

**AN EXAMINATION OF FACTORS THAT UNDERMINE AND SUPPORT OLYMPIC-  
LEVEL ATHLETE WELL-BEING: A MULTI-PERSPECTIVE APPROACH**

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## **Abstract**

The overall goal of the research subsumed within this doctoral dissertation was to ascertain what factors contribute to and/or undermine the well-being of Olympic-level athletes. Accordingly, this dissertation consists of two qualitative studies and a knowledge mobilization project which are presented in five chapters. The introduction (Chapter 1) provides a general overview of how well-being has been conceptualized and the psychosocial factors that are posited as having an influence on well-being, particularly in the context of Olympic-level sport. Chapter 2 consists of Study 1, an examination of factors that recently retired Canadian Olympic athletes perceived as supporting and/or thwarting their well-being over the course of their careers in elite sport. The findings from Study 1 highlight the complexity of factors that influence athlete well-being, and the problematic imbalance of power between athletes and the authority figures within their sport environment (including their coaches and performance directors). Building on Study 1 and adopting a critical interpretivist paradigm, Study 2 (Chapter 3) includes an exploration of Canadian national team coaches' and National Sport Federation performance directors' perspectives regarding factors that they felt influence athlete well-being (both positively and negatively), and their perceived role in contributing to the well-being of their Olympic-level athletes. Chapter 4 consists of a knowledge mobilization initiative wherein the key findings and recommendations from studies 1 and 2 are shared with leaders in the Canadian elite sport environment. Further, the knowledge mobilization initiative was designed to ignite discussion on how these findings and recommendations may inform future National Sport Federation programs and policy intended to enhance athletes' experiences of well-being in elite sport. In

Chapter 5, a concluding discussion is provided that entails a synthesis of findings across the research included in this dissertation, as well as three interrelated propositions for the leaders of National Sport Federations in Canada who are attentive to opportunities to improve the well-being of their athletes. Chapter 5 also addresses the limitations of the research presented in this dissertation, as well as recommendations for future research related to Olympic-level athlete well-being.

## **Lay Summary**

With the pressure to prepare and compete at the Olympic Games, there are concerns that Olympic athletes are exposed to factors that are harmful to their well-being. In an effort to produce research that might help support the well-being of current and future athletes at the Olympic-level, the purpose of the research included in this dissertation was to identify and better understand the various factors that influence (in a good way or bad way) athlete well-being. Interviews with recently retired Olympic athletes, national team coaches, National Sport Federation performance directors, and national sport chief executive officers were conducted. The research findings and discussions from these interviews were then used to provide practical recommendations to those leaders of National Sport Federations who are interested in improving the well-being of their athletes.

## Preface

The studies for chapters 2 and 3 have been written in manuscript format. Chapters 2 and 3 have been published in peer-reviewed journals.

**Chapter 2** was published in *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*. The citation is: Sauv , J. L., O'Rourke, J. J., Wilson, B., Bundon, A., & Beauchamp, M. R. (2022). Looking back to move forward: Recently retired Olympians' perspectives of factors that contribute to and undermine athlete well-being. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 11(1), 44-60. doi: 10.1037/spy0000273. My contributions included all aspects of the investigation, including research conceptualization, design of the methodology, participant recruitment, conducting the interviews, data analysis, writing – original draft and review and editing. Beauchamp, M. R. was the supervisory author for this study and contributed to the research conceptualization, design of the methodology, and was involved throughout the manuscript composition and review and editing. Wilson, B., and Bundon, A. contributed to the research conceptualization, design of the methodology, and review and editing the manuscript. O'Rourke, J. J. contributed to the data analysis, review and editing the manuscript. Ethics approval was obtained from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia (ID: H22-01585).

**Chapter 3** was published in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. The citation is: Sauv , J. L., Waldhauser, K. J., Wilson, B., Bundon, A., & Beauchamp, M. R. (2023). What supports and what thwarts Olympic athlete well-being?: Coach and organizational perspectives. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, doi: 10.1080/10413200.2023.2166156. My contributions included all aspects of the investigation, including research conceptualization, design of the methodology, participant recruitment, conducting the interviews, data analysis, writing – original draft and

review and editing. Beauchamp, M. R. was the supervisory author for this study and contributed to the research conceptualization, design of the methodology, and was involved throughout the manuscript composition and review and editing. Wilson, B., and Bundon, A. contributed to the research conceptualization, design of the methodology, and review and editing the manuscript. Waldhauser, K. J. contributed to the data analysis, review and editing the manuscript. Ethics approval was obtained from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia (ID: H22-01585).

**Chapter 4:** Supporting Olympic athlete well-being: Knowledge mobilization for National Sport Federations.

For the research reported in this chapter my contributions included all aspects of the investigation, including research conceptualization, design of the methodology, participant recruitment, conducting the interviews, data analysis, writing – original draft and review and editing. Dr. Mark R. Beauchamp was the supervisor for this project and contributed to the research conceptualization, design of the methodology, and was involved throughout the project review and editing. Ethics approval was obtained from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia (ID: H22-01585).

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CCES – Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport

CEO – chief executive officer

COC – Canadian Olympic Committee

ILM – intensive longitudinal methods

IOC – International Olympic Committee

IST – integrated support team

NSF – national sport federation

NSO – national sport organization

PERMA – Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment

PD – performance director

PWB – psychological well-being

PWBS – psychological well-being scale

SD – standard deviation

SDT – self-determination theory

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## **Dedication**

To Sara, Griffin, and Ellysen.



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In January 2023, 91 scholars from 30 Canadian universities presented an open letter to the Prime Minister of Canada calling for an urgent inquiry into the current climate of elite sport, that has been beset with multiple instances of athlete mistreatment and impaired physical and psychological athlete well-being. In 2022 alone, several Canadian National Sport Federations (including ice-hockey, soccer, rowing, rugby, artistic swimming, water polo, bobsleigh, skeleton and gymnastics) were publicly criticized for perpetuating a toxic culture within elite sport that has had an immeasurable harm to the well-being of athletes (McKenzie, 2022). In their letter, the scholars demanded an independent inquiry and the reformation of a sport system where the well-being of athletes is placed as an absolute priority (Scholars Against Abuse in Canadian Sport, 2023). In the same month that the team of Canadian scholars published their letter, Canada's former Minister of Sport from 2018-2019, Kirsty Duncan<sup>1</sup>, explained that individuals in positions of power (including National Sport Federation leaders and government officials) pushed back against her efforts to prioritize a safe sport environment that supports athlete well-being, and that there exists a lack of understanding of the factors that negatively influence the well-being of athletes within the Canadian sport environment (Heroux, 2023). With the proliferation of controversy described above with respect to Canada's National Sport Federations, the current era represents a watershed moment for both 'understanding' and 'looking to support' the well-being of elite athletes in Canada.

In an effort to produce research that might contribute to supporting the well-being of current and future athletes, and in the context of my dissertation, I sought to ascertain what factors contribute to and/or undermine athlete well-being at the very highest level of sport performance, namely among Olympic-level competitors. This involved conducting, and

reporting on, two qualitative studies (chapter 2 and 3) that when taken together, provide the basis for a subsequent knowledge mobilization project (chapter 4). This knowledge mobilization project was designed to explore Canadian multi-sport leaders' perceptions of my research findings and the concomitant evidence-informed implications and practical recommendations (that I offered on the back of these studies) for Canadian National Sport Federations to support elite athlete well-being. In the final chapter of my dissertation (chapter 5), I reflect on these national leaders' perceptions and discuss 'what' (based on the research subsumed within this dissertation) National Sport Federation support for elite athlete well-being could encompass in moving forward. A more detailed description of the purpose and structure of my dissertation is presented below. Prior to outlining the purpose and structure of my dissertation, it is important to first articulate how well-being has been conceptualized more generally in sport. In this chapter, I explore how athlete well-being has been studied, and investigate the psychosocial factors identified as having an effect on well-being, and specifically in the context of elite (Olympic-level) sport.

### **1.1 Conceptualizations of Well-Being**

Seeking to understand factors that constitute well-being across a wide range of contexts is an area of research that has, over the last two decades, evolved from the investigation of ill effects of negative states and psychopathology to an expanded view of human flourishing (Hernandez et al., 2018). With this evolution, the nature, scope, and definition of well-being has come more clearly into focus. While there may be no singular universally agreed upon definition, broadly conceived, well-being is best described as a multidimensional psychosocial construct that encompasses both the pursuit of what feels good (the presence of positive emotions and affective states), as well as thriving in life while striving to realize one's full

potential (Diener 2009; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). This definition acknowledges both the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives of human functioning as central concepts in the study of well-being (Huta & Waterman, 2014).

The hedonic approach to well-being includes the pursuit of positive emotions and affective states (i.e., happiness, pleasure, carefreeness) and the avoidance of negative states (i.e., anger, pain, fear). Further, hedonic well-being is associated with an individual's immediate and short-term pursuit of their basic wants and needs (Diener, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2018). Where a hedonic approach focuses on the individual pursuit of what feels good now, a eudaimonic approach to well-being involves the pursuit of realizing one's true potential over time and involves the cognitive appraisal of what the individual believes to be virtuous and meaningful (Huta, 2014). Philosophers as far back as Aristotle have advanced the idea that the aim in life is to strive to realize one's true nature (authenticity) and potential ('daimon'), making the most of one's talents and capacities. The outcome of this pursuit for personal growth and excellence is what Aristotle termed *eudaimonia* (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Although the theoretical and empirical literature on well-being has made clear the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Tomer, 2011), it has also been recognized that the greatest levels of well-being involve attributes of *both* (Huta, 2014; Huta & Waterman, 2014). Both approaches contribute to a broader conceptualization of well-being and are important for defining and investigating factors that contribute to human well-being.

## **1.2 Psychosocial Factors and Well-Being**

Within a literature that is attentive to both hedonic and eudemonic perspectives, several scholars have advanced models that have identified and defined various psychological and social factors that are posited as having a causal influence on well-being (Forgeard et al., 2011). A

notable body of research emerged from the seminal work of Carol Ryff who developed a model of psychological well-being (PWB), “to address omissions in formulations of positive human functioning that prevailed in the 1980s” (Ryff, 2013, p. 10), and to establish a theoretically informed measure of well-being with acceptable validity evidence (Cooke et al., 2016; Giles et al., 2020). Ryff’s PWB model includes six psychological factors that are deemed central to well-being, including self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth, and positive relations to others (Ryff, 1989). Ryff’s model was operationalized via the widely used Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS, Ryff & Keyes, 1995), with research indicating that well-being is prospectively related to improved physical health-related outcomes over time (Babnik et al., 2021). For instance, compared to those with low psychological well-being profiles, those with high psychological well-being profiles reported fewer subsequent functional health impairments over a ten year period (Ryff et al., 2015), and a reduced risk of chronic health conditions and mortality (Ryff, 2016). Accordingly, these findings linking well-being to important health indices have been instrumental in shifting the focus of researchers to include an emphasis on identifying and defining factors that *promote* well-being (Keyes, 2016).

This shift in focus galvanized research by others such as Corey Keyes who developed a model to define and appraise *social well-being* (Keyes, 1998). Keyes posited that well-being cannot be assessed without particular consideration given to an individual’s perception of their ability to thrive in social contexts, and that well-being is contingent upon a variety of interrelated social factors that include meaningfulness, social integration, acceptance of others, social contribution, and social actualization. Relatedly, evidence has amassed on the causal association between facets of social well-being and positive individual health outcomes (Holt-Lunstad, 2022). For example, positive social relationships (supportive and genuine connections with

others) can serve as a protective factor against stress (Hostinar, 2015), health disorders (Yang et al., 2016), and morbidity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Keyes' emphasis on positive social functioning provided important context for subsequent efforts to identify and define distinct factors that promote well-being. This includes the work of Martin Seligman who, under the acronym PERMA, identified and defined five factors that he contended promote well-being; these include Positive emotions (e.g., hope, interest, gratitude), Engagement (e.g., immersion in the present moment), Relationships (e.g., acceptance and care from others), Meaning (e.g., sense of purpose in life), and Accomplishment (e.g., achieving results, Forgeard et al., 2011; Seligman, 2018).

There has been considerable debate within the field of psychology related to the utility of the PERMA model, and whether in fact those five factors that are posited to contribute to well-being in the model are synonymous with well-being itself. For example, Goodman and colleagues (2018) reported high correlations ( $>.95$ ) with measures of subjective well-being, and suggested that the PERMA model is redundant, and thus offers no insights beyond measures of subjective well-being. Other work supports Seligman's contention that the PERMA constructs operate as building blocks for subjective well-being (Donaldson et al., 2021). Previous correlational work has found that the five PERMA constructs are positively associated with various health indicators (Coffey et al., 2016; Kern et al., 2014). From an applied perspective, it has been posited that targeting these PERMA constructs through intervention (via programs and policies) may represent practical means of facilitating individual well-being across various social services and life domains (Kern et al., 2014), including the workplace (Donaldson et al., 2022), and education (Kern et al., 2015; Kovich et al., 2023).

A complimentary, but distinct area of well-being research developed by Deci and Ryan (2001) explores well-being from a motivational perspective. To examine conditions that facilitate well-being, Deci and Ryan developed a macro theory of human motivation known as self-determination theory (SDT). Within their theory, Deci and Ryan (2000; 2002) proposed three innate needs of humans are essential to foster well-being. These three basic needs include competence (i.e., an individual's perceived mastery of tasks within their environment), autonomy (i.e., an individual's perceived ability to make choices and decisions within their environment), and relatedness (i.e., an individual's perception of belongingness with others in their environment). A considerable body of SDT-informed research demonstrates how fulfilling these three basic needs is viewed as a natural aim of human life and essential to enhance an individual's psychological and social well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT research remains an important and growing area of well-being inquiry, applied widely across a variety of contexts, including sport (Deci et al., 2017). For instance, researchers have highlighted that supporting the autonomy of athletes can enhance psychological well-being (Gagne, 2003) and provide athletes with coping skills to manage the stressors within their sport environment (Gaudreau & Antl, 2008). Further, autonomy supportive behaviours within sport have been associated with greater effort (Pope & Wilson, 2012) and improved performance in athletes (Pope & Wilson, 2015).

### **1.3 Athlete Well-Being and Psychosocial Factors**

Research contributions from those such as Ryff, Keyes, Seligman, Deci, and Ryan provide important insight into the psychosocial factors that influence well-being across a variety of social contexts including education (Simmons et al., 2015), the workplace (Nielsen et al., 2017), and sport (Lundqvist, 2011). In the context of sport, a significant body of research, that falls under the broad umbrellas of sport psychology and the sociology of sport, has emerged that

demonstrates the array of psychosocial factors that contribute to an athlete's well-being (both positively and/or negatively). Lundqvist (2011) ascertained that to enhance an elite athlete's experiences of well-being it is important to understand the unique social factors that influences an athlete's experience in sport. Some researchers have reported that the coach, as the primary figure responsible for the preparation and performance of athletes, has the greatest influence on shaping the culture in which athletes operate (Bissett et al., 2020). By shaping the culture of the sport environment, the coach is also the central figure influencing an athlete's experiences of well-being (Keegan et al., 2014). For instance, coaches who adopt a more athlete-centred and less authoritarian coaching style are reported to have athletes who are more committed, trustworthy, and satisfied (Mallory et al., 2023). Coaches who support the basic needs of their athletes (and particularly autonomy), have athletes who feel more respected (Dohsten et al., 2020), and motivated (Keegan et al., 2014). Conversely, athlete well-being may be negatively influenced in circumstances where, for instance, athletes perceived their coach to be too controlling (Cheval et al., 2017), and/or discouraging of balance across life domains beyond sport (Dohsten et al., 2020). As Kavanagh (2017) reported, the prevailing culture within elite sport thrives on the authoritarian leadership of coaches, a power imbalance that can create a range of negative effects on athlete well-being (e.g., physical and/or emotional abuse).

Increasingly, researchers have highlighted that other interpersonal dynamics, beyond the coach-athlete relationship, contribute to an athlete's experiences of well-being. For instance, in their study on thriving and elite sport performers, Brown et al. (2018) found that family members and teammates provide an important foundation of support that can facilitate athlete well-being. Similarly, an athlete's relationship with their performance support team within their sport environment (e.g., physiotherapist, sport psychologist, team physician) can provide a source of

positive social support (Bartholomew et al., 2017). Conversely, an elite athlete's well-being can be thwarted where there is continuous personnel turnover within their performance support team (Wagstaff et al., 2015), limited financial support (Malone et al., 2019), poor communication (Ekstrand et al., 2019), and a win at all costs approach to competition (Roberts & Sojo, 2020). Similar to the coach-athlete relationship, the imbalance of power between an athlete and their performance support team is a risk factor for depleted well-being and can lead to various forms of physical and psychological athlete abuse (Roberts, et al., 2020), and particularly within an elite sport environment (Mountjoy et al., 2016). For elite (Olympic-level) athletes, their sport environment is typically overseen by their respective National Sport Federation. In Canada, for example, each Olympic sport is governed by a separate National Sport Federation whose leaders are responsible for organizing and delivering the core operational functions within an athlete's sport environment (i.e., finances, human resources, and national teams). Specific to the athlete's sport performance, the performance logistics (e.g., hiring and oversight of coaches and support team, competition schedules, and training environment) are managed in many Western countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom by the National Sport Federation performance director (Arnold et al., 2019). In their study on elite athletes, Fletcher and Arnold (2011) highlighted that, in addition to the coach, the performance director in the United Kingdom is a central figure in shaping the culture of the sport environment.

Increasingly, prominent media reports (Dotson & Sterling, 2021; Smith & Pegoraro, 2020), and notable studies (Kavanagh et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2020) have underscored that factors associated with the culture pervading the elite sport environment can undermine the psychological well-being of athletes (including a win at all costs approach, and controlling coaches). Though elite athletes are, at times, able to cope with the psychological pressures



within their sport environment, exhibiting mental toughness (Gucciardi et al., 2017) and resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012), the defining cultural factors promoted within elite sport can lead to negative well-being outcomes for athletes. These outcomes include overtraining (Chang et al., 2020), disordered eating (Coker-Cranney et al., 2018), negligent injury management (Bahr et al., 2020), mental health stigma (Gulliver et al., 2012), and abandoning life domains outside of sport (Hardy et al., 2017). Notably, researchers have highlighted that these problematic well-being outcomes can be exacerbated as athletes progress to the highest levels of their sport (e.g., an Olympic-level) (Henriksen et al., 2020; Mountjoy et al., 2016).

#### **1.4 An Olympic Perspective**

In seeking to explore potential psychosocial factors that contribute to Olympic-level athlete well-being, some scholars have noted that Olympians experience a greater overall risk of exposure to stressors that negatively impact their well-being (Hardy et al., 2017). This exposure has been further posited to be compounded by the pressure of competing in the Olympic Games (Haut et al., 2016). To ascertain what factors contribute to and/or undermine the well-being of Olympic athletes, it is important to recognize the global sporting context of the Olympic Games in which they compete. The International Olympic Committee is the self-proclaimed “supreme authority” for all matters related to the Olympics (“International Olympic Committee,” n.d.), however the International Olympic Committee, along with the Olympic host nations, sponsors, and television broadcasters are reliant on Olympic athletes from across the globe to create a compelling spectacle through their pursuit of “faster, higher, stronger”<sup>2</sup> performance outcomes (dos Santos et al., 2021). In its current form, the Olympic Games are held every two years, alternating between the summer and winter Olympics, with an audience of billions (up to 70% of the world’s population) watching the athletes (Nielsen, 2008). In total, over 10,000 athletes from

more than 200 National Olympic Committees will compete in the upcoming Olympic Games in 2024, where it is anticipated the financial cost to the host nation of this mega-event will exceed \$14.5 billion (Nussbaum, 2022).

However, more than just a financial cost, the infrequency, global expansion, and heightened nationalism of the Olympic Games comes at a cost to the well-being of the participating athletes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). As highlighted in recent consensus statements (Chang et al., 2020; Henricksen et al., 2019), including expert consensus statements authorized by the International Olympic Committee (Reardon et al., 2019), the performance demands associated with competing in the Olympic Games represents a significant threat to the well-being of Olympic athletes. Threats to the well-being of Olympic-level athletes can be wide ranging within a sport environment where performance demands are centred on an unhealthy emphasis on winning. As Roberts et al. (2020) highlighted over two decades ago, the emphasis on *winning above all else* is a distinguishing feature of a self-regulated Olympic sport system. Within this system the pressure for athletes to perform (and win) at the Olympic Games is, at times, compounded by National Sport Federation leaders (including coaches and performance directors) who depend on a results-based funding model to operate the core elements of their operations (e.g., human resources, training camps, competitions, support staff) (Malone et al., 2019). Given this, and in light of the problematic psychosocial factors perpetuated within the Olympic sport system, it is unsurprising that many scholars are demanding a more standardized and evidence-informed approach to ensure the well-being of athletes is the priority within their sport environment in moving forward (Reardon et al., 2019; Scholars Against Abuse in Canadian Sport, 2023).

## 1.5 Purpose and Structure of the Dissertation

The overall goal of my doctoral dissertation research was to ascertain what factors contribute to and/or undermine Olympic-level athlete well-being. Accordingly, I interviewed Olympic athletes, national team coaches, and National Sport Federation performance directors from within the Canadian Olympic sport system. In chapter 2 of my dissertation, I present Study 1 (Sauvé et al., 2021). For this study I took an interpretivist approach to query 12 recently retired Canadian Olympians about the factors they perceived contributed to, or impaired, their well-being over the course of their careers as international athletes. Although researchers have examined factors that might influence well-being among elite athletes (e.g., Brown et al., 2018), there has been a notable gap in research focused on understanding those factors among experienced Olympic athletes. Study 1 directly addresses this gap, and in an effort to advance understanding of factors that contribute, both positively and negatively, the well-being of Olympic-level athletes. The results of Study 1 underscore the complexity of factors that contribute to these elite athlete's experiences of well-being, and the problematic imbalance of power embedded in what can be described as a *self-regulatory elite sport system*. Further, the results highlight that authority figures (such as coaches and performance directors) have a profound, and at times harmful, impact on Olympic athletes' experiences of well-being.

In light of these findings, and building on Study 1, I adopted a critical interpretivist approach in Study 2 (Sauvé et al., 2023). This study constitutes chapter 3 of my dissertation and includes a qualitative thematic analysis of 24 participant interviews, including 12 Canadian National Team coaches and 12 Canadian National Sport Federation performance directors. Notably, prior to this study, there was a lack of research on the factors influencing Olympic athlete well-being as described by those key social agents, namely coaches and performance

directors, who are integral to shaping the psychological climate and well-being of the athletes under their guidance. Accordingly, the purpose of Study 2 was to explore the factors these participants felt influence athlete well-being and to examine their perceived roles in contributing to the well-being of their athletes. Furthermore, I was interested in ascertaining synergies and discordance between the perspectives of the coaches and performance directors that I interviewed.

As a complement to conducting the abovementioned primary research with athletes, coaches, and performance directors, a major higher-level goal of my doctoral research is/was to disseminate/exchange the key findings with leaders in the Canadian elite sport environment. Indeed, from the outset I was particularly keen to share any practical implications and provide evidence-informed recommendations related to how Canadian National Sport Federations may help support the well-being of their athletes and potentially refine future programs and policies. As such, I sought to share the knowledge presented in my doctoral studies with leaders who served in influential positions, and who were at the centre of communication and strategizing with National Sport Federations. With this in mind, chapter 4 includes a knowledge mobilization project (“Supporting Olympic athlete well-being: Knowledge translation for National Sport Federations”) wherein I shared the findings of chapters 2 and 3 (i.e., Studies 1 and 2), along with an executive summary (see Appendix C.3) with the Chief Executive Officers of the Canadian Olympic Committee and the Coaching Association of Canada who agreed to, and indicated a desire to, respond to these studies’ findings ‘on the record’. I subsequently sought to explore these leaders’ perceptions of our findings, and explore whether (and the extent to which) these findings could be used to inform subsequent decision making and practices within these organization, as well as potential barriers to implementation. In the final chapter of my

dissertation (chapter 5), I reflect on these leaders' perceptions and the practical implications for the elite sport system, as they relate to athlete well-being. Chapter 5 also includes a synopsis of the studies and knowledge mobilization project subsumed within Chapters 2 to 4, including notable findings, general limitations of the research, as well as potential applied contributions. I discuss 'what' National Sport Federation support for elite athlete well-being might look like and suggest future directions for researchers interested in understanding, and intervening to support, athlete well-being.

## 1.6 Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In Canada the Prime Minister appoints a Member of Parliament to serve as the Minister of Sport. The Minister of Sport is responsible for the oversight of Sport Canada, the government agency providing approximately \$233 million sport system annually, 76% of which is distributed to multi-sport organizations and National Sport Federations (Government of Canada, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> “Citius, Altius, Fortius” (translated in English to “Faster, Higher, Stronger”) is the traditional Latin motto for the Olympic Movement as promoted by the International Olympic Committee. More recently, the word “Communiter” (translated in English to “Together”) was added to the motto (International Olympic Committee, 2021).

## **Chapter 2: Looking back to move forward: Recently retired Olympians' perspectives of factors that contribute to and undermine well-being**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Elite athletes represent a unique population in sport, subject to an array of demands that set them apart from their nonelite athletic counterparts (Lebrun & Collins, 2017). Within the elite sport environment, and compounded by the globalization, nationalism, and infrequency of the Olympic Games (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Haut et al., 2014), Olympic-level athletes can be subject to increased psychological pressures and social demands. In their analysis of Olympic athletes, Hardy et al. (2017) reported various psychosocial characteristics that distinguish Olympic champions from other athletes including the need for success, obsessiveness, and/or perfectionism in training and performance, ruthlessness and/or selfishness in pursuit of their athletic goals, and prioritizing their athletic career over other life domains. Further, in a recent consensus statement published by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Medical and Scientific Commission, Reardon et al. (2019) noted that compared to their nonelite athletic counterparts, elite athletes may experience a greater overall risk of exposure to factors that negatively impact their well-being such as psychological abuse (Mountjoy et al., 2016), stigma in seeking help when their well-being is thwarted (Gulliver et al., 2012), and well-being challenges due to injury or transitioning out of sport (Schuring et al., 2017). In explaining reasons why athletes may experience a greater threat to their well-being, Kerr et al. (2020) and Coakley (2015) highlighted issues regarding the self-regulatory nature of sport organizations that are incentivized to prioritize performance results above all else (Carless & Douglas, 2013), and the

propensity of elite athletes to embrace a culture that can at times undermine their well-being (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

### **2.1.1 Well-Being**

Well-being is best described as a multidimensional construct that includes the presence of positive emotions and affective states (e.g., happiness), the absence of such negative emotions and affective states (e.g., depression, anxiety), life satisfaction, as well as thriving in the fulfillment of one's potential (Diener, 2009; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Describing well-being as such acknowledges both the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives of human functioning as central concepts to the study of well-being (Huta & Waterman, 2014). The hedonic approach to well-being includes attributes such as pleasure, carefreeness, and happiness and is concerned with both positive and negative effects. Hedonic well-being is associated with the individual's acquisition of their basic wants and needs and focuses largely on circumstances in the present moment (Diener, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2018). Where a hedonic approach focuses on the individual pursuit of what feels good in the present, a eudaimonic approach to well-being involves the pursuit to realize one's true potential over time and involves the cognitive appraisal of what the individual believes to be virtuous and meaningful (Huta, 2014).

The study of well-being in sport psychology research is commonly attentive to both hedonic and eudaimonic approaches and includes the investigation of both psychological and social factors that contribute to athlete well-being. Much of what is known about these factors can be synthesized into two primary areas of study. Broadly speaking, these relate to the various interpersonal and social dynamics that exist within the elite athlete sport environment (e.g., the coach-athlete relationship, athlete support teams), as well as the intrapersonal or psychological



characteristics displayed by elite athletes and their respective development (e.g., resilience, focus, mental toughness). Also relevant here are the structural conditions and political aims that underpin decisions about when and how much to invest in elite sport, and the outcome measures associated with such investments – recognizing that investments are often driven by aims associated with performance-related prestige markers, and that the pursuit of such outcomes may be at the expense of the well-being of athletes (Donnelly, 2009). Attending to these macrolevel processes is especially important when attempting to explain why elite sport cultures and environments have the features they do and why certain problems may be perpetuated. It is also valuable when developing recommendations for systemic changes that may support athlete well-being.

### **2.1.2 Social Dynamics**

Within the extant sport psychology literature, no relationship has been the subject of more study than that of the coach and athlete. Coaches shape the sport environment and culture in which their athletes operate (Bissett et al., 2020) and serve as a primary agent for supporting and motivating elite athletes to enhance their sport performance and individual well-being (Jowett, 2017). As a central figure shaping athlete motivation (Keegan et al., 2014), coaches have the strongest influence on motivation when they support their athletes' basic needs, particularly that of athlete autonomy (Felton & Jowett, 2015; Stebbings et al., 2015). Conversely, when coach behaviour is perceived to constrain athletes' basic needs, motivation and well-being may be negatively influenced. In a recent study, Cheval et al. (2017) indicated that coach behaviours that are controlling in nature can undermine elite athletes' basic needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, particularly when a coach expects athletes to centre

their entire lives around sport. Lack of support for, and increased coach control over, elite athletes' lives inside and outside of sport can lead to a variety of negative impacts (Dohsten et al, 2020). These range from a noncritical acceptance of negative coach behaviours that thwart an athlete's well-being through increasing negative emotionality (e.g., anger and anxiety; Stirling & Kerr, 2013), to severe emotional abuse such as shouting or the use of insulting and/or demeaning language (Kavanagh et al., 2017).

Despite these findings, and highly publicized accounts of abuse within mainstream media, these behaviours and the maltreatment of elite athletes persist (Coakley, 2015). Explorations of why forms of abuse repeatedly occur in sport contexts commonly lead to questions about the incentive systems that dictate the priorities of administrators at all levels of sport – recognizing that these priorities are linked to decisions about how resources are invested (e.g., how performance-focused investments are balanced against investments in athlete safety), what policies and procedures are in place for reporting abusive behaviours, and how the effectiveness of these policies is assessed (Kerr et al., 2020). As noted above, too, the cultures that are fostered in sporting environments – cultures that tend to fall in line with the incentive systems that drive the funding of athletes and organizations – are relevant for the day-to-day experiences of athletes (Donnelly, 2009). For example, Kerr et al. (2020) reported that elite athletes may accept maltreatment within their sport environment to avoid consequences that might inadvertently negatively impact their performance goals (e.g., being benched, not selected), fearing ostracism and isolation if they were to complain. Considering these findings, it is not surprising that in their survey of 266 recently retired Canadian national team athletes, Greaves et al. (2000) concluded that athlete maltreatment was a systemic problem concerning not

only the coach-athlete relationship, but the athlete's relationship with their support personnel more broadly.

The well-being of elite athletes is posited to be facilitated by a variety of additional performance specialists (e.g., sport psychologist, physiotherapist, nutritionist, physician) and sport organization leadership (e.g., high performance director, administrative staff) within the sporting environment (Bartholomew et al., 2017). For Olympic-level athletes in Canada, these individuals form an athlete's *integrated support team* (IST), who are tasked with the goal of ensuring "athletes are healthy, fit and psychologically ready for optimal performance" (Own the Podium., n.d.; Hings et al., 2018). ISTs can include up to eight sport science and medical disciplines, each with multiple practitioners (Swim Canada, n.d.). Several researchers have highlighted the complex challenges associated with an increase in sport science and medical disciplines within an athlete's IST. These include blurred role clarity between IST disciplines (Theberge, 2009), a need to produce "fast" results with limited funding (Malone et al., 2019), personnel turnover (Wagstaff et al., 2015), and suboptimal internal communications (Ekstrand et al., 2019). Collectively, these operational factors can diminish athlete well-being (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009).

### **2.1.3 Psychological Characteristics**

In addition to interpersonal relationships within the elite sport environment, consideration has also been given to how the psychological characteristics of elite athletes influence their own well-being. Often with a view to understand which psychological characteristics facilitate sport performance, researchers frequently focus on how elite-level athletes respond to stressors in their sport environment (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Several studies point to

characteristics which, at times, can serve as protective factors that help athletes withstand the demands of elite sport, including focus (Hardy et al., 2017; Swann et al., 2015), mental toughness (Gucciardi et al., 2017; Jones, 2002), and resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Conversely, psychological characteristics common among elite athletes can have (unintended) deleterious effects on their well-being. Characteristics such as a maladaptive, obsessiveness, the need for success, and extreme single mindedness can potentially damage athlete well-being (Carless & Douglass, 2013; Hardy et al., 2017).

#### **2.1.4 Purpose of the Study**

Although some research has notably examined factors that might contribute to well-being among elite athletes (e.g., Brown et al., 2018), there has been a relative paucity of research focused on understanding those factors among experienced Olympic athletes. In Hardy et al.'s (2017) Great British medalists project, the authors identified several aspects related to psychosocial development of Olympic medalists (e.g., commitment, emotional regulation, competitive environment); however, the study was not explicitly concerned with examining the etiology of athlete well-being. Recently, Arnold et al. (2019) examined factors that contributed to well-being among athlete support personnel (who worked with Olympic-level athletes), but did not seek to examine sources of well-being among the athletes themselves. Some research has explicated some of the varied emotive responses that emerge during specific periods of transition, such as the post-Olympic “blues” that athletes might experience immediately after the Olympics have ended (Howells & Lucassen, 2018), or the experience of retirement from international competition (Cosh et al., 2015). In this study, we specifically sought to query recently retired Olympic athletes about factors that they felt contributed to, or impaired, their

well-being over the course of their respective international-level athletic careers. Although the Olympics represented the pinnacle competitive event for all athletes in this study, they were also involved in national and international-level competitions between Olympic cycles. Sampling athletes right at the end of their careers was identified as holding substantive potential to reveal unique insights that only the accumulation of (considerable) experience (through a lifetime of involvement in elite sport) and perspective can offer. Most research involving recently retired athletes has focused on the experience of ‘transitions to retirement’; however, in this study we sought to examine the perspectives of this population regarding those factors that they felt supported and/or thwarted their well-being while they were Olympic-level athletes.

## **2.2 Method**

### **2.2.1 Participants**

Twelve recently retired Canadian Olympic athletes (eight women and four men), who ranged from 27 to 39 years of age ( $M_{age} = 33.42$ ,  $SD = 2.78$ ), participated in the study. Six had competed at the Winter Olympics (two from alpine skiing, and one each from biathlon, cross country skiing, figure skating, and luge), and six had competed at the Summer Olympics (basketball, cycling, rowing, soccer, triathlon, and volleyball). Participants competed in at least one and up to three Olympic Games. Five participants competed in sports classified as team sports and seven competed in sports classified as individual sports. Four of the participants won Olympic medals. As part of the study’s inclusion criteria, participants were categorized as *recently retired* if they competed at one or more of the following Olympic Games: Vancouver 2010 Winter Games (five participants), London 2012 Summer Games (four participants), Sochi 2014 Winter Games (three participants), or Rio 2016 Summer Games (two participants).

Additionally, participants were required to have competed for Canada at the international level for five or more years prior to their publicly announced retirement.

### **2.2.2 Procedure**

At the outset, the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) agreed to assist with arms-length recruitment (see Appendix A.1). After ethical approval was granted from the first author's institutional review board, the COC distributed an information letter by email to approximately 190 athletes who fulfilled the inclusion criteria. This letter outlined the purpose of the study and invited interested participants to contact the first author directly (see Appendix A.2). The letter offered assurances of participant anonymity and that involvement in the study was voluntary. The first 12 athletes who replied to the invitation were selected as study participants. The decision to engage a purposive sample of 12 was informed by the recommendation to include enough interviews to provide new insight into the area of study (Smith & Sparkes, 2017), but to include no less than six interviews (Braun et al., 2016). Further, a sample size of 12 was consistent with comparable qualitative studies in elite sport (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014; Thelwell et al., 2017), and those interviewing Olympic athletes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Sarkar et al., 2015). Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview (see Appendix A.3). Athletes were made aware that they could decline to answer any questions or choose to withdraw from the study at any time without experiencing any negative consequences. The interviews were conducted from May to June, 2017 and recorded by Skype (nine interviews), telephone (two interviews), and in-person (one interview). The average interview duration was 31 minutes.

### **2.2.3 Interview Guide**

To explore the perceptions of participants in relation to factors associated with their well-being during the course of their international athletic careers, questions were pursued flexibly and moderately altered as conversations unfolded (see Appendix A.4). In order to obtain greater insight into the participants' involvement in their sport, and to foster rapport between the interviewer and interviewee, participants were initially asked to provide a summary of their sporting background at the international and Olympic levels. Participants were then asked what well-being meant to them. This was done to establish a broad understanding of what is meant by well-being (including its multiple subfacets), and (if needed) orienting participants to a broad definition of the construct (from the extant literature), before subsequent questions were posed related to factors that participants thought contributed to and/or thwarted their well-being.

Participants were asked to share stories of well-being support and nonsupport (i.e., “Describe a time when your well-being needs as an athlete were (were not) being met?”), and how their national sport federation (NSF) responded in these situations. These stories often led to further probes regarding the most substantive factors that participants felt thwarted or supported their well-being. While the majority of questions focused on personal stories and reflections, the final questions asked participants for their perceptions of the elite sport system in Canada. For example, participants were asked: “Is there anything you would suggest could, or should, be put in place to ensure elite athlete well-being is supported in Canada?” Additional probes often led to suggestions from participants on what is needed to change with respect to elite athlete well-being.

#### **2.2.4 Data Analysis**

To analyze the data for this study, interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a latent thematic analysis by the first author. The analyses were guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase process of familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. Throughout these phases, a *reflexive thematic analysis* approach was embraced, acknowledging the subjectivity of assumptions and decisions made while capturing the themes that were coded (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). After multiple readings of the transcripts and three rounds of coding, a matrix of *higher order themes* and *lower order themes* (sub themes) was developed. QSR NVivo 12 software was utilized to organize and code the data.

#### **2.2.5 Rigour**

An interpretivist approach underpinned this study with the intent to understand participants' subjective experiences in elite sport and interpret athletes' meanings ascribed to these experiences (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). Working within an interpretivist paradigm requires the researcher to be reflexive about the quality of the study, as demonstrated by a commitment to rigour within the research methods applied (Smith & McGannon, 2017). To assess the quality of the study, considerations of rigour were aligned with the methods deemed most relevant to the goals of the inquiry (Burke, 2016). This relativist approach enables an assessment of quality and rigour where "researchers use criteria from lists that are not fixed, rigid, or predetermined before the study, but rather are open-ended; they can add or subtract characteristics from lists" (Smith & McGannon, 2017, p. 16).



All decisions regarding data collection and data analysis were designed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of results. To enhance credibility, the sample for this study was selected from those Olympians who had recently retired from international competition, who were free to reflect on their elite sport experience without potential consequence to their athletic career. The trustworthiness of researcher interpretations of the participants' reflections was maintained through collaboration and ongoing consultation with the senior author, including through the development of the interview guide and themes. This collaboration enhanced reflexivity and encouraged the lead author to ensure analytical alignment between research paradigms, thematic findings, and the presentation of results. Rigour within the data analysis process was augmented with the addition of a third researcher. Consistent with Thelwell et al. (2017), a third researcher was not involved with data collection or initial data analysis, but reviewed the raw data and provided critique and discussion throughout the coding and theme development process. Two additional co-authors served as critical friends, encouraging dialogue and providing feedback on data analysis and interpretation (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

### **2.3 Results**

As illustrated in Table 2.1 below, the data analysis resulted in the generation of three higher order and nine lower order themes. The three higher order themes reflected interpersonal dynamics, NSF operations, and intraindividual factors involved in supporting or thwarting participants' well-being. Findings for lower order themes are presented under the associated higher order theme. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned a number from A1 to A12.

**Table 2.1** *Higher and Lower Order Themes of Perceived Factors Associated with Well-Being Among Recently Retired Olympic Athletes*

Higher Order Themes	Lower Order Themes	Meaning Units
Interpersonal Dynamics		106
	Coach-Athlete Relationship	39
	Athlete's Support Team	44
	Athlete's Training Environment	23
NSF Operations		108
	Finances	43
	Planning	26
	Communication	39
Intraindividual Factors		148
	Results-Focused Mindset	74
	Identification with Elite Sport Norms	42
	Feelings of Isolation versus Connectivity	32

*Note.* Displayed in the table is the frequency of meaning units coded for all higher and lower order themes. Frequency counts are not intended to denote the relative importance of any one theme over another. Frequency counts are reported to provide insight into the relative frequency with which participants discussed themes.

### **2.3.1 Interpersonal Dynamics**

The participants described a variety of individuals within their sport environment as having had an influence on their well-being. The personnel that constitute an athlete's sport environment are wide ranging, with each individual serving a specific role in elite athletes' experiences. As illustrated by A8:

Whether that for us was our high-performance director, down through the coaches, down through the team of support staff working with each group, and then obviously the people you're surrounded by every day. I think just that whole environment can be such a huge influence, because that is what you're doing every day, and these are the people you're with, all your time is spent with them.

All participants spoke to the interpersonal dynamics within their sport environment during the time they were international athletes. Specifically, participants highlighted their relationship with the coach, the interpersonal dynamics with their support team, and the interpersonal dynamics within their training environment as having had an influence on their well-being.

#### **2.3.1.1 The Coach-Athlete Relationship**

All participants in the study referenced the relationship with their coach in contributing to their well-being. Participants underscored the importance of this relationship, as expressed by A1 who said: "The biggest influence on my well-being I would say... a coach makes a huge difference." Participants also elaborated on the complexity of the coach-athlete dynamic, as conveyed by A5:

A coach is a boss, and bosses have to tread a fine line between getting buddy buddy and producing and motivating, and you're going to have to scold, and you might have to fire, and you might have to make tough decisions, but that doesn't preclude them from creating a relationship of some sort, right?

Six participants shared positive reflections when discussing their coach relationship, including A3 who described that he "just got along well with the coach," and "felt like he checked in with us, and cared how we were doing, not only in our daily performance but as a person." Six participants shared stories of negative dynamics with their coach, most of which reflected a deeper more personal impact on their well-being. As A2 articulated:

There are moments in my career where I would go to my coach and say, I'm in essence dying out here! Like, I feel so alone... and they did not have the skillset or capacity to listen. They would say, we'll get back out there and we'll train and... they just didn't have the capacity.

Some participants expressed concern related to the control their coach held over them. A few participants elaborated on this, explaining strategies employed by the coach in an effort to control athletes for the sake of maximizing results. This was expressed by A9, who said: "I've also had coaches that have definitely used psychological warfare, essentially, to get the best out of their players and the mental breakdowns as well as the physical, and again, those were rough, rough times for me as a player." Also highlighted by A9 were potential downstream effects on well-being where negative coach-athlete relations persisted:

I will suffer for the rest of my life from injuries that occurred because I was abusing my vessel, just to try and do some insane coach's idea of what tough athletes look like.

And you know what, that example is a much lesser one because I think the mental agonies I went through with certain other aspects of my game were much harder and much more challenging to overcome, so that was just a physical example.

### **2.3.1.2 The Athlete's Support Team**

In addition to the coaches, a support team is typically employed by the sport organization (NSF) with a goal to maximize the athlete's performance. This support team includes, but is not limited to physiotherapists, psychologists, physiologists, nutritionists, strength and conditioning specialists, physicians, and equipment technicians. All of the participants referred to the interpersonal dynamics with their support team and reflected on how these dynamics influenced their well-being, both positively and negatively. Most participants discussed their support team as essential to their well-being because collectively these individuals were responsible for their performance readiness and general health maintenance. As described by A2, "for the health portion of it, the fitness, the doctors and physios that you need is huge, because of the strains you take on your body as an athlete."

The most frequently cited member of an athlete's support team was the psychologist. Ten participants discussed dynamics with their sport psychologist, some of which reflected positive interactions and some negative. Three participants shared positive experiences with their sport psychologist, including A9 who explained an outcome of these experiences: "Now I've retired, I've continued that practice because I don't think it's...psychology is not sport psychology, it's psychology." In describing her positive interaction with her team psychologist A4 explained:

He was all about knowing who you are and where your support is, and then he was just working with a group of people like myself who have the competitive fire, have that switch turned on, but really just need to be healthy and happy and whole, and then you just put us in our arena and we can do it, if we can manage the pressure we put on ourselves. That was really critically important for me, I had great sport psychs.

Balanced against these positive interactions, several participants described the dynamics with the psychologist supplied by their sport organization as problematic. As illustrated by A7:

So if that sport psychologist doesn't work for you, which is pretty common, everybody connects with different people in different ways... but he never worked for me, and I didn't know where else to go... you don't feel like you have the base to ask questions, or to question what they're doing, you just think they know best, and that you should just be happy with what you're given?

While acknowledging the importance of the interpersonal dynamic between athlete and psychologist, A10 also reflected on the challenges she faced with her appointed psychologist:

I think well-being as you talked about is massive, and that comes from good mental health and happiness, and I think sport psych serves a big part of that, but I think their job is really hard, because it has to go beyond sport at some point and I don't think all sport psych's can do that.... I just think you need to be careful with who the sport psych is, and sometimes I felt like everything was more towards performance, because that was her job, but she wasn't listening as much when it was more about general well-being.

When meeting with his sport psychologist and discussing more general well-being A2 explained: “They would turn it back to performance, and it wasn’t until I went outside of our regular sport psychologists we work with to a regular psychologist that I found someone that was able to listen.”

### **2.3.1.3 The Athlete’s Training Environment**

The training environment is typically organized and funded by the elite athlete’s sport organization and consists of their coaches, support team, teammates, and facilities. Most of the participants suggested their training environment was a factor that impacted their well-being at the time they were an elite athlete. Seven of the participants discussed the positive influence of effective interpersonal dynamics within their training environment, including A9 who explained: “They did a really good job of hiring the right people to sort of...support us through this new territory and ground, and to then not just hire them for tournaments, but to have them part of our lives.” Some participants described the influence to their well-being of a training environment adapted to the athlete, taking into consideration the athletes’ experiences and development in elite sport. A5 explained that the career path of an athlete is not linear, and a more flexible training environment that accommodates the individual is appropriate:

There’s very few that I could pinpoint that said they [athletes] just followed the path from A to Z. Most of them say, I followed the path from A to T or A to U, and the remaining, usually at the end of their career, were fighting against the system, and the system’s so ingrained that it’s like, you followed the system to get here, you need to follow the system to get to the very end, and it’s like no; I don’t think you need to actually.

The notion of a less flexible, more systematized training environment was highlighted by four participants as restricting their personal development. As A7 explained:

I think [name of sport organization] just needed so much control over the athletes, they needed to measure them and monitor them and make sure that they were doing it exactly properly according to their way... that kind of... it sort of crushed the spirit of why these people are such good athletes, and so when you're feeling a little bit like a lab rat.

Acknowledging an athlete's restricted training environment appeared to impact athlete well-being, A3 offered an athlete-centred recommendation to sport organizations:

I think that was the biggest thing, just giving athletes the breathing room to figure out which interventions and which support systems that the NSO could provide that were helpful in their development, and then just giving people the time to see their development through.

### **2.3.2 National Sport Federation Operations**

Throughout their career in elite sport, Olympic athletes have an ongoing relationship with their NSF. Core operational functions of the NSF include providing performance leadership to support athletes (e.g. coach, high performance director, IST), planning and financially supporting athletes' programs, and establishing a process to communicate and engage with their athletes.

All participants spoke of multiple operational factors related to their NSF as having influenced their well-being during their time as elite athletes, including finances, planning, and NSF communication.



### 2.3.2.1 Finances

Finances were the most frequently mentioned of all operational factors perceived by the participants as having had an influence on their well-being. All participants mentioned finances, with most characterizing financial factors as a stressor. As stated by A7: “You could be racing at a World Cup level and still be paying quite a bit of money to compete, and that’s obviously super stressful for a lot of people.” Compounding the lack of funding for the individual athlete, eight participants suggested the *inconsistency of funding* from their NSF had a negative impact on their well-being, particularly when funding was taken away. A1 explained:

I felt like I was fighting a battle on my own, me and my partner, but the other thing it did too was that we lost our funding. The expense of our training didn’t go down...trying to make the Olympics and achieve our goals, I ended up having to work even more, like I worked even more as a waitress when I was able to get back up on my feet, so as my competitors are doing their full training and getting massages after to recover, hot and cold tub, you name it...and having sports science on their side...I would finish a 5 hour day of training and go and be on my feet for another 6 hours working as a waitress.

Eight participants described a sport system where consistency in funding was tied to performance results, and how this results-based funding model was a stressor for athletes, particularly when results were poor and funding was jeopardized. As illustrated by A10:

We had a lot of trouble in terms of the system letting us down, we had a lot of trouble in the last year, we lost a lot of funding, we weren’t getting results... so, that’s how

the Canadian sport system works... if I was getting the results then everyone was supportive and happy.

A1 discussed the influence of a system where funding is dependent on results: "I think a lot of it is just perspective as always, but that's not easy to keep when you're being continually told what you need to be at, and if you don't do it, there's no money." With a lack of funding, some athletes perceived this as a lack of care from the NSF, as A12 explained: "There's no money, nobody even cares if we're there, nobody's going to help us along... who's going to be there?" While most referenced finances as a stressor, three participants did reflect on *positive financial initiatives* by their NSF, including A3:

He brought in private backers, he brought in a lot of volunteer resources initially, that helped us make a few gains right at the beginning working with him, that gave us just that little bit of a head start where we could breathe a bit, and it's not just World Cup to World Cup.

#### **2.3.2.2 Planning**

Most participants reflected on well-being implications related to the lack of longer-term planning over the entirety of their career in sport, including guidance with planning for life domains outside of sport. Having a longer-term plan for elite athletes, guided by the NSF, was an operational factor discussed by 11 participants. As A1 explained: "I think that... more guidance, as to here's what's possible, here is a path you should take, and it's up to the athletes to obviously take it, but more guidance towards what are the resources that you have". A3 suggested this planning and guidance should include a well-being plan for the duration of an elite athlete's career:

Long-term well-being or that athlete life cycle curve, where it takes them through 5-10 years of their career, and then beyond that, and where they're going to fit in the sport after they leave, and... even on the front end, like where are they coming from, and what kind of situations are we finding successful athletes in and from, and what are we missing?

Over half of the participants explained that planning support from their NSF, with regard to pursuing post-secondary education, was an operational factor that influenced their well-being.

As described by A1:

I wished that I would've been able to be in school through it all, because of finance and because of coach's lack of support I wasn't... Even though I was taken care of as an athlete at the time, it was self-serving for these people to not prepare me for life. During that time I was their full client, but it was better for them for me not to be in school, not for me!

### **2.3.2.3 Communication**

NSF communication was an operational factor raised by 10 participants as influencing their well-being. Of the operational factors related to NSF communication, the most reported positive influence on athlete well-being was simply the *ability to listen*. As A10 reflected: "I think listening to the athlete is massive, because they'll know what's best for them in the long-term." Accentuating the point, A12 stated: "That is maybe the greatest thing, being able to listen to the feelings of the individual athlete." Recounting her team's Olympic qualification after an 8-year hiatus from the Games, A6 described her NSFs ability to listen as a key factor in supporting the well-being of the team:

I felt like they started to listen to us, and what we needed, and even just where we trained, and how many people they brought in, and to the schedule of we were an older team, and we couldn't train as many times back to back to back kind of days, and more days off, and even recovery mode, they looked into what was the best recovery for us.

Conversely, eight participants described ineffective communication from their NSF and the adverse influences on athlete well-being including A2 who described selective NSF communication:

Being recognized for who you feel you really are outside the athlete is important. And going back to my first point of well-being, an athlete recognizing that they're more than an athlete... well, when that part of you that's the athlete wants to speak to a coach or organization, that they're there to listen to that part of you, and recognize that. They'll listen to you as an athlete for sure, they got your full ears, but if I want to talk about other aspects, or who I am, there was no one there for that to be recognized.

### **2.3.3 Intraindividual Factors**

All participants reflected on their state of mind during their time as an elite athlete, why this mindset persisted, and what were the perceived impacts on their well-being as a result. All shared reflections of intraindividual factors associated with well-being that including a result-focused mindset, identification with elite sport norms, and feelings of isolation.

### **2.3.3.1 Results-Focused Mindset**

All participants described their mindset during their career as focused on their competition results. Ten participants suggested having an exclusively result-focused state of mind was detrimental to their well-being. As conveyed by A11:

My results were a reflection of who I was and of my self-worth, and so that's detrimental because it varies and fluctuates week in and week out, and it doesn't allow you to take risks. And every time you step out on the court, it's a moment to go oh my God, today am I a good person, or a bad person?

Elaborating on how this result-focused state of mind was reported to negatively influence athlete well-being, A2 explained:

I mean, if you're talking about getting results, it's like using cheap, dirty fuel that maybe you run through an engine, and you get bursts of energy, but the engine will seize. I know where to channel my anger and frustration, and accept it into my skiing and training, but I was slowly degrading inside.

### **2.3.3.2 Identification With Elite Sport Norms**

Most participants discussed experiences they considered to be “normal” during their time in elite sport and how prescribing to these norms, at times, thwarted their physical and psychological well-being. Participants shared personal experiences in sport that required sacrifice, taking risks, and refusing to limit themselves physically, all of which they identified as a normal part of being an elite athlete. However, as stated by A5 when reflecting back on conforming to the perceived norms of his sport: “I'm realizing, oh man, that wasn't normal.” A3 described that the norms embedded within elite sport encouraged him to push his limits: “Sport

for me was always about pushing your individual boundaries, and understanding what that journey is like, and where you learn more about yourself and your own human condition, because you're operating on the fringes.”

Seven participants discussed the demands of elite sport, and the impact on their physical well-being. As A9 recollected:

I remember eating in bed, and sort of nibbling on a granola bar between these sessions, and literally not being able to do anything else. My energy was just, get to training, try and eat something, sleep. That was all I could manage physically... we then went to a tournament, where I remember the ball rolling over my foot, and not being able to move my foot...just completely over-trained.

While unaware at the time, A9 elaborated on the long-lasting physical consequences: “When you first started playing, how they [coaches] believed training worked was to break you down physically, to destroy you, and [I am] definitely feeling the effects of that at the end of my career.”

Reflecting on why athletes continued to conform to the perceived norms of elite sport, five participants explained that they lacked the awareness that their actions could have a negative influence on their physical and/or psychological well-being. As illustrated by A5:

I was not aware that my well-being was being compromised in the pursuit... at that time, I was good, but upon reflection... well there were moments when I definitely was not, I definitely went through my bouts of depression and challenges with the team.

Underscoring the lack of awareness by athletes that accepting what is considered “normal” in elite sport can negatively impact their well-being, A5 recalled:

It was normal to feel fatigue, it was normal to feel these kinds of pressures non-stop, and as I transitioned out, I’m realizing oh man, that wasn’t normal. Like, being an athlete, you’re going to be rundown physically, rundown mentally, how do you... because athletes start so young, they don’t know any better, and it puts more onus on the sport system to make sure that we’re making sure that these athletes are supposed to feel like humans, not supposed to feel rundown or they’ve got nothing to them anymore.

### **2.3.3.3 Feelings of Isolation Versus Connectivity**

Eleven participants described times when they felt isolated and that these experiences negatively influenced their well-being. During a particularly challenging period of her career, A9 compared her lived experience to being incarcerated:

The routine was the same every day, you woke up, you ate, you trained, it was absolutely the same every day, and you were critiqued and criticized throughout. And it was the hardest thing I’ve ever lived through... I think my sister summed it up best: ‘what’s the difference between what you were doing, and a minimum-security prison?’ And...there weren’t any differences.

A few participants reflected on how individuals within their training and competition environment created isolating conditions. As shared by A2: “When I got physically harassed by the same coach, um... and I told my athletic director, he shrugged it off, “Oh no, he’s European, it’s fine,” and I’m calling from Europe over... at 21, in tears, and like... I had nowhere to go”.

As A4 suggested, feelings of isolation may be a factor in preventing many athletes from reaching their potential: “For every female athlete who stands on the podium, I would guess there are many more who didn’t make it to that level because they were bogged down in injuries and eating disorders or social isolation.”

Contrary to feelings of isolation, nine participants shared experiences of connectivity and empathy, which were positively associated with well-being. As A5 recalled:

I had a specific coach, and we were working a lot collaboratively, so you and I are going to mesh our brains together, you’re not superior to me, I’m not superior to you... I wasn’t this autonomous vehicle that worked by myself, and that worked really well, it was kind of, “how do we mold [Athlete Name] into what we need him to be? Because he’s already proven that he’s good enough that we should spend that time changing that.”

## **2.4 Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of recently retired Canadian Olympians in relation to factors they believed contributed to, or impaired, their well-being over the course of their careers. The results provided unique insight into the interpersonal dynamics, NSF operations, and intraindividual factors that participants felt influenced their well-being. In explaining these factors, participants described a variety of demands central to their experience in elite sport (e.g., lack of sport life balance, managing relationships within their sport environment). When taken together, the factors described by participants support claims from previous research that Olympic-level athletes represent a unique population, subject to particularly heightened levels of psychological pressure and social demands (Hardy et al., 2017;



Reardon et al., 2019).

Participants identified their relationship with their coach as an interpersonal dynamic that contributed to their well-being. Not surprisingly, this finding is consistent with a substantial body of research that underscores the influence of the coach in promoting a positive culture of well-being support (Bissett et al., 2020; Dohsten et al., 2020). More specifically, it aligns with the widely accepted notion that the coach is a central figure in shaping the motivational climate for the athlete (Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015). In reflecting back on their relationship, a number of participants highlighted how their motivation was influenced by their coach, and in particular related to *autonomy supportive behaviours* of their coach. This finding is notable as, despite operating in an elite sport environment where higher levels of autonomy-support might be expected (as compared to earlier stages of athlete development), participants described coaches who did not employ autonomy supportive behaviours (e.g., considering the athletes' perspective) and explained that these unsupportive behaviours negatively impacted their well-being. These findings suggest that athletes could benefit from greater ownership over the development of their sport environment when competing at the highest level (Kavanagh et al., 2017), specifically via coach behaviours such as committing time to listen to and converse with their athletes. Indeed, coaching styles that are more athlete-centred and less authoritarian can enable athletes to feel respected and better control how they feel in sport and in life (Dohsten et al., 2020).

In addition to the coach, participants identified a variety of sport science and medical personnel as influential in shaping their sport environment. Participants discussed several of these individual IST roles (physiotherapist, team doctor, strength and conditioning coach). They were particularly insightful in their reflections on the role of the sport psychologists assigned by

their NSF. In elite sport, the sport psychologist is a primary guardian of athlete protection and well-being (Kavanagh et al., 2017). However, of particular note, participants' reflections of their relationship with their sport psychologist suggested that, at times, an unsupportive and problematic relationship existed. A number of participants expressed particular concerns and frustration regarding the psychologists' focus on performance and results, to the exclusion of discussing personal matters and support for their overall well-being. Gulliver et al. (2012) found almost a decade ago that when (young) elite athletes have negative experiences with sport psychologist, this can act as a barrier to seeking help in the future and (in particular) at times when athletes may need support the most. While participants expressed frustration regarding the psychologists' focus on performance-related issues, some emphasized the value of a relationship that was attentive to their general well-being. Current research suggests that recurrent success in elite sport is dependent not only on athletic talent but also on effective relationships within an athlete's sporting environment (Wagstaff, 2019). More than ever, sport organizations are being held accountable for their role in ensuring a duty of care by promoting positive relationships between athletes and those individuals within their sport environment (Wagstaff, 2019). This duty of care represents a *shared mandate* across all levels of a sport organization (MacIntyre et al., 2017).

The results of this study, pertaining to NSF operations, suggest that elite athletes desire input into the long-term planning and communication of decisions that affect their experience in sport. This finding aligns with work conducted in other domains (such as medicine and education), that emphasize the importance of "having a say," and in doing so may challenge entrenched assumptions on authority and operational decision-making process (Simmons et al.,

2015). A number of participants reflected on the (in)capability of their NSF to communicate with athletes and listen to their concerns and suggestions related to factors that directly influenced their sport environment. These factors included decisions on the location of their daily training environment, the selection of international competitive events, opportunities to pursue post-secondary education, and the selection of personnel employed by the NSF to support them (e.g., sport psychologist). In particular, participants underscored their concerns related to the amount and inconsistency of *funding* from their NSF. By characterizing finances as a substantive stressor, this finding supports recent claims that financial hardship and perceived financial (in)security undermine elite athlete well-being (Walton et al., 2021). When taken together, the results pertaining to NSF operations, point to a notable awareness and desire by elite athletes to be more informed and engaged with operational and policy decisions that affect their sport environment (Bundon et al., 2018; Kihl et al., 2008; Thibault & Babiak, 2005).

Relatedly, there are implications for future research that could be discerned from our findings that: (a) the interviewed athlete saw value in having additional input into the kinds of well-being related supports they are offered, and; (b) that they were also interested in increase communications with NSF representatives who are sensitive to athlete experiences and identities outside the sporting realm as well as those within sport. Specifically, we would suggest that these findings invite additional questions about ways that athletes experiences and perspectives are tied to, for example, racial and ethnic identities, gender identities, sexuality, and class position – and about how differently positioned athletes, who may be required to negotiate systemic and over challenges within and outside sport that are integrally related to their social location, would describe their well-being when they feel supported within NSFs, and when not.

In light of the wealth of research related to both activism and long-standing forms of discrimination in and around sport (Kilvington & Price, 2017) – and recent events where questions around the obligations of elite sport leagues to respond to societal tensions and the interests and needs of elite athletes around the Black Lives Matter movement – extending the findings in this paper to consider athlete well-being in these contexts would seem to be an important and obvious next step.

In addition to findings related to interpersonal dynamics and NSF operations, participants identified various intraindividual factors that contribute to their well-being. In looking back on their careers in elite sport, a number of participants described a lack of awareness of factors that they later realized thwarted their well-being. This finding is consistent with the notion of *false consciousness*, in which an individual fails to perceive the injustices of their situation. The concept of false consciousness is helpful in understanding why an individual may hold inaccurate (or false) beliefs that are contrary to one's own best interest (Jost, 1995). Jost and Banaji (1994) point to a variety of psychosocial factors (e.g., ego, stereotypes, intergroup relations) by which individuals and social systems justify and maintain existing conditions, even at the expense of their own personal well-being. Drawing from this concept, and aligned with insight from participants, this finding suggests that (while they are competing) elite athletes may be largely unaware of (or dissociate from) the negative influences on their well-being due to their own psychosocial characteristics. An example of this pertains to a result-focused mindset, whereby, as participants explained, not only does the elite sport system perpetuate an emphasis on results, but so too does the “normal” or “expected” elite athlete mindset. At the elite level, medals are a matter of nationalistic pride (Haut et al., 2016), where funding support is dependent

on results (Kerr et al., 2020), and athlete adversity is considered a normal and essential factor for winning (Sarkar et al., 2015). Where elite athletes conform to this result-focused narrative, as suggested within the notion of false consciousness, long-term well-being might be compromised (Carless & Douglas, 2013).

A number of participants described struggling with long-term impacts of their conformity to the cultural norms of elite sport (e.g., inhibited from enrolment in education, ongoing injury). Results of this study suggest that elite athletes in many cases *overconform* to cultural norms (e.g., to the point where they become injured, based on excessive training). Unsurprisingly, excessive conformity to these norms can negatively influence athlete well-being (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Participants shared stories of injury, overtraining, missed opportunities outside of sport, and fractured relationships. These findings point to the detrimental effects that sacrificing well-being for the sake of achieving athletic “success” can have on athletes, particularly when athletes are unaware of this at the time of competing.

While results of this study provide unique insight into factors that might influence elite athlete well-being, the following limitations should be taken into consideration. Despite recent findings that connect an athlete’s well-being *within* their sport environment to their well-being in general (Trainor et al., 2020), exploration of influences *outside of sport* that may impact participants’ well-being were pursued less directly throughout the interviews. While participants were in no way discouraged from discussing any perceived influences on their well-being, the interview guide primarily included questions that prompted reflections of participants’ lives within their sport and during their time as international athletes. Indeed, it is possible that insights into relevant influences outside sport may have been missed, such as the influence of

peers, and family support (Brown et al., 2017; Keegan et al., 2014). It is also possible that participants' accounts were subject to memory bias. While interviewing participants who are no longer actively competing in elite sport (i.e., recently retired) was done to enhance participant candour, memory bias should be taken into consideration when appraising the results. It is possible that the length of time between participants' competing at the Olympic level and participating in an interview could distort how they recollected factors they perceived to have influenced their well-being at the time of competing.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study provide important and unique insights into factors that recently retired Olympic athletes perceived to influence their well-being. In reflecting back on their time as an elite athlete, participants provided rich, nuanced, and candid accounts of their experiences, that were both positive and negative. Participants were balanced and thoughtful in providing suggestions across the sport system to better facilitate well-being for current and future elite athletes. Results from this study point to practical implications to inform the support of elite athlete well-being. Recommendations for NSFs include a focus on fostering interpersonal connectivity within an athlete's sport environment (e.g., coach-athlete and sport psychologist-athlete relationships), establishing longer-term program plans that are effectively communicated to the athletes, and exploring opportunities to re-envision and integrate athletes into decision-making processes (see also Thibault & Babiak, 2013). Furthermore, international and national sport governing bodies should look to better align and implement programs that provide support for athletes' lives outside of elite sport. In acknowledging this, the IOC has committed to work with their member nations to improve quality of life among their elite athletes. In Canada, for instance, an initial program administered by the Canadian Olympic

Committee (COC) provides support for national team athletes to thrive (Game Plan, n.d.). Similarly, Sport Australia has invested in initiatives to support athletes in finding balance by engaging in activities away from the elite sport environment (Australian Institute of Sport, n.d.) These programs are in their early stages of development and represent efforts to support elite athlete well-being through initiatives in support of educational guidance, financial planning, and career development.

It should be noted that these programs were designed and delivered by self-regulating organizations that may have little incentive to fully address athlete well-being, or only to the degree that these programs serve the pursuit of performance outcomes (Kerr et al., 2020). Further, and supported by the findings of this study, it is this results-focused environment that might unintentionally undermine athlete well-being. Paradoxically, it is possible that programs intended to support athlete well-being end up having adverse effects. Moving forward, an evidence-informed, independent, and critical research approach when implementing and expanding athlete well-being programs is necessary (Coakley, 2015). Supported by recent expert consensus statements (Chang et al, 2020; Henricksen et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019), there is an opportunity for future research to address factors that impair athlete well-being across cultures and sports and subsequently, to encourage athletes, coaches, sport governing bodies to make well-being a core component of the athlete experience in elite sport.

Indeed, if decision-makers that dictate funding provision went so far as to mandate well-being practices and rigorous oversight as a condition of funding, this would serve not only to alter the incentive system for NSFs, but it could also lead to important changes in the culture of elite sport – whereby ensuring athlete well-being could be prioritized alongside performance

goals. At the very least, open engagement with questions about existing barriers to balancing performance and well-being goals could be engaged with at all stages of an athlete's career, and stage-specific strategies for addressing these could be considered reflexively.



## **Chapter 3: What supports and what thwarts Olympic athlete well-being?:**

### **Coach and organizational perspectives**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Since 1908, the Olympic Charter has endured as the constitutional document governing the International Olympic Committee, guiding the delivery of the Olympic Games, and defining the notion of Olympism (dos Santos, et al, 2021). Within the Charter, the fundamental principles of Olympism are described as being rooted in an ethical commitment to athlete well-being through the promotion of a balanced whole, while tasking leaders in sport with the social responsibility to understand and address well-being by putting athletes at the core of the Olympic Movement (International Olympic Committee, Olympic Charter, 2020). However, recent consensus statements and position pieces have highlighted that Olympic athletes struggle with balancing the demands of their career in sport (Henriksen et al., 2020), are more susceptible to a host of mental health problems (Reardon et al., 2019), and may compete in a sport environment rife with abuse and irresponsible leadership (Burke, 2021).

Although these reports exist in stark contrast to the principles of Olympism, they do highlight an increased awareness of the complexities of athlete well-being in Olympic sport. In their recent study, Sauvé et al. (2022) provided insight into various operational, intra-individual, and interpersonal factors that recently retired Olympians felt influenced their well-being over the course of their respective careers. The interpersonal relationship between an athlete and their coach was identified as a significant factor that was reported to both support and negatively impact athlete well-being. More specifically, coaches who were able to relate to their athletes on a personal level were described as more caring and supportive of athlete well-being. Conversely,

coaches portrayed as controlling and focused on results over athletes' individual needs were perceived to undermine athlete well-being. Similarly, the dynamic between Olympians and their support personnel (e.g., sport psychologist, performance director) was occasionally problematic when it was perceived that there was a predominant focus on performance and results. In these situations, athletes reported feeling isolated and that they could not discuss with their performance leaders the concerns they had regarding their health and well-being. The findings of this study support the assertion that an imbalance of power is embedded in the system and culture of elite sport – and, relatedly, that authority figures have a profound, and at times negative, impact on athletes' experiences of well-being (Kavanagh et al. 2017; Roberts & Sojo, 2020). These authority figures include coaches (Stirling & Kerr, 2013) and National Sport Federation performance directors (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

For many Olympic athletes, coaches are the central figures in their training and competition environment, and are responsible for the technical and tactical delivery of an athlete's sport program (Cook et al, 2021). Typically, within the structure of international Olympic sport, the coach reports to the performance director within the hierarchy of individuals employed by a National Sport Federation. For many top performing Olympic nations around the world, the performance director is responsible for managing performance logistics (such as the competition and training schedules), people (including hiring coaches), and the National Sport Federation's financial investment into the athlete and their sport program (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). As authority figures and key decision-makers, the coach and performance director not only serve as influential performance leaders within an Olympic athlete's career, they are central

figures in shaping the culture of the elite sport environment in which athletes operate (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

Increasingly, researchers have highlighted that the culture pervading elite sport may be a primary factor in thwarting athlete well-being (Henriksen et al., 2020; Mountjoy et al., 2016). Coakley (2015) emphasized that Olympic athletes are often under pressure to conform to the prevailing cultural norms of elite sport including seeking performance perfection, prioritizing results above all else, and accepting that there are no limits in the pursuit of excellence. Several studies point to the propensity of elite athletes to conform to these cultural norms and that in doing so they may undermine their own well-being (Carless & Douglass, 2013), such as through overtraining (Chang et al., 2020), disordered eating (Coker-Cranney et al., 2018), neglecting life domains outside of sport (Hardy et al., 2017), and pushing through serious injury (Bahr et al., 2020; Trainor et al., 2020). In the consensus statement by the International Olympic Committee, Mountjoy et al. (2016) noted that ‘elite athletes’ are at particular risk of threats to their well-being. Notably, the authors emphasized power imbalances between athletes and performance leaders within elite sport environments (e.g., coaches and performance directors) as a primary well-being risk factor.

In a recent review, Roberts et al. (2020) indicated that the imbalance of power between athletes and their performance leaders is a defining structural factor within sport, and an antecedent to various forms of physical and psychological maltreatment of athletes. These threats to well-being can be wide ranging in sport environments, where performance leaders can have a considerable degree of negative influence over their athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). At the Olympic level, for instance, leadership styles are frequently based on traditional forms of

authoritarianism, with organizations placing relatively few constraints on a coaches' authority in relation to athletes (Kavanagh, et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2006). With unfettered latitude in a high-pressure win-at-all costs environment, performance leaders are more likely to use coercive and manipulative tactics to exert control over their athletes (Roberts & Sojo, 2020). According to Kerr et al. (2020), the influence and control that performance leaders have over athletes is greater in Olympic sport than other levels of sport, and a reason why this maltreatment persists (Chang et al., 2020; Coakley, 2015). Even when suffering the most extreme threats to their well-being (e.g., discrimination, harassment, abuse) athletes may normalize transgressive behaviour (Mountjoy et al., 2016), fail to act or question for fear of repercussions to their career (e.g., team selection, funding), or to distance themselves from being perceived as mentally weak (Poucher et al., 2021). Despite these findings, obvious threats to athlete well-being in Olympic sport persist, as testament to the recent media accounts of athlete isolation and fear of retaliation if they do report abuse, both of which can become normalized behaviours within the culture of sport (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020).

Coker-Cranney et al. (2018) reported that it is the organizations in which athletes, coaches, and performance directors operate that promote conformity to the cultural norms of elite sport. Furthermore, Coker-Cranney et al. (2018) note, adhering to these norms is often perceived to be necessary by those within sport organizations (e.g., coaches and athletes) to achieve performance success. For National Sport Federations, the incentive to prioritize performance above all else comes in the form of financial support. Specifically, National Olympic Committee and national government funding is commonly allocated to those National Sport Federations who win Olympic medals or contribute to medal winning targets ("Own the Podium, Funding," n.d.).

This funding model has been identified as a contributing factor in the exploitation of athletes (Haut et al., 2016). As Kerr et al. (2020) described, an increased emphasis on – and an accompanying pressure to attain – performance outcomes is a distinguishing feature of the Olympic sport system, a self-regulated system in which the hegemonic narrative of a single-minded focus on winning is often propagated (Carless & Douglas, 2013), and where measures of athlete well-being do not factor into the definition of success (Donnelly, 2009). When Olympic medals are the sole measure of success for sport organizations (e.g., National Sport Federations) the narrow focus on winning can increasingly become problematic for athletes (Kerr et al., 2020). As Roberts et al. (2020) discussed, sport organizations that support a single-minded focus on winning are more often tolerant of an environment that is prone to thwart athlete well-being, and that this organizational tolerance and negligence can be an antecedent of various forms of athlete abuse (e.g., psychological, physical, and sexual) to occur in sport organizations.

Balanced against these concerns, within the extant sport psychology literature, authors have also identified that sport organization leaders, including coaches and performance directors, can create a positive environment in which an athlete's well-being can flourish (Brown, et al., 2018; Dohsten et al., 2020; Sauvé et al., 2022). Lundqvist (2011) highlighted that a more fulsome perspective of well-being includes an understanding of the positive influences that contribute to a more virtuous and meaningful lived experience within an athlete's elite sport environment. This perspective is consistent with the shift in the study of well-being over the last two decades, from the study of ill effects and negative states and psychopathology, to a multi-dimensional view of human thriving (Hernandez et al., 2018). Acknowledging this shift, some researchers have examined Olympic sport environments with a view to understand those factors,

both positive and negative, that influence well-being (Arnold et al., 2019), including studies querying Olympic athletes directly (Sarkar et al., 2015; Sauvé et al., 2022). However, there is an absence of research on the sources of Olympic athlete well-being according to, and as described by, the social agents that play a particular role in contributing to the psychological climate and well-being of the athletes they work with and/or support. We designed the current study to fill this gap, focusing in this case on coaches and performance directors as the social agents who play a role in athlete well-being.

### **3.1.1 Study Purpose**

For Olympic athletes, the coach and performance director are central figures in framing the power dynamics and shaping the culture within the sport environment, all of which can impact both positively and negatively athletes' experiences with well-being (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Roberts et al., 2020). Given the influence coaches and performance directors have on Olympic athletes' lived experiences in sport, we designed this study to ascertain, from the perspective of Olympic coaches and National Sport Federation performance directors, what factors contributed to and/or undermined athlete well-being. We were interested in ascertaining synergies and discordance between coach and performance director perspectives. From a knowledge translation perspective, the study was designed to attain insights that could be used to inform the development of programs and policies with Canadian National Sport Federations to support elite athlete well-being.

## **3.2 Methods**

### **3.2.1 Research Design Overview**

The study comprised a sample of Canadian Olympic coaches and performance directors who participated in semi-structured interviews. Analysis of data derived from these interviews was guided by a reflexive thematic analysis approach, with themes generated at the latent level. We adopted a critical interpretivist research paradigm throughout our study. Critical interpretivism draws from critical theory (Alvesson & Deetz, 2011) and interpretivist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) paradigms, and involves exploring the perspectives of participants, while at the same time holding well-founded assumptions about the cultural and structural factors that influence participants' experiences. Critical interpretivist research, including studies conducted in sport, involves an awareness of the of the hierarchies of power implicated in the perpetuation of conditions that ensure the maintenance of the status quo (Beal, 2002; Crawford, et al., 2022; Steinmann & Wilson, 2022).

Influenced by critical theoretical approaches (Alvesson & Deetz, 2011), our study drew on literature that demonstrates (a) how problems within elite sport are commonly perpetuated by and embedded within a system of power relations characterized by inequities and forms of exploitation, and (b) where the well-being of athletes especially may be compromised due to the conditions under which their labour (e.g., within national sport systems) takes place. As such, we saw this study as aligning with critical approaches that sensitize researchers to the overt and often subtle ways that such problems and inequities are perpetuated, as well as to strategies for challenging the status quo and promoting change through critique of the prevailing culture and power relations within elite sport (Cassidy, 2017).

Our study also included the adoption of an interpretivist research lens, an approach where researchers seek to understand, interpret, and ascribe meaning to participants' subjective experiences (Thorpe & Olive, 2017). The decision to work across both paradigms was motivated by our desire to (a) understand participants' interpretations of their experiences with athlete well-being specifically, while at the same time highlighting the cultural norms and power relations that shape ideologies in Olympic sport, and (b) to mobilize our findings to be translated to a wide audience within elite sport in Canada, with the intention of improving the lived experience of Canadian Olympic athletes.

### **3.2.2 Study Participants**

The study participants ( $n = 24$ ), all leaders in Canadian Olympic sport (12 coaches and 12 performance directors), were interviewed individually. In making the decision regarding how many individuals to recruit, we acknowledged that, in qualitative inquiry, there are no explicit rules to determine the 'ideal' number of participants. Rather, we were guided by pragmatic advice to adopt a sample size small enough to manage, and large enough to provide rich and novel insight into the lived experience of the participant group (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). Accordingly, we established a purposive sample of 24 participants. This decision was consistent with sample sizes used in previous qualitative research with a focus on Olympic sport (Brown, et al., 2018; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Sauvé et al., 2022, Stirling & Kerr, 2013).

The 24 participants (five women and 19 men) for this study included 12 Canadian National Team coaches (four women and eight men) and 12 Canadian National Sport Federation performance directors (one woman and 11 men). Although we sought to derive a balanced sample of women and men, the sample composition was representative of the current gender



balance of National Team coaches and performance directors in Canada. To be included all participants were required to be currently employed by a Canadian National Sport Federation as coach or performance director. Further, we required the National Sport Federation with which the participant was employed to have at least one Canadian national team eligible to compete in the Summer or Winter Olympic Games. Of the 24 participants in the study, 14 represented Summer Olympic National Sport Federations (seven coaches and seven performance directors) and 10 participants represented Winter Olympic National Sport Federations (five coaches and five performance directors).

### **3.2.3 Participant Recruitment**

Upon receiving ethics approval from our institution's Behavioural Research Ethics Board, we identified potential participants through National Sport Federation websites. We contacted only those coaches and performance directors from National Sport Federations affiliated with Olympic sport, and provided an information letter outlining the purpose of the study (see Appendices B.1 and B.2). The letter assured potential participants of anonymity and if they expressed interest in taking part in the study, they arranged with the first author a time to be interviewed. The first 12 coaches and 12 performance directors who replied to the request were selected as the study participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer questions without any negative consequences (see Appendices B.3 and B.4). Due to the high-profile nature of the participants, and that participants did not consent for their data to be shared or placed in the public domain, the data (i.e., interview transcripts) are not made publicly available (Tamminen et al., 2021).

### **3.2.4 Data Collection**

We developed two semi-structured interview guides; one for coaches and one for performance directors (see Appendices B.5 and B.6). The interview guides comprised three sections, with each section designed to progressively explore the perceptions of participants in relation to factors they felt were associated with athlete well-being. The first section consisted of questions to build rapport, obtain a brief history of participants' experience in international sport, to understand how they construed athlete well-being, and to explore the participants' approach(es) to managing the well-being of their athletes. In the second section of the interview guide, participants were invited to share stories from their involvement in international sport, reflecting on situations in their role as coach or performance director when they felt the well-being needs of their athletes were being supported, or thwarted. In the third section of the interview guide, questions explored what well-being programs exist, or should exist, within participants' respective National Sport Federation and the broader Olympic sport system. To encourage insight into participants' reflections and recommendations, questions were pursued flexibly and with additional probes injected throughout each individual interview. Each of the 24 participants were interviewed by the first author (20 interviews by telephone and 4 interviews in-person) with interviews ranging from 15 minutes to 45 minutes in length (the average length of interviews was 29 mins).

### **3.2.5 Analysis**

Throughout the data analysis process we incorporated a reflexive thematic analysis approach. By adopting a reflexive thematic analysis approach, we acknowledged that the construction of all findings was subjective and that, as researchers, we were active participants in

the interpretation of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). We transcribed verbatim all interviews and organized the data using QSR NVivo 12 software. All analyses were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of familiarizing ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. The analyses were led by the first author, but informed iteratively by ongoing conversations with the research group (see section below on Methodological Integrity) who pushed and challenged the interpretation and/or asked different questions of the data based on their own areas of expertise and interest. Accordingly, after multiple rounds of transcript analysis and abductive coding, we generated resultant themes at the latent level. Summaries of these themes (along with illustrative quotes) are provided below.

### **3.2.6 Methodological Integrity**

Our embrace of critical interpretivism guided our analysis, and all other methodological decisions, including our appraisal and illustration of study rigour. For instance, the ontological underpinning of an interpretivist paradigm is relativism – an approach promoting ongoing reflection and reinterpretation of judgements made (including those decisions concerning rigour), as time and circumstances change (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Accordingly, we adopted a relativist approach to the assessment of rigour within the study. Embracing a relativist approach supported our belief that, for this study, criteria to evaluate the quality of research should be tailored to the goals and methods of the study (Burke, 2016). We did not select quality criteria from fixed lists prior to the study (e.g., Tracy, 2010), but rather applied quality criteria flexibly within the study (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Although quality criteria were applied flexibly, trustworthiness and meaningful coherence represented criteria of quality assessment that underpinned our study. For instance, to enhance trustworthiness of our data analysis throughout the study we incorporated a team of five researchers who promoted a reflexive and iterative process intended to encourage a greater understanding of the lived experiences of our participants. More specifically, [Author 1] was supported by ongoing consultation through a senior author, [Author 5] who provided feedback on alignment between research paradigms, theme development, and the presentation of findings. An audit trail was developed by [Author 1] and supported by [Author 2] to provide a framework for research steps taken and ongoing discussions and decisions throughout the study (Nowell et al., 2017). [Author 3] and [Author 4] fulfilled the role of critical friends and provided feedback on interpreting the data and positioning of findings (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This collaboration of five researchers promoted considerable reflexivity throughout the study. At the same time, we recognized that the construction of all findings was subjective and that, as a team of five researchers, we were active participants in the interpretation of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Accordingly, and while it was the task of [Author 1] to track group conversations and decisions, [Author 5] ensured researcher biases were acknowledged and managed appropriately throughout our deliberations (Crawford et al., 2022).

In addition to trustworthiness, meaningful coherence was a criterion of quality assessment adopted throughout the study. The coherence of our study was enhanced by ensuring meaningful interconnections between the study aims, the literature, and balanced interpretations of the lived experience of our study participants (Tracy, 2010). Meaningful coherence was adopted given our decision to embrace critical interpretivism, and to our aim of highlighting

threats to athlete well-being, while at the same time recognizing our biases and remaining open to different perspectives. For example, we made sure that we queried participants on factors they perceived as both negatively and positively influencing athlete well-being, to promote a balanced perspective.

### **3.3 Results**

The findings generated include three higher-order and six lower-order themes (see Table 3.1 below). The three higher-order themes reflected the relentless pursuit of results, the influence of the coach, and financial uncertainty. The six lower-order themes are subsumed under the associated higher-order theme. When taken together, our findings of this study highlight that participants were aware of threats to athlete well-being, including that their pursuit of high-performance incentives can negatively impact the well-being of their athletes. However, participants were, at times, not aware how to support well-being or of their individual role in potentially negatively influencing the well-being of their Olympic athletes. The findings are discussed within the broader context of the culture of elite sport. To ensure anonymity, we allocated participants in the study a number from C1 to C12 for coaches, and PD1 to PD12 for performance directors.

**Table 3.1** *Higher and Lower Order Themes of Perceived Factors Influencing Well-Being Among Elite Athletes*

Higher Order Themes	Lower Order Themes	Meaning Units (Participants)		
		Coach	PD	Total
The relentless pursuit of results		46 (12)	49 (12)	95 (24)
	The lack of opportunities outside of sport	25 (12)	23 (9)	48 (21)
	The focus on results as harmful	21 (9)	26 (11)	47 (20)
The influence of the coach		72 (11)	35 (11)	107 (22)
	The coach as the relationship builder	40 (9)	15 (8)	55 (17)
	The coach as the gatekeeper of well-being	32 (9)	20 (9)	52 (18)
Financial uncertainty		24 (11)	55 (12)	79 (23)
	Financial uncertainty of the program	10 (7)	21 (9)	31 (16)
	Financial uncertainty for the athlete	14 (7)	34 (12)	48 (19)

*Note.* Displayed in the table is the frequency of meaning units coded for all higher and lower order themes. Frequency counts are not intended to denote the relative importance of any one theme over another. Frequency counts are reported to provide insight into the relative frequency with which participants discussed themes. Displayed in brackets are the number of participants who discussed the corresponding higher and lower order themes.

### 3.3.1 The Relentless Pursuit of Results

All 24 participants discussed that the relentless pursuit of results has a negative influence on athlete well-being. As PD9 explained: “We’re putting such an emphasis on results, but it often removes the athlete’s well-being because you’re so focused on that. It’s almost like a ‘survival of the fittest’ kind of approach.” Participants described an elite sport system in Canada designed to win medals, and that this pursuit of results shifts focus away from the well-being of athletes. As illustrated by PD5:

People on the Olympic committee, and certainly people at Own the Podium, and others on the amateur sport system, want all of us to believe that our results are a matter of 10 out of 10. No one ever asks about the well-being of the athlete, it’s just what’s with the results, and did you convert [win] the medals you were supposed to, and if not, why not?

Elaborating on the pursuit of results within the sport system and how this pursuit can negatively affect athlete well-being, PD7 described: “I think we’re creating, in the system and it’s not just in Canada, it’s prevalent across the sport landscape, it’s probably a bit too extreme, but they’re [treated as] robots. They’re designed, optimized to perform on the field and get the results.” As C3 added: “We start treating athletes like commodities, like we need you guys to get national results for us. I think we’re burning out some athletes and passing over athletes that could have results for us in the future.”

Speaking to the over-emphasis on performance, all coaches and nine performance directors highlighted that chasing results can limit opportunities for athletes to pursue interests outside of their sport environment, all of which can thwart athlete well-being. These findings are

reflected in the lower-order themes below including (1) the lack of opportunities outside of sport, and (2) the focus on results as harmful.

### **3.3.1.1 The Lack of Opportunities Outside of Sport**

Most participants, including all coaches and nine performance directors, discussed how the pursuit of results can limit opportunities for athletes in their lives outside of their sport environment. Some participants explained that promoting athlete well-being involves encouraging a balance across life domains (e.g., education, employment). As C2 articulated:

A lot of people talk about player-centered but talking about it and being player-centered are two different things, and player welfare can come in lots of different ways. It's encouraging a life balance, so that everything's not super focused on the same thing.

Elaborating on the importance of balance, PD6 explained that encouraging balance while an athlete is involved in the sport system can promote well-being and prepare athletes for challenging moments in their elite sport career (e.g., retirement from sport):

I think the balance is important. Particularly in our sport, I look at the age at which athletes tend to retire. If they haven't achieved balance by the time they're leaving the sport, we can have 30-year-old athletes who really have no idea what direction they want to take in life, they're not sure outside of the sport what makes them happy, what they want to do. I think achieving balance while you're in the sport, so you're still sort of in a framework, there's a certain safety around it, is very important for that transition.



Nine coaches and eight performance directors identified education as a life domain that's often neglected during an athlete's career in elite sport and elaborated on the negative implications to their athletes' well-being. As PD7 described:

I'd definitely say because our sport is quite demanding in terms of training time, multiple times a day, I think the hardships for some athletes is sometimes having to choose between developing oneself further in school and training sufficiently to be among the best. I think that's something we're trying to make easier, but that's definitely a challenge for athletes and their well-being, because I think they feel often that they're forced to make a choice.

Participants acknowledged that providing opportunity for athletes outside of the elite sport system can be challenging. As PD9 expressed: "I think the management of the athlete's life... if they're continuing with school and sport at the same time and trying to find balance between both... can be quite difficult." Participants elaborated on the complexity of providing opportunity outside of sport when the priority is to pursue world-class performances and desirable results. As C5 stated: "If I feel like, school can at some point affect their results, that's a different story so I need to take some hard decisions." Participants reflected on difficulties with how to support athletes outside of the elite sport system (e.g., education, employment), while at the same time focus on performance results. As C8 questioned: "Where does the balance sit?"

### **3.3.1.2 The Focus on Results as Harmful**

Nine coaches and 11 performance directors discussed that the pressure to perform does come at a cost, and the constant pressure to achieve results can be harmful to athletes. As PD1

explained: “The single biggest negative impact on the athletes is the pressure to achieve performances. There is an immense amount of pressure, as soon as you enter a program, for achieving some benchmark result.”

Several participants shared circumstances where, even when it was known that pursuing results will have a negative impact on athlete well-being, sport leaders will continue to prioritize performance. As C8 illustrated:

There’s denial, there’s plausible denial, and people may look at an athlete and that athlete may be winning, and they’ll look and say that athlete has any number of issues, and they choose to ignore it because the athlete’s winning. And so, a decision is made based on...a lot of coaches justify it as: imagine how bad they’d be if they’re not winning? And I honestly say that’s bullshit, and I’m quite angry about that approach, because the winning comes and goes.

As C8 further acknowledged, it is the athletes themselves who, at times, will sacrifice their well-being for the sake of results:

I’ve had athletes who put performance ahead of their own health and well-being, and I think that’s one of the education pieces, educating coaches and the national sport federation, but there’s athletes who will do whatever it takes to win to that extent, putting their own well-being at risk, and they will always find a coach who’s willing to perpetuate that.

Reflecting on the relentless pursuit of results on athlete well-being, 11 participants (four coaches and seven performance directors) explained that prioritizing results above all else, ironically, can have a negative influence on performance. Acknowledging that “the weight

[emphasis] on medals” is one of the “sport culture issues”, PD4 suggested that athlete well-being is an antecedent to sustainable performance success: “If you don’t have well-being, you can have one off success, but it’s not sustainable.” C7 illustrated an incident during an international competition where a lack of focus on well-being negatively impacted their athletes’ performance:

They were a mess; they were an absolute mess. All they needed was a day [a day off from training and competition] to walk around [name of city], that’s all they needed... Just one of the 20 days, not all of the 20 days, just one. The athlete wellness wasn’t taken care of and we had one of our worst performances we’ve ever had.

Both coaches and performance directors contended that prioritizing well-being can facilitate results, including C9 who stated:

“If their well-being isn’t good, we cannot expect them to perform.” As C4 suggested: The other initial thought is that the care, the health, and the well-being of the athlete comes first. It has to come first because they have to feel good about themselves. They have to feel strong, capable, and confident before they can perform.

As PD6 reinforced: “I would agree with the fact that when you take care of the person, you’re taking care of the athlete and you’re allowing performance to emerge.”.

### **3.3.2 The Influence of the Coach**

Throughout an Olympic athlete’s career in elite sport, the coach is a significant figure within their sport environment. Of the 24 participants in the study, 22 participants (11 coaches and 11 performance directors) described the coach as having a key role in supporting athlete well-being. PD12 explained that the coach is like “a parent” who is “at the crux of the well-being of athletes in terms of having to read the athletes, go through the highs and lows that

athletes go through, and the person who meets the needs on a day-to-day basis.” As C9 elaborated:

We have a massive influence on our athletes because we see them more than their families, we are not their sole support, they have their friends and their family, but we are a big influence on how their outlook is every day.

Reflecting on the critical role coaches serve in supporting athlete well-being, coaches and performance directors emphasized the influence of the coach as (1) the relationship builder, and (2) the gatekeeper of well-being.

### **3.3.2.1 The Coach as the Relationship Builder**

Discussing the role of the coach and their influence on athlete well-being, 17 participants (nine coaches and eight performance directors) suggested it as the duty of the coach to establish positive relationships with their athletes. Coaches in particular reflected on this duty, including C8 who described:

I try to create relationships where they feel they can ask me questions about their personal life, their professional life. I try to involve myself at the level that they're comfortable, but in saying that, if I see something that I'm concerned about, and given that I feel I do have a duty to care for my athletes, if they haven't shared something with me, I'll not go backwards and go forward and asking, or asking them to speak to someone if they choose not to speak to me.

Underscoring the importance of the role of the coach in building positive relationships with their athletes, C4 explained:

Part of coaching is building relationships so that they [athletes] really feel that the coach understands that and that you know them well enough as a person to understand what to look for and what to watch for and to know that they're okay. A huge component of coaching towards wellness is relationship building. Getting to know the athlete better and having the athlete get to know the coach better so there's a lot of trust.

Ten participants (six coaches and four performance directors) perceived trust to be the essential element a coach must establish with their athletes to promote well-being, and especially in the more challenging moments of an athlete's career. As PD6 described: "When things are not going well, the coach is largely responsible for bringing things [well-being] back for the athletes, so I see that relationship as very, very important. You have to have a lot of trust with your coach." As C5 further conveyed: "If there's no trust, there's no well-being." In offering suggestions on how to strengthen trust and the relationship between the coach and athlete, two performance directors suggested a more formalized approach, including the enhancement of National Sport Federation policy that address athlete well-being specifically. As PD4 offered: "Policy is probably the best way to impact positively on athlete well-being. If you're looking at good coaching or good leadership, put policies together."

### **3.3.2.2 The Coach as the Gatekeeper of Well-Being**

Eighteen participants (nine coaches and nine performance directors) positioned the coach as the primary individual responsible for ensuring the well-being of their athletes. As C3 described, this gatekeeper role of the coach is to be "the person whose main goal is to oversee the well-being of the athlete and is the connection between their sport and the rest of their life."

Elaborating on their role as the gatekeeper of athlete well-being, C10 highlighted the perceived responsibility of the coach to support athlete well-being with the following example:

I took that up on my own about becoming an invigilator for, for example, at the [university name]. We can be on the road in Europe and someone can write an exam, because I can actually be the so-called invigilator. That makes it easier for the athletes to actually do those academics.

Despite efforts and the expectations of coaches to fulfill the gatekeeper role, it was acknowledged that serving as the guardian of athlete well-being in an elite sport environment can be complex, and particularly in circumstances where coaches are faced with decisions between an athlete's more immediate results and their longer-term well-being. C5 explained the compromised role as the gatekeeper of well-being for a coach, in an environment where their role is to maximize performance:

I'm going to help the athletes for their well-being at some point, to a certain level, but if I feel like it's going to affect their performance or their training [negatively] in the near future, I have to take some hard decisions.

Eleven participants (five coaches and six performance directors) shared concerns that it is unclear if it is the role of the coach to serve as the primary caretaker of athlete well-being. This was expressed by C1 who said: "There's no really solid line. To me, it's situation-by-situation. There are certain times when somebody [the athlete] is telling me something and I'll be like, yea, I don't want to know this and I'll just cut the conversation off." As C9 suggested: "Maybe it's a piece by the institute [National Sport Federation] by making us more aware of where your job as a coach begins and ends." The lack of clarity regarding a coach's formal role in serving as the

gatekeeper of athlete well-being was illustrated by PD6 who expressed confusion regarding how to support well-being: “I think we just try and make sure that our athletes have access to resources and that they are aware of what’s around them.” Underscoring the concern as to how they are to support well-being, and highlighting the lack of formal guidelines for coaches regarding the role they are expected to serve as the gatekeeper of athlete well-being. Some participants reflected on the incentives within their National Sport Federation employment agreements, and their contractual obligations related to athlete well-being of. As C8 explained:

We sign up to some sort of code of ethics. It’s all very loose around what we do but we’re very clearly rewarded on performance. In my contract, the key performance indicators are very clear, but there’s no guidelines on how to achieve them outside of anti-doping and ethics.

### **3.3.3 Financial Uncertainty**

Twenty-three participants (11 coaches and 12 performance directors) discussed the finances involved in Olympic sport and reflected on the negative implications finances can have on athlete well-being. Identifying finances as a stressor, participants highlighted both the financial uncertainty for the individual athletes, as well as the uncertainty of funding for the athlete’s program.

#### **3.3.3.1 Financial Uncertainty of the Program**

Over the duration of their elite sport career, Olympic-level athletes belong to a national program organized and funded by their National Sport Federation. The core elements of the program include the training environment, human resources (e.g., coaches, performance directors, physiotherapists, psychologists, physiologists, nutritionists, strength and conditioning

specialists, physicians, and equipment technicians), and the various opportunities to compete (e.g., international tours, world championships, Olympics). Sixteen participants (seven coaches and nine performance directors) spoke of the financial uncertainty of the program and the negative influence this uncertainty can have on athlete well-being. As C3 illustrated:

We had cases last year where our sport, because of financial reasons, wasn't going to fund our athletes to the final World Cup... and that puts an emotional strain on athletes, like, it's an important part of our season! Sometimes emotional support is financial support too.

Several participants criticized the sport funding model in Canada and the financial uncertainty it creates for National Sport Federation programs. Specifically, four performance directors discussed Own the Podium, the organization primarily funded by the federal government responsible for the distribution of funds to National Sport Federations for the purpose of winning medals for Canada at Olympic and Paralympic Games (“Own the Podium, About Own the Podium,” n.d.). As PD4 said: “The Canadian sport system has to realize that it's not sustainable. People don't realize how punitive the system is. You win medals, you get money, you don't [win], you don't get money.” As C10 added: “Our biggest stress is insecurity and unsureness. I am speaking out for our sport. From year to year, we are unsure how our funding is, and not knowing that, you cannot plan.”

Reflecting on the uncertainty of National Sport Federation program funding and the influence to athlete well-being, PD5 recollected:

Two years after Vancouver [2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games] we had one of our [name of sport] athletes go down... and that was interpreted by Own the Podium as



suggesting we didn't have the same gold medal potential as we had before, so our funding was reduced. So now, you have a National Sport Federation that's now putting more pressure on their athletes, not just to win gold and medal, but if you don't go win gold medal, there won't be as much money in the system for either us to spend on you or to spend on [name of sport].

Acknowledging athlete well-being is a priority identified by their National Sport Federation, PD7 explained that supporting athlete well-being initiatives requires a financial investment "but when it comes down to dollars and cents, what's the real priority, performance programming wins each time" and "that's just the reality we live in." Furthermore, as PD8 described, there are circumstances where the cost to operate the performance programs (e.g., international tours and competitions) exceeds the funding available and athletes are required to pay for their National Sport Federation program:

They [athletes] are for the majority self-funded, so in terms of well-being they are worrying about the financial aspect of how they're going to compete and be able to achieve their goal, be it National Champion, Olympic champion, making it to the Olympics, whatever it is.

### **3.3.3.2 Financial Uncertainty for the Athlete**

Nineteen participants (seven coaches and each of the 12 performance directors) discussed that in elite sport in Canada, Olympic-level athletes face ongoing stress regarding their personal finances, particularly when contemplating life after sport. As C5 explained:

For the other guys who are really scared about their future, what they're going to do, because in [name of sport], really few people are able to make enough money to live after. For them, it could be stress on the daily basis, even affect their training.

Some participants highlighted the lack of preparation for a career after their time in elite sport as contributing to an athlete's financial uncertainty. As PD7 emphasized, the degree of financial uncertainty and future employment prospects can be alarming:

The biggest smack in the face for me, was very soon after starting in the role here, having a very experienced member of one of our teams, come and sit on the sofa in my office, and break down, terrified of what they were going to do if they weren't carded [a living and training stipend] again for the next cycle, because they had no plan. And this is an intelligent, strong, huge contributor to the team environment, to the game, and sitting in their late 20s with nothing, no opportunity.

Several performance directors perceived it to be the duty of the sport system (e.g., National Sport Federations) to support the career development of athletes while they are pursuing their Olympic aspirations. Reflecting on a conversation with an athlete, PD11 recalled a moment where the lack of support became evident:

She really had piecemealed the career so she could be an Olympian... I remember the conversation, as much because it really spoke to somebody who had sort of given her all to the sport and now was looking to move on with her life, and what had sport really done to help her prepare to move on with her life? At that point of time, not a heck of a lot.

Acknowledging the lack of support for career planning and the influence on athlete well-being, PD9 explained:

One key piece missing is really, building up their professional career portfolio over the time, and giving them little job opportunities here and there, and as a national organization that's one piece I'm trying to piece together with our existing alumni that have possible successful companies that we can utilize, so I think for me that's definitely a huge one in terms of athlete well-being.

Participants offered suggestions to reduce financial uncertainty, but recognized this may take time, investment in support initiatives, and the adjustment of expectations. As PD1 proposed:

As people [athletes] enter into the sport, some sort of plan from the beginning, on how they go through a development phase and have an exit skill from the very start so they're finished or halfway through doing something, education or work experience, whatever it may be. They shift into high gear, doing the Olympic thing, and they can exit, doing something they have already worked on. That takes a system that can fund development programs without any sort of expectations on reaching some performance benchmarks.

### **3.4 Discussion**

The purpose of our study was to examine the perspectives of Olympic coaches and National Sport Federation performance directors regarding factors they felt supported and/or thwarted athlete well-being. The findings provided insights into the harmful effects of the relentless pursuit of performance results on athlete well-being, the role of the coach in contributing to athlete well-being, and the debilitating effects of financial insecurity on athletes' well-being. The findings highlight that participants recognized threats to athlete well-being and that these threats persisted as a consequence of the underpinning incentive system and priorities

within elite sport (e.g., performance results above all else, financial considerations). Balanced against these findings the results suggest that, in general, coaches and performance directors felt uncertain about *how* they can support athlete well-being. Further, the findings suggest that participants may be unaware of their role in supporting and/or thwarting the well-being of their (Olympic-level) athletes. Paradoxically, participants acknowledged that, at times, they prioritized performance results over well-being, despite their awareness that not supporting athlete well-being can negatively impact achievement outcomes.

With regard to the *relentless pursuit of results* and links to impaired athlete well-being, this finding from the perspective of coaches and performance directors is consistent with previous work by Sauvé et al. (2022) wherein Olympic athletes identified the *result focused mindset* embedded in the culture of elite sport as detrimental to their well-being and can lead to feelings of isolation, long-term injury, and missed opportunities in life domains outside of sport (e.g. enrolment in education). Comparably, participants in the current study highlighted *education* as a life domain that is often neglected as a trade-off to pursuing Olympic results. Coaches and performance directors described how the performance demands on Olympic athletes (physical, social, and emotional) require ‘hard decisions’ be made regarding educational opportunities for athletes. Participants in the current study recognized that these hard decisions and trade-offs are a distinguishing feature of the elite sport system (Kerr et al., 2020), and that pursuing results over other life domains might negatively influence athlete well-being. However, participants also emphasized that the disproportionate focus on performance over well-being is a consequence of the underpinning *financial* structure in Olympic sport. Not surprisingly, the performance directors (whose role it is within a National Sport Federation to oversee the

distribution of funding for performance programs) highlighted that investment into the Olympic sport system is not allocated for well-being programs, but rather targeted at initiatives perceived by funding agents as more directly aligned with winning medals, such as training tours, equipment, and competitions (Donnelly, 2009). Participants acknowledged that limited financial support contributes to the financial uncertainty of both the sport programs and the individual athletes. These findings are consistent with recent studies that claim results-based funding models can be a stressor that negatively influences well-being (Henriksen et al., 2019; Sauvé et al., 2022).

Coaches and performance directors described the pressure to prioritize those elements of their sport program that funding agents (i.e., Own the Podium) deem more relevant to performance results (e.g., more competitions). Additionally, and of note (from a critical perspective) is the finding that several participants acknowledged that they prioritize athlete performance over athlete well-being, despite their belief that supporting athlete well-being would improve athletes' results. Diminishing an athlete's performance by neglecting well-being for the sake of pursuing results presents a problematic paradox for athletes, coaches, and performance directors. Acknowledging that the relentless pursuit of results negatively impacts athlete well-being, some coaches made clear that this was a trade-off they were unwilling to make. Some coaches described that, in their opinion, for an athlete to achieve optimal performance, well-being is an essential antecedent. However, and contrary to this opinion, some coaches and performance directors positioned the relationship between results and well-being as an 'either/or' proposition, acknowledging that results are prioritized (over well-being) within the Olympic sport system. When taken together, participants characterization of the association between

performance and well-being highlights a gap in understanding an important, though under-examined, causal sequence between a focus on well-being and an athlete's results. This is reinforced by recent expert consensus statements that highlight that an increasing pressure on international athletes to produce results represents a significant threat to athlete well-being (Chang et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019).

The findings of this study, related to the gap in understanding relationship between results and well-being, are useful in attempting to understand the lack of clarity identified by coaches and performance directors regarding how they can serve in supporting athlete well-being. Consistent with a substantial body of emerging research that underscores the influence of the coach (Dohsten et al., 2020; Sauvé et al., 2022), participants in the study identified the coach as the central figure within the sport environment responsible for supporting athlete well-being (e.g., assisting with education, providing adequate rest and recovery). Performance directors and coaches were aligned in positioning the coach as the “gatekeeper” of athlete well-being. However, and in addition to this finding, reflecting on the role of the coach as gatekeeper, participants expressed a lack of understanding as to *how* the coach should serve in this role. More performance directors than coaches suggested they are unclear on how the coach should support athlete well-being. This finding is significant as it is the responsibility of the performance director to oversee the coach and establish role awareness (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011), but it was evident that performance directors themselves may not feel equipped to direct, or effectively support, their coach(es) on matters relates to athlete well-being.

Despite the gap in awareness and understanding how to support well-being, few participants considered that they themselves were a potential negative influence. For instance,

the coaches in the study did *not* describe themselves in any way as undermining athlete well-being. This finding supports recent claims that a lack of self-awareness among decision-makers within the elite sport environment may, at times, be deleterious to athlete well-being (Uzzell et al., 2022). Additionally, this finding is consistent with the study by Sauvé et al. (2022), where the coach-athlete relationship was identified by Olympic athletes as an interpersonal dynamic that can negatively influence athlete well-being (e.g., overtraining, psychological abuse, overprescribing to cultural norms of elite sport). Furthermore, awareness (or lack thereof) of the negative influence on athlete well-being must be considered in light of a growing body of literature that underscores the disproportionate degree of power and influence a coach can have over athletes (Cook, et al., 2021; Kavanagh et al., 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). If coaches are unaware or unwilling to acknowledge that this power dynamic can influence the well-being of their athletes, this potential deficiency may impede the provision of effects supports for athletes.

### **3.4.1 Limitations and applied implications**

Although the findings provide insight into athlete well-being, limitations of the study should also be acknowledged. While we in no way discouraged participants from discussing any perceived influences on well-being, various demographic characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, sex, class, geography) were not identified as effects modifiers in the course of the thematic analysis and were not explicitly explored as primary antecedents of athlete well-being. In future work, research might look to explore in greater depth the relationship between the above demographic factors, social position, well-being, and elite sport participation, and investigate the societal challenges that persist across sport and non-sport contexts, and reflecting on how sport leaders and athletes themselves might be implicated perpetuating these

same societal inequities. Additionally, we delimited the study to the Canadian context. Although the findings may be of interest to other Olympic sport nations and governing bodies, questions for our sample of Olympic coaches and performance directors from Canadian National Sport Federations centred on experiences within Canada and the Canadian Olympic sport system. Indeed, it is likely that insight from diverse perspectives will enhance the inquiry of athlete well-being.

The findings and limitations of this study point to practical applied implications and opportunities for future research to inform the support of athlete well-being. An intention of this study was to examine perspectives of sport leaders responsible for shaping the environment, culture, and lived experience of Olympic athletes. When considered as a complement to perspectives derived from Olympic athletes themselves (Sauvé et al., 2022), the intent of this study was to obtain a multi-perspective view (from coaches and performance directors) that can provide insight upon which future well-being programs, policies, and interventions in elite sport can be developed. By taking this approach it appears evident that there is an opportunity for researchers to better understand, and articulate to coaches and performance directors, the nature of the relationship between sport performance and athlete well-being. Although participants in the study described a relationship between well-being and performative results, it remains to be ascertained the directional nature of this relationship and whether (and the extent to which) this is a causal one. Regardless, findings from this study point to a lack of awareness by leaders within the elite sport system (at least within Canada) as to how they can best support athlete well-being, and particularly in the context of a pervading sport culture that is perceived by those within the system as prioritizing an athlete's results above all else. Addressing such a deficit



through the development of safeguarding policies and procedures, monitoring programs, as well as mental health and well-being literacy training would appear to be an ethically-necessitated priority for knowledge mobilization (Purcell et al., 2022). Of course, it is also essential that such developments be evidence based, and that future research continue to explore stakeholder perspectives as a way of attaining insight into the efficacy of such developments and remaining in tune with changes to the social and cultural contexts that elite athletes operate within. Only under these conditions can the contributions of studies like the one reported in this paper be optimized to support the well-being of elite athletes.

## **Chapter 4: Supporting Olympic athlete well-being: Knowledge mobilization for National Sport Federations**

### **4.1 Introduction**

On completion of studies 1 and 2 (as presented in Chapters 2 and 3), an important objective from the outset was to derive insight from our study participants (Olympic athletes, international coaches, and National Sport Federation performance directors) so that the research findings and practical implications would be shared with influential leaders in the Canadian elite sport environment. As such, I sought to translate the knowledge presented in these studies in an accessible, credible, and meaningful way (Smith et al., 2015), to leaders who served in influential positions, and who were at the centre of communication with our targeted audience (e.g., National Sport Federations) (Grimshaw et al., 2012). Beyond simply sharing our research, our knowledge mobilization initiative described in this chapter was designed to examine these leaders' thoughts and impressions regarding the themes, findings, and practical implications presented in our studies. Furthermore, we sought to explore these leaders' perceptions concerning the barriers to implementing the practical suggestions presented in our studies. Specifically, this initiative involved sharing the insights derived from the first two studies of my dissertation with two influential leaders, and inviting them to reflect on their perceptions of the findings and practical recommendations that we offered. The purpose of this chapter is to present a summary of the discussions with the leaders that I interviewed. In the section below, I articulate the methodology that informed how we shared the knowledge from our studies, with whom we shared this knowledge, as well as the findings from this knowledge exchange approach. I report what they felt was notable and surprising from our themes and findings, and

their perceptions regarding the barriers to implementation related to the practical recommendations and implications that were proffered.

## **4.2 Methodology**

After receiving ethics approval from the University's Behavioural Research Ethics Board, we targeted two prominent leaders in Canadian sport to be contacted for interviews. These two individuals were identified as senior executives employed by the two Canadian Multi-Sport Organizations deemed most relevant to the overall objectives of our research, including our goal to ascertain from Olympic athletes, international coaches, and National Sport Federation performance directors what factors contribute to and/or undermine elite athlete well-being, and to transfer notable and unique insight to elite sport leaders. The leaders we targeted for our interviews were recognized as having direct interaction with, and providing guidance and support to, the senior executive leaders of Canada's National Sport Federations. Subsequently, the two individuals targeted to be interviewed were approached via email (see Appendix C.1). It was made clear they could decline to participate without experiencing any negative consequences. Both confirmed their willingness to participate and provided a signed consent form (see Appendix C.2). The individuals were also invited to assess their willingness to be deanonymized. Both indicated a desire to go 'on the record', a decision that was revisited and reconfirmed at the beginning of each interview.

The two interviews were conducted via Zoom and the average length was 57 minutes and 46 seconds ( $SD = 5$  minutes). A semi-structured interview guide was developed, and questions were pursued flexibly and judiciously altered as conversations developed (see Appendix C.4). The first section of the interview guide was designed to gather an overview of the individuals'

leadership experiences in elite sport. In the opening moments of the interview, the two individuals were asked if they had read the executive summary (see Appendix C.3). The executive summary served as a primer for the interviews and consisted of an overview of the purpose, themes, key findings, and practical implications derived from the two studies presented in Chapters 2 and 3. The full versions of the final papers were provided as well. Prior to commencing their respective interviews, both individuals confirmed they had read and understood the executive summary. This assurance was important as questions from the interview guide referred to the executive summary. For instance, in the second section of the interview guide the leaders were asked various questions regarding the higher and lower-order themes from our studies (e.g., What themes stood out to you, and why?). In the third section of the guide, interview questions encouraged reflection on the key findings from our studies (e.g., Were there any key findings that were unexpected, and if so, which ones and why?). The fourth and final section of the interview guide focused on questions regarding the practical implications and recommendations for National Sport Federations (e.g., Are there any barriers that you feel might impede National Sport Federations from implementing our suggestions?).

A critical interpretivist approach underpinned our knowledge mobilization project. Critical interpretivism is a paradigm that incorporates both interpretivist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and critical theory (Alvesson & Deetz, 2011) approaches to research. Guided by an interpretivist approach, we sought to explore and understand the perspectives of our participants by querying their interpretations of the key findings and practical implications presented in Study 1 and 2. At the same time, our knowledge mobilization initiative was influenced by critical theory, an approach intended to challenge hegemonic organizational goals, and advocate for change

through critique of power relations within organizations (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006). When taken together, the integration of critical theory and interpretivist paradigms facilitated our desire to both understand our participants' perceptions of Study 1 and 2, while highlighting to our participants the "problematic findings" from our studies.

Adopting a critical interpretivist research paradigm shaped the *design* of our knowledge mobilization initiative in various distinct ways. For instance, in the executive summary that was distributed to our participants we presented findings that highlight potential deficits within the Canadian sport system that have the potential to deplete the well-being of some Olympians (e.g., Mountjoy et al, 2016; Reardon et al, 2019). These included, among other factors, the (in)capability of NSFs to adequately communicate with athletes and listen to their concerns, the amount and inconsistency of funding provided by NSFs to athletes, as well as the perhaps paradoxical finding that support staff who were employed to 'support' athletes, on occasions, actually impaired the well-being of their athletes (see Appendix C.3). By presenting Canadian sport leaders with these 'potentially confronting' findings, as a basis for subsequent interviews, this project sought to shed light on potential systemic factors (both recognized and unrecognized by organizational leaders) that may contribute to the current 'well-being climate' of Olympic athletes in Canadian sport. Further, in our executive summary we provided practical implications for improving the lived experience of Canadian Olympic athletes and later questioned participants during our interviews on the *barriers* they perceived to implementing the well-being suggestions that were presented. From a critical interpretivist perspective, these steps provided an opportunity for sport leaders to address (in their own words) their current and forecasted level of organizational commitment towards meaningful change, but also reveal

(through their responses) any lack of meaningful engagement with changing systemic/organizational deficits. A critical interpretivist paradigm also guided how we selected the expert interviewees as participants for our knowledge mobilization initiative. Several findings from Study 1 and 2 provided critique of the organizational goals of National Sport Federations and highlighted that these goals can, at times, have a negative effect on their Olympic athletes (e.g., prioritizing performance results over well-being). With this knowledge, and our intention to advocate for meaningful change, we chose to share our findings and interview expert leaders, *who themselves have the capacity to facilitate substantive 'change'* within and across their organizations. For the purposes of qualitative inquiry (including knowledge mobilization), expert interviews are conducted with leaders who hold unique knowledge and are in a position of power and influence (Audenhove & Donders, 2019). In Canada, expert interviews have been utilized by researchers as an opportunity to engage in critical reflection while advancing practical recommendations to national policymakers and leaders in strategic positions (Dooris, 2013). Accordingly, for our knowledge mobilization initiative we engaged experienced national sport leaders who provide guidance and oversight of the leaders of *all* National Sport Federations in Canada.

#### **4.2.1 The Leaders**

The Canadian Olympic Committee and the Coaching Association of Canada were the two Multi-Sport Organizations deemed most relevant to our overall research goals regarding factors that contribute to or undermine elite athlete well-being. In Canada, Multi-Sport Organizations are publicly funded governing bodies that deliver specific services for National Sport Federations (“National Multisport Service Organizations,” 2021). Both the Canadian Olympic Committee

and Coaching Association of Canada are organizations that provide nation-wide elite sport programs, offering oversight of National Sport Federations in the delivery of Olympic-level sport and athlete well-being programs. The Canadian Olympic Committee for instance, is responsible for providing direction and funding to National Sport Federations for Canada's participation in the Olympic Games ("Role of the Canadian Olympic Committee," n.d.). Additionally, the Canadian Olympic Committee funds various national programs aimed at providing services for Olympic athletes, including *Game Plan*, their self-proclaimed 'total athlete wellness program' ("Game Plan, Canada's Total Athlete Wellness Program," n.d.). Similarly, the Coaching Association of Canada endeavors to support athlete well-being by delivering 'safe sport' education to coaches with the intention of promoting maltreatment-free sport across 65 National Sport Federations ("Support for Sport Partners," n.d.). More generally, the Coaching Association of Canada leads the education and certification of coaches at all levels, including elite sport coaches, through their National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) ("Learn to Coach a Sport," n.d.).

**Marg McGregor**, *Director, Sport System Excellence, Canadian Olympic Committee*

Marg McGregor was identified as an important leader from the Canadian Olympic Committee to interview given her rich experience in elite sport in Canada, as well as the functions of her current role. Her professional career in elite sport started after graduating from university, after which time she worked for three different National Sport Federations. Eventually, Marg was appointed to the role of Chief Executive Officer for U Sports (formerly Canadian Interuniversity Sport) from 2000 to 2012. For the last 10 years, Marg has served as the Director of Sport System Excellence with the Canadian Olympic Committee. In this role, she

has led the National Sport Federation Services Department, the division that guides and supports leaders of the 55 National Sport Federations that constitute the membership of the Canadian Olympic Committee. She is also the senior executive tasked with oversight of the Canadian Olympic Committee's Game Plan program.

**Lorraine Lafrenière**, *Chief Executive Officer, Coaching Association of Canada*

As with Marg, Lorraine Lafrenière has a deep history of serving in influential leadership roles within Canadian sport. She has worked in the sport industry since 1987. Her experience in elite sport began in 1988 when she began fulfilling various communications roles over the following nine years with the Canadian Olympic Committee. In 2002, she was appointed the Chief Operating Officer of the Coaching Association of Canada, before being recruited to serve as the Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Cycling Association (2007-2009), followed by Canoe Kayak Canada (2009-2013). After seven years as the senior executive leader for National Sport Federations, Lorraine was hired in 2013 as the Chief Executive Officer of the Coaching Association of Canada, a role she has fulfilled for the last nine years.

### **4.3 The Interviews**

This knowledge mobilization initiative was designed to share our themes, findings, and practical recommendations with experienced and influential Canadian sport leaders who work directly with National Sport Federation leadership, providing guidance and programming related to elite athlete well-being. To support both interviewees in preparing them for the interviews, and to ensure high quality information was derived from those interviews, I asked them to review the executive summary (see Appendix C.3) that we sent them, and also made the full papers available that provided the basis for the executive summary. Both interviewees had reviewed



and engaged with the essential readings (this was confirmed at the outset of the interviews, and was also evident in my discussions with them), all of which provided the basis for a rich discussion on what they felt was *notable* and *surprising (or not)* from our themes and findings, and their perceptions regarding the *barriers to implementation* related to our practical implications.

#### **4.4 The Findings**

##### **4.4.1 What was Reported as ‘Notable’**

Throughout both interviews, Marg and Lorraine were asked what themes and findings stood out to them, and why. Given her role with the Coaching Association of Canada, it was not surprising that Lorraine immediately emphasized the *interpersonal dynamics* between the coach-athlete as a notable theme from our study with Olympians (Study 1). Both Lorraine and Marg found notable the finding from Study 1 that highlighted that coaches who did not employ *autonomy supportive* behaviour were perceived by athletes as negatively impacting their well-being. As Marg explained:

That makes a lot of sense... the research that you did was good learning for us, and that it supports the need for promoting mental health through coaching practices workshops... because the [sport] system has spent a lot of time telling coaches what not to do... but the [sport] system hasn't really supported coaches in how to replace their current coaching practices with a more autonomy supportive approach... So effectively, communicating and integrating athletes in decision making is very important.

The Study 1 theme that underscored the importance of *communication* as an *organizational factor* influencing an athlete's well-being also stood out to Marg and Lorraine,

and both spoke of the need for National Sport Federation leaders (including coaches and performance directors) to improve communications with athletes. Elaborating on this point, Lorraine used the example of communicating with athletes regarding the *uncertainty of finances* (a theme from Study 2, our study with coaches and performance directors), and the fear that if athletes don't achieve performance results the funding (e.g., from Own the Podium) will be taken away from their program:

National [Sport] Federations are still wrapping their head around what the message is to the athlete about the reality of funding. It is true, they may or may not maintain their [program] funding... We need to spend more time on that communication and understanding... There's this ultimatum language [achieve results or lose funding] that doesn't, that's very, quite frankly old school.

The *relentless pursuit of results* and the influence on athlete well-being was another finding from Study 1 and Study 2 that Marg and Lorraine found notable. Marg emphasized the "enormous pressure to deliver [results]," and that an elite sport system that perpetuates an emphasis on results above all else "is a problem for sure. It's not a sustainable model where you just treat people like commodities." Lorraine also reflected on the relationship between an emphasis on results and athlete well-being: "There's a narrative that you can have results, or you can have safety, and that narrative has to go away. It's not either or. That's the conversation that has to happen to improve performance, bluntly."

#### **4.4.2 What was Reported as Surprising (or Not)**

When queried as to her overall thoughts and impressions of the themes and findings, Marg expressed a lack of surprise at various times throughout the interview: "I'm not shocked.

I'm not surprised... These are not shocking findings... they all line up with what my perceptions would be." However, when prompted, Marg reflected on two elements of Study 2 she found surprising. The first was related to the finding that coaches and performance directors displayed a *lack of awareness* of their responsibility in supporting and/or thwarting the well-being of their athletes. As Marg articulated:

That's a bit of a surprise to me because I would think that people may not buy-in to it [athlete well-being], or, but not know how to do it [support the well-being of athletes], but to not be aware of their [coach and performance director] responsibilities is a bit surprising, maybe a bit disappointing. But probably, again, in the rough and tumble of all the priorities they [coaches and performance directors] have to deal with, they may say that 'I wasn't aware' that it's [athlete well-being] in my court."

The second element Marg highlighted as surprising, and questioned the positioning and wording of the theme, was related to the harmful effects the *relentless pursuit of performance results* has on athlete well-being. As Marg expressed:

I was perhaps a bit surprised at how definitive it is like, 'the focus on results is *harmful*'. That's a fairly strong statement. And I think the narrative has been framed that way. So, like, I guess, again, it's probably not surprising that you're hearing that, but it's a strong, strong, strong word. And maybe it's 'an *exclusive* focus on results is harmful'.

Marg also questioned the wording of the finding from Study 1 wherein several Olympic athletes described that their relationship with their sport psychologist allocated by their National Sport Federation was, at times, problematic. More specifically, athletes expressed frustration

regarding the psychologists' focus on results, to the exclusion of discussing personal matters and support for their overall well-being. However, as Marg explained:

Another observation was the use of the term sport psychologist in our work, which is, I guess, nomenclature that contributes to the confusion around the different types of practitioners that are working with athletes at the intersection of psychology and performance. So, it may impact the clarity of your findings. We [Marg and a staff member with whom she shared our summary] kind of assumed in reading it, that athletes are talking about their mental performance consultant. And so, it would make sense that they [the athletes] might be frustrated by the lack of focus on well-being, because generally that's not what mental performance consultants do.

As with Marg, Lorraine did not express an abundance of surprise regarding the themes and findings, but she also questioned some of the wording: "I am not sure organizations have little incentive to fully address athlete well-being in this day and age." Questioning wording was not done in a dismissive or abrasive manner, and both Marg and Lorraine reflected on the concept of *not* being surprised by some of (what was to me) the more surprising and alarming themes and findings from our studies. As Lorraine explained:

Some of them [themes and findings] are concerning generally, right. It's not, of course, there's some statements in here that you don't want to see, right. That's absolutely part of why this study exists because it's trying to contribute, contribute to a more holistic view so that you can improve the [sport] system.

As Marg further described: “Well, it [the study themes and findings] again reinforces what we know is – that sport practiced well can be great... and then bad sport can be very bad for people, and problematic.”

It was evident throughout the interviews that Marg and Lorraine were cognizant that they serve as leaders of Multi-Sport Organizations mandated to support the participants from our studies (Olympic athletes, National coaches, and National Sport Federation performance directors). Understandably, it was discouraging for them to read and discuss some of the themes and findings from our studies, and particularly those described by our study participants as explicitly harmful to the well-being of Canadian athletes. However, both Marg and Lorraine expressed the need for all organizations, including their own, to take ownership where athlete well-being is thwarted. Marg stated: “The entire [sport] system needs to be accountable.” As Lorraine added: “We need to rethink and shift our services in the interest of a better system.”

Interestingly, when discussing the themes and findings that presented the negative influences on athlete well-being, responses from Marg and Lorraine frequently followed a similar pattern – they were aware (often not surprised) of the issue, acknowledged it was problematic, and provided examples of how their organization (or the sport system more generally) was addressing the problem. As Lorraine explained: “We are working to support NSO [National Sport Federation] CEOs to create a culture to address, and create a culture of prevention.” As examples, Lorraine referred to Own The Podium’s new “culture audit assessment tool”, and the Canadian Olympic Committee’s Game Plan program, which she described as having “done a ton of work”, and “made significant inroads [supporting the well-being of athletes].” Not surprisingly (as the senior executive leader of Game Plan at the

Canadian Olympic Committee) Marg referenced Game Plan as the national elite sport program designed to support athlete well-being. More specifically, ten times throughout the interview Marg highlighted the new Mental Health Strategy for High Performance Sport in Canada. Led by the Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport the strategy is intended to improve mental health outcomes for elite Canadian athletes (Durand-Bush & Van Slingerland, 2021). As Marg described: “the Mental Health Strategy applies to the entire system, but the Game Plan team are really driving it... and one [barrier to addressing well-being] was a lack of a strategy, and now there is a high performance or mental health strategy. So that’s good progress.” When probed as to her overall thoughts and impressions of the findings from our studies, Marg discussed the importance our research and also pointed to the new strategy: “I think it [our research findings] reinforces the importance of focusing on mental health, and doubling down on the Mental Health Strategy, and investing sufficient resources and supporting athletes in that fashion.”

#### **4.4.3 What were Reported as Barriers to Implementation?**

Throughout the interviews Marg and Lorraine expressed concern and understanding of the negative influences on athlete well-being as described within the themes and findings of our studies. Furthermore, Marg and Lorraine did not waiver in their perception that supporting athlete well-being was a priority, and especially for the leaders of National Sport Federations. Lorraine depicted an emphasis on athlete well-being from National Sport Federation leadership as “non-negotiable”. Similarly, Marg stated that support for the well-being of athletes should “be baked in as part of the foundation of any [National Sport Federation] high performance program, and not, you know, a discretionary add on.” Given their perspectives, it was not surprising that both Marg and Lorraine were supportive of the practical implications for National

Sport Federations recommended in our studies. As Lorraine asserted: “They are all good recommendations, and they are all critical for consideration.” Additionally, Marg and Lorraine were queried as to the *barriers* they felt might impede National Sport Federations from implementing the recommendations. The two barriers discussed above all others included, *competing priorities* of National Sport Federation leaders, and *financial* resources.

Marg expressed that, in her opinion, most National Sport Federations leaders have a desire to support athlete well-being, but that urgent competing priorities in their roles present a barrier to even begin to discuss athlete well-being:

We [the Canadian Olympic Committee] have a lot of difficulty getting in front of NSOs and high performance directors with these messages [about the importance of athlete well-being]. It needs to be a priority of the NSOs but it simply isn't a burning balcony.

Elaborating on the analogy of a burning balcony, Marg explained:

Yeah, I mean, I guess it's bandwidth eh. It's everything that needs to get done... There isn't a day that goes by when someone isn't on fire for some issue. So, the notion of mental wellness is not necessarily a burning balcony, compared to some of these other issues. They [well-being supports] are just competing for attention and time and space amongst many other issues.

Both Marg and Lorraine highlighted, the problematic “other issue” associated with National Sport Federation and their ability to support athlete well-being was financial resources, or the lack thereof. This included the ability to hire individuals with the expertise to develop and deliver athlete well-being programs. As Lorraine stated:

It is very significantly related to capacity and human resources and finances of the National [Sport] Federations who deliver on all of these programs... The organization only has so many dollars...and is going to be restricted to spend its dollars in a certain way in its high performance program”.

As Marg further explained:

Everything comes at a cost and finances are finite and limited right now, and with the impact of the pandemic and the impact of inflation and, so there's an opportunity cost and if you're investing here you're not investing somewhere else.. it's not necessarily an easy sell [to invest in athlete well-being]... There is the pressure of the immediate... to deliver results today. So, it's a challenge.

#### **4.4.4 What were Reported as Solutions?**

Notable in our discussions regarding the perceived barriers facing National Sport Federations, both Marg and Lorraine offered solutions to overcome these obstacles. For instance, both expressed that leadership *education* was essential. As Marg explained: “I think it is the education of the leaders, continuing to educate the leaders about the importance of athlete wellness, and what supports are currently available in the system, and how to tap into those supports.” Lorraine emphasized the need for the key stakeholders within a National Sport Federation (e.g., athletes, coaches, performance directors) to “negotiate” what well-being support should be:

I think the organization needs to come together as a whole... ultimately it is about bringing people together and identifying the critical components [of well-being support]



where the organization needs to achieve, to create a safe sport environment and achieve a collective agreement on objectives.

Marg explained that research that highlights the importance of supporting athlete well-being would help “build the case” with National Sport Federation leadership:

I think research would help validate, again, what we intuitively know to be true. And to help convince those who may not be onside that a focus on well-being, you know, is not only is the right thing to do from an ethical care perspective, but also the right thing to do if we want to continue to be on the podium and be successful. So, to have some data that shows that a focus on athlete wellness does translate into positive outcomes related to results, I think that would be very helpful.

Although they were not specifically asked for their solutions to address the perceived barriers National Sport Federations may face moving forward, the opinions Marg and Lorraine offered were insightful and reflected an overarching and genuine care that both Marg and Lorraine displayed for the well-being of elite athletes.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

The purpose of our knowledge mobilization initiative was to share our two studies (as presented in Chapters 2 and 3) with experienced and influential Canadian sport leaders working directly with National Sport Federation leadership. Through individual interviews we examined these leaders’ thoughts and impressions regarding the themes, findings, and practical implications presented in our studies. Additionally, we explored these leaders’ perceptions concerning the barriers to implementing the practical recommendations that we presented. We targeted two longstanding and influential leaders of prominent national Multi-Sport

Organizations in Canada, and we were fortunate to have Marg McGregor of the Canadian Olympic Committee and Lorraine Lafrenière of the Coaching Association of Canada agree to serve as our knowledge mobilization participants. Marg and Lorraine committed to preparing for their interviews and were candid with their thoughts and opinions regarding the themes, findings, and practical implications from our studies. While providing us an opportunity to share the knowledge from our studies, Marg and Lorraine also offered their perspectives concerning current barriers that leaders of National Sport Federations face in supporting elite athlete well-being.

The perspectives offered by Marg and Lorraine provide valuable insight upon which future well-being programs, policies, and interventions in elite sport can be considered. Reflecting on the interviews with Marg and Lorraine, the alignment in the perceptions between the two leaders is notable. For instance, both highlighted that, to enhance elite athletes' experiences of well-being, it will take dedicated resources (both human and financial). They indicated that prioritizing athlete well-being is "non-negotiable", and while leaders of National Sport Federations may agree with this sentiment, more urgent "competing" organizational priorities were also reported to diminish opportunities to enhance athlete well-being. As underscored in studies 1 and 2, funding and other support (e.g., human resources) is largely reserved for initiatives perceived to have a direct impact on an athlete's performance results. Thus, the framing from both interviewees that attention to athlete well-being is a 'non-negotiable' might be considered as more of a 'reported ideal' (or 'soundbite') than a firm commitment to ensuring athlete well-being is substantively supported by Canadian National Sport Federations. With that said, Marg and Lorraine did reflect on the potential negative

implications for athletes in an elite sport system where the underpinning incentive system is focused on results above all else. Both acknowledged this incentive system might be problematic and that future research could be “helpful” and play a role in “building the case” to convince funders and leaders to support athlete well-being. In the final chapter of the dissertation, I will discuss ‘what’ support for elite athlete well-being could encompass.

Our interviews with Marg and Lorraine provided an opportunity for open engagement with questions concerning the barriers to implementing the practical suggestions presented in our studies. However, I was surprised with the paucity of discussion regarding barriers we highlighted as negatively influencing athlete well-being (despite prompts throughout the interviews). While some barriers were identified by both Marg and Lorraine as problematic (e.g., *competing organizational priorities* and *limited funding*), their suggestions to address these barriers came across as somewhat cursory and insular. Notably, in discussing solutions to overcome these barriers both participants offered suggestions where leaders within the current system should “come together” to “negotiate” and “educate” one another on the challenges and opportunities to support athlete well-being. I was taken aback at the reluctance to discuss and consider engaging ‘independent’ individuals (or organizations) ‘outside’ the existing system to inform and support the implementation and expansion of athlete well-being initiatives. Aside from suggesting that researchers could help “build the case” by (ideally) establishing a cause and effect relationship between athlete well-being and results, solutions offered by Marg and Lorraine were focused on the involvement of pre-existing sport system decision-makers.

Our interviews also presented an opportunity to investigate Marg and Lorraine’s interpretations and opinions of our practical suggestions regarding how National Sport

Federations may consider supporting elite athlete well-being. Informed by findings from Study 1 and 2 and presented in our executive summary, multiple questions and prompts in both interviews were intended to solicit discussion related to our recommendations (e.g., are the recommendations useful, and what are the barriers [if any] to implementing our practical suggestions?). However, responses from both Marg and Lorraine indicated less of an opportunity to recognize and embrace (or refute) our recommendations, and more of an opening for both to validate current initiatives within the elite sport system. For instance, when questioning the barriers to implementing our recommendations, responses from Marg and Lorraine felt restrained to highlighting the recent “progress” of current self-regulated programs (e.g., Canadian Olympic Committee’s “Game Plan”), and to suggestions on “doubling down” on existing initiatives (e.g., the Mental Health Strategy for High Performance Sport in Canada). Additionally, Own the Podium (which is closely affiliated with the Canadian Olympic Committee and the Coaching Association of Canada) was praised by Marg and Lorraine as the performance experts who have adopted a more of a “holistic” view of athlete development. Contradictorily, participants from our Study 1 and 2 specifically highlighted Own the Podium as the organization that values *winning above all else*, and whose funding model was described as contributing to a disproportionate focus on athlete results over athlete well-being. Relatedly, and also highlighted in Study 1 and 2 was the caution that the self-regulatory nature of sport organizations can perpetuate cultural norms within elite sport that, at times, may have a limited positive or even substantive negative influence on athlete well-being (Donnelly, 2009; Kerr et al., 2020; Mountjoy et al, 2016). For this reason and as evidenced in our knowledge mobilization initiative, it is (again) important to underscore that, to improve elite athletes’

experiences with well-being - independent expertise, evidence-informed research, and critical inquiry are essential elements to meaningfully meet the needs of (Olympic-level) athletes.

## **Chapter 5: General Discussion**

The overall purpose of the research subsumed within this doctoral dissertation was to ascertain what factors contribute to and/or undermine the well-being of Olympic-level athletes. In pursuing this objective, I conducted two qualitative studies exploring the perspectives of recently retired Canadian Olympic athletes (Sauvé et al., 2022), as well as national team coaches and National Sport Federation performance directors from within the Canadian Olympic sport system (Sauvé et al., 2023). In addition, and as a complement to this research, a particularly important objective of my dissertation was to share the key findings and evidence-informed recommendations from these studies with influential leaders from within the Canadian elite sport environment. The intention of this knowledge mobilization initiative was to ignite dialogue with regard to substantively understanding salient barriers and opportunities to improve Olympic-athletes' experiences of well-being. Accordingly, I engaged multi-sport Chief Executive Officers who are at the centre of communication and strategizing with leaders of Canadian National Sport Federations. This involved examining their perceptions and appraisals of our findings (in chapters 2 and 3), in particular with regard to their perspectives on barriers to implementing the practical recommendations that were offered to National Sport Federation leaders (vis-à-vis supporting athlete well-being) as part of that project.

In this Discussion chapter, I (a) highlight some pertinent issues with regard to my own 'researcher reflexivity' with regard to the subject matter being examined, (b) provide a synthesis of research findings from the two studies presented in chapters 2 and 3, while reflecting on these findings in relation to the knowledge mobilization initiative described in chapter 4, (c) present three propositions for leaders of Canadian National Sport Federations to consider with regard to

supporting elite athlete well-being, and (d) address the limitations of the research presented within this dissertation and outline a series of pressing directions for future research.

### **5.1 A Final Note on Researcher Reflexivity**

In Study 1 (chapter 2) and Study 2 (chapter 3) I highlighted the importance of researcher reflexivity, in situating the research presented in this dissertation. More specifically, I acknowledged that researchers are active participants in the interpretation of their findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021), and sought to transparently describe the methodological decisions that were taken as a ‘research team’ (involving my co-authors) in an effort to enhance the trustworthiness of our interpretations. In addition to embracing reflexivity within the research teams that contributed to each study, I have concertedly sought to practice self-reflexivity and remain attentive to my motives and goals in completing this dissertation (Tracy, 2010). While completing the research described in this dissertation, I tried to remain aware that my lived experiences as a white settler, able-bodied, cis-gender male, as well as my formal roles within elite sport in Canada, likely influenced elements of my research processes (Watt, 2007). Further, I tried to remain aware that my personal and professional positionality likely shaped what each of the 38 participants, across the three studies, shared (or did not share) with me.

Between 2002 to 2021 I was employed as the senior staff leader (Executive Director or Chief Executive Officer) of a Local Sport Organization, two Provincial Sport Organizations, and a National Sport Federation. While serving as the Chief Executive Officer of a National Sport Federation between 2013 to 2018, I was actively involved with the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) where I was one of 79 voting members who met semi-annually at ‘Session’ meetings. The COC session “consists of a representative of each National Sport Federation

governing a sport on the official programs of the Olympic, Olympic Winter, or Pan American Games; the IOC Members in Canada; the members of the Athletes' Commission Executive; a Coaches representative; the Chair of the Canadian Olympic Foundation; the International Federation Presidents resident in Canada; twelve Directors-at-large; and two Canadian Olympians" (Canadian Olympic Committee, 2023). Session meetings provide governance oversight with regard to the COC's overall policy, objectives, and monitors its progress toward its stated goals. Session also includes separate summer and winter sport group leadership meetings, and I was appointed by my peers as the co-chair of the National Sport Federation Summer Sport Caucus from 2016 to 2018. Within the COC, I also served on the Team Selection Committee (between 2014-2018) that was tasked with approving Canada's athletes for inclusion within two Olympic Games (Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada, n.d.) during that period. The National Sport Federation for which I was the chief executive officer was an Olympic Summer sport and funded by national Multi-Sport Organizations including the Canadian Olympic Committee, Sport Canada, the Coaching Association of Canada, and Own The Podium.

When I started my doctoral program in 2016, I perceived myself to be an 'insider' within the Canadian elite sport system where, given my formal leadership roles, I had acquired some insight into the barriers and opportunities leaders of National Sport Federations face regarding athlete well-being. Since then, I have reflected considerably on my interpretation of what constitutes an 'insider' and questioned if my experiences in elite sport provided me with an 'advantage' compared to others (Holmes, 2020) or perhaps skewed my perceptions of what elite athlete well-being meant? For example, did two decades working in elite sport (e.g.,



hiring/firing coaches, applying for Own the Podium funding, preparing athletes for different Olympic Games) mean that I was at a ‘better’ (more insightful) starting point than a doctoral student who, for instance, started with a limited knowledge of the sport system and no experience operating sport organizations? In a practical sense, my personal contacts (and networks) within the Canadian elite sport system were certainly helpful in facilitating the research process, with respect to participant recruitment in chapters 2 and 3 (e.g., the Canadian Olympic Committee supported participant recruitment), and gaining access to senior leaders within the Canadian Sport system (in chapter 4). However, what became acutely evident through the research process, by engaging with the extant research literature, and conducting the interviews in chapters 2 to 4, my initial ‘lens’ (via my contributions to the COC and NSFs) may have markedly shaped, and indeed, limited my understanding of the phenomena being studied.

I arrived at my PhD in 2016 with preconceived notions of what well-being support within National Sport Federations *should* look like. My opinions at the time were informed by my lived experience in sport and fueled by a desire to explore solutions to athlete well-being concerns that senior leaders in Canadian sport were discussing in non-public meetings (e.g., Canadian Olympic Committee session). In reflecting back on my world views that existed circa 2016, I have gained a measured appreciation of how my opinions then were not sufficiently informed by the realities of athletes’ lived experiences. For instance, I was not fully aware of the degree to which the underpinning incentive system in elite sport influenced my own actions. Annual funding requests I proposed to sponsors and government agencies (e.g., Sport Canada and Own the Podium) were (almost) exclusively focused on more training camps, more competitions, and

retaining higher profile coaches. I did not contemplate the request for funds to implement athlete-centred well-being initiatives, nor do I feel I would have been successful in such requests.

By acknowledging that I was not sufficiently aware of the complexity of psychosocial factors that contribute (both positively and negatively) to athlete well-being, I remained attentive to being reflexive (and continue to do so) throughout my research, including a mindfulness of my position within the environment in which I was conducting research. Remaining reflexive throughout my research was transformative in various ways, including a shift in the manner in which I interpreted the data from my participant interviews in Study 1 (athletes) and Study 2 (coaches and performance directors). For instance, in Study 1 I assumed an interpretivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Reflecting on the findings from Study 1, and with recognition of the potential for power differentials between those such as coaches and performance directors in relation to ‘their athletes’, I adopted a critical interpretivist research paradigm (Kuhn & Deetz, 2009) approach in Study 2. With this shift in research paradigm between studies I actively engaged with the literature on critical theory to a greater extent and was more sensitive to the overt and subtle ways that threats to athlete well-being can (sometimes) be perpetuated within the existing Olympic-level sport system. Remaining reflexive was particularly important throughout my knowledge mobilization initiative (chapter 4), and especially in those moments of tension where my own exposure to athletes perspectives and experiences (chapter 2), as well as my own personal biases or opinions, collided with different and sometimes conflicting perspectives of Canadian sport leaders (Clandinin et al., 2009). There were moments during my interviews with Canadian sport leaders in chapter 4 where I disagreed with their analysis of the Canadian sport system and their appraisals of what could and could not

be done to better evolve and enhance the system. However, prior to those interviews and ‘in the moment’, I sought to remain reflexive in an effort to avoid any potential personal biases disrupting the targeted line of inquiry outlined in my interview guide.

## **5.2 Synthesis of Research Findings**

The key findings from Studies 1 and 2 provided insight into various factors that Olympic-level athletes, coaches, and performance directors felt supported and/or thwarted elite athlete well-being. In Study 1, the participants included recently retired Olympians from both winter and summer sports. They described a number of interpersonal dynamics (i.e., coach athlete relations, support team, training environment), National Sport Federation operations (i.e., finances, planning, communication), and intra-individual factors (i.e., results-focused mindset, identification with elite sport norms, feelings of isolation versus connectivity) that they felt contributed (both positively and negatively) to their well-being during their careers in Olympic-level sport. In Study 2, I examined the perspectives of Olympic coaches and National Sport Federation performance directors regarding factors they felt contributed to the well-being of Olympic-level athletes. These participants identified the relentless pursuit of results (i.e., lack of opportunities outside of sport, the focus on results as harmful), the influence of the coach (i.e., the coach as a relationship builder, the coach as a gatekeeper of well-being), and financial uncertainty (i.e., financial uncertainty of the program, financial uncertainty for the athlete) as the factors they perceived to have contributed to the well-being of their athletes.

The findings from Studies 1 and 2 were shared (vis-à-vis chapter 4) with experienced and influential Canadian sport leaders who work directly with National Sport Federations. I examined these leaders’ perceptions of the findings derived from both studies, and queried their

thoughts concerning any barriers they felt would impede the implementation of the practical recommendations. The leaders were aligned in the perception that support for athlete well-being is “non-negotiable”, but that more urgent priorities (those priorities perceived by the leaders of National Sport Federations to have a direct impact on an athlete’s performance results) “compete” against National Sport Federation leaders’ capacity to fully support and meaningfully prioritize athlete well-being (i.e., human resource support, financial support). The leaders that contributed to the knowledge mobilization initiative in chapter 4 spoke of the negative implications for athletes where the underpinning incentive system is focused on results above all else, but they offered relatively superficial solutions to overcome barriers and shift the culture of elite sport to a system where leaders are more attentive to the well-being needs of their athletes. For instance, both sport leaders in chapter 4 offered solutions where leaders within the current system could “come together” to “negotiate” and “educate” one another on the current challenges and future opportunities to support athlete well-being, but proffered few tangible solutions. The participants in chapter 4 also appeared reluctant to consider engaging ‘independent’ individuals (or organizations) from ‘outside’ the sport system for guidance on the design and implementation of athlete well-being initiatives. Instead, they elected to validate current initiatives within the elite sport system that their organizations are leading, or that they are delivering in partnership with other self-regulated sport organizations.

As leadership and crisis management experts, Boin and Hart (2003) highlighted the challenging task for public leaders to manage the persistent tension between expectations (i.e., provide actions and answers that the public expects in times of crisis) against the pragmatic realities of their leadership role, which might involve protecting the image of their respective

organizations. Not surprisingly, and taking into consideration the current and pressing public crisis over the neglect of athlete well-being by Canadian sport leaders (McKenzie, 2022), one must recognize that impression management (for both themselves and their organization) likely influenced the narratives, to one extent or another, of the sport leaders in chapter 4. For instance, in agreeing to go ‘on the record’, these leaders showed awareness of the very public challenges to athlete well-being, and expressed a deep interest in addressing challenges for athletes. However, they also appeared to withhold fulsome responses when discussing barriers and solutions to these challenges, or provide response that might portray their organization (or themselves) in a negative light. This impression management by the leaders in chapter 4 is perhaps unsurprising, and highlights that the requisites of public leadership (and especially during times of crisis) can be incompatible with the requirements of effective reform (Bion & Hart, 2003). In managing the impressions of how others perceive their organization (and themselves), leaders can, on occasions, struggle to adapt to change and prevent meaningful reform in the causes they themselves might be championing (such as athlete well-being; Carucci, 2016).

The research findings from Studies 1 and 2 (chapters 2 and 3), together with the analysis from the knowledge mobilization initiative in chapter 4, point to alignment in some factors that participants across felt supported and/or thwarted elite athlete well-being. For instance, an area of alignment corresponds to the perception that within elite sport athlete performance results matter above all else. That the relentless pursuit of results in Olympic-level sport is the primary focus of an elite sport system is not a new or novel narrative (Purcell et al., 2022). However, that the athletes in Study 1 and the coaches and performance directors in Study 2 emphasized that the

pursuit of results can potentially be *harmful* to the well-being of Canadian athletes is an important finding that lends support for recent global expert consensus statements that highlight that an increasing pressure on Olympic-level athletes to produce results represents a significant threat to athlete well-being (Henriksen et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). In discussing *why* the pursuit of results is harmful to athlete well-being, athletes in Study 1, as well as coaches and performance directors in Study 2 highlighted the results-based funding model in Canada (e.g., Own the Podium) is a stressor that negatively influences well-being. Both participants from chapter 4 agreed that the relentless pursuit of results *can* be harmful, and that an underpinning financial incentive system rewarding results places “enormous pressure” on athletes.

Another finding that was consistent across different participant groups corresponded to a *lack of awareness* regarding their roles in, and contributions towards, athlete well-being in elite sport. It is a common refrain that it is everyone’s responsibility within the sport system to ensure the well-being of athletes (Malloy et al., 2023). However, the findings highlighted that Olympic athletes, international coaches, and National Sport Federation performance directors were, at times, unaware of their role in perpetuating a sport culture that occasionally depleted athlete well-being. For instance, the athletes in Study 1 described that they uncritically accepted circumstances within their sport environment that, only after retirement from Olympic-level sport, did they realize were responsible for thwarting their own well-being. Athletes explained that their results-focused mindsets were a contributing factor to their lack of awareness, but so too were the interpersonal dynamics within their sport environments, and in particular their relationships with their respective coaches. Findings from Study 2 pointed to a lack of awareness of coaches in their understanding of the potential role they can play in negatively

influencing the well-being of their athletes. In addition, the findings from Study 2 highlight a lack of awareness from coaches and performance directors as to *how* they can best support the well-being of the elite athletes for whom they have oversight. Parenthetically, the sport leaders who were interviewed as part of chapter 4 (knowledge mobilization initiative) appeared to be similarly unaware of, or inattentive to, effective solutions that National Sport Federations can implement to support (or even optimize) athlete well-being. When taken together, the lack of self-awareness demonstrated by the participants throughout my research, regarding their respective roles in contributing to or undermining athlete well-being is noteworthy, and informs the following three propositions for National Sport Federations.

### **5.3 Propositions for National Sport Federations**

Informed by the research presented in this dissertation, in this section I provide three propositions for leaders of National Sport Federations in Canada who are (hopefully) interested in embracing opportunities to enhance the well-being of their athletes. These propositions are not intended to be considered as mutually exclusive of one another, and it is recommended that all three propositions be actioned simultaneously, and with a sense of urgency. National Sport Federations in Canada face a watershed moment for the well-being of their elite athletes. In the last year alone, 20% of all Canadian Olympic National Sport Federations have been publicly criticized for perpetuating a culture within elite sport that has had an immeasurable and toxic effect on the well-being of elite athletes (McKenzie, 2022). In the last twelve months, leaders of Canadian National Sport Federations have faced lawsuits (Westhead, 2022), government hearings (McLeod & Brady, 2023), and demands for change (Gillespie, 2022). Amidst a wave of negative criticism over the neglect of athlete well-being, the board of directors and chief

executive officers of four of Canada's largest National Sport Federations have resigned, including Soccer Canada (Westhead, 2023), Hockey Canada (Grant, 2022), Gymnastics Canada (Rowbottom, 2023), and Water Polo Canada (Westhead, 2022) . In this current climate, leaders of National Sport Federations must act now, but with an appreciation that shifting the culture of sport takes time (Kerr et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2022). Accordingly, the following three propositions are not extemporary solutions; they are actionable recommendations that leaders of National Sport Federations could (and should) apply, and with the intention of shifting the culture within elite sport to embrace an environment that can, in time, optimally support athlete well-being.

### **5.3.1 Proposition 1: Understand and Embrace Hedonic and Eudaimonic Components of Well-Being**

Although the study of well-being has moved beyond conceptualizations of the construct as the absence of ill-being to encompass a holistic explanation of well-being (Huppert, 2017), the same understanding cannot be said to apply to those operating on a day-to-day basis in the context of Olympic-level sport. Conceptualizations of well-being in elite sport remain largely (although not always) fixated on the need to produce performance results (and deriving happiness *from* the achievement of performance results; in the form of hedonic well-being); indeed, this appears to be a distinguishing feature of the Olympic sport system (Roberts et al., 2020). Findings from Studies 1 and 2 highlight that various threats to Canadian Olympic athlete well-being persist as a consequence of an exclusive hedonic approach, that reflects the accrual of well-being derive from a win-at-costs enterprise.



With this in mind, understanding and embracing eudaimonic facets of well-being would appear essential for National Sport Federation leaders who are genuinely concerned for the well-being of their athletes. As highlighted by the athletes in Study 1, factors that were reported to promote a greater *sense of purpose* throughout their athletic career (eudaimonic well-being) included opportunities to flourish in life domains outside of sport (e.g., education), the capacity have a say on decisions that affect their experience in sport, and a psychologically safe space to share their concerns related to their own well-being. Within a recent literature attentive to a holistic approach to the study of athlete well-being, researchers have emphasized the importance of embracing hedonic *and* eudaimonic facets of well-being. For instance, in their analysis of factors that promote athlete well-being, Gosai et al. (2021) found that promoting psychological safety within a sport environment enhanced a sense of purpose (eudaimonic well-being) and performance satisfaction (hedonic well-being) for athletes. A psychologically safe environment is one in which athletes feel protected from emotional harm (e.g., fear and insecurity) (Vella et al., 2022), and authentic connections are cultivated (e.g., coach-athlete relationship) (Malloy et al., 2023). Wilson et al. (2022) suggested that to cultivate authentic relationships in sport requires a shift away from a singular focus on results, towards a more holistic view of well-being.

Informed by my findings throughout this dissertation, as well as the current literature centered on a holistic approach to athlete well-being, it is proposed that National Sport Federations leaders ensure the following four guiding principles are embedded throughout their organization and embraced by athletes, coaches, and performance directors:

- Olympic-level athlete well-being includes both hedonic (e.g., related to achieving results) and eudaimonic (e.g., associated with personal growth) perspectives;
- The non-athletic identity among athletes is encouraged and supported, with interests and relationships outside of their sport environment meaningfully valued and encouraged;
- Athletes should have a say in designing the sport environment in which they operate; and
- Psychological safety for athletes is recognized as of paramount importance within the sport environment.

### **5.3.2 Proposition 2: Make Athlete Well-Being Part of Your Core Operations**

The two chief executive officers who contributed to the knowledge mobilization project described in chapter 4 made clear in their opinion that prioritizing athlete well-being is ‘non-negotiable’. In chapter 4, I discussed that this might be more of a ‘soundbite’, as opposed to an operational commitment to ensuring athlete well-being is supported within National Sport Federations. To date, it appears that the *intention* of well-being as non-negotiable has not matched the *actions* of National Sport Federation leaders, and as testament to the chorus of demands to address the underlying factors that negatively influence elite athlete well-being (Scholars Against Abuse in Canadian Sport, 2023). Research in the broader field of behavioural medicine reflects that a non-trivial *intention-behaviour gap* often exists in relation to the pursuit of meaningful behaviour change (Godin et al, 2005), and in the content of elite sport leadership in Canada a similar gap appears to exist between laudably stated intentions and meaningful behaviour change. If leaders of National Sport Federations are substantively committed to optimizing athlete well-being, it is recommended that *the support of well-being* be identified as a strategic priority and a core element of their organizational operations. To this end, and

informed by research reported in this dissertation, taking steps to operationalize athlete well-being within a National Sport Federation should (1) make clear who is responsible for athlete well-being, (2) communicate to all stakeholders what each National Sport Federation is doing (or planning to do) to improve athletes' experiences of well-being in their respective sport(s), and (3) develop and implement a *substantive* and *financial plan* to support athlete well-being.

While everyone in sport has an obligation to cultivate an environment and culture that ensures the well-being of athletes (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, n.d.), it should be made clear to all (e.g., athletes, staff, funding partners), who within the National Sport Federation has the assigned responsibility to support athlete well-being. In their expert consensus statement on elite athlete well-being, Henriksen et al. (2019) posit that, if well-being is “everyone’s business” there is a risk that at an operational level, well-being is “nobody’s responsibility” (p. 558). They suggested that a specific people should be assigned roles and held accountable to manage a coordinated effort to communicate and deliver well-being programs, education, and policies. Making clear who within a National Sport Federation is responsible for well-being is essential, and especially in light of the finding in Study 1 where athletes highlighted ineffective communication from their National Sport Federation (and the concomitant negative effects on their well-being). Further, the need to clearly articulate *who is responsible for supporting athlete well-being* within a National Sport Federation is not subject to many of the barriers identified by the athletes, coaches, and performance directors, such as the availability of funding. Nevertheless, in moving forward, operational funding within a National Sport Federations’ annual budgets should be allocated for athlete well-being initiatives (e.g., research, stakeholder education, and program delivery). In the current results-based funding model within the

Olympic-level sport system, the (re)allocation of funding may be unrealistic for National Sport Federations who have limited financial capacity for priorities beyond the immediate need to produce performance results (Malone et al., 2019). However, the current results-based funding models have been identified as a contributing factor in the exploitation of athletes (Haut et al., 2016), and for enabling sport organizations to be more tolerant of an environment that is prone to thwarting athlete well-being (Roberts et al., 2020). For leaders of National Sport Federations genuinely concerned for the well-being of their athletes, the manner and purpose in which funding is currently allocated does require some degree of reprioritization, and has for some time (Donnelly, 2009).

### **5.3.3 Proposition 3: Engage Independent Experts for Guidance**

I expressed concerns regarding the potential biases of participants in chapter 4 (national multi-sport organization chief executive officers) that manifest in preserving the elite sport system, to a large extent, as it currently exists (e.g., a reluctance to discuss engaging individuals ‘outside’ of the system for direction). However, with the current wave of resistance from Canadian athletes (Ewing, 2022) and politicians (Strashin & Ward, 2023) against the pervading culture of sport (including the underpinning incentive structure), it is evident that tolerance of the current system is waning (Kerr et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2020). Additionally, this wave of resistance includes prominent scholars who emphasize that, shifting the culture of elite sport to a system that better supports athlete well-being will require guidance from those independent from Canada’s sport authorities, and who will remain independent from the sport system (Scholars Against Abuse in Canadian Sport, 2023; Wilson et al., 2022). Lending support to this position, findings from Studies 1 and 2, and the knowledge mobilization initiative point to

a lack of awareness by participants with the Canadian Olympic-level sport system as to *how* they can best support athlete well-being.

Given the insight from the research presented in this dissertation and the ongoing demands for change from athletes, politicians, and scholars, it is recommended that National Sport Federations engage independent experts (individuals and/or companies) for guidance on all current and future well-being initiatives. More specifically, National Sport Federations should seek independent advice, direction, and production for (1) education and training initiatives for stakeholders including athletes, coaches, and performance directors, and (2) a broader framework and plan for optimizing athlete well-being. To date, leaders of National Sport Federations have been reactionary when reports of egregious threats to the well-being of their athletes surface (Tunney, 2022). As a reflection of this, Canada's Minister of Sport has promised an independent mechanism for reporting maltreatment in sport (Ewing, 2022), which represents an important and essential component of any athlete well-being plan. However, as a complement to such an approach, there is an opportunity for National Sport Federation leaders to progress beyond a reactive state, by engaging independent experts who can provide a critical analytic lens and create a framework for meaningful (and forward-thinking) change, mapping the course of action to better meet the needs of (Olympic-level) athletes in the immediate and long-term future.

#### **5.4 Limitations and Future Directions**

The findings presented in chapters 2 and 3 provide unique insight into factors that contribute to and/or undermine elite (Olympic-level) athlete well-being. These insights informed the three propositions outlined in the previous section. However, when taken together it is also important to note that there are limitations to the research presented in this dissertation that

should be acknowledged and taken into consideration. The three primary limitations include (1) the delimitation of inquiry to a Canadian context, (2) the possibility that some factors that may potentially contribute to athlete well-being (e.g., discrimination) may not have emerged due to the methods that were implemented, and (3) the limited span of time I engaged with participants (a snapshot in time). Accordingly, in this section I discuss these limitations, while also providing recommendations for future research.

The research presented in this dissertation is delimited to the Canadian context. Questions presented to the participants in Studies 1 and 2, and the knowledge mobilization initiative centred on athlete experiences of well-being within the Canadian Olympic sport system. Recent expert consensus statements highlight the pervasiveness of threats to athlete well-being across the globe (Chang., 2020; Reardon et al., 2019); however, it is important to note that the findings derived from this dissertation may not generalize to other countries, cultures, and settings. In future, and embrace of cross-cultural perspectives, involving athletes, coaches, performance directors, and sport leaders from a range of countries has the potential to more fully inform our understanding of factors that influence elite athlete well-being around the world. For instance, in their cross-cultural comparison elite athletes from Switzerland, Denmark, and Poland Kuettel et al. (2020) highlighted that national sport systems, societal norms, and cultural traditions all contribute to athletes' experiences of balancing the demands of sport with other life domains (e.g., education, career). Clearly, athletes struggling to maintain their well-being while juggling the demands of elite sport is not only a Canadian experience. By broadening a research focus to include participants with perspectives beyond Canada, researchers have an excellent opportunity to explore potential (cross-)cultural factors that might contribute to the well-being of

elite athletes in a range of settings and cultural milieu.

In addition to encouraging further cross-cultural examination of factors that might contribute to, or thwart, athlete wellbeing, there also exist important opportunities to further explore how issues related to discrimination and marginalization, that did not emerge from the research (in Studies 1 and 2), might impair athlete well-being. In Study 1, for instance, I endeavoured to encourage athletes to share factors that *they* believed supported or undermined their well-being. However, it should be recognized that some factors may not have emerged because the recruitment of participants (with the overall sample size being fairly small;  $n = 12$ ) did not derive a collection of athletes with lived marginalization experiences. Although the sampling procedures were not designed to derive generalizability with regard to the study findings (Smith, 2018), it is also conceivable that some *voices were not heard*. It is also conceivable that my positionality (highlighted earlier in this chapter: as a white settler, able-bodied, cis-gender male) may have inhibited the full depth and breadth of participant experience being shared with me. With this in mind, future research would appear warranted that specifically looks to explore the extent to which marginalization with respect to ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation (Evans et al., 2020; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021; Kilvington & Price, 2017; Meier et al., 2021), and their intersections (Cole, 2009), contributes to athlete well-being, both in Canada as well as other cultures, contexts, and countries.

A third limitation of the research presented within this dissertation corresponds to the span of time in which I engaged with the participants in exploring their perceptions of the factors they felt shape elite athlete well-being. This is particularly limiting in Study 1 as I chose to interview Olympians who had recently retired from international competition. Although this

choice was made to promote candor by creating a ‘safe space’ for athletes to reflect on their experiences without potential consequences to their athletic careers, in doing so I was only able to explore their perceptions as a given snapshot in time. Further, memory bias should also be taken into consideration as it is possible that the length of time between participants’ elite sport career and participating in the study could change the Olympians’ assessments. In future, it would be worthwhile to adopt a longitudinal approach and explore factors that support and/or thwart well-being over the entirety of an athlete’s career in sport (and beyond). Stambulova et al. (2015) suggested a longitudinal approach plays an important role in understanding the athletic, psychological, and psychosocial development occurring over an athlete’s lifespan, and that this insight can help leaders meet the changing well-being needs of their athletes (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). A longitudinal approach to well-being inquiry provides an opportunity for researchers to guide the development of an evidence-informed elite sport system that is sensitive to the changing well-being needs of athletes over their lifespan (Purcell, 2022).

## **5.5 Summary**

The research subsumed within this doctoral dissertation highlights the diverse and complex range of factors that contribute to and/or undermine the well-being of Olympic-level athletes. Prior to this research there had been a relative paucity of studies focused on exploring factors among experienced Olympic athletes, as well as among the social agents (coaches and performance directors) that play a central role in contributing to the psychosocial climate and well-being of the athletes with whom they work and/or support. In addressing this gap in research, the findings from Studies 1 and 2 pointed to threats to athlete well-being that persist as a consequence of the prevailing culture norms held within a self-regulated elite sport system, and



the long-term impacts to the well-being of athletes who conform to these cultural norms (e.g., a win-at-all costs mindset). The findings from these studies were shared with influential leaders from within the Canadian elite sport environment via a knowledge mobilization initiative, reported in chapter 4, to examine their perceptions and appraisals of our findings, and to ignite dialogue with regard to substantively understanding salient barriers and opportunities to improve Olympic-athletes' experiences of well-being. Informed by Studies 1 and 2, as well as this knowledge mobilization initiative, three propositions are provided for leaders of National Sport Federations to action and implement with a sense of urgency, and in the best interest of the well-being of their athletes. While acknowledging the limitations of the research within my dissertation, I provide timely recommendations for additional research with the intention of optimizing athlete well-being in the future.

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## Appendix A Study 1 Materials (Chapter 2)

### A.1 Email: Canadian Olympic Committee

Hello ([Canadian Olympic Committee staff member](#)),

I trust this message finds you well. We are currently conducting a study that will look to examine the experiences of recently retired Canadian Olympians, and in particular will focus on what the Canadian sport system can do to best support athlete well-being.

The study is titled “Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians” and Dr. Mark R. Beauchamp serving as the Principal Investigator.

Please find attached an **information letter** that specifies what this study entails. I would be most grateful if you could please send this information letter to those recently retired Canadian Olympic athletes who meet the criteria for the study. People who are eligible include those who:

- Competed in the category of “athlete” for Canada at one or more of the following Olympic Games: Rio 2016, Sochi 2014, London 2012 and Vancouver 2010;
- Retired from International competition as an athlete;
- Prior to retirement, competed for Canada at an International level for 5+ yrs.

To avoid any conflict of interest, given my employment as CEO of Field Hockey Canada, please do not email any athletes on your list from the sport of field hockey.

From those eligible participants interested in taking part, we will select twelve. The twelve individuals will have a 45-60 minute interview with myself in person, by phone, Skype or FaceTime. We will ensure those taking part in the study will remain de-identified, and will not be identifiable in any of the reports/results that may emanate from this research.

Should more than twelve individuals reply to the call to participate, consideration will be given when selecting the final twelve participants to ensure a balance / variety in gender, sports and International sports experience. While it is anticipated all potential participants speak English, if necessary a French language speaker will be recruited to conduct the interview.

If we have more than twelve potential participants reply, I will email those not selected for the study thanking them for their interest, and informing them we have reached our desired quota of athletes and that they will not be required to proceed with an interview.

We look forward to sharing the outcome of the study with the Canadian Olympic Committee and sincerely thank you again for your support. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any additional questions.

Best regards,  
Jeff

## A.2 Information Letter



Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab  
War Memorial Gym (Room 122)  
School of Kinesiology  
The University of British Columbia  
6081 University Blvd, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

### INFORMATION LETTER

Principal Investigator:  
Mark R. Beauchamp, Ph.D.  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

Co-Investigator:  
Jeff Sauvé MHK, BPHE, BA  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

Congratulations on your career and being a Canadian Olympian. In an effort to explore how we can best support the well-being of those athletes who will follow you, we are embarking on a study that we hope you are willing to be a part of.

The purpose of the study is to examine, from the perspective of recently retired Olympians, what the Canadian sport system could do to best support athlete well-being. The title of the study is “Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians”.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to set up an interview with the co-investigator, Jeff Sauvé. It is anticipated the interview will last 45-60 minutes. If possible the interview may be done in person if convenient, but it may also be done by phone, Skype or FaceTime.

Twelve recently retired Canadian Olympic athletes will be selected for interviews. Specifically, we will look to explore recently retired Canadian Olympians’ experiences in elite sport, to better understand what National Sport Federations are doing to support athlete well-being, what resources athletes utilize, and what further support may be put in place. We anticipate this research will benefit future Canadian Olympians and inform how the sport system can best support them.

Any information you provide within your interview will remain de-identified. This means that no information that can identify you will be discussed or made available within any reports that may result from this research. Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and you may decline to answer any question(s) that you choose. There are no known psychological or physical risks

associated with participation. You may also withdraw your participation at any time throughout the course of the interview.

If for ANY reason, you do not want to take part in this interview, that's fine; you don't have to. It is up to you if you want to take part or not. You are also free to withdraw at any time without having to give any reason. If you decline participating or drop out, you will not experience ANY negative consequences at all. If you have any further questions concerning the study please feel free to contact either Jeff Sauvé ([redacted]; [redacted]) or Dr. Mark Beauchamp ([redacted]; [redacted]).

If you are willing to put your name forward for this study, please reply by email to [redacted] no later than (insert date). Those participating in the study will be required to sign a consent form. From there we will set up a convenient interview time.

Thank you for the consideration and we hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jeff Sauvé  
[redacted]

### A.3 Consent Form



Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab  
War Memorial Gym (Room 122)  
School of Kinesiology  
The University of British Columbia  
6081 University Blvd, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

#### Consent Form

Principal Investigator:  
Mark R. Beauchamp, Ph.D.  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

Co-Investigator:  
Jeff Sauvé MHK, BPHE, BA  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

**Project Title:** Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to examine, from the perspective of recently retired Olympians, what the Canadian sport system could do to best support athlete well-being.

**Eligibility:** The following criteria will be used to determine participant eligibility for this study:

1. Competed in the category of “athlete” for Canada at one or more of the following Olympic Games: Rio 2016, Sochi 2014, London 2012 and Vancouver 2010;
2. Retired from International competition as an athlete;
3. Prior to retirement, competed for Canada at an International level for five or more years.

**Involvement:** Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview with the co-investigator, Jeff Sauvé. It is anticipated the interview will last 45-60 minutes. If possible the interview may be done in person if convenient, but it may also be done by phone, Skype or FaceTime.

**Benefits:** Through interviews with twelve Olympic athletes we will look to explore their experiences in elite sport, to better understand what National Sport Federations are doing to support athlete well-being, what resources athletes utilize, and what further support may be put



in place. We anticipate this research will benefit future Canadian Olympians and inform how the sport system can best support them.

**Confidentiality:** Any information you provide within your interview will remain de-identified. This means that no information that can identify you will be discussed or made available within any reports that may result from this research. Any recordings or transcripts will be stored in a locked and secure storage room in the War Memorial Gym (Room 310) at UBC. All computer files will be kept on a secured password-protected computer in the Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab (Room 122, War Memorial Gym).

**Participation:** Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and you may decline to answer any question(s) that you choose. There are no known psychological or physical risks associated with participation. You may also withdraw your participation at any time throughout the course of the interview.

If for ANY reason, you do not want to take part in this interview, that's fine; you don't have to. It is up to you if you want to take part or not. You are also free to withdraw at any time without having to give any reason. If you decline participating or drop out, you will not experience ANY negative consequences at all.

If you have any further questions concerning the study please feel free to contact either Jeff Sauvé ([redacted]; [redacted]) or ([redacted]; [redacted]). Alternatively, if you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

*Consent: By signing below, I am acknowledging that the study has been explained to me, I understand what is involved, and I agree to take part in this study. It also means that I understand that my participation in this study is entirely my choice, and that I may pull out from the study at any time without having to give any reason for doing so and without experiencing any negative consequences. I understand that that if I do not wish to answer any question, I may refuse to answer.*

**By signing this form, you have consented to participate in this study.**

SIGNED.....

NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS.....

DATE.....

## A.4 Interview Guide

### Interview Guide

#### **Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians**

##### Personal Interview Schedule for Participants

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

Tell me about your background in elite sport (International competition including Olympics)?

How would you describe your general well-being while competing as an International athlete?

What were the biggest influences on your well-being as an International athlete (positive & negative)?

What do you understand athlete well-being to mean?

Describe a time when your needs as an athlete WERE being met (in the context of athlete well-being)?

What did your National Sport Federation do to support your well-being as an athlete?

What were the impacts on you when your well-being needs were being met?

Describe a time when your needs as an athlete WERE NOT being met (in the context of athlete well-being)?

What were the impacts on you and your athletic performance when your well-being needs were not being met?

What do you feel are, for an athlete, the essential elements for success at the Olympic games and other major International competitions (i.e., World Cups)?

What did you value most while competing as a Canadian International athlete?

If you could go back in time, if resources were in no way an issue, what would your primary focus be to better support your personal well-being as an athlete?

What are the most substantial barriers to athlete well-being?

To what extent does it matter that NSFs focus on athlete well-being?

Is there anything you would suggest could, or should, be put in place to ensure elite athlete well-being is being supported in Canada?

In the Canadian sport system, is there anything that needs to change?

What role could the National Sport Federation play in this?

## Appendix B Study 2 Materials (Chapter 3)

### B.1 Information Letter (Coach)



Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab  
War Memorial Gym (Room 122)  
School of Kinesiology  
The University of British Columbia  
6081 University Blvd, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

#### INFORMATION LETTER

Principal Investigator:  
Mark R. Beauchamp, Ph.D.  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

Co-Investigator:  
Jeff Sauvé MHK, BPHE, BA  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

In an effort to explore how we can best support the well-being of Canadian athletes we are embarking on a study that we hope you are willing to be a part of.

The purpose of the study is to examine, from the perspective of recently retired Olympians, National team coaches and high performance directors, what the Canadian sport system could do to best support athlete well-being. The title of the study is “Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians”.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to set up an interview with the co-investigator, Jeff Sauvé. It is anticipated the interview will last 45-60 minutes. If possible the interview may be done in person if convenient, but it may also be done by phone, Skype or FaceTime.

In addition to yourself, eleven Canadian National team coaches will be selected for interviews. Specifically, we will look to explore what National Sport Federations are doing to support athlete well-being, what resources athletes utilize, and what further support may be put in place. We anticipate this research will benefit future Canadian athletes and inform how the sport system can best support them.

Any information you provide within your interview will remain de-identified. This means that no information that can identify you will be discussed or made available within any reports that may result from this research. Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and you may decline to answer any question(s) that you choose. There are no known psychological or physical risks associated with participation. You may also withdraw your participation at any time throughout the course of the interview.

If for ANY reason, you do not want to take part in this interview, that's fine; you don't have to. It is up to you if you want to take part or not. You are also free to withdraw at any time without having to give any reason. If you decline participating or drop out, you will not experience ANY negative consequences at all. If you have any further questions concerning the study please feel free to contact either Jeff Sauvé ([redacted]; [redacted]) or Dr. Mark Beauchamp ([redacted]; [redacted]).

If you are willing to put your name forward for this study, please reply by email to [redacted] no later than (*insert date*). Those participating in the study will be required to sign a consent form. From there we will set up a convenient interview time.

Thank you for the consideration and we hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jeff Sauvé  
[redacted]

## B.2 Information Letter (Performance Director)



Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab  
War Memorial Gym (Room 122)  
School of Kinesiology  
The University of British Columbia  
6081 University Blvd, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

### INFORMATION LETTER

Principal Investigator:  
Mark R. Beauchamp, Ph.D.  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

Co-Investigator:  
Jeff Sauvé MHK, BPHE, BA  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

In an effort to explore how we can best support the well-being of Canadian athletes we are embarking on a study that we hope you are willing to be a part of.

The purpose of the study is to examine, from the perspective of recently retired Olympians, National team coaches and high performance directors, what the Canadian sport system could do to best support athlete well-being. The title of the study is “Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians”.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to set up an interview with the co-investigator, Jeff Sauvé. It is anticipated the interview will last 45-60 minutes. If possible the interview may be done in person if convenient, but it may also be done by phone, Skype or FaceTime.

In addition to yourself, eleven high performance directors of National Sport Federations will be selected for interviews. We will look to explore what National Sport Federations are doing to support athlete well-being, what resources athletes utilize, and what further support may be put in place. We anticipate this research will benefit future Canadian athletes and inform how the sport system can best support them.

Any information you provide within your interview will remain de-identified. This means that no information that can identify you will be discussed or made available within any reports that may

result from this research. Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and you may decline to answer any question(s) that you choose. There are no known psychological or physical risks associated with participation. You may also withdraw your participation at any time throughout the course of the interview.

If for ANY reason, you do not want to take part in this interview, that's fine; you don't have to. It is up to you if you want to take part or not. You are also free to withdraw at any time without having to give any reason. If you decline participating or drop out, you will not experience ANY negative consequences at all. If you have any further questions concerning the study please feel free to contact either Jeff Sauvé ([redacted]; [redacted]) or Dr. Mark Beauchamp ([redacted]; [redacted]).

If you are willing to put your name forward for this study, please reply by email to [redacted] no later than (*insert date*). Those participating in the study will be required to sign a consent form. From there we will set up a convenient interview time.

Thank you for the consideration and we hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jeff Sauvé  
[redacted]

### B.3 Consent Form (Coach)



Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab  
War Memorial Gym (Room 122)  
School of Kinesiology  
The University of British Columbia  
6081 University Blvd, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

#### Consent Form

Principal Investigator:  
Mark R. Beauchamp, Ph.D.  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

Co-Investigator:  
Jeff Sauvé MHK, BPHE, BA  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

**Project Title:** Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to examine, from the perspective of recently retired Olympians, coaches and high performance directors, what the Canadian sport system could do to best support athlete well-being.

**Eligibility:** The following criteria will be used to determine which coaches are eligible for this study:

1. Currently serving as a coach of a National Team that falls under the purview of a Canadian National Sport Federation.

**Involvement:** Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview with the co-investigator, Jeff Sauvé. It is anticipated the interview will last 40-60 minutes. The interview may be done in person if convenient, but may also be done by phone or Skype.

**Benefits:** Through interviews with athletes, coaches and high performance directors we will look to explore experiences in elite sport, to better understand what National Sport Federations are doing to support athlete well-being, what resources athletes utilize, and what further support may be put in place. We anticipate this research will benefit future Canadian Olympians and inform how the sport system can best support them.



**Confidentiality:** Any information you provide within your interview will remain de-identified. This means that no information that can identify you will be discussed or made available within any reports that may result from this research. Any recordings or transcripts will be stored in a locked and secure storage room in the War Memorial Gym (Room 310) at UBC. All computer files will be kept on a secured password-protected computer in the Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab (Room 122, War Memorial Gym).

**Participation:** Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and you may decline to answer any question(s) that you choose. There are no known psychological or physical risks associated with participation. You may also withdraw your participation at any time throughout the course of the interview.

If for ANY reason, you do not want to take part in this interview, that's fine; you don't have to. It is up to you if you want to take part or not. You are also free to withdraw at any time without having to give any reason. If you decline participating or drop out, you will not experience ANY negative consequences at all.

If you have any further questions concerning the study please feel free to contact either Jeff Sauvé ([redacted]; [redacted]) or Dr. Mark Beauchamp ([redacted]; [redacted]). Alternatively, if you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

*Consent: By signing below, I am acknowledging that the study has been explained to me, I understand what is involved, and I agree to take part in this study. It also means that I understand that my participation in this study is entirely my choice, and that I may pull out from the study at any time without having to give any reason for doing so and without experiencing any negative consequences. I understand that that if I do not wish to answer any question, I may refuse to answer.*

**By signing this form, you have consented to participate in this study.**

SIGNED.....

NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS.....

DATE.....

## B.4 Consent Form (Performance Director)



Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab  
War Memorial Gym (Room 122)  
School of Kinesiology  
The University of British Columbia  
6081 University Blvd, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

### Consent Form

Principal Investigator:  
Mark R. Beauchamp, Ph.D.  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

Co-Investigator:  
Jeff Sauvé MHK, BPHE, BA  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

**Project Title:** Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to examine, from the perspective of recently retired Olympians, coaches and high performance directors, what the Canadian sport system could do to best support athlete well-being.

**Eligibility:** The following criteria will be used to determine which high performance directors are eligible for this study:

1. Currently serving in the role of high performance director for a Canadian National Sport Federation.

**Involvement:** Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview with the co-investigator, Jeff Sauvé. It is anticipated the interview will last 40-60 minutes. The interview may be done in person if convenient, but may also be done by phone or Skype.

**Benefits:** Through interviews with athletes, coaches and high performance directors we will look to explore experiences in elite sport, to better understand what National Sport Federations are doing to support athlete well-being, what resources athletes utilize, and what further support may be put in place. We anticipate this research will benefit future Canadian Olympians and inform how the sport system can best support them.

**Confidentiality:** Any information you provide within your interview will remain de-identified. This means that no information that can identify you will be discussed or made available within any reports that may result from this research. Any recordings or transcripts will be stored in a locked and secure storage room in the War Memorial Gym (Room 310) at UBC. All computer files will be kept on a secured password-protected computer in the Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab (Room 122, War Memorial Gym).

**Participation:** Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and you may decline to answer any question(s) that you choose. There are no known psychological or physical risks associated with participation. You may also withdraw your participation at any time throughout the course of the interview.

If for ANY reason, you do not want to take part in this interview, that's fine; you don't have to. It is up to you if you want to take part or not. You are also free to withdraw at any time without having to give any reason. If you decline participating or drop out, you will not experience ANY negative consequences at all.

If you have any further questions concerning the study please feel free to contact either Jeff Sauvé ([redacted]; [redacted]) or Dr. Mark Beauchamp ([redacted]; [redacted]). Alternatively, if you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

*Consent: By signing below, I am acknowledging that the study has been explained to me, I understand what is involved, and I agree to take part in this study. It also means that I understand that my participation in this study is entirely my choice, and that I may pull out from the study at any time without having to give any reason for doing so and without experiencing any negative consequences. I understand that that if I do not wish to answer any question, I may refuse to answer.*

**By signing this form, you have consented to participate in this study.**

SIGNED.....

NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS.....

DATE.....

## **B.5 Interview Guide – Coach**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians**

##### Personal Interview Schedule for Participants

*The following questions represent an overarching agenda for interviews with the Canadian National Team Coaches. The questions will be pursued flexibly and may be altered and added to over time as different themes and patterns emerge in the data.*

Tell me about your background as an International coach?

What is your approach to managing the well-being of your athletes?

What do you understand athlete well-being to mean?

To what extent can coach-athlete dynamics impact (both positively and negatively) athlete well-being?

- Examples?

Are you able to describe a time when you felt athlete well-being needs WERE being met within your National Sport Federation?

What, if anything, did the National Sport Federation do to support the athletes' well-being during this time?

As a coach, what do you see as the impacts on performance when your athletes' well-being needs are being met?

Are you able to describe a time when you felt athlete well-being needs WERE NOT being met within your National Sport Federation?

What, if anything, could the National Sport Federation have done to support the athletes' well-being during this time?

As a coach, what do you see as the impacts on performance when your athletes' well-being needs are not being met?

What can a coach do to support athlete well-being?

What programs or initiatives to support athlete well-being are currently in place within your National Sport Federation?

Are there ways in which National Sport Federations can better support athlete well-being?

To what extent does it matter that National Sport Federations focus on supporting athlete well-being?

What are the most substantial barriers to athlete well-being?

Is there anything you would suggest could, or should, be put in place to ensure elite athlete well-being is being supported in the Canadian coach sport system?

## **B.6 Interview Guide – Performance Director**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Athlete Well-Being: National Sport Federation support of Canadian Olympians**

##### Personal Interview Schedule for Participants

*The following questions represent an overarching agenda for interviews with National Sport Federation high performance directors. The questions will be pursued flexibly and may be altered and added to over time as different themes and patterns emerge in the data.*

Tell me about your background in elite sport?

What is your approach to managing the well-being of the athletes in your organization?

What do you understand athlete well-being to mean?

What dynamics within your sport impact (both positively and negatively) athlete well-being?  
- Examples?

Are you able to describe a time when you felt athlete well-being needs WERE being met within your organization (National Sport Federation)?

What, if anything, did the National Sport Federation do to support the athletes' well-being during this time?

What are the impacts on performance when your athlete's well-being needs are being met?

Are you able to describe a time when you felt athlete well-being needs WERE NOT being met within your organization?

What, if anything, could the National Sport Federation have done to support the athletes' well-being during this time?

What are the impacts on performance when your athletes' well-being needs are not being met?

What can a high performance director do to support athlete well-being?

What programs or initiatives to support athlete well-being are currently in place within your organization?

Are there programs or initiatives to support athlete well-being you would like to have in place within your organization?

Are there ways in which National Sport Federations can better support athlete well-being?

To what extent does it matter that National Sport Federations focus on supporting athlete well-being?

In your role as high performance director, what are the most substantial barriers to athlete well-being?

Is there anything you would suggest could, or should, be put in place to ensure elite athlete well-being is being supported in the Canadian sport system?

## Appendix C Knowledge Mobilization Project Materials (Chapter 4)

### C.1 Supporting Olympic Athlete Well-being: Knowledge Translation for National Sport Federations Invitation Letter



THE UNIVERSITY  
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

#### Supporting Olympic Athlete Well-being: Knowledge Translation for National Sport Federations Invitation Letter

[Date]

To: [Participant Name]  
[Participant Organization]

---

Dear [Name of Participant],

I am excited to reconnect and see if we can find a window of time so I can share with you the research I have been conducting here at UBC, and discuss whether, and the extent to which, the findings might be of use to you and (potentially) National Sport Federations in Canada. As a member of the Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Laboratory, and under the advisement of Dr. Mark Beauchamp, we have now completed two studies. The findings from these studies are directly applicable to the [participant organization] and related to something I know you are an advocate for – athlete well-being.

Attached to this email is an executive summary of two projects (one was conducted with recently retired Canadian Olympic athletes and the other with Performance Directors and Coaches working with Olympic athletes). The projects were designed to examine some of the barriers and facilitators to elite athlete well-being. Given your current role, I'm hoping that you'd find the executive summary useful (I've also attached the two 'academic' papers as well in case you're interested in reading in greater detail).



Given the very practical nature of the study findings, I was wondering if you would have any interest in having a conversation about the potential application (or not) of the findings. Of course, your participation would be completely voluntary, but I am hoping to spend 30-60 minutes to discuss the results as well as the practical implications of our studies. Additionally, I am hoping to get your thoughts on our suggestions, and what you feel are the opportunities and barriers to better supporting athlete well-being moving forward.

If you are willing and able to chat with me, we will discuss the level of anonymity you would like to have. You may wish to be identifiable by your comments in any summary or report that derives from this research. Conversely, if you would prefer to not have your identity revealed, then your name and your organization's name will not be referred to in any of the documents emerging from this knowledge translation study. I would like to record our conversation as well. I will outline this in a consent form if you are agreeable – which I sincerely hope you are. You are such an important leader in Canadian sport, and I would be honoured to share my research with you and get your feedback.

If you are agreeable to being interviewed I will send you a consent form, that explains in greater detail what is involved, how the data will be handled, as well as your freedom to decline to answer any questions without incurring any negative consequences.

Otherwise, I hope you and your crew are well.

Sincerely,

Jeff Sauvé  
[redacted]

## C.2 Supporting Olympic Athlete Well-being: Knowledge Translation for National Sport Federations Consent Form



Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab  
War Memorial Gym (Room 122)  
School of Kinesiology  
The University of British Columbia  
6081 University Blvd, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

### Supporting Olympic Athlete Well-being: Knowledge Translation for National Sport Federations Consent Form

Principal Investigator:  
Mark R. Beauchamp, Ph.D.  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

Co-Investigