focus on men varsity athletes given that the previous self-compassion literature primarily focused on women athlete samples and much of the limited self-compassion research conducted with men relied on non-athlete samples (Reis et al., 2019, 2021).

I recruited 11 men athletes from UBC’s varsity sport teams, resulting in 20 interviews in total. Participants took part in two interviews which occurred approximately four months apart, with the exception of two participants who only took part in one interview. Given that thematic analysis does not have specific sample size requirements I had created a provisional estimate of

eight to twelve participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019b). The provisional estimate is a guess of sample size based on the previous literature which will potentially generate adequate data that tells a rich and compelling story documenting the phenomena of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2019b). The previous self-compassion qualitative research conducted with women athletes and exercisers guided my provisional estimate and the literature I drew on ranged in sample size from seven (Wilson et al., 2019) to twenty one participants (Bennett et al., 2017). Braun and colleagues (2016) suggest that six participants are sufficient to identify patterned meaning across a data set which also guided the provisional estimate I created. I made the in-situ decision to stop recruiting after I reached eleven participants based on my judgement that the data collected were rich, diverse, and complex, and allowed me to create a compelling story which answered my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019b).

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years old ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.8$). Participants all identified as men and were current varsity athletes representing three different sports, including one team sport (one participant) and two individual sports (10 participants). The number of years the participants spent as a varsity athlete ranged from one to five years ($M_{\text{years}} = 2.5$). The age at which participants started their current sport ranged from five to 16 years of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 8.5$). With regards to ethnocultural background, participants identified as Canadian ($n = 3$), Korean ($n = 1$), Punjabi ($n = 1$), Afrikaans ($n = 1$) and five participants identified as having multiple backgrounds (Canadian, German, and Italian ($n = 1$); Canadian and Filipino ($n = 1$); Canadian, German, Irish, and English ($n = 1$); Canadian and American ($n = 1$); and German and Chinese ($n = 1$). Of the 11 participants, two identified their sexual orientation as gay and nine identified as heterosexual.

3.4 Procedures

Prior to participant recruitment, ethical approval was obtained from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia. Initial recruitment started in November 2020 when I emailed all men's varsity team coaches, assistant coaches, and athletic trainers asking for their assistance in recruitment. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the provincial health guidelines at the time prohibiting in-person conversations, recruitment was restricted to online methods. In the emails to gatekeepers, I included an outline of the study, a letter of introduction (Appendix A) and initial contact (Appendix B) and a recruitment poster (Appendix C) and asked if they could forward my email to their athletes. Of the 23 gatekeepers that I contacted, I received responses from four coaches. My status as an outsider may be the reason why I did not receive more responses as I did not have a direct connection to UBC athletics or to UBC varsity coaches. Eleven participants contacted me after receiving the recruitment materials from their coaches. Data were generated through two in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with each participant (two participants did not engage in the second interview). First time interviews began on November 24, 2020 and concluded on January 15, 2021. Second interviews began on April 23, 2021 and concluded on May 11, 2021.

Prospective participants contacted me via email and in my response I outlined what their participation would entail, their ethical rights of confidentiality and freedom to withdraw, and suggested a few dates and times that I could conduct the interview should they be interested in proceeding. Once the participant confirmed an interview time, I would send them the demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) and informed consent form (Appendix E) to complete before the interview along with a Zoom link. All participants were emailed the day before the scheduled interview confirming the date and time. In this email I also re-attached the Zoom link

which served as a friendly reminder of the upcoming interview. When the interviews began, I emphasized confidentiality and the participants were made aware that all identifying information would be removed from the interview transcripts. Before the interview officially began the men were also asked if they had any questions about the interview process. I explained what the interview would consist of, highlighting that they did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering, they could stop the interview at any time, and that they could ask questions throughout the interview. I also reiterated that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point and no penalty would occur.

The purpose of the first interview was to understand how the men athletes experienced self-compassion in relation to sport-related challenges, and their perceptions on how masculinity shaped their experiences of self-compassion. Participants were not provided with the definition of self-compassion during the first interview. This was done to avoid priming them to the three components of the construct and to reduce the deductive nature of interviewing about a psychological construct. The decision to abstain from providing the theoretical definition of self-compassion was informed by previous research which has suggested that athletes can be influenced by the theoretical definition of self-compassion during qualitative interviews (Wilson et al., 2019). Wilson et al. (2019) did not introduce or define self-compassion for the study participants until the second interview to give the participants the opportunity to reflect on the components of self-compassion without preconceived notions, biases, or misunderstandings of the construct. Previous research has indicated that the definition of self-compassion may be inaccessible and hard for participants to understand, which further supported the decision to not provide the theoretical definition (Bennett et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2019). Refraining from defining the construct allowed the participants to reflect on how they

experienced self-compassion without biasing them to confirming personal experiences with the three components (Bennett et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2019).

The first interview began with some general questions regarding the participant's athletic background to allow for the participant to become comfortable with the interviewer (Appendix F). Then two vignettes were used to illustrate a (a) highly self-compassionate athlete and (b) an athlete lacking self-compassion, and how both athletes reacted to challenges in the sporting context (i.e. the loss of a game that the athlete was expected to win) (Appendix G). These vignettes were created by myself and were drawn from existing self-compassion exercises created by Dr. Kristen Neff (Neff & Germer, 2018). The participants were given the vignettes prior to the first interview via email, to allow them ample time to thoroughly read the material. The participants were instructed to read the two vignettes thoroughly prior to the first interview to allow ample time for discussion. During first interviews, I also summarized each vignette to provide a refresher for the participants. Follow-up questions and probes were utilized to ask participants to detail their personal experiences that either aligned or deviated from the vignettes. These follow-up questions and probes remained open-ended and served to probe the participants in discussing how they managed sport related difficulties and how they experienced self-compassion, in the attempt to avoid constraining the participants to agree closely with one of the vignettes. In this way, the vignettes served as elicitation tools to generate talk data by asking the participants about their experiences with self-compassion to cope in sport without priming them with the specific definition of the construct. Vignettes were also selected as elicitation tools given that a hypothetical scenario can be less threatening for a participant to respond to rather than being directly asked to discuss personal experiences or views (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The vignette discussions were then followed by open-ended questions regarding the participants'

perceptions and experiences with masculinity and self-compassion in sport, which were informed by an interview guide (Appendix F). The open-ended questions regarding self-compassion in the interview guide were informed by the existing self-compassion in sport literature (Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich, 2020; Reis et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2019).

The second semi-structured interview served as an opportunity for member reflections where the participants discussed the common topics I identified and interpreted from the data set of the first interviews (Appendix H). During this interview, I presented the participants with my interpretations of these common themes. I then asked the men follow up questions of their perceptions, thoughts, or feelings about the topic. These follow up questions gave the men the opportunity to generate additional data or provide deeper insight into the lived experiences they discussed in the first interview (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Below I have included a question from the second interview guide (Appendix H) which exemplifies how I presented my interpretations to the participants:

4. *“Many of the participants spoke about the need to be hardworking in sport in order to be successful. I’m wondering if these ideas of being a hard worker and being able to push through long tough practices are why many said that being self-kind is not a trait of a successful athlete.”*
 - a. *What do you think?*
 - i. *Can you be both self-kind and hardworking and be successful as an athlete? Why or why not?”*

Member reflections are not “about verifying results, finding correspondence with the truth, or getting at the independent reality” (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 108) but rather serve as an opportunity to recognize, discuss or explore the existence of contradictions and differences in knowing. Having the participants engage in member reflections and discuss my interpretations from the first interview created a dynamic conversation, which strengthened the data collected. These conversations also helped me better understand the participants’ lived experiences of the

common topics I identified as relevant to answering the research questions. Member reflections were selected as this method aligns with the critical interpretivist paradigm of the research project, whereby participants were not asked to confirm one singular truth nor verify their statements from a previous social interaction (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

All interviews were audio recorded via a second generation iPad on Apple's *voice memos* app. After each interview I wrote field notes in my research journal to document my interpretations of what the participants said, how the interview went from my perspective and any other observances I made. I later read these field notes to help refamiliarize myself with the interview before I began transcribing the audio. I revisited these field notes when I was coding the transcripts to refresh my memory. I also used these field notes to practice reflexivity where I reflected on my role in the research process, my own biases and assumptions, and how I constructed the data.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to analyze the data, which is a method of qualitative analysis used to identify patterns of meaning from a data set (Braun et al., 2016). Reflexive thematic analysis was selected as the method of analysis for this study because it centres around researcher and participant subjectivities which align well with the critical interpretivist paradigm of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). Reflexive thematic analysis is a distinctive TA approach which centres on the researcher's role in the production of knowledge where a researcher "strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of TA" (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, p.594). In reflexive TA, the researcher engages in a dynamic coding process where the researcher questions their interpretations of the data and coding based on their theoretical and methodological research

paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). TA involves semantic coding, the codes related to what is explicitly expressed, and latent coding, the codes that are based on implicit meanings of what is expressed in interviews (Braun et al., 2016). In thematic analysis, codes are used to draw out layers of meaning within the data and require the researcher to code and revisit the data multiple times (Braun et al., 2016). Quality reflexive TA involves a researcher being reflexive and thoughtful in their engagement with the data and within the analytical process and taking into careful consideration how their theoretical and philosophical assumptions inform every stage of the data analysis and creation (Braun & Clarke, 2019a).

The process of TA has been described as a six-phase process; however, researchers do not move linearly from one phase to the next (Braun et al., 2016). Rather, TA (especially reflexive TA) involves a recursive process of moving forward and backward through data familiarization, coding, theme development, revision, naming, and writing (Braun et al., 2016). I utilized these six phases as a guideline for how to progress throughout my data analysis while taking into account that I would progress and regress through these phases multiple times before I reached an analysis with which I was satisfied. Phase one involves data familiarization and requires a researcher to immerse themselves within the data and to engage with it in a “curious and questioning way” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 196). In data familiarization, I read and re-read all the transcribed interviews and at the end of the transcript, I created a bullet point list outlining aspects of the interview that were of interest to me. Below I provide an example of what one transcript looked like as I began the data familiarization phase (this was done for every transcript):

- *“Perfectionist*
- *Being self-critical is needed to improve technically as an athlete*
- *Need a balance between too little and too much self-criticism*
- *Too little means you’re not on it mentally and probably making mistakes*

- *Criticism keeps you accountable, your best coach is yourself*
- *Too much criticism causes critique overload, you can't improve on absolutely everything*
- *Masculinity defined as: breadwinners, winning, push through things, stoic*
- *Gender is performative*
- *Athlete's sport is on the lesser side of masculinity as a sport, no real strong sense of it compared to previous stereotypically masculine sport they competed in, current sport is co-ed so experience different values of what makes a good athlete and appears to be less linked to gender"*

Following the reading of interview transcripts in full to re-familiarize myself with what each participant said, I then began to highlight and make annotations of the interviews using the software NVivo (version 12). These annotations were focused on excerpts of the data that caught my attention and often contained questions of whether the participants were demonstrating an experience with using a particular construct. This act of making notes on interesting excerpts of data served as an informal way for me begin to generate meaning from the data (Braun et al., 2016). I made the decision to conduct the coding process digitally through the NVivo software given the amount of data that were generated from the 20 interviews. I thought that from an organizational standpoint, coding digitally versus on paper would be simpler as I could highlight and annotate the documents multiple times without having to re-print out the transcript. This decision proved to be fruitful for me as I was able to have all iterations of my codes and annotations saved on the transcripts and visible as I moved onto the later stages of the analysis. Having all of my previous code names in one place was helpful once I reached the theme development stage as I could easily look back to see how each code evolved and fit amongst other codes to form a particular theme.

The second phase focused on coding, which entailed identifying and labelling excerpts in the data of relevance to the research questions at the semantic and/or latent levels. This was a flexible process which required me to expand, amalgamate or rewrite the codes to best align with

my data analysis (Braun et al., 2016). It was important during the coding process that my codes were kept open and inclusive as themes had not yet been developed and too narrow of codes could constrain later data analysis (Braun et al., 2016). I began the coding process by working my way through each interview one at a time making simple semantic codes that described the participants' explicit words. Along with these semantic codes, I made analytical notes with the goal of identifying and interpreting the deeper latent meaning of what the participants said. As I progressed through the transcripts, I began to rely less on semantic codes and began to code the latent meaning constructed within the interviews. In the first round of coding, I experienced some doubt surrounding the number of codes I had; I worried that I was not attending to the nuances within the data correctly. Although there is no correct number of codes that a researcher uses in TA, my inexperience with TA made me second guess whether I was creating codes in a way that would produce a rich analysis. This self-doubt is reflected in an excerpt from my audit trail and reflexive journal:

“As I make my way through coding the transcripts I noticed that I do not have that many codes, I currently stand at 58 codes. Although I know it often occurs that researchers over code and have to work to reduce codes I am wondering if I am not picking up nuances in my data and am overgeneralizing what I am coding. I’m currently telling myself that it’s possible that more codes will be developed as I start coding the time two interviews as the content of those interviews were different from the first interview. I’m working to embrace the ambiguous process that is qualitative research and not compare how I am conducting my analysis to the work of others.” - July 21, 2021

After I completed the first round of coding on all of the 20 transcripts, I began the second round, which involved refining, expanding and renaming the codes I created. The first step in this round was to rename some of the codes so as to relate them to my research questions. This was documented in my reflexive journal:

“After my meeting with [colleague] I feel less worried about the total number of codes I have. We spoke about how the number of codes is less important than the actual meaning captured in the codes which was really reassuring for me and helped me realize that I’m

not doing anything wrong rather I'm working through my own process which is not the same as anyone else's. One thing that was brought up is that my codes are quite broad in their naming and that they should be more linked to the data itself to reflect the participants' words. Although I have clearly defined my codes and given them specific definitions, the code names are more general and do not reflect the meaning within the data making the codes seem less unique to my study. To amend this in the second round of coding I will work to not only revise or break apart codes but I will also look at renaming some codes to make them more specific and descriptive to my data set and research questions." - August 3, 2021

I began reworking my codes by creating documents that contained all of the data extracts for that code along with the definition of that code at the top of the document. I did this for all 73 codes.

Examples of these documents are as follows:

Code: Common Humanity

Definition: accept that people make mistakes or recognizing that you're not alone in suffering

"Um it depends I guess because if it's something that in fact a lot of [athletes] do feel like [my sport] specific... like whatever I'm experiencing then maybe I'll be like I'm not alone in this feeling like that." p.9

"I think it helps knowing that like well not just the people I train with but my competitors too are going through similar things and it's not just me." p.15

I then used the data extracts in each code document to assess whether the code name was detailed and capturing the essence of the data describing that code. I renamed codes that were less specific to my research questions or too general in nature. An example of a revised code includes:

Previous code: Common Humanity

Previous definition: accept that people make mistakes or recognizing that you're not alone in suffering

Revised code: It's Nice Feeling Like You're Not Alone

Revised definition: practices of common humanity and accepting that people make mistakes or recognizing that you're not alone in your experiences of suffering.

After I worked my way through all 73 codes and renamed the codes as needed, I collapsed similar codes together to eliminate redundancies, which resulted in a final total of 49 codes. At

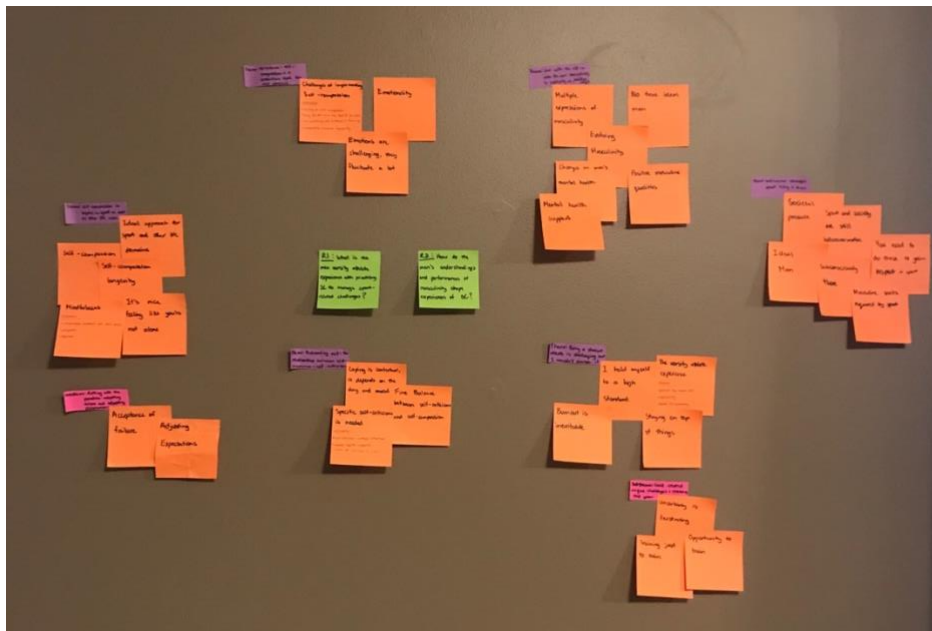
this point I was beginning to identify patterns within the data set and began to cluster certain codes together in a rudimentary fashion for theme development. This is reflected in an extract from my reflexive journal and audit trail:

“I did it, I reworked my codes and cut down 73 codes to 49! At first I found the process of amalgamating codes and renaming my codes to be difficult as I often second guessed myself when I was collapsing certain codes together or choosing to eliminate a code. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was doing something wrong and I constantly questioned if I had the “right number of codes”. However as I continued the process I began to recognize that there will be no right number of codes as I, the researcher am constructing the data and the analysis will reflect how I have come to understand and explain the data. With that in mind I began to trust my decisions a little more and began to feel more comfortable with how I was amalgamating codes, creating higher order and subcodes, and even choosing to eliminate some codes. I think I am starting to see a bit of a story within the data and have tentatively thought about a few “main categories” existing, those being sport-related challenges, masculinity, self-compassion, and self-criticism which serve to describe the lived experiences as a man varsity athlete. I know that these main categories do not automatically qualify as themes but it does feel promising that I am on the right track to construct meaningful and robust themes as I am beginning to see patterns within my data.” - August 18, 2021

Phases three, four, and five are centred around theme development, refinement and naming (Braun et al., 2016). As TA is an iterative process I progressed and regressed through these phases multiple times before I achieved an analysis I was satisfied with that I answered my research questions in a rich and compelling way. Clarke and Braun (2017) define a theme as a broader “pattern of meaning, underpinned by a central organizing concept- a shared core idea” (p. 297). Theme development involves grouping codes into higher level patterns which are rich and diverse, capturing more than one specific idea (Braun et al., 2016). I recognized that not all of my 49 codes would fit into the themes I constructed and that the analysis would never reflect the complete story of the raw data; however, it was important that my themes displayed texture and nuance in their meanings as that richness lends to the themes’ ability to answer my study’s research questions (Braun et al., 2016).

I began the theme development stage by writing each of the 49 codes on a post-it note and then grouped the codes in clusters around the two research questions. Once I arranged the codes in clusters based on their similarities, I reviewed each cluster and moved certain codes as I felt appropriate. I then began to develop themes and subthemes for each cluster, which I wrote on smaller and different coloured post-it notes to denote whether it was a theme or subtheme (Figure 3.5.1). The themes I constructed were based on my perceptions of broad patterned meaning across the codes I generated. I developed six preliminary overarching themes: 1) being a student athlete is challenging but I wouldn't change it, 2) balancing act: the relationship between self-compassion and self-criticism, 3) self-compassion is helpful in sport as well as other life areas, 4) reluctance: self-compassion is a contentious topic for men athletes, 5) out with the old, in with the new: masculinity is evolving in positive ways, and 6) subliminal messages about being a man. Below is an image that illustrates my process of theme development:

Figure 3.5.1: Theme Development



Source: Photo by Myriam Tremblay

After I developed my preliminary six themes I moved into the refinement phase which required me to review the coded data extracts and review the themes in relation to the entire data set (Braun et al., 2016). Once I reviewed the themes I created, I decided to merge the themes ‘out with the old, in with the new: masculinity is evolving in positive ways’ and ‘subliminal messages about being a man’ into one theme which I labelled ‘the dichotomous existence of inclusive and hegemonic masculinities’. I made the decision to merge these two themes to better capture the tumultuous experience of modern masculinity and to create a more coherent story. During this phase I also assessed how the analysis I generated fit with the data and whether the story I created was compelling and adequately addressed my research questions (Braun et al., 2016). At this point, I reviewed the data within each of the themes to ensure that the data extracts complemented one another and formed a coherent and unique story. I also assessed whether the themes were clear and distinct from one another and reflected the meaningfulness present within the data.

Once I was confident that my themes captured the data well and addressed the research questions in a compelling manner, I moved into the fifth phase of defining the themes (Braun et al., 2016). During this phase I created detailed definitions of each theme, highlighting the unique story each theme represented and how it contributed to the overall story of the data set. I also created definitions for each subtheme associated with the overarching theme to ensure that each subtheme was unique enough and worked alongside each other to demonstrate the theme’s story. The goal of defining the themes and subthemes was to further build a rich and compelling analytic narrative (Braun et al., 2016). The final step of this phase was to create clear and concise theme names that accurately reflected their meaning.

The sixth and final phase involved producing the report where I engaged in “compiling, developing, and editing existing analytic writing and situating it within an overall report” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 200-201). I worked to ensure that my report provided adequate detail capturing and highlighting the complex story of my data in a clear and concise manner (presented in the findings below). I utilized data extracts to compliment the analytic commentary throughout my work which illustrated the nuances within the data and strengthened the interpretations I made based on the participants’ experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I sought to provide ample justification and evidence for each theme and generate a compelling argument which could adequately answer the research questions.

3.6 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is used by researchers to critically consider the impact of their epistemological and ontological assumptions, positionality, theoretical framework, and past experiences such as race, gender, sexuality, and age on their research (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). Reflexivity has been described as an essential component of quality qualitative research as it is pertinent that researchers consider how their subjectivities are involved and inform every stage of the research process and how such personal subjectivities influence the knowledge produced (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). Personal reflexivity is concerned with situating the researcher within the research process and acknowledging how their personal experiences, assumptions, and biases shape the knowledge they produce (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

I recognize that my personal experiences in sport and utilizing self-compassion to manage anxiety and depression deeply influenced my interest in this area of research. From the age of 14 to 17 I was training and competing in the sport of luge with the goal of representing Canada on the Junior National Team and competing internationally. During this time, I experienced a lot of

sport-related challenges and setbacks from persistent pneumonia that resulted in me missing almost half of a winter training season, to injuries, bullying, and undiagnosed anxiety and depression. These experiences ultimately led to me dropping out of luge as sport no longer was enjoyable. I was also highly self-critical following poor personal performance which only further degraded my sense of confidence and made my depression at the time worse because I convinced myself that I was worthless because I was not excelling in sport despite putting in maximal effort. After I dropped out of sport, I developed a strong interest in the field of sport psychology and eventually went on to pursue a Bachelor's of Kinesiology at the University of Calgary where I studied in the Mind Sciences major. My interest in sport psychology stemmed from my experiences as a high level youth athlete and my desire to help young athletes develop their mental skills and potentially escape the negative experiences I had in sport. My interest in self-compassion arose from two places, the first being my personal experience with using self-compassion to manage my anxiety and depression and the second being the sport psychology courses that I took in both my Bachelor's and Master's.

It was important that I critically assessed my assumptions in regard to my interpretations of the participants' experiences with self-compassion and masculinity. I had to recognize that being a woman investigator separated me from those I interviewed and I was operating from the position of an outsider. As aforementioned, I utilized a reflexive research journal where I recorded my thoughts, feelings and reflections about my research process and how my position as a woman researcher shaped how I not only engaged with the participants but also impacted my data construction and dissemination. This was documented in my reflexive journal:

“I recognize that my assumptions about masculinity possibly do not match the participants' interpretations of their own experiences with masculinity. Being a woman I have first-hand experience of the effects of masculinity creating experiences of marginalization and subordination. This certainly has resulted in me viewing masculinity

as damaging not only for women but the men that do not fit within hegemonic masculinity. As I move into the second round of interviews, I will need to let go of these assumptions that masculinity is harmful to both men and women. Rather I will go into the interviews with an open mind that my participants have different experiences with masculinity and can describe how it has positively impacted their lives which may help me better understand this experience that I cannot relate to.” – February 28, 2021

The reflexive research journal allowed me to understand how my position as a researcher, my preconceived notions and assumptions, as well as social location informed my data collection and analysis processes. I also carefully considered my social identity as a former athlete in my reflexive journal as my experiences with high level youth sport shaped my interest in self-compassion and passion for sport psychology research. A few excerpts from my research journal illustrate how I considered my social identity as a former athlete and how these impacted my understanding of and interpretations of participants’ experiences:

“I recognize that my experiences in high level youth sport are not universal and that I have to approach the interviews with the understanding that not all athletes may appreciate the power of self-compassion. It is not my job to convince the participants that self-compassion is beneficial for them as athletes but rather to listen to their experiences of using or not using self-compassion. I will need to confront my assumption that self-compassion is adaptive for all athletes when I construct the data.” – September 21, 2020

“I’ve come to the realization that in the first interviews I had the slight assumption that self-criticism is always a negative thing for athletes. I believe this is because of my experiences in luge where the self-criticism I experienced was highly maladaptive and heightened my depression and ultimately affected my performance. I’ve never viewed self-criticism as adaptive or in the context of serving to assist self-improvement as all of my experiences with self-criticism have been negative and impacted my sense of self, well-being, and confidence. My discussions with the men have made me realize that there are positive aspects of self-criticism despite my personal experiences with it not being so positive. I wonder if this stark contrast in their experiences with self-criticism and my own could be a gender difference between how men and women experience self-criticism.” – January 27, 2021

The creation of my study’s ethical principles also required me to critically reflect on my decisions as a researcher. It is important to note that being an ethical researcher extends beyond procedural ethics, the standard of research practice that is required and upheld by institutional

research review boards (Palmer, 2016). Ethics in practice involves enacting ethical principles when entering research sites, conducting research with vulnerable groups, undertaking covert research, ethnography, research from the position of a social insider, and the process of writing and disseminating research findings (Palmer, 2016). Unlike procedural ethics, ethics in practice is more ambiguous and often requires a researcher to make ethical decisions in situ and cannot be predetermined before entering the research field (Palmer, 2016). Before conducting the interviews, I carefully considered how I would approach ethics in practice and considered how comfortable I was with disclosing personal information with my participants. Although I do not have any personal experiences of masculinity, I was comfortable disclosing my personal experience with poor well-being, anxiety and depression whilst being an athlete to build rapport with the participants. I made the decision to disclose this information with participants when applicable to not only aid in building rapport but to help the participants feel less vulnerable discussing such sensitive topics. An excerpt from my reflexive journal and audit trail details this decision and my reasoning behind it:

“I am comfortable with sharing information about my mental illnesses and discovery of self-compassion to manage my anxiety and depression with my participants where (and when) appropriate. I am mindful that some researchers avoid self-disclosure in the attempt to keep themselves separate from the data and to not influence their participants; however from personal experience I have found that disclosing personal struggles with mental health is often reciprocated and I believe that could lend itself well to the co-construction of knowledge that my philosophical assumptions embrace.” – September 17, 2020

The act of reflexivity allowed me to better understand my assumptions and preconceptions and helped guide my ethical decision making. It also allowed me to gain perspective on how my personal experiences and worldviews influenced my interactions with the participants and shaped the data analysis.

3.7 Credibility

This study adopted a relativist approach to evaluating the rigor of qualitative research which involves a researcher selecting criteria for assessing the quality of the work in a manner that is flexible and contextually situated (Burke, 2016). The relativist approach was selected for this research study as it is closely aligned with ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism, which aligns with the critical interpretivist approach of the proposed study. The relativist approach proposes that evaluative criteria for assessing qualitative rigor is study specific and that certain criteria are only applicable under specific study conditions (Burke, 2016). The relativist approach requires a researcher to make “informed and ongoing judgements about which criteria reflect the inherent properties of a particular study as it develops overtime” (Burke, 2016, p. 334).

Substantive contribution, credibility, and transparency were the most salient quality criteria (Burke, 2016) that I utilized to uphold the rigor of this study. I did so through the utilization of member reflections, by keeping a research journal, and by engaging with a critical friend throughout the entire research process. The criteria of substantive contribution refers to whether a research study contributes to the broader understanding of an area of literature or of social life (Burke, 2016). This research study stands to provide a substantive contribution to the empirical evidence surrounding self-compassion in the men athlete population due to its novel investigation with masculinity and self-compassion in sport which have rarely been studied qualitatively (to the best of my knowledge and literature search). Qualitative inquiry is warranted as the results of this proposed study stand to illuminate the lived experiences of men athlete’s regarding self-compassion and masculinity which would strengthen the literature’s understanding of the interaction between the two.

Credibility is concerned with whether the researcher has spent a significant amount of time with the participants (Burke, 2016). Member reflections are a form of credibility and are utilized as an opportunity for increased dialogue with the participants regarding the data and the researcher's interpretations (Burke, 2016). This promotes "reflexive elaboration, critique, feedback, affirmation, disagreement and even collaboration" which can promote a richer and deeper analyses (Burke, 2016, p. 336). As previously mentioned, member reflections were utilized within the second interview to strengthen the data and deepen my interpretations of the participants' lived experiences. Using member reflections allowed me to recognize differences in knowing amongst myself and the participants and added nuance to the data collected as we discussed patterns I identified from the first interviews.

Transparency involves researchers providing thorough documentation of the procedures they utilized within the study, providing an 'audit trail' for an interested peer to better understand the decisions the original researcher made throughout the data analysis process and how they constructed the data (Burke, 2016). To ensure transparency, I kept a research journal where I documented my field notes from interviews, critically reflected on my role in the research process, and the decisions made throughout the data analysis process. This journal served as an audit trail for this research study. Another act of transparency can be the use of a critical friend whereby another researcher scrutinizes the decisions made throughout the research process, from the theoretical preferences, depth of the sample, how the data was organized, sorted and analyzed (Burke, 2016). Utilizing a critical friend can promote the original researcher to reflect upon and explore alternative interpretations of the data (Burke, 2016). As this study was the first time I conducted a qualitative research study I relied on my academic peers and a member of my thesis committee for guidance throughout the research process and utilized these individuals as critical

friends. Using a critical friend helped illuminate areas of the analysis that I may have overlooked and allowed me the opportunity to rationalize why I constructed that data in such a way which helped deepen my analytic narrative (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Chapter 4: Findings

Five themes were identified to describe how the eleven men (eleven in interview one, nine in interview two) perceived and experienced self-compassion to cope with sport-related challenges in varsity sport and the connections between self-compassion and masculinity. The five themes included: (1) Being a Student Athlete is Challenging but I Wouldn't Change it; (2) Balancing Act: The Relationship Between Self-Compassion and Self-Criticism; (3) Self-Compassion is a Very Helpful Coping Strategy; (4) Reluctance: Self-Compassion is a Contentious Topic for Men Athletes; and (5) The Dichotomous Existence of Inclusive and Hegemonic Masculinities.

4.1 Being a Student Athlete is Challenging But I wouldn't Change it

This theme focuses on the unique challenges and stressors that men varsity athletes experienced and encompasses how the participants managed pursuing both sport and academics at a high level. Three subthemes were constructed to describe this theme and represent the different challenges and stressors the men varsity athletes faced. This includes (1) *the varsity athlete experience*, which details the expectations placed on varsity athletes from multiple sources and how the participants balanced dual school and sporting demands; (2) *unique COVID-19-related challenges and stressors*, which attends to the men's experiences of motivational changes resulting from the training and competition disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; and (3) *I couldn't do it without my supporters*, which discusses the participants' various social support systems which they relied on to maintain their wellness when coping with sport-related challenges and difficulties. This theme sets a foundation and provides context for the men's perceptions and experiences of self-compassion in the face of sport and life-related challenges presented in future themes.

4.1.1 The Varsity Athlete Experience

The participants described their experiences as varsity athletes as stressful but rewarding. This was demonstrated in how they discussed the internal and external expectations to perform well in school and sport, the techniques they used to stay on top of their school workload, and the pressures present to represent the sport program and school in a professional manner. Hayden described how the expectations placed on varsity athletes meant that they needed to excel in both sport and academics, and work to effectively manage their time to be successful in both areas.

“Yeah, I think like you’re expected to do two things really well... at a really high level. Um so it’s not so much dealing with those expectations, it’s just managing your, limited amount time that you have in a day and to accomplish both those things.”

Many of the participants perceived the expectation to excel in sport and academics to come from internal and external sources. The external sources were perceived by the participants to be their coaches for enforcing specific minimums for an acceptable GPA on the team and encouraging the team to strive towards a high team average, their teammates for creating inner team competition to beat the women varsity team’s average, and the university itself for setting a minimum of a 60% GPA for varsity athletes to play their respective sports. Noah described the ways in which the coaches enforced these expectations to achieve academically:

“It’s like directly coming from the coaches like they say you need to get like x percent and then it’s like indirectly coming from [university] and... the other [athletes] like the team really because we, they all kinda have like an expectation. And then [university] has like if you don’t get... I think it’s above [a] 60 average you’re off the team or you’re on academic probation.”

Some participants managed these academic expectations by taking fewer courses to ensure that they could balance the demands of varsity sport and academics, which Ethan recounted with this statement:

“I mean school’s important for me as well as [sport] so it’s kind of like having two primary focuses is kind of tough. And like I don’t want to put school on the back burner,

and I don't wanna put [sport] on the back burner so like having to manage both equally is kinda, it was tough, but I figured that out. And I mean I just take, I take only 3 courses a term now so I can like focus on 3 courses fully instead of being like overwhelmed."

The participants spoke about the unique pressures they experienced as student athletes in which they were required to act in a respectful manner. When identifiable as a varsity athlete they were expected to act as leaders and to represent the university and sport program in a positive manner. Owen reflected on how being a varsity athlete meant that he was held to a higher standard for his behaviour than other university students and felt that other students were less accountable for certain actions than varsity athletes.

"We're held at a higher standard than like other students because... we can't like, go do crazy stuff outside of like school or [sport] because... it would backfire for us and like the way...we represent the university whereas like I feel like a lot of... other people can just like go and do whatever they want without like repercussions and stuff."

Brayden shared this sentiment about feeling like varsity athletes are held to a higher behavioural standard than other university students. He stated that bad behaviour and personal conduct whilst wearing team gear reflects poorly on the varsity athletics program.

"The expectation is that you represent the team well, you don't be loud or obnoxious or you know be respectful... especially when you're wearing team gear...like when you're wearing the team gear it's like you... better act in line or it looks it reflects badly on the whole program."

Many of the participants expressed that although being a student athlete was a stressful experience with having to balance the demands of being a full-time university student and athlete, it was overall a positive experience. Daniel spoke about how as a student-athlete he had less time devoted to his schoolwork than his peers, which created challenges and unique stressors. However, he noted that being a student-athlete also gave him many experiences that he would not change if given the chance.

“I think it’s a lot of a mix it can be really stressful at times balancing both the school aspect and the sport cause both are very I feel like both are very important. Most people are here for school and that’s... really important and they have a lot of time to study and all that kinda stuff but... we have to study, and we have to get ready for practice and we have to get ready for competition. So psychologically that can be really hard, I feel like it’s a lot of fun too. Like I feel like there’s a lot of good that comes out of it like the experience that I’ve gone through and just being here as a student athlete I wouldn’t change it.”

In summary, this subtheme reflects the unique experiences the participants had because of being a varsity athlete. They were faced with unique stressors that their non-athlete peers did not experience, such as internal and external pressures to excel in sport and school, time management conflicts, and expectations of their behavioural conduct. These stressors and challenges required the athletes to cope in adaptive ways to prevent burnout or sport dropout which led many of the men to rely on self-compassion as a coping resource.

4.1.2 Unique COVID-19-Related Challenges and Stressors

The persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic created many unique challenges for athletes ranging from health restrictions prohibiting training in particular facilities or in large groups, to competitions being cancelled and resulting in many of the men experiencing motivational challenges. Many participants expressed frustration surrounding the uncertainty of their training due to COVID-19 restrictions continually changing. Often the changes in health restrictions resulted in the participants not having concrete training schedules for longer than a week which only added to the frustration, as reflected in Noah’s statement.

“A lot of us, myself included were kind of... a bit frustrated I suppose with how inconsistent the practices were gonna be. Like one week it’s normal and then next week we have like... 3 days off cause... the health bureau or whatever told us we can’t practice those days. So I guess it was just pretty frustrating.”

For some participants, this uncertainty surrounding training and competition caused more distress given that they were trying to qualify for the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and had to

deal with Olympic trials continually being rescheduled. In the second interview Hayden described how the uncertainty around whether Olympic trials would take place was the biggest stressor he was experiencing at the time.

“I would say probably... dealing with uncertainty. Because kind of after Christmas they told us that, well trials were originally supposed to be in April and then postponed it to May and then now it’s kind of uncertain... if that will even happen because there’s a June trials also scheduled. So yeah, it’s just a bit... I think the uncertainty is the biggest factor.”

Daniel also found the uncertainty surrounding whether the Olympic trials for his sport would occur to be quite difficult to manage. He particularly struggled with preparing himself psychologically to be ready to race only for the trials to be postponed again and having to switch back into a training mindset.

“Well from the beginning of the year like we [thought]... this meet might happen and then it got cancelled and it kinda... kept going like that. Now there’s Olympic trials which got cancelled a bunch. Like we were supposed to go in May and now that got postponed again until June So now, we gotta like psychologically get ready for another month of training.”

The participants also experienced changes in their motivation to train because of COVID-19 disrupting their training and competition schedules. Some participants expressed that it was hard to maintain motivation for their training when they did not know when they would have another chance to compete and felt that their training was almost pointless. Wesley shared that at times he questioned why he was training when competitions were cancelled and felt that it was difficult to maintain motivation when he was not really training towards a specific goal.

“It’s just the lack of... big competitions. Like normally every year you have a series, you have some smaller competitions to start the season but then you have kind of like a main big competition like a Provincials or National that you can kinda train for. But because there’s no big competitions like that, it’s kinda hard to like... you’re training but it’s like oh what am I really training for, there’s nothing really... no serious competition for me to go and compete in.”

Shawn experienced instances of demotivation for his training linked to having no competitions to strive towards and found it difficult to always push himself in workouts.

“I think it’s... going out and like giving your all in a workout... and you’re just not doing it for like any competitive races. It’s just hard and... motivation just is hard.”

Although motivational changes were experienced because of COVID-19 and the changes it imposed on the ability for the participants to train and compete, many expressed feelings of gratitude for still being able to train. For some of the participants these feelings of gratitude were related to their use of self-compassion which allowed them to reframe the loss of competition into an opportunity to improve as evidenced by Callum:

“I don’t think COVID-19 has had too much of an effect, I mean some maybe for other people because it’s cancelled their full season. But I still like to think of it as I still have an opportunity to train and be better for next year.”

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic created many unique challenges for participants as they were unable to compete in their respective sports. Constant changes to health restrictions impacted their ability to train and for a few, delayed their Olympic trials which created feelings of uncertainty and frustration. As a result, many men experienced changes in their motivation as they felt that they were not training towards a particular goal. To combat these motivational shifts, some of the men used mindfulness to focus on manageable daily goals to decrease feelings of frustration and uncertainty.

4.1.3 I Couldn’t Do it Without My Supporters

When dealing with the stress of being a student-athlete or coping with sport-related challenges, many participants relied on their friends, family, coaches, and teammates for social support. Having a strong support system helped participants feel more capable of facing the challenges they encountered in sport. The social support the participants received offered them common humanity, an integral component of self-compassion and helped them feel less isolated

when experiencing challenges in their sports. Some men also used social support to cope with the uncertainty of COVID-19 and relied on their support network to provide a distraction from this novel and difficult stressor.

Some participants' coaches valued members of their support system and a close athlete-coach relationship contributed to the athletes' navigating of sport-related challenges. Noah shared that his current coach was very understanding of his athletes, recognized the idiosyncrasies of each athlete, and worked to tailor his coaching to suit their specific needs.

“He’s very understanding and then... he’s open to a lot of suggestions. He’s not just like cut and dry and... he has good problem-solving techniques. He doesn’t just say like this is the way, he doesn’t have functional fixedness like this is the way it’s worked for these people so it should work for you. And he’s just very approachable.”

Many participants identified that approachability, understanding, and empathy were important characteristics for their coaches to exhibit. These characteristics made the men feel comfortable confiding in their coaches for help or support when they experienced sport-related challenges and difficulties. Brayden shared how he turned to his assistant coach for social support when he encountered difficulties in his sport:

“Lack of judgement and empathy are the most important ones I would say. So you can tell her something and she won’t like smirk or like laugh or anything. And then she’ll be like yeah that is really hard or whatever. So the feeling that you’re not gonna be judged or anything, that she won’t laugh you out of the office is pretty good.”

When one participant, Alex, sustained a possible career ending injury, his support system was comprised of his coaches, physiotherapist, surgeon, and family. Having complete trust that his surgeon and physiotherapist were well versed in his injury type and could provide the best possible care for his rehabilitation gave him confidence that he would be able to recover fully and return to play. Without having these individuals in his support system, Alex felt he would

not have been able to have a successful recovery. His strong support system appeared to give him confidence in the recovery process and helped him maintain a positive mental attitude:

“I think a lot of guys when they get hurt the way that I got hurt... it’s really mentally defeating for them. A lot of guys they quit, they don’t wanna do the rehab...so it’s a pretty defeating injury to have if you don’t have the right mindset. I think a lot of it is just having good support system around you. I had really good coaches, [a] really good physio, a great surgeon and that just gave me a lot of confidence and didn’t really put me in into the mental state where I could be sad or be angry. it was all focused on the future and where you’re gonna go. And I think for guys that don’t have that, it would be really tough for them. I think having that some kind of support system to get you... through your injury is huge.”

Teammates were another source of social support for many participants, upon whom they relied on when encountering failure or challenges in sport. Participants expressed that they often turned to their teammates as sources of support because their shared experiences allowed them to easily understand what the participant was going through. Grayson relied on his teammates for common humanity when he experienced times of difficulty and this served as a way for him to bond with his teammates.

“I find that when other people... talk about challenges that they experience, and I experience similar ones it’s kinda like... maybe like bonding in a way. Because I’m more like oh we’re going through this together and then we can also help each other. Be like oh yeah, I know what you were going through and... this helped me if you want to try it. Or just like know what they need and that they’re there for you. So I think... understanding what other people are going through is kinda...yeah bonding.”

Receiving social support and common humanity from teammates following poor performances was a source of reassurance for Owen and allowed him to view his situation from a different perspective:

“It’s nice to hear that from your teammates who like train with you all the... time and it’s just reassuring. Like hearing that someone else sees the situation in a different way than you do, in a more positive light... yeah it can be helpful.”

In summary, this subtheme displays how the men used social support to overcome sport-related challenges and the various individuals they turned to for support. These sources of social

support helped participants feel capable of overcoming the challenges with which they were faced. This social support in the form of common humanity was an integral part of their coping processes and imperative for them in being able to overcome the sport-related challenges they encountered. Another challenge the men faced in sport was integrating self-compassion and self-criticism in tandem to maximize both constructs' performance benefits whilst maintaining their mental well-being.

4.2 Balancing Act: The Relationship Between Self-Compassion and Self-Criticism

This theme focuses on the participants' perceptions of the relationship between self-compassion and self-criticism in relation to the sport-related challenges they experienced as student athletes. The men expressed that both self-compassion and self-criticism were critical for success in sport but alluded to needing to strike a balance between the two to maintain motivation, mental well-being, and self-confidence. Three subthemes were constructed to describe this theme and represent how the participants maintained a balance self-criticism with self-compassion: (1) *coping is contextual, it depends on the day and mood*, which details how the participants enact their coping resources; (2) *specific self-criticism is needed*, which discusses how the participants incorporate self-criticism in a specific manner to identify areas of improvement; and (3) *fine balance between self-criticism and self-compassion*, which attends to how the participants perceived both self-compassion and self-criticism to be beneficial for them as an athlete.

4.2.1 Coping is Contextual; it Depends on the Day and Mood

For some of the men, the ability to cope with sport-related challenges and difficulties was dependent on the resources they perceived to have available. Specifically, participants' abilities to cope adaptively depended on the mental capacity they were able to direct to overcoming the

given challenge or stressor in the particular context of the situation. Depending on the situation, it would either be easier or more difficult to respond to the stressor in a self-compassionate manner. For example, some participants felt it was easier to overcome a poor performance when the timing of their next competition or event occurred close to the failure as they did not have time or space to dwell over the failure, needing to quickly place themselves back in a performance mindset, as denoted by Wesley:

“If my next competition is really soon like I don’t have much time after, I can kinda just be like okay I don’t have... any time to worry about this so I might as well just completely forget it and just get ready for my next one cause I don’t [have] that much time. Whereas if I don’t have another competition like say it was my last competition of the season where I did bad and then... I don’t have another competition until next season which is like months away. Then I’d probably just won’t have the motivation to just like kinda forget about it... that quickly.”

This sentiment about it being easier to overcome poor performance when the next competition occurred in close timing was also shared by Alex:

“I would say it depends, my summer season I play every day so it’s kind of that night I can think about it and then I wipe it cause I get to play the next day. Our school season we only play Friday, Saturday, Sunday so if I have a really bad weekend... I could be dwelling about it all week or it could just be that night. It really depends kind of on how much I sucked that day. I guess like once I get back to training... it kinda blows over and I’m more focused on how to get ready for the next game.”

Wesley also spoke about how his ability to cope with setbacks in his performance was dependent on whether he was having a successful season or not. When experiencing a successful season, he found it easier to be less critical following a poor performance; however, if experiencing a less successful season he was more critical of himself and needed to use coping strategies to overcome feelings of frustration or failure.

“It fluctuates... I think it really depends more so on the season I’m having like if I’m having a really good season and I have one bad race I’ll be like ah you know what I won’t really be critical of myself. I’ll be like you know what I’ve been [doing] really well all season, one bad race doesn’t really define anything, so then I am a lot less critical.”

But if it's been like a worse season where it hasn't been going as well then I think I'm a lot more likely to be critical after a race."

The ability to cope with a challenge appeared to be related to an individual's appraisals of their internal resources to engage in the coping strategies necessary to deal with the demands of the challenge. For many participants, appraisals of their coping resources as adequate to deal with sport-specific challenges were heavily influenced by the mental capacity and energy they could devote to coping, as exemplified by Owen:

"I guess it kind of depends on the day also like on the mood. Sometimes it's easier to be more like kind to yourself than others. Like I said before it depends on what kind of day it is... I guess the weather, the stress like everything... plays a factor. So some days it's a lot easier to like to deal with that self-criticism that like voice in your head. While other days it's just like it's a lot more overpowering and you can't... overcome that. Yeah, like some days you're able to like pull through and talk yourself out of it and like bring yourself back up but like it doesn't work 100% all the time."

Often times when participants appraised their resources as insufficient in adequately addressing the stressor, they found it easier to respond with self-criticism than to enact self-compassion. This impacted their ability to challenge the stressor and cope in an adaptive manner for their well-being and mental health.

In summary, the men's appraisals of internal resources affected their perceptions of their ability to overcome the challenges and stressors they experienced. These appraisals also impacted whether they utilized self-compassion or self-criticism to cope with the stressor or challenge. Many participants discussed how coping with sport-related challenges was highly situation specific and dependent on the day, the coping resources they could dedicate to the stressor would fluctuate.

4.2.2 Specific Self-Criticism is Needed

Participants viewed self-criticism to be a beneficial part of their training as it allowed them to be aware of the areas they needed to improve and held them accountable for

implementing such changes. However, the men perceived that self-criticism needed to be delivered in a specific and purposeful manner for optimal performance outcomes to occur. Many participants recognized that if self-criticism was delivered in a general manner or focused on their self-worth it would have devastating results on their well-being, confidence, and mental health.

Self-criticism was viewed by the participants to be necessary for their improvement in sport and many mentioned that it helped them identify areas of their training they needed to focus on. Many participants mentioned that they were their best coach and that self-criticism allowed them to be in control of their training. Grayson used self-criticism to identify which areas of his training he wanted to improve without having to rely on his coaches for constant guidance.

“I think that... it’s necessary cause I think... to be a good athlete... you have to be doing things right and I need to be on myself for doing them right. I can’t have my coach yell at me all the time to do things right. I think I need to be the one... directing myself. It needs to be like coming from within I guess.”

The men also acknowledged that self-criticism needed to be focused on a specific area of their training versus being presented broadly or aimed at their self-worth. Brayden expressed that when he used general self-criticism it was unhelpful for his training as he would make general statements about his performance and therefore could not pinpoint how to improve on his mistakes.

“Self-criticism is often very general and general criticism is unhelpful. You can be self-critical and if it’s specific then it’s... helpful. That’s almost what I do... I don’t think of it as self-criticism but when I find what I did wrong it’s like okay that’s exactly what I did wrong and that’s what I can change next time. Whereas... if I said I’m the worst, I’m so slow... that’s not helpful self-criticism and that’s because it’s too general.”

When Hayden worked on adjusting his technique, he became overwhelmed with the number of critiques and used self-criticism in a specific manner to focus on one thing to improve at a time.

“If there are too many critiques then you kind of get lost on what you need to actually focus on. So, if you’re like oh I need to do this, this, this, this, and this to be better... you won’t improve on any of them because... you can’t focus on more than one thing at a time. I think being specifically self-critical is probably the best way to go.”

While participants recognized the value of self-criticism for training and performance, they also acknowledged that self-criticism could have negative impacts on their mental well-being if not monitored closely. The men identified that if self-criticism was used in excessive amounts, it could generate decreased enjoyment in sport and ultimately harm one’s mental health, as illustrated by Wesley:

“I think if you have too much self-criticism, like self-criticism to the point where it no longer becomes enjoyable to you, the sport is no longer enjoyable you just feel bad about yourself and what you’ve been doing the whole time. If it’s not enjoyable like you’re not gonna be able to find the motivation to actually do well and for that matter, it’s not even worth trying.”

Shawn also perceived higher levels of self-criticism to be problematic for athletes’ enjoyment in sport.

“I would say to an extent it might be okay but to a certain level then... it becomes a problem. I think it’s good to self-reflect for sure and realize where your weaknesses are so you can get better. But I think when it comes to a point where you’re never focusing on the positive, I think that starts to become a problem and I think that might be when people start to lose the love for a sport.”

Grayson discussed how too much self-criticism could create self-judgements which could lead to decreases in one’s confidence and resultant negative impacts on sport performance. He denoted that negative thoughts were not inherently harmful for athletes but could degrade one’s mental health if not addressed properly.

“I think if you are like judging yourself it can just turn... non-constructive if that makes sense and then you can like start to spiral in like a... vortex like a bunch of negative thoughts that aren’t constructive. I think personally negative thoughts are okay... if you can adjust them and then work on them and get something out of it. But I feel like if you start to go down like a vortex spiral of negative thoughts that don’t really have a meaning or an end to them then it’s like all you’re doing is like putting yourself in a non-ideal mental state for performance.”

In summary, self-criticism played an integral role in the participants' improvement in their respective sports as it placed them in control of their progress. However, the men expressed that self-criticism needed to be implemented in a specific manner to produce optimal performance outcomes or it could disrupt their mental well-being and self-confidence.

4.2.3 Fine Balance Between Self-Criticism and Self-Compassion

While the participants acknowledged the benefits of self-criticism on their training and performance, many discussed how they had found a balance between self-compassion and self-criticism to produce optimal performance and maintain their mental well-being. The men perceived self-compassion and self-criticism to be related in that both were advantageous for their training and performance. However, they denoted that the use of self-criticism and self-compassion were context and situation dependent. Hayden described finding a balance between self-criticism and self-compassion. He used self-criticism in his training to push himself and after would implement self-compassion to prevent himself from dwelling over mistakes:

“I would say in the moment of training it’s probably more of a balance but outside of training like the mental kind of aspect... and stepping away you kind of can’t really do anything about that. So you kind of have to practice self-kindness that way, like you can’t do anything more than what you’ve already done so [you] can’t be hard on yourself that way.”

“When I’m at [training]... you’re your own coach pretty much... so you need to have that, you’re the critic of yourself essentially. So, when you’re at [training] that’s kind of the place but when you go away like you can’t keep thinking about the practice or that sort of thing after you’ve done it. So, I think for myself... when I get home, I don’t really think about it anymore I just like debrief and then just move on or just do something else other than [sport] like... cook dinner or watch a show or something like that.”

Wesley shared that although he used self-criticism to push himself to achieve high levels of performance, he would implement self-compassion to recognize when a situation was beyond his control and to alleviate the self-blame he experienced.

“You gotta be tough on yourself but then like at the same time... every once in a while, there’s stuff you can’t really control. So that’s kinda where the self-kindness comes in, like... if you have a bad competition due to something that was out of your control sometimes you just gotta think like okay well I can’t blame myself for this because... I did my very best, but this was something out of my control I couldn’t really do anything about.”

Ethan found the balance between self-compassion and self-criticism to be complex and spoke about how too much of either one could be detrimental for performance. He perceived that while being too hard on oneself would affect one’s mental well-being, being too self-compassionate may not allow an athlete to reach their full potential. He observed that self-compassion and self-criticism could be present at the same time and enacted together when needed.

“I guess it’s in moderation... I think being too in your head and too harsh is not beneficial. So, I guess... being content I feel like doesn’t lead you to your best potential but also at the same time you have to sometimes be happy or what’s the point of doing it. I could be kind to myself and be self-critical, just because I’m critiquing something doesn’t mean I’m not kind to myself.”

In summary, participants worked to achieve a balance between self-criticism and self-compassion. Many men enacted self-criticism and self-compassion situationally either during training or outside of training to maintain motivation, confidence, and mental well-being.

4.3 Self-Compassion is a Very Helpful Coping Strategy

This theme is centred around participants’ experiences with self-compassion and perceptions of it as a beneficial coping strategy to manage stressors and challenges in both sport and other life pursuits. Three subthemes were constructed to describe this theme: (1) *it’s the ideal approach for sport and other life domains*, which attends to participants’ perceptions of the benefits of self-compassion for sport and everyday life; (2) *it’s nice feeling like you’re not alone*, which details participants’ experiences of common humanity during times of difficulty; and (3) *rolling with the punches: accepting failure and adjusting expectations* which discusses self-

compassion's involvement in the acceptance of failure and adjustment of performance goals to maintain the optimal performance mindset.

4.3.1 It's the Ideal Approach for Sport and Other Life Domains

When the participants discussed the benefits of using self-compassion as a coping strategy, it became apparent that it was not just restricted to use in sport but had positive implications for other life domains. Many men viewed self-compassion as an important mindset that they implemented into their schooling or everyday life to reduce stress and improve their overall well-being. Daniel recognized the importance of self-compassion for managing challenges and difficulties in both sport and other life areas. He spoke how mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity were integral to the coping process.

“I feel like that'd be the three like big pillars in help coping with... a loss. And if you're feel down, I feel like being kind to yourself would be really important to maybe uplift yourself. Like seeing your mistakes and recognizing them and making sure emotionally that you're okay, I think those are like really important things not even as especially as an athlete but coping with other aspects of your life too.”

Ethan expressed that although self-compassion was something he used to overcome challenges in sport, he was still learning how to implement it in his everyday life. He identified that the use of self-compassion would be beneficial for him to utilize outside of sport settings to manage feelings of anxiety or to prevent himself from overthinking.

“I know that I get like irrationally anxious about the stupidest things outside of my sport. Just like if I say something... I irrationally wonder like what did that person think about it, like are they upset. Whereas they probably didn't even notice because I wouldn't notice something like that if someone else did that. So I think... improving that would probably... improve my [sport] as well. Learning how to not overthink things I can't control or things that are just irrational to think about. I feel like I could take what I've learnt from [sport] and how I am with [sport] and apply that a bit more to my life outside of [sport] and I feel like I could get some benefits from that.”

Hayden discussed how self-compassion allowed him to recognize that the uncertainty caused by changing COVID-19 restrictions was outside of his control. Mindfulness allowed Hayden to

remain in the present moment, accept his circumstances created by the COVID-19 restrictions and take advantage of the training he was still able to do.

“I think that’s how you should live your life pretty much. Like it’s not just sport related it’s just like how to live your life. And with COVID-19 like nothing’s gonna be perfect if... it’s shown us anything it’s like what you’re doing is not gonna be perfect, so just accept that... do the best you can with what you have.”

Participants perceived self-compassion to be related to continued sport participation, with more self-compassionate athletes remaining in sport longer due to self-compassion promoting increased sport enjoyment and mental health stability. For Grayson, self-compassion played a role in the maintenance of his mental well-being through the prevention of burnout and ultimately benefited his performance.

“I think like mental health sustainability over like a long period... like I said earlier [self-compassion] prevents me from burning out. So I think it would like have longevity in the sport with... the mental aspect and I think it would just increase quality of life. I feel like when you’re a happier person, you’re just a better athlete and like you’re able to perform better.”

Brayden perceived that athletes with lower levels of self-compassion often discontinued sport post university level, and viewed self-compassion as imperative for continued sport participation.

“I think almost all the successful people on my team are hardworking and also self-kind. To be honest, the people who aren’t [self-compassionate] don’t last and they end up... quitting. We have a massive turnover rate... we carry 18 [athletes on the team] and... you have 5 years of eligibility. But we have almost like 8 to 10 new people come in every year because probably only a third of people actually make it through all 5 years. So it’s not usually the ones who aren’t self-kind who end up making it far enough to do that.”

Similarly, Callum believed that self-compassionate athletes were more likely to remain in sport due to their ability to move past failure quickly.

“I think those are the ones that make it farther. Especially when you can have fun and brush off a bad race and just be like I’m excited for the next meet or I’m excited for next year. I think those are more of the people that I surround myself with.”

In summary, participants viewed self-compassion to be beneficial in life domains beyond sport. Self-compassion was an important coping strategy to manage life stressors and helped them maintain their overall well-being. The men also perceived self-compassion to be related to continued sport participation. They observed that self-compassionate athletes tended to stay in sport longer due to self-compassion promoting increased sport enjoyment.

4.3.2 It's Nice Feeling Like You're Not Alone

The act of common humanity involves recognizing that one is not alone in their suffering and that experiences of challenges and difficulties are part of the shared human experience. The participants denoted that common humanity was particularly helpful for their coping processes and often used to overcome feelings of isolation when encountering sport-related challenges such as setbacks or injuries. Common humanity helped participants alleviate these feelings of isolation as they could acknowledge that their teammates experienced similar challenges and were there to offer support. Noah relied on common humanity to cope with the transition from high school to university and found support amongst his fellow first year teammates. He described how knowing that his teammates experienced similar stressors brought him reassurance as he navigated the start of his university career.

“It’s just like reassuring cause... I’m not like alone going through this very weird transition. It’s not so weird anymore cause it’s been like three years since I’ve gotten here but it’s just... nice to know there’s someone else there.”

Ethan used common humanity to recognize that his experiences of sport-related challenges and difficulties were also shared by his teammates and competitors. This realization allowed him to accept that he was not alone in his struggles and to feel more connected to other athletes in his sport.

“I think it helps knowing that... not just the people I train with, but my competitors too are going through similar things and it’s not just me. So if everyone’s going through the

same thing then it's a lot easier to wrap your head around competing with them. I think the coaches just sort of drive that point home, especially like in the university programs a lot of us are going through the same thing and that we shouldn't feel too unique in that aspect. I feel like it feels sometimes that it's only some of us going through that but all of us are going through the same thing."

The men utilized common humanity to recognize their own humanity and to accept their imperfections, which helped them alleviate feelings of disappointment following poor performance. Common humanity also allowed the men to acknowledge that perfection in relation to sport performance was an unattainable goal. Daniel discussed how common humanity could be an advantageous strategy for coping with failure by helping athletes recognize that everyone makes mistakes and that no one is perfect.

"I guess understanding that everyone does make mistakes and no one's a perfect person or a perfect athlete. I feel like as soon as you understand that you will make mistakes in your sport and like as a person in practice and stuff... it will help you understand, help you cope with failure. "

Grayson described how accepting his limitations helped decrease the internal pressures he placed on himself for his performance in sport and academics.

"Like I said earlier with the whole example of staying up late writing a paper and then going to morning workout, I think that's like an example where it's just like okay so I'm only human today I can't do everything. I can't do everything perfectly, as much as I would like to I can't. And then when you say that it's like there's a bit of pressure off you but then it's also like I'm gonna do the best that I can despite the circumstances. I think it brings it back a bit which allows me to do what I can within my boundaries instead of being outside of my boundaries and freaking out. It brings me back in and then like allows me to work from there I guess."

In summary, participants integrated common humanity into their coping processes. They used common humanity to overcome feelings of isolation in their experiences of sport-related challenges or to recognize their imperfections and alleviate self-imposed pressures for performance.

4.3.3 Rolling with the Punches: Accepting Failure and Adjusting Expectations

The acceptance of failure and adjustment of performance expectations were perceived to be involved in the application of self-compassion to manage sport-related challenges. The participants expressed that it was more advantageous for their mental health to recognize that mistakes would occur throughout their athletic career and to view failure as an opportunity for growth. When they viewed failure as a learning opportunity it allowed them to process the failure quickly and focus on areas of improvement for their future performances. Ethan discussed how viewing failure as an opportunity to improve was valuable for him being able to process his poor performances. When he approached failure as a chance to improve on his previous mistakes, it helped him maintain his motivational levels and return to training with a new focus.

“If it’s something that I did specifically that went wrong the day before I don’t think it helps to just forget about it because you know that’s something to learn from. But I think it doesn’t help to be upset about it for too long. It’s almost exciting to have another opportunity the next day. That’s what’s the nice thing about sport is you’ve always got the next day to be better or the next day to fix the mistakes that you made the day before.”

Wesley shared that following poor performances he would usually experience a mixture of emotions ranging from sadness to disappointment but also increased motivation. What helped him overcome these difficult emotions was switching to a mastery performance orientation where he could focus on improvement in his training and performance.

“It’s kinda like a mix of bad and good for me, like I feel kinda sad and disappointed in myself but then at the same time I feel a lot of motivation to just work harder. Just tell myself okay like in the future I gotta really work on this to improve this one area so that doesn’t happen again. Then I typically just try and get in some really good training after that. Learn from what I did wrong and just try my best to move on and I just basically try and focus on what my next competition is.”

The adjustment of performance expectations was also perceived to be involved in the employment of self-compassion to overcome sport-related challenges. The participants discussed how it was useful for them following a poor performance to adjust their performance goals to

ones that were more reasonable and attainable. The decision to focus on more attainable goals helped participants lessen the feelings of disappointment that resulted from their poor performances. Grayson discussed how the adjustment of his performance expectations when he was not in prime physical condition helped him accept his limitations. This brought him a new perspective where he was able to accept that his performance would not meet his standards, but he could still make the best out of his current circumstances.

“ I have to balance school and [sport]... it can get stressful and I can get run down a bit. So if I stayed up until midnight doing a paper and... I have like a morning workout the next day, I know that I’m just not gonna do as well. While I do have that super high standard that... I need to do the best that I can, I also understand that it won’t be as good as if I did sleep the whole night. So it’s like I won’t like beat myself up over that... keeping perspective that even though I’m in like this state that might be like lower than if I had rested, I’ll still make the best of that what I can do that day. But I’ll just like understand that it won’t be like the best work out of my life.”

Similarly, Brayden used instances of failure to readjust his performance goals to ones that would better match his abilities at the time.

“Okay I didn’t hit my goal time but that means my goal time wasn’t set properly. I’ll work on it again or readjust my goals for the rest of the competition or the next competition or whatever. If I go 5 seconds slower than I wanted to I’ll be like okay so maybe next competition my next goal time will be 5 seconds slower than what I originally adjusted to.”

When Ethan started university, he struggled with managing the demands of both academics and varsity sport. He learned to lower his academic expectations to be more realistic given the fact that he was in varsity sport and could not dedicate all his effort and time to school.

“When I first got to [university] I was still in like the high school mindset where like you try to go for like 100% in the course. But I think realizing that’s not necessarily necessary or realistic if I’m doing [sport] as well. Managing my expectations a little bit.”

This subtheme is focused on how participants perceived the acceptance of failure and the adjustment of performance goals to play an integral role in the utilization of self-compassion.

When the men viewed failure as a learning opportunity, they were able to process the failure

quicker and return to their training with newfound motivation. The adjustment of performance expectations to more attainable goals helped them lessen feelings of disappointment and provided them with a fresh perspective.

4.4 Reluctance: Self-Compassion is a Contentious Topic for Men Athletes

This theme attends to the participants' reluctance of adopting self-compassion, with attention to their beliefs that self-compassion may promote complacency in athletes. The men indicated that self-compassion could lead athletes to create excuses for themselves which could then result in performance plateaus. Dominant masculine narratives of emotional stoicism underpinned the participants' perceptions of self-compassion and complacency. Two subthemes were constructed to describe this theme: (1) *I think it might make you soft*, which highlights participants' self-compassion hesitancy; and (2) *emotions are challenging, they fluctuate a lot*, which attends to the participants' embodiment of emotional stoicism narratives which in some cases prevented their use of self-compassion.

4.4.1 I Think it Might Make You Soft

Although participants acknowledged that self-compassion was a beneficial coping strategy for athletes, expressions of hesitancy were still present in many of their accounts. This hesitancy was centred around the belief and albeit misconception, that self-compassion fosters complacency in athletes. Many of the men discussed how they believed that being too kind towards oneself would lead an individual to create excuses for themselves and ultimately result in performance stagnancies. They also concluded that self-compassion was not compatible with the mindset of a high-performance athlete and that it would likely be more useful for recreational athletes, as described by Wesley:

“I don't think there's anything wrong with being self-kind. I don't think many people think there is anything wrong with that but same time... I'm just not so sure. I think a lot

of athletes think if you are self-kind that's... not sort of the mindset of an athlete at high level. That's how I would kinda see it like, I would say... I don't know anyone who thinks there's anything wrong with that. Just that I think most people would probably think that's not really the sort of mindset a high-level athlete has. Cause... the person who's at a high level would want to push themselves hard even if that does mean being critical of themselves sometimes. Whereas being just self-kind... I think a lot of people would kinda think of that as kind of just like coddling yourself, kind of babying yourself and that's not really what's expected."

Some participants viewed self-kindness, a component of self-compassion, as a potential hindrance to sport performance because they perceived self-compassionate athletes to not be willing to criticize themselves. This lack of willingness to be self-critical would therefore result in performance plateaus, as these athletes would not push themselves hard enough. Brayden and Noah shared similar viewpoints on self-compassion as complacency:

"You don't make it to the high level unless you have the right amount or too much [self-criticism] because if you have too little you wouldn't have made it this far."

"I think if you have too little [self-criticism] then it's kind of like... you're just wasting your time. You're not invested enough, and you don't really seem to care that much if you're not like willing to criticize yourself and improve."

Participants perceived that self-compassion could exist in two contrasting forms, either as a coping strategy to help an individual manage sport-related challenges with associated maintained motivation and self-confidence, or as a more disadvantageous way of relating to oneself which may lead individuals to settle at their current performance level. These perceptions of self-compassion were strongly tied to notions of masculinity, particularly the dominant narrative of needing to work hard and to push oneself to be successful sport. Many of the men discussed how they experienced pressures to be stoic, physically, and mentally tough and how these pressures were tied to traditional masculinity narratives. Alex discussed his personal experience with self-compassion existing in these opposing forms and had witnessed it in his teammates and competitors. He perceived the benefits of self-compassion to be dependent on its

direct application by an individual. Alex also viewed the form of self-compassion chosen by an individual to serve as an overall reflection of their commitment to sport.

“I think that depends on how they approach it, I think the athletes view that either as someone who just really knows themselves and they know how they tick. They understand themselves really well and that’s a big thing that I think athletes respect if they see a guy that knows that. Or if a guy carries themselves the other way and they aren’t super critical then it can look like they’re just there to have fun and they’re not taking it seriously. Then that’s usually not a good thing when you have a guy that doesn’t look like he wants to really be there. He’s just there to mess around and other athletes usually frown upon that pretty heavily when guys at least seem like they don’t care.”

Although Ethan perceived self-compassion to be generally advantageous for athletes, he did acknowledge that more self-compassionate athletes could be viewed as lazy by their teammates. He viewed more self-compassionate athletes to play an important role for uplifting team morale but expressed concern that they may not push for improvement in their own training:

“I think it definitely helps a group environment... I feel like maybe it doesn’t help their own performances, but I do appreciate them that’s for sure. Cause generally if you’re more self-kind, you’re more kind in general towards others. But yeah... I feel like it’s pretty well accepted as long as it’s not like they’re seen as lazy, like they’re not doing anything to improve. But I think being positive definitely is a good thing especially in the group environment. I think it really depends on how they approach it and how they sort of express their non-self-criticism.”

In summary, participants’ hesitations were grounded in the belief that self-compassion promotes complacency in athletes which results in performance stagnancies. The men viewed self-kindness as a potential hinderance to sport performance and as a strategy that may be more valuable for recreational athletes not striving to achieve peak performance. Participants also viewed self-compassion to exist in two contrasting forms, either as beneficial for performance through its promotion of motivation, self-confidence, and increased coping abilities or as detrimental for athletic performance due to its association with complacency.

4.4.2 Emotions are Challenging, They Fluctuate a Lot

The embodiment of emotional stoicism narratives strongly influenced the participants' willingness to implement self-compassion. Many of the participants discussed how from a young age they learned that it was inappropriate for men to express their emotions publicly. As a result, the men would repress their emotions to avoid scrutiny from their peers and teammates. Owen described how these societal messages strongly influenced his ability to display his emotions. He feared being judged by his teammates and being viewed as weak for expressing his emotions.

“That’s also like traits that supposedly a man should have... like not showing your emotions and pushing through internal struggles without putting it out to other people until you’ve gone through it or... even like ever. Even right now seeing a guy cry after a race still feels like weird to me even though it should be perfectly fine. Usually like seeing tears like that in sport just feels weird. Like a guy is supposed to be strong and showing tears kinda... shows that you’re a sissy like you’re weak.”

Alex experienced challenges with displaying his emotions which he concluded was a learned behaviour from the influential people in his life like his father and friends.

“I’m a pretty private person so I don’t really share my emotions very well or the way I’m feeling on the inside doesn’t always come out on the outside. I have emotions but I’m not good at showing my emotions. Growing up my dad never really showed emotions and my friends they were never really emotional people. So... that was just the norm for me to kind of just stuff in your emotions and not really express them.”

This resistance to acknowledging and processing emotions only further prevented the participants from using self-compassion as an emotion-focused coping strategy to manage sport-related challenges. Some participants observed that they did not attend to their emotions because being emotional was not encouraged in sport. This sentiment was shared by Alex who discussed how athletes were expected not to display their emotions outwardly and to overcome challenges quickly whilst maintaining a positive attitude.

“That could be an athlete thing too... it’s kinda expected that they don’t show their emotions. They’re expected to put everything behind them and just focus on their sport and be happy and whatnot.”

The promotion of emotional avoidance by coaches and fellow athletes only further perpetuated narratives of men as emotionally stoic. Hayden described how he and his teammates were not encouraged by their coaches to discuss their emotions or experiences of difficulties in training.

“I think there’s a sense and maybe this is just the way I’ve been taught, but if you’re not having a good practice like you don’t really want to share that. Like you’re either positive or neutral in practice. And even to say one bad thing about yourself... even if it’s self-deprecating or I’m very sore today or that sort of thing, like those types of sentiments in practice are not conducive to the overall environment. So I think there’s a sense where sharing your negative feelings... like negative sentiments just about how you’re bodily feeling or mentally feeling is something that we don’t really do in [sport]... at least in training.”

This avoidance of addressing one’s emotions discouraged participants from using self-compassion to manage the emotions associated with sport-related challenges. Some of the men felt that it was unnecessary to acknowledge or deal with their emotions due to their fleeting nature. This perspective further dissuaded participants from being willing to use self-compassion for emotional management. Wesley found the acknowledgment of emotions to be a trivial endeavour for managing sport-related challenges given that his emotions were short-lived.

“Emotional difficulties are kind of a weird one cause it really fluctuates a lot I find depending on how things are going at the time and things can change so quick. Like you might be having... a really good month where you’re performing really well and then you might have a month where you perform really poorly or maybe get injured. So I find the emotional state can definitely, fluctuate a lot and it can do that pretty fast depending on how things are going in sport for me. It can range a lot from... happiness, sadness, stress, jealousy all kinds of things really. I don’t know if it’s so useful to acknowledge them really though. I can’t really think of any benefits to it cause I think in the end of the day you gotta just go with things and just kinda stay optimistic.”

In summary, the men had trouble with the acknowledgement and expression of their emotions. Highly prevalent emotional stoicism narratives created learned behaviours for the participants to repress their emotions. This embodiment of emotional stoicism engendered self-

compassion reluctance. Part of the reluctance to self-compassion was related to the belief that managing one's emotions was a futile endeavour due to the fluctuating nature of emotions.

4.5. The Dichotomous Existence of Inclusive and Hegemonic Masculinities

This theme is centred on the participants' accounts of experiencing contrasting masculine ideologies (that of inclusive masculinity and hegemonic masculinity) and the impacts of such masculinities on their experiences of self-compassion. The men described observing society's masculine values shift from restrictive traditional ideals to more accepting ideals that made allowances for the expression of different masculinities throughout their lifetime. Participants perceived that a major change in masculine values was the popularization of and discussion surrounding men's mental health and increased resources available for men to access mental health support. The men still experienced the pressures from the traditional masculine values despite the popularization of more inclusive masculine ideologies in various settings. This contrast between the increased promotion of inclusive masculinity ideologies and continued reinforcement of hegemonic ideals created tensions for many of the men. These traditional values reinforced narratives of men athletes displaying physical toughness and aggression. Four subthemes were constructed to describe this theme: (1) *masculinity has changed since I grew up*, which describes the ways in which the participants' experiences of masculine ideals evolved over time; (2) *men's mental health is less taboo now*, which highlights the shifting narratives surrounding men's mental health; (3) *you need these traits to be a man (in sport)* which details the pressures to adopt hegemonic traits for successful in sport; and (4) *sport and society are still very heteronormative* which discusses the subconscious assumption that all men athletes are heterosexual and the ramifications of this bias on 2SLGBTQ+ athletes.

4.5.1 Masculinity Has Changed Since I Grew Up

Participants discussed experiencing the masculine values that were upheld by society shift throughout their childhood and early adulthood. During their childhoods, masculine values were conservative and centred on men as physically and mentally tough, unemotional, and aggressive. As participants entered adolescence and early adulthood, they noticed shifts in these cultural expectations of masculinity. These newer masculine values were focused on men being emotional, increased gender equality between men and women, and the allowance of less hegemonic forms of masculinity within society. This increased acceptance of men's emotionality thereby promoting the use of self-compassion amongst the participants. Brayden described how growing up he experienced less pressure to be emotionally stoic and perceived the current masculine values to be less restrictive for men's emotionality and behaviour.

“I think the traditional values are being strong, not being emotional, being tough, being aggressive and stuff. But I think that's started to change in culture at least in most places. Like in all of my schooling I haven't been told that... like you're allowed to be emotional as a man, you're allowed to do those things. I think they're starting to change to like you can be emotional... I think they're just being more liberal you can like do whatever you want kind of thing.”

Noah discussed how his generation did not require men to always be resilient and rather encouraged them to discuss their emotions and challenges, thereby denoting a transition away from the traditional and hegemonic values long upheld by society.

“Now I think lot more like open, it's like encouraged almost to like voice your emotions to whoever. I mean you don't always have to be mentally or emotionally like resilient in many cases it's the opposite you can say whatever you want. I think it's just... the new school... it's the newer generations are more open about it.”

Wesley perceived that the masculine values of today were less focused on men being superior to women with men no longer being expected to be the sole financial provider for their families and newer masculine values more accepting of gender equality and equity. However, he

noted that in sport, the traditional values were still prevalent and focused on men's physical and mental toughness:

“I do think they are changing somewhat like I definitely think it's kind of getting more to a state of gender equality. Where it's more so like the typical stereotypical role that a guy is supposed to play in society is no longer really that anymore. It's more there's definitely still are some standards especially in sport like the ones you said about having to be kind of like mentally and physically tough for instance that sort of thing. I think a lot of them are gone though such as the gotta be like breadwinner sort of thing. I don't think, I don't really see that anymore.”

The participants also discussed how masculine values in their respective sports were beginning to change and mirror the more inclusive form of masculinity that was present in society. They experienced less emotional policing by their coaches and teammates in recent years than they had during their childhood periods. The lessened policing on men's emotional displays made allowances for them to implement and embody self-compassion in their lives and in sport. Owen described a change and move away from traditional ideals of emotional stoicism in sport:

“Like before I would say 10 years ago crying... in like the public or just like anywhere like people would just say to like man up and stuff. Like I noticed that right now... if a guy cries like I've seen people cry after races and they're not overly like they're not criticized as much for it as they would have been like some time ago.”

Grayson described experiencing a sport culture that was not heavily hypermasculine and more accepting of non-traditional forms of masculinity. His teammates placed less importance on gender conforming behaviours and upheld social norms that were universal to the men and women on the team. These social norms were focused on how the athletes on the team conducted themselves in their role as athletes irrespective of their gender.

“I guess [sport] is a super independent sport so there's no, I don't think there are many norms or... there's no like insane [sic] team culture that is not welcoming. You could do whatever you want as long as you're respectful about it, then like no one will question it, no one will like bully you about it or anything. I think that this applies to... what you are like outside of being an athlete. I feel like if you are doing things that go against the norm

of being an athlete then people are going to start saying things. So I mean like if you're skipping workouts always or if you're coming to [training] and not applying yourself or just having negative energy with the team then there will be more of a reaction. But if there's social norms that are like... I'm trying to think of one, like if I showed up to the pool in a skirt or something no one would say anything. But if I was not being a good athlete or good team member then people would say like hey, you're not being a good team member like stop that... or something."

In conclusion, the men perceived masculinity to be evolving from hegemonic forms to more inclusive forms in both society and sport. They described how masculine values of mental toughness and policed emotionality were no longer as privileged within sport contexts. The men described their observations of the acceptance of emotional displays, increased gender equality between men and women, and the embodiment of more inclusive forms of masculinity in previously hegemonic spaces. With the inclusive masculine ideologies becoming popularized amongst society, it is possible that self-compassion has become a more acceptable coping strategy for men to utilize.

4.5.2 Men's Mental Health is Less Taboo Now

Participants described witnessing the attitudes and narratives surrounding men's mental health shift as they entered late adolescence and early adulthood. During their childhoods, the topic of men's mental health was extremely taboo and not one discussed openly or publicly. Participants discussed how emotional stoicism narratives encouraged men to avoid talking about their mental health and those who did admit their struggles were ostracized and viewed as less of a man for doing so. As the men began to age, they noticed more inclusive cultural messaging surrounding men's mental health where men were able to discuss their struggles with mental health openly, receive proper support, and not feel shame for experiencing mental illness. With society being more accepting of men's mental health, participants felt more comfortable reaching out to friends, mentors, and family when they experienced mental health concerns. Shawn

described this shift in mental health narratives and his increased comfort in discussing his own mental health and working with a counsellor without experiencing shame:

“I think around the mental health side of it is probably the biggest one I think like that’s like really important. Even seen a difference in like the last 10 years where people really start to take everything like that really seriously, especially on men’s mental side of it too. I feel more and more comfortable to just go and talk about something or even go to a counselling session, something like that. It doesn’t feel weird at all to me, and I don’t know if it does for other men, but I think we’re seeing it shift where it’s starting not to feel as weird. I just don’t... have a problem talking about it or telling anyone stuff like that and I think that’s starting to happen a bit more.”

Participants also discussed how the topic of men’s mental health had become popularized in sport; many were encouraged by their coaches to place importance on their mental health and well-being. This promotion of men’s mental health also supported the increased use of self-compassion by men to manage their emotions in relation to sport-related challenges and stressors. Daniel described how his coaches emphasised that the mental health of the athletes was more important than their performance:

“Luckily on the sports team here we... emphasize a lot about mental health and our coaches told us multiple items if mentally or like emotionally if we’re having difficulties to maybe take a step back for a couple days. Just to make sure we’re okay as a person before we come in and try to do other things as an athlete. They do care just as much about our mental health and us showing emotion that they do as on the women’s team. And they make sure that all the men’s teams are okay and that we are sharing how we’re feeling internally and that kind of thing. They really make sure that the men’s team, especially cause... the men tend to not talk about it as much but there are resources for us.”

“Throughout the year our coaches always say that our mental health is always number one and then school and [sport] always come after that. But mental health’s always number one. And we have meetings throughout the year ... with our sport psychologist about stuff like this so we’re always reminded that there are resources.”

Brayden shared an example of how his coaches enforced mental health as a priority above performance outcomes for their athletes.

“Both my coach and the assistant coach on the varsity team are always like if you’re having a bad day, it’s okay, it’s not your fault you can just do what you can today. Do

your best that you can, given how you're feeling and then tomorrow you'll feel better, and you can do better. This team is really good, it's very focused on mental health and making sure you're not like pushing yourself when you shouldn't be and stuff."

The participants perceived the popularization of social media to play a key factor in men's mental health becoming a less stigmatized topic. They described how the internet exposed them to men celebrities and athletes openly discussing their mental health. This empowered them to challenge the stigma surrounding men's mental health and help seeking behaviours in their own lives, as described by Shawn:

"I think social media is huge with how everything is changing because people... have a platform now to like speak out about everything. I think that's recognized and I think that it is totally changing with everything. Like I don't think it's really like that anymore, I think people are starting to recognize mental health more it's a bigger issue. People are really... taking a look at that in a mirror and I think social media is one way people are doing so and building a platform for it. So I think that's really part of it whereas back in the day like years ago years and years ago they didn't have stuff like that... whereas now it's actually coming to the forefront, people are starting to realize how important mental health is how these like social constructs sometimes aren't always the best for you know men or even females' mental health."

In conclusion, participants recounted their experiences of new, more inclusive masculine values which allowed for conversations surrounding and stigmatization of men's mental health and help-seeking behaviours. With the increased discussion regarding the importance of men's mental health resulting from inclusive masculinity, it has allowed men to realize the potential of self-compassion for their mental well-being. The participants discussed the ways in which they were supported by their coaches to prioritize their own mental health over performance. The dawn of social media marked an important moment in the popularization of men's mental health as it created a platform for men to openly discuss their struggles with mental health.

4.5.3 You Need These Traits to Be a Man (In Sport)

Despite experiences of less hegemonic societal masculine values, participants still experienced pressures to display hegemonic masculinity in the context of their sport. This

pressure to enact hegemonic masculinity was related to the perceived benefits of these hegemonic behaviours for sport performance. Expectations of toughness permeated across the men's accounts, with the athletes' expressions of the need to push through pain, illness, or injury. Such promotion of emotional stoicism and physical toughness from hegemonic masculinity reinforced to the participants that self-compassion was not beneficial nor appropriate for men athletes. Hayden described how some of his teammates experienced reluctance admitting when they were ill, particularly in the context of the COVID-19, as it was a social norm for an athlete in his sport to continue to train whilst being unwell due to the fear of being viewed as less of a man for taking time off due to illness.

“When the whole COVID-19 outbreak started people were afraid to come forward that they had COVID-19, or they weren't feeling well or that sort of thing. I personally think that ties into like masculinity and just not wanting to be a failure. Even then some people on our team like some of the guys would be like well like I don't wanna get tested for COVID-19 like what if I, have COVID-19... I don't think they want to have to deal with admitting that they're sick. I think it's been a really hard time for our coaches to know if people are feeling well cause you shouldn't come to [training] if you're not feeling well that's kind of the protocol. In our sport it's like usually train when you're sick you show but having to step away or not come to practice, I think is hard for our sport... also thing in general, like a cultural sport thing that you don't usually admit that you're sick.”

Many of the participants described the importance of demonstrating acts of confidence or hard work to gain the respect of their teammates and solidify their status as a man.

Demonstrations of these socially valued behaviours would place them higher on the social hierarchy created and reinforced by hegemonic masculinity. The participants described demonstrations of confidence to occur through displays of their commitment to their sport and being performance oriented. Wesley discussed how being confident and able to perform at a highly competitive level was valued in his sport and men who did not display those behaviours were viewed as lesser than.

“I feel like if you don’t act kinda like confident and performance oriented, you’d probably be taken as kinda like... soft and non-competitive. Like you’re not really the sort of athlete who’s ready to be competing at a high level. Yeah, lack of confidence would probably be like seen as like oh he’s doesn’t have the experience or still needs more time to be at a competitive level. And if you’re not performance oriented, they’re just not gonna think of you as being able to compete at high level, just kind of at an amateur level.”

Callum described how demonstrating the ability to be tough and hard-working gained the respect of his men teammates. He perceived these two traits to be highly regarded and feared social rejection if he did not act accordingly.

When you look at the top person on the team... everyone tends to respect them and the only way that you get there is by being tough and working hard. So I’ve done that most of my life, been tough, been at the top spot and had people respect me. I don’t think you can make it very far if you’re not tough. I mean people would start looking down on me probably if I didn’t act like that.

These notions of toughness promoted by hegemonic masculinity further instilled the idea of self-compassion creating complacency as many of the men viewed being kind to oneself as incompatible with toughness and hard work. This belief of self-compassion creating complacency only furthered the participants’ hesitation towards implementing self-compassion as a coping strategy.

Aggression was another traditional masculine trait that was perceived to be beneficial for men athletes to embody. The participants discussed how aggression was perceived to be related to success for men athletes, even in non-contact sports. Ethan discussed only feeling comfortable using aggression within the sport setting:

“I mean not necessarily like on the [sport competing area], I don’t like change my personality, but I think that [during competition] you do need to have a bit of a like an aggressive side. Not aggressive but like you don’t wanna let the guy next to you outperform. You have to have a bit of like a fighter mentality. Like if someone was to cut in front of me in line at a restaurant, I’m not gonna get ready to fight him but if the guy next to me was trying to beat me in the race I’m not going to physically fight him but I’m definitely gonna physically do something to not let that happen.”

In summary, despite denoting the emergence of more inclusive forms of masculinity, men continued to embody hegemonic masculinity narratives in their respective sports. These narratives were centred around acts of toughness, confidence, hard work, and aggression. Such narratives thereby reinforced the men's hesitation to utilizing self-compassion out of fear of acting in a way that defied hegemony and would place them lower in the social hierarchy of masculinities. These traits were perceived to be related to success in sport and many participants described feeling pressure to enact these behaviours despite aligning with non-hegemonic masculinities.

4.5.4 Sport and Society Are Still Very Heteronormative

While many participants perceived their respective sports to be accepting of 2SLGBTQ+ athletes, they described an underlying assumption of heteronormativity that still existed. This assumption of heteronormativity was an extension of hegemonic masculinity which further privileged certain men over others. Although most of the participants were straight, they were able to acknowledge and critically reflect on how sport culture marginalized gay athletes. Daniel discussed that while sport culture was becoming more inclusive of out gay athletes there still was an assumption of heteronormativity present:

“I feel like times are changing but for the most part I think they are still characterized as heterosexual sports and meant for heterosexual males and females.”

Grayson, a queer participant described how heteronormativity and homophobia often appeared in the sport context. He discussed how in general gay men were less accepted in sport than lesbians due to the homophobic perceptions that gay men were effeminate.

“There's also like all the trans issues or that aren't issues but people are making issues with like trans people in sport and like the whole stuff there. And how lesbians in sport are always like oh of course but then gay people in sport are more surprising, I guess. That like a gay man in sport would be more surprising than a lesbian in sport by society because it's like oh like lesbians are just more masculine, so like obviously it makes more

sense. But then gay people it's like oh they're feminine. So yeah, there's a lot of that still happening in sport."

Grayson also experienced heteronormative narratives stemming from sport marketing which exemplified stereotypical masculine traits and reinforced traditional gender roles for men.

"I think it's still like a thing...I feel like sport marketing is still very like this is a man, this man is super strong and powerful and like the best in world and all that. It's not saying that there's like discrimination but it's just the underlying theme about it. I think there is still a heavy role that like gender and gender roles play."

Hayden, another queer athlete described that while he did not feel discriminated against by his coaches or teammates, there were times that he felt othered in his sport. He spoke about not always being able to relate to his men teammates when they discussed the women they were dating or shared 'locker room banter'. While he acknowledged that sexual orientation was not the sole connecting factor between himself and his teammates, he had experienced times where he did not relate to his teammates because of his sexuality.

"I think part of it also is... I guess the idea of otherness. It's just like if you're not [straight] I mean there's nothing wrong with it, it's just like you kind of don't have the same experiences as like straight people. So it's like kind of hard to relate or like identify sometimes. But I guess in sport like sport is your main reason why you're all together so it's like that shouldn't matter. You're not all in the same group because you're straight, you're all in the same group because you're playing the same sport where it [sexual orientation] shouldn't matter."

The participants perceived sport type to play an integral role in the level of acceptance and inclusion for 2SLGBTQ+ athletes. They concluded that stereotypically masculine sports and/or team sports were less inclusive of 2SLGBTQ+ athletes than non-stereotypically masculine sports or individual sports. Brayden viewed stereotypically masculine sports to be heavily influenced by traditional masculine values which reinforced heteronormativity and homophobia narratives.

"You might not get the same reaction [stereotypically masculine sports] ... because those sports have much more of an element of... like aggression and other traditional male

values. So it would be harder to, it's understandably gonna be harder to have different values in those kinds of sports than it would be for [an athlete in my sport]. But it that doesn't mean you can't do it and it doesn't mean that it should be the case."

Many of the individual sport participants described how the co-ed nature of their sport seemed to create better understanding between the men and women on the team. This exposure to athletes of the opposite gender appeared to play a role in men athletes being more inclusive and accepting of 2SLGBTQ+ athletes. This was reflected in Hayden's experience as a queer athlete in a stereotypically masculine team sport and in his current sport.

"I don't know it's not the same as I would say it's definitely less heteronormative than other sports. As someone who also played [stereotypically masculine sport] growing up it's definitely like leaps and bounds different than that. I think it also has to do with the fact that from a young age, boys have always been grouped with boys in [stereotypically masculine sport] versus [current sport] like it's all its usually co-ed and so like varsity kind of level and even then, like our team is co-ed. So I think there's a sense of like you're exposed more to femininity in [current sport] just as a child because you're with girls. So I think that's one aspect where it's like my sport I guess isn't as much."

In summary, while participants acknowledged the ways in which their respective sports were inclusive of 2SLGBTQ+ athletes, they described the existence of heteronormative narratives. Such heteronormative narratives not only reinforced the social hierarchy between men but demonstrates how even in spaces of inclusive masculinity, hegemony was still prevalent and advantaging certain men over others. Sport type appeared to be related to the level of inclusion of 2SLGBTQ athletes with individual co-ed sports being perceived to be less homophobic and heteronormative than other sports.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore competitive men athletes' perceptions, understandings, and experiences of self-compassion to manage sport-related challenges. This study also examined the role masculinity plays in shaping self-compassion and considered the interaction between embodied masculinities and the practice of self-compassion. This purpose was explored through one to two interviews (20 interviews total) with 11 competitive team and individual sport men athletes. Key findings include detailed accounts of how the men used self-compassion to gain perspective following poor personal performances and implemented mindfulness to maintain perspective during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the men identified a balance between self-compassion and self-criticism was needed for success in sport, and provided first-hand accounts of how masculinity has begun to shift away from hegemonic values in both society and sport.

The findings extend the current research knowledge surrounding men athletes' lived experiences and perceptions of self-compassion and highlight how masculinity shapes experiences of self-compassion. The current study contributes to the sport psychology literature by focusing on men athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of sport-related challenges. This study also can contribute to applied sport psychology practice and serves to inform coaches and practitioners on how to implement self-compassion interventions with men athlete populations.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will discuss how the findings of this study extend the current research and I will provide suggestions for future self-compassion research. A discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study, practical implications and concluding remarks will be the final focus of this chapter.

5.1 Men Varsity Athletes' Lived Experiences of Self-Compassion

Until the recent works of Reis and colleagues (2019, 2021), little research has focused on men athletes' perceptions and experiences of utilizing self-compassion to mitigate the unique demands such as adversity, self-evaluation, poor performance, and injury that sport participation places on athletes. Findings from the current study contribute to the growing research evidence focused on men athletes' lived experiences with self-compassion. The findings align with existing research suggesting that men athletes utilize self-compassion to manage and cope with sport related challenges and may reap similar benefits from self-compassion as women athletes (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2011, 2013; Reis et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2019). The participants indicated that self-compassion was a helpful mindset for both sport and other life domains as it facilitated the maintenance of optimal mental well-being whilst coping with sport-related challenges.

In line with previous literature, the participants described how mindfulness allowed them to reframe failures more objectively and as a learning opportunity (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2013; Reis et al., 2019, 2021; Wilson et al., 2019). The implementation of mindfulness allowed the men to overcome the difficult emotions that often arose from instances of failure. Athletes also described how self-compassion can be applied to other life domains to reduce stress levels and thereby improve overall well-being and mental health. While the previous sport psychology research has focused on sport-related well-being, the present finding is consistent with the previous psychology literature which suggests that self-compassion is strongly related to psychological well-being, increased happiness, and optimism (Neff & McGhee, 2010). These findings add to the growing evidence surrounding men athletes' lived experiences and perceptions of self-compassion. They also extend the current literature as little

focus has been placed on how self-compassion improves men athletes' well-being inside and outside of the sporting context.

A particularly unique finding of the present study was how the men described self-compassion as a dynamic entity that is dependent on the individual's personal bandwidth and internal appraisals of resources available to cope with the situation. Participants described how it was at times easier to use self-compassion to cope with a given challenge when they perceived their internal coping resources to be sufficient in being able to overcome the challenge. In contrast, at other times when the men viewed the challenge as a threat and perceived their internal coping resources as insufficient for the challenge, it caused them to feel overwhelmed and unable to enact self-compassion as a coping strategy. This finding is in line with Bennett and colleagues' (2017) qualitative work with older women suggesting that self-compassion is contextual and therefore subject to change over time and context. Bennett et al. (2017) also suggested that self-compassion can be influenced by one's age, experience, and social, cultural, and historical factors. Contention still exists surrounding how best to conceptualize self-compassion and whether the construct is a function of one's personality (trait-like perspective), an approach to relate to the self, a positive self-attitude, or is rather applied as a resource or strategy (state perspective) (Mosewich, 2020). The present study supports the state perspective of self-compassion through its suggestion that self-compassion is applied as a coping resource or skill that is situational, contextual and fluid in nature. Researchers may wish to examine if the coping effectiveness of self-compassion is highly dependent on other internal and external resources available to the individual at the time coping is required.

Another unique finding of the current study was the perceived relationship between self-compassion and continued sport participation. Participants described how self-compassion

created mental health stability and helped buffer against experiences of burnout, ultimately resulting in athletes avoiding sport dropout. To my knowledge, this is a novel finding and stands to provide a substantive contribution to the growing evidence focused on how self-compassion may improve athlete well-being and continued sport participation. Previous literature focusing on self-compassion's relationship with thriving and the attainment of potential in sport (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015; Mosewich, 2020) revealed positive relationships between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being. Other research with women athletes has highlighted how self-compassion is linked with higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Magnus et al., 2010) and the maintenance of motivation and determination in sport (Adam et al., 2021) both factors are associated with continued sport participation. Therefore, this finding extends the previous literature through its suggestion that self-compassion may play a role in continued sport participation through its promotion of well-being.

5.2 The Importance of Balance between Self-Compassion and Constructive Self-Criticism

Many athletes believe that self-criticism is necessary for optimal psychological functioning in sport and results in successful performance (Ferguson et al., 2021; Mosewich, 2020). While many athletes are reluctant to abandon self-criticism, it is important to note that self-criticism is a psychological process that has been associated with underachievement and self-handicapping strategies (Ferguson et al., 2021). Previous literature has suggested that self-compassion runs counter to self-criticism with self-compassion appearing to buffer the effects of self-criticism for athletes (Ferguson et al., 2021; Mosewich, 2020). However, participants of the current study provided accounts that counter the current literature's suggestion that self-compassion and self-criticism are opposing entities. Participants described finding self-compassion and self-criticism to be compatible with one another particularly when self-criticism

was enacted in a way that did not negatively impact one's cognitions, nor did it undercut performance or psychological well-being. Often times the men used self-compassion and self-criticism in tandem to achieve optimal performance which counters Mosewich's (2020) suggestion that self-compassion runs counter to self-criticism. Findings from the current study suggest that perhaps it is necessary for self-criticism to be designated into two components: constructive self-criticism and destructive self-criticism. Defining self-criticism in such a way would better account for the positive aspects of self-criticism that the men described with constructive self-criticism mobilizing them to improve their training and performance, remain vigilant in their training, and able to evaluate oneself in a way that did not destabilize their self-worth. This finding represents a novel contribution to the self-compassion and self-criticism research through its suggestion that self-compassion and self-criticism may operate under a less dichotomous relationship than previous studies have indicated. It also extends our current understanding of self-criticism by offering a perspective of its benefits when implemented in a constructive manner by athletes.

Participants also described how it was important to strike a balance between the use of self-compassion and constructive self-criticism, thereby indicating that their usage is situational and context dependent. Given the situation, the men would either implement more self-compassion and less constructive self-criticism or more constructive self-criticism and less self-compassion. For many, using self-criticism and self-compassion in tandem allowed them to provide feedback to themselves in a way that fostered their psychological well-being while still maintaining a focus on optimal performance. The perceived relationship between self-compassion and constructive self-criticism mirrors the work of Wilson and colleagues (2019) which described the relationship between self-compassion and mental toughness through a

zipper metaphor. If in an effective balance, self-compassion and mental toughness were described to have the potential to create optimal mindsets for coping with sport-related difficulties and the achievement of athletic success (Wilson et al., 2019). While mental toughness is associated with self-criticalness, Wilson et al. (2019) defined the construct as a set of positive attributes that allow athletes to persevere through difficult times. Therefore, the perception that self-compassion and constructive self-criticism are contextual is a potential novel contribution of the present study to the self-compassion literature. This finding extends current understandings of self-compassion in relation to constructive self-criticism and may challenge the current evidence which suggests that self-compassion buffers the effects of self-criticism (Ferguson et al., 2021; Mosewich, 2020).

5.3 The Interplay of Self-Compassion and Masculinity

It has been suggested that the experience of masculinity and adherence to traditional masculine norms like risk taking, self-reliance, and stoicism represent the most difficult experiences men athletes encounter in the context of sport (Reis et al., 2021). Thus, investigation into the interplay between self-compassion and embodied masculinities is warranted to better understand whether self-compassion can be a viable coping resource for men athletes. While the literature attending to the link between men athletes' self-compassion and masculinity is limited, a few studies provide results suggesting that men athletes do benefit from the utilization of self-compassion (Reis et al., 2019, 2021; Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018). The previous literature suggests that while men athletes are generally accepting of self-compassion, they experience feelings of hesitation towards the construct, which is linked to their experiences of masculinity (Reis et al., 2021). Consistent with the research by Reis and colleagues (2019, 2021), the athletes in the current study described a contentious relationship with self-compassion. In particular, the men's

feelings of hesitancy towards self-compassion were related to the (mis)belief that self-compassion promotes complacency, passivity, and therefore will undermine performance. These feelings of hesitancy concerning the utilization of self-compassion are not unique to men athletes as previous research studies have found this same belief in women athletes (Ferguson et al., 2014; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). However, in the present study the feelings of hesitancy were related to narratives of emotional regulation and stoicism stemming from masculinity, a finding that was not reported in previous research with women athletes. Previous studies (Mosewich, 2020; Reis et al., 2021) have suggested that perhaps the biggest barrier men athletes experience in regard to implementing self-compassion is the ‘soft’ connotation that accompanies the construct, a finding which is reflected by the present study. This finding of linking the experience of hesitation to implementing self-compassion to masculine narratives expands the previous research conducted by Reis and colleagues (2021).

In the present study, participants who embodied inclusive masculinity appeared to be more accepting of using self-compassion to cope with sport-related challenges. In particular, these athletes did not perceive self-compassion to be related to passivity and inaction in sport and were more open to using self-compassion as an emotional coping strategy to mitigate sport-related challenges. This finding aligns with the previous work of Reis and colleagues (2019) who suggested that men with higher levels of inclusive masculinity are more likely to engage in self-compassionate practices compared to men who demonstrated higher levels of traditional masculinity. Reis and colleagues (2021) highlighted how men athletes who embody inclusive masculinity were more willing to implement self-compassion and perceive it to be helpful for improving sport performance. This finding was also reflected in the present study and adds to the

growing evidence suggesting that men who demonstrate non-traditional representations of masculinity are more likely to perceive self-compassion to be a helpful resource.

5.4 Lived Experiences of Masculinity

The masculinity literature often describes masculinities as fixed entities to highlight the differences in power that can exist within a social organization; however, some researchers argue that masculinities are fluid entities that men embody and can vary dependent on the social setting and context (Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005; Sargent, 2005). This fluidity of masculinity was evident in the present study when the participants described experiencing tensions between hegemonic values and inclusive values in the context of their sporting environment. Most participants demonstrated inclusive masculinity ideals, especially when describing feelings of comfort with discussing their feelings and struggles with their family, friends, teammates, and coaches and relying on these significant individuals for social support. However, many athletes also described feeling pressure to conform to the ever-present traditional masculine norms in sport which centre on risk-taking, self-reliance, and stoicism (see Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005; Hargreaves, 1990). The present findings support previous masculinity research demonstrating the fluid nature of masculinities across time and place (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Participants described experiencing shifts from traditional hegemonic values in both sport and society to more inclusive masculinity values; in particular, they described sport becoming less hegemonic and more accepting of 2SLGBTQ+ athletes. This perspective is in accordance with a growing literature advocating that the current generation of men appear to be placing less value on traditional masculinity (Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Anderson & McGuire, 2010; Reis et al., 2021). It is important to note that because discussions during the interviews centered around enactments of self-compassion, the men may have

demonstrated inclusive masculinity and it is possible that under different circumstances and/or in different contexts more hegemonic/traditional views may have been more present.

Inclusive masculinity theory has faced some criticism in that it is too simplistic, ideal, and potentially dangerous to indicate that homophobia and homophobia are drastically reduced in contemporary times (De Boise, 2015; O'Neill, 2015; Reis et al., 2021). Since hegemonic masculinity theory was designed to incorporate societal shifts in the dominant representation of masculinity, De Boise (2015) suggested that inclusive masculinity theory offers little theoretically beyond hegemonic masculinity theory. However, inclusive masculinity theory actually incorporates hegemonic masculinity theory and acknowledges that traditional/hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity in spaces where homophobia and homophobia are highly prevalent (Anderson & McGuire, 2010). In spaces where homophobia and homophobia are reduced, inclusive masculinity theory situates masculinities as 'horizontal' to one another as opposed to the hierarchical arrangement described by hegemonic masculinity theory (Anderson & McCormack, 2018; De Boise, 2015; Reis et al., 2021). The arrangement of masculinities as horizontal suggests a more egalitarian conception of masculinities where neither is more socially powerful than the other (Anderson & McCormack, 2018; De Boise, 2015). Recent literature has suggested that inclusive masculinity theory has theoretical merits beyond hegemonic masculinity theory in contemporary men's sport settings (Reis et al., 2021). Reis and colleagues (2021) argued that the lack of traditional or hegemonic representations of masculinity demonstrated by participants in their study aligns with and offers support for inclusive masculinity theory. This is echoed by the present study which adds support for the theoretical merits of inclusive masculinity theory and its continued utilization in the sport and masculinity literature.

A novel finding of the current study was the participants' accounts of their coaches attending to their mental health. Participants described how their coaches openly discussed the importance of mental health, encouraged their athletes to find someone (either a professional or a friend) they could confide in, provided mental health resources, and reassured the men that their mental health was more important than their athletic performance. This finding runs counter to hegemonic masculinity's emphasis on stoicism and emotional regulation which has created stigma around men seeking support for mental health concerns (Cleary, 2011; Heath et al., 2017). It may be that the men's coaches also embodied the contemporary inclusive form of masculinity that was present in the athletes' accounts. Perhaps this embodiment of inclusive masculinity contributed to how the coaches attended to and stressed the importance of their athletes' mental health. It is possible that other factors such as society popularizing mental health and well-being and confronting certain stigmas has contributed to the participants' coaches attending to the mental health of their athletes. This finding also challenges the performance narrative which situates winning and dedication to sport performance above other life areas and the self (Douglas & Carless, 2009). The performance narrative is often linked to hegemonic masculinity in sport which 'links maleness with highly valued and visible skills' (Bryson, 1987, p.357). The present findings suggest there may be a shift in sport culture for men athletes which reflect an emphasis on mental well-being over performance and thus may represent the diminished effects of hegemony in sport. These findings extend current understandings of men athletes' mental health and necessitate future research focused on the role of coaches on men athlete's well-being and mental health outcomes.

5.5 Practical Implications

Findings from the present study highlight the gaps in knowledge surrounding men athletes' utilization of self-compassion as a coping strategy to manage sport-related challenges. While previous literature has suggested that self-compassion is a valuable resource for athletes to manage sport-related challenges, stressors, and increased well-being, little research has focused on men athletes and has led researchers to speculate how men athletes perceive, experience and implement self-compassion (Mosewich, 2019; Reis et al., 2019, 2021). With less research dedicated to exclusive men athlete samples, it has also left a deficit in the understanding of how masculinity impacts self-compassion. The previous literature has indicated that athletes have very little knowledge on how best to implement self-compassion, a finding that is reflected in both men and women athletes (Mosewich et al., 2019; 2020; Reis et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important for research to provide practical suggestions to applied practitioners on best practices for self-compassion interventions based on empirical findings.

While previous literature has speculated that men athletes do not benefit from self-compassion or may not accept the construct, the present study highlights the ways in which men athletes not only experience but perceive self-compassion. Findings also indicate that men athletes are willing to implement self-compassion to cope with sport-related challenges but experience reservations over the construct's 'soft' connotations. Thus, it may be useful for applied practitioners to create self-compassion interventions that are tailored towards men athletes that resonate with their unique experiences of masculinity (Mosewich et al., 2019, 2020; Reis et al., 2019, 2021). One suggestion is that practitioners could deliver self-compassion interventions with language that properly attends to the array of masculinities demonstrated by men athletes (Mosewich et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2021). Findings from the current study support

Reis and colleagues' (2021) suggestion that practitioners focus more on the benefits of self-compassion when delivering a self-compassion intervention to men athletes rather than focusing on the description or definition of the construct. By lessening the focus on what self-compassion is and instead highlighting the construct's benefits and practical ways to integrate it as a mental performance skill, it may help decrease the reservations men athletes have towards self-compassion. The current study's suggestion of creating self-compassion interventions that attend to men's unique experiences of masculinity can inform mental performance consultants and coaches in how best to implement a self-compassion intervention amongst this population.

5.6 Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

5.6.1 Strengths

A strength of this study was that it explored self-compassion and masculinity in the context of sport-related challenges with a focus on the perceived interplay between constructive self-criticism and self-compassion in a population of men varsity athletes. The present study built on past self-compassion and masculinity research by investigating men athletes' perceptions of self-compassion use in regards to sport-related challenges. It also explored the participants' experiences of self-compassion and self-criticism, which to my knowledge is a novel discovery of this study. The current research provides unique lived experiences and perspectives from competitive men athletes. Findings from this study provide initial evidence for men athletes' experiences of self-compassion, masculinity and the interplay between the two and justification for continued research in the area of self-compassion with men athletes. It also provides justification for the further investigation into how self-compassion and constructive self-criticism are related to an athlete's ability to cope with sport-related challenges.

Another strength of this research was that participants were interviewed twice which allowed me to build rapport with the participants (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). The second interview also served as a way to expand on topics of interest with the participants and incorporate member reflections which allowed the participants to reflect on discussions from the first interview. Following suggestions from the previous self-compassion literature (Mosewich et al., 2019, Wilson et al., 2019) in the interviews self-compassion was not defined for the participants as a way to avoid priming the men to confirm the components of self-compassion. Rather the construct was discussed as a coping strategy which allows athletes to maintain a positive attitude in the face of challenges and involves being kind and non-judgemental towards oneself, viewing mistakes and difficulties as part of being a human and being aware of one's emotional difficulties without ignoring or over-identifying with them. Following the work of Wilson and colleagues (2019), I elected to not define the construct of self-compassion for participants and instead loosely described the construct for the men. This allowed the participants to organically connect with the construct and describe their lived experiences with implementing self-compassion.

My position as an outsider proved to be beneficial for the development of rapport despite my initial fears that I would not be able to build rapport with the participants due to not having experience as a varsity athlete nor as a man. While I could not connect with participants through common experiences of being a varsity athlete, that proved to be less important for the establishment of rapport with the men. My abilities as an active and empathetic listener, however, did allow me to build rapport with the participants. Previous literature suggests that men may be more comfortable speaking with a woman interviewer than a man interviewer when the context is seen as more traditionally 'feminine' (e.g., nursing, emotions, or family life)

(Broom et al., 2009). Therefore, it is possible that my position as an outsider and in particular as a woman, allowed the participants to be more forthcoming when discussing topics of sensitive nature as there was less pressure for them to respond in a socially desirable manner which may have occurred if I was a man (Broom et al., 2009).

5.6.2 Limitations

Despite the contributions and strengths of the current study, a potential limitation of this work was the homogeneity of the sample. While recruitment was open to all varsity men athletes the sample consisted of mostly individual sport participants, many of which were in the same sport; therefore the findings may not transfer to other populations. However, it is important to note that the sample was heterogeneous in two aspects with some of the participants displaying diversity in terms of their ethnocultural background and sexual orientation. This heterogeneity was a strength as findings from the present study could be transferrable to men with similar ethnocultural backgrounds and sexual orientations as the participants.

Another potential limitation of this study was that all of the interviews were conducted via Zoom to accommodate for COVID-19 pandemic health restrictions. A potential limitation of online interviews is that the software's time lag can disadvantage the researcher's ability to build rapport with participants (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). While online interviews can mitigate geographical limitations, the risks of this interview medium include technological problems and the potential for the interviewer to miss subtle social or body language cues (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Such body language cues and social subtleties do shape how the interviewer and participants construct the data; therefore, it is conceivable that my interpretations and final analysis were impacted by any body language or social cues that I missed during the online

interviews. Had the interviews been conducted in person, it is possible that some of my interpretations and analysis would be different.

5.6.3 Use of Vignettes

A novel aspect of the current study's design was the use of vignettes in the first interview as a talk elicitation tool. Vignettes are a valuable technique for exploring participants' perceptions, beliefs, and meanings surrounding specific situations and can be especially useful to discuss topics of sensitive nature (Barter & Renold, 1999; Braun & Clarke, 2013). The implementation of vignettes served as a way to better understand the participants' perceptions and understandings of self-compassion without defining the construct and potentially priming the participants. The vignettes acted as a starting point to discuss how the participants reacted to poor personal performances and provided insight into how they coped with such situations which was valuable for me when interpreting their lived experiences with self-compassion. A limitation of the vignette use was that I created vignettes that described two team sport athletes which made it difficult for the individual sport athletes in the study to relate to the particular situation. Although the individual sport athletes could still relate and understand the emotions the fictional athlete was experiencing, some participants indicated that they could not entirely connect to the fictional situation as an individual sport athlete. Therefore, future studies could include vignettes that attend to the diversity present among the sample to increase the participant's relatability to the fictional stories to better elicit talk data.

5.6.4 Future Research

Further research is needed to continue to explore men athletes' lived experiences with self-compassion. It is important that future studies continue to examine how self-compassion and masculinity interact and shape one another. Future research should investigate men's lived

experiences of self-compassion amongst diverse populations (e.g. elite, non-elite, recreational, adolescents), contexts (e.g. Olympics, NCAA), social class, and ethnocultural backgrounds. By investigating diverse populations of men it would provide understandings of how differing embodiments of masculinity shape experiences of self-compassion, which could later inform practitioners in how to integrate self-compassion interventions that attend to various forms of masculinity. Additional research should focus on what language surrounding self-compassion resonates with men athletes and their unique experiences of masculinities. Moreover, it is imperative that future studies focus on creating and implementing a self-compassion intervention that is tailored for men athletes to best inform applied practitioners and coaches on how to integrate self-compassion with this population. It may be beneficial for future research to investigate how self-compassion develops in athletes, attending to the influence of important others in the participants' lives (e.g. parents, coaches, siblings, teachers) that either promote or discourage the use of self-compassion. Lastly, findings from this study identified the importance of the balance between self-compassion and constructive self-criticism. Further attention towards this novel finding is warranted and can be applied to diverse athlete populations (e.g. women, elite, non-elite, recreational) to determine how athletes can reap the benefits from both self-compassion and constructive self-criticism on their sport performance.

5.7 Concluding Remarks

In summary, in the present study I sought to answer the following research questions: 1) How do men varsity athletes experience and practice self-compassion to manage sport-related challenges? and 2) How do men's understandings and performances of masculinity shape perceptions and experiences of self-compassion? The present study revealed competitive men athletes' experiences, perceptions, and understandings of self-compassion in the context of the

management of sport-related challenges. It also explored how men athletes' unique experiences with embodied masculinities impacts their perceptions and experiences of self-compassion. Findings suggest that self-compassion is a viable resource for men athletes to implement to cope with sport-related challenges; however, the embodiment of certain traditional masculine narratives can promote feelings of hesitancy towards the construct and should be attended to when creating self-compassion interventions for this population. In conclusion, the current research demonstrates that self-compassion is worthy of investigation in men athletes, particularly with regards to how the unique experiences of masculinities shape their perceptions, experiences, understandings, and implementations of self-compassion.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Introduction



Sport and Exercise Psychology Lab
School of Kinesiology

Masculinity in Varsity Sports: Exploring Lived Experiences of Coping and Adaptation to Sport-Related Challenges

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

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

Myriam Tremblay, BKin (Co-Investigator)
School of Kinesiology
The University of British Columbia
Contact Number: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

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 (UBC). The co-investigator for this study is Myriam Tremblay, a Master's student working under the supervision of Dr. Crocker.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

We are interested in learning about how men varsity athletes cope with and adapt to challenges experienced in sport and the role masculinity plays in shaping the management of sport-related challenges.

WHAT WILL PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY INVOLVE?

If you agree to participate, you will be invited to take part in two interviews occurring approximately 2-3 months apart (conducted in English) that will be conducted via Skype. Each interview will be approximately 1 to 1.5 hours in length. 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.

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 all identifying information will be removed. All interview transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer of the co-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, presented at academic conferences, and is part of MSc student Myriam Tremblay's Master's thesis work.

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 about the role of masculinity on men athletes' coping, management, and adaptation to sport-related challenges, as well as allow us to learn more about how men athletes experience and perform gender in sport.

If you would like more information about this study or to learn how to become involved, please contact Myriam Tremblay at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Thank you!

Appendix B: Letter of Initial Contact



Sport and Exercise Psychology Lab
School of Kinesiology

Masculinity in Varsity Sports: Exploring Lived Experiences of Coping and Adaptation to Sport-Related Challenges

LETTER OF INTIAL CONTACT

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

Myriam Tremblay, BKin (Co-Investigator)
School of Kinesiology
The University of British Columbia
Contact Number: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

To whom it may concern,

My name is Myriam and I am a Master's student at the University of British Columbia under the supervision of Dr. Peter Crocker in the School of Kinesiology. Dr. Crocker and I are studying how men varsity athletes cope, adapt and manage sport-related challenges, as well as how experiences and performances of masculinity shape such experiences. We are currently looking to speak to men athletes who are currently enrolled in at a post-secondary institution and are actively on a varsity sports team. Participation in the study would involve athletes participating in two one-on-one interviews with myself that will last approximately 1 to 1.5 hours each. The second interview would take place 2-3 months after the first interview to provide the opportunity to reflect on what was said in the first interview and to discuss my data analysis with participants. Interviews will occur over Skype to accommodate for the current public health physical distancing guidelines. Topics to be covered in the interviews will include experiences of coping, management, and adaptation to sport-related challenges, experiences and performances of masculinity, perceptions of masculinity in sport, and perceptions of how masculinity shapes coping amongst men athletes. The findings from our study will further our understanding of how men athletes manage sport-related challenges and the role of masculinity in coping in sport.

The reason for my writing of this letter is to ask for your assistance in recruiting athletes to participate in this study. I could personally speak with your athletes via Skype to explain the study at a time that is convenient for you and the athletes. 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 or I could provide you with a video message of myself explaining the study. As you will be sending this to your athletes, I will not have access to any of

your athletes' contact information unless they choose to contact me. You will be able to view the message prior to it being sent to your athletes.

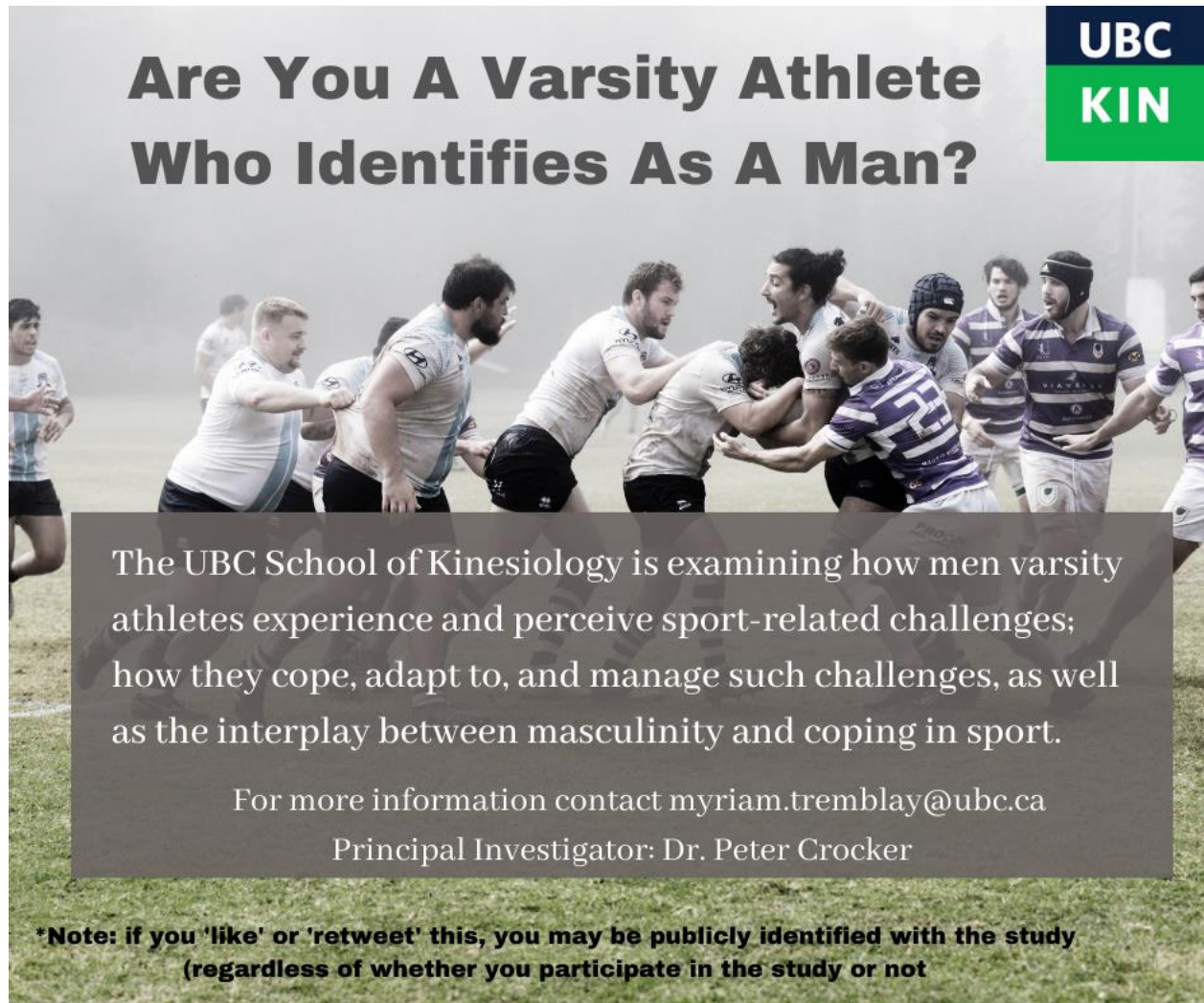
Furthermore, while we appreciate your assistance in recruiting athletes, due to the confidential nature of the study you will not be privy to who chooses to contact the researchers and who is participating in the study. Please note, there is no obligation to agree to the potential recruitment of participants,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

I will contact you in a week's time to see if you would be willing to assist us in recruiting 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,
Myriam Tremblay

A black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.



Are You A Varsity Athlete Who Identifies As A Man?

**UBC
KIN**

The UBC School of Kinesiology is examining how men varsity athletes experience and perceive sport-related challenges; how they cope, adapt to, and manage such challenges, as well as the interplay between masculinity and coping in sport.

For more information contact myriam.tremblay@ubc.ca
Principal Investigator: Dr. Peter Crocker

***Note: if you 'like' or 'retweet' this, you may be publicly identified with the study (regardless of whether you participate in the study or not)**

Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire



Sport and Exercise Psychology Lab
School of Kinesiology

Masculinity in Varsity Sports: Exploring Lived Experiences of Coping and Adaptation to Sport-Related Challenges

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION 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 un-answered if you do not feel comfortable providing certain information. All information recorded here will be kept strictly confidential.

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

Note that a pseudonym will be created for you if you do not provide one – this will help promote confidentiality.

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. How would you describe your cultural origin? (*Canadian, Chilean, Dutch, East Indian, English, Filipino, French, German, Greek, Indigenous, Irish, Italian, Jamaican, Jewish, Japanese, Lebanese, Polish, Portuguese, Somali, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, etc.*):
4. Sexual orientation:
5. What university sport do you participate in?
6. At what age did you start participating in your current sport?
7. Year of eligibility?
8. What university program and faculty are you currently enrolled in?
9. If you would like to provide any more information about yourself, please do so below:

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form



Sport and Exercise Psychology Lab
School of Kinesiology

Masculinity in Varsity Sports: Exploring Lived Experiences of Coping and Adaptation to Sport-Related Challenges

CONSENT FORM

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

Myriam Tremblay, BKin (Co-Investigator)
School of Kinesiology
The University of British Columbia
Contact Number: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The purpose of this study is to examine how men varsity athletes cope, adapt and manage sport-related challenges, as well as how experiences and performances of masculinity shape such experiences. Topics to be covered in the interviews will include experiences of coping, management, and adaptation to sport-related challenges, experiences and performances of masculinity, perceptions of masculinity in sport, and perceptions of how masculinity shapes coping amongst men athletes. The findings from our study will further our understanding of how men athletes manage sport-related challenges and the role of masculinity in coping in sport. Data will contribute to the MSc thesis of Myriam Tremblay and will seek research journal publication.

STUDY PROCEDURES:

You will be interviewed twice via Skype at a time of your choosing by Myriam Tremblay, MSc Student in the School of Kinesiology at UBC. The interviews will take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours each and occur 2-3 months apart. Questions during interviews will pertain to managing sport-related challenges and perceptions of masculinity. 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:

The researchers will strive to anonymize any information you provide within this interview. Personal information that can identify you such as sport and real name will be removed from any reports that may result from this research. You will be identified by a pseudonym (a fake name) in the transcripts and any research papers resulting from this study that will be submitted for journal publishing. The consent form with your name on it will be stored separately from your transcript. However, although all identifying information will be removed, there is still a chance that you could be identified based on what you have said. If you feel uncomfortable with any part

of the discussion, you can indicate to the interviewer that you do not want that part of the discussion included in the data to be analyzed.

Your confidentiality will be upheld in the highest regard possible. We will make sure that audio-recordings are not overheard and that transcripts are not read by anyone other than the researchers involved with this study. All interview transcripts will be encrypted and kept on a password protected computer and no one other than the researchers associated with this study will have access to this information. It is important that you are aware that there are certain types of information that the researcher may be obliged to report to relevant authorities if it comes up during the interview (e.g., child or elder abuse, intent to do harm to oneself or others).

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.

POTENTIAL RISKS:

This study will not subject you to any physical risk. You can refuse to answer any questions and/or withdraw from the study at any time and doing so will result in no penalty to you or anyone else. Although we do not expect any psychological risk, if we feel participating is placing you under undue stress we will discontinue your involvement in the study and direct you to appropriate resources, again resulting in no penalty. Any data collected prior to this point will be omitted from the study and deleted. In the event that you would like to further discuss your feelings regarding the topics discussed in the study, Family Services of Greater Vancouver (counselling services 604-874-2938) can be of assistance.

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 [REDACTED] or if long distance email [REDACTED] or call toll free 1 [REDACTED].

QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions or want further information about the study, please contact Myriam Tremblay by telephone at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED].

CONSENT

I have read the above and I consent to being part of this study of Masculinity in Varsity Sports: Exploring Lived Experiences of Coping and Adaptation to Sport-Related Challenges.

I consent to audio recording of the interview.

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

Signature: _____

Printed Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: Interview One Guide

Research Questions:

1. What is the men's varsity athlete experience with practicing self-compassion to manage challenges?
2. How do the men's understandings and performances of masculinity shape perceptions and experiences of self-compassion?

Ice Breakers:

1. Tell me a bit about yourself
 - a. When did you start playing sports?
 - b. What sports have you played?
 - c. How long have you been playing on the varsity team?
 - i. What position do you play [if applicable]?
 - d. What has been the highlight or most memorable moment of your sporting career?

Self-compassion components (perceptions and experiences without stating 'self-compassion'):

1. What are some challenges or difficulties you face in your sport? (Failure, setbacks, or adversity)
 - a. What is it about these experiences that make them difficult?
 - b. How do you pay attention to your emotions or feelings during challenges/difficulties in your sport, if at all?
Probe around thoughts and behaviours
 - i. Could you describe if and how anyone has ever encouraged you to acknowledge your emotions?

2. Now I would like to ask what you thought about the two vignettes you read prior to our interview. If you did not have the chance to read them before the interview, I will give you a moment to do so now.

The vignettes were two stories about fictional athletes with differing reactions to poor personal performances. The first was of Mason, the hockey player, who worked to let go of his feelings of disappointment and approached his failure as a learning opportunity to improve his goal keeping abilities. The second was Charlie, the basketball player, who had a hard time letting go of the lost game, used exercise as punishment for not playing well, and reacted poorly to his girlfriend offering support.

- a. What did you think of how Mason approached his poor performance? Why?
- b. What did you think of how Charlie approached his poor performance? Why?
- c. How do you typically approach your own poor performances?
 - i. Can you tell me about how you act following poor personal performances?

- ii. Can you tell me a about how you manage your thoughts and feelings after you perform poorly?
Probe for thoughts if only speak on feelings and vice versa.
Probe if dwell on the event, obsess over mistakes or ignore it entirely.
 - a. How does this affect how you feel about your performance and yourself?
 - iii. Do your reactions post poor performance generally resemble Mason, Charlie, or both athletes? Or perhaps you react in an entirely different way? Can you tell me about that.
- 3. How do you think others usually experience challenges in sport?
 - a. How similar are their experiences of these challenges to your own?
 - b. What is it like to acknowledge that other athletes share similar experiences and challenges as you?
 - i. Is this difficult to acknowledge, why or why not?
 - c. Could you describe if and how anyone has ever encouraged you to acknowledge that other athletes share similar experiences?
 - i. How effective was this in helping you deal with difficulty?
- 4. How critical are you of yourself when it comes to your sport?
 - a. What role does self-criticism play in your role as an athlete?
 - b. Is it possible to have too much or too little self-criticism why or why not?
- 5. Could you describe if and how anyone has ever encouraged you to be less critical and more understanding of yourself?
 - a. Has anyone told you to be more critical of yourself?
 - b. How do you think people view others who are self-critical? Self-kind?

Masculinity:

- 6. Thinking about society broadly, what are some of the behaviours, acts and attitudes associated with being a man or being masculine?
 - a. Do you identify with those ideas of what it means to be a man? How so/why not?
- 7. Describe what being a man means in the context of your sport.
 - a. Do you identify with those ideas of what it means to be a man?
- 8. Where did you learn about how you need to act to be respected by your teammates?
 - a. How do you act in your sport? Why?
 - b. If you did not act in the way that your teammates and coaches approve of, how do you think they would perceive you? Why?
- 9. Who are you most comfortable sharing your experiences with in the context of you sport?
 - a. What qualities does that person have that make you feel safe sharing those experiences with?

10. How would you describe your relationship with your teammates?
 - a. In what ways are you close with other members on your team?
 - b. What feelings and emotions are you comfortable sharing with your teammates, if at all?
 - c. When you have experienced a difficulty or adversity in your sport, in what ways are you encouraged by your teammates to talk about your difficulties, if at all?

11. How would you describe your relationship with your coaches or support staff?
 - a. In what ways are you close with your coaches or support staff?
 - b. What feelings and emotions are you comfortable sharing with your coaches or support staff, if any?
 - c. When you experienced a difficulty or adversity in your sport, in what ways are you encouraged by your coaches or support staff to talk about your difficulties, if at all?

Appendix G: Interview One Vignettes

I would like you to read through these two descriptions of athletes then tell me which athlete most closely represents your typical thoughts, feelings, and behaviours when you experience a poor personal performance.

Disclaimer: These situations used in the vignettes may parallel a real situation however they are fictional and created based on previous research and athletes' accounts in sport psychology textbooks.

1. Mason is the starting goaltender for UBC's varsity men's hockey team. In the Canada West Championship game against UofC, Mason was unable to block the game winning shot from UofC's star forward after reacting to a fake resulting in UBC losing 3-2. After the game Mason felt as though he let his entire team down because he was not a good enough goaltender to have stopped the shot. To help himself overcome the feeling of being an inadequate goal tender, Mason tried to focus on what he currently could control. He recognized that the game was now over and that focusing on what he could/should have done would not change the outcome of the game. To stop thinking about not being able to stop the shot after reacting to the fake from the forward, Mason said to himself 'it's okay, it was one shot that went in and I saved many others tonight. I played to the best of my ability and I'm proud that we made it to the final CanWest game'.
2. Charlie is a forward for UBC's varsity men's basketball team. In the Canada West Championship game against UVic, Charlie missed scoring a three pointer in the last two minutes of the game which would have resulted in UBC winning. In the locker room Charlie kept thinking to himself that he was such a failure and how he had let his whole team down. He couldn't stop replaying the shot over in his mind and kept thinking about what would have happened if he had just set up his body position a bit better. Charlie could not shake his feelings of frustration and disappointment and concluded that he was clearly the worst player on the team.

Appendix H: Interview Two Guide

Research Questions:

1. What is the men varsity athlete experience with practicing self-compassion to manage challenges?
2. How do the men's understandings and performances of masculinity shape perceptions and experiences of self-compassion?

Ice Breaker:

4. How have you been doing since we last spoke?
 - a. How is your training going?
 - b. Has anything changed in your training or life since the last time we met that you think I should know about?

Coping and Self-Compassion Questions:

4. What has been the biggest source of stress for you since we last spoke in (insert month to provide context)?
**Probe for feelings, cognitions, behaviours and emotions experienced.
 - a. How did you manage this stressor?
 - b. What went well and why?
 - c. What did not work and why?
4. In the first interview participants spoke about self-criticism playing an important role for them as athletes. They mentioned that self-criticism keeps them motivated and the self-criticism is usually focused on the technical aspects of their training/ performance such as their body positioning or execution of a skill. When we compared self-criticism with being more understanding and kind to yourself many participants mentioned that being self-kind is not a trait successful athletes have.
 - a. What are your thoughts?
 - b. How might being kind to yourself hinder athletic success?
 - c. How might being kind to yourself help athletic success?
 - d. Some of the participants spoke about needing to find a balance between self-criticism and self-kindness to overcome challenges in their sport. Could you describe how you find a balance between self-criticism and self-kindness for yourself, if at all?
4. Many of the participants spoke about the need to be hardworking in sport in order to be successful. I'm wondering if these ideas of being a hard worker and being able to push through long tough practices are why many said that being self-kind is not a trait of a successful athlete.
 - a. What do you think?
 - i. Can you be both self-kind and hardworking and be successful as an athlete? Why or why not?

4. Could you describe how [insert component of self-compassion here] might be useful for you when dealing with stress or a difficulty in your sport?
 - a. Being kind and non-judgemental towards yourself
 - b. Viewing mistakes and difficulties as part of being human
 - c. Being aware of emotional difficulties without ignoring or over-identifying with them

4. I'm interested in researching a coping strategy which involves maintaining a positive attitude in the face of challenges, being kind and non-judgemental towards oneself, viewing mistakes and difficulties as part of being a human and being aware of one's emotional difficulties without ignoring or over-identifying with them.
 - a. What do you think of this approach to coping with challenges in sport?
 - b. What do you think might be the strengths of an approach like this?
 - c. What do you think might be the challenges associated with an approach like this?

Masculinity Questions:

4. How would you describe your experience as a student athlete?
 - a. What is expected of you as a varsity athlete?

** Probing if there are pressures to look or act a certain way and the perceived sources of these pressures/expectations. Follow up probes by asking if these experiences might be different/similar from the experiences of women athletes.

4. In the first interview participants identified that in society being a man is tied to these ideas of being tough both physically and mentally, emotionless, being the breadwinner, protective, and confident. But many didn't identify with these ideas and spoke about how society's ideals of what it means to be a man are shifting.
 - a. In what ways do you think these ideals are changing, if at all?
 - b. Some participants spoke that a lot of times traits of men are focused on the negative aspects so can you describe some of the positive attributes of a man?

4. The research literature talks about sport as a heteronormative institution meaning that being straight is the norm and often times diverse sexualities are frowned upon. Can you describe your experience with your sport?
 - a. Do you agree with this characterization of sport?
 - i. Is this changing?
 - b. Does it depend on the sport?

4. I am interested to hear about the male role models in your life, can you tell me about them?
 - a. What are the positive qualities they have that you admire?
 - b. What qualities or characteristics do your teammates on the men's team have that you admire?

4. Who do you look up in your sport? **Probing for what does the ideal man in their sport look like.

- a. What are some characteristics that they have that you would like to have or currently possess?
 - i. Why? What makes these characteristics desirable?

** Come up with a few specific follow up questions per participant which will be incorporated throughout the interview.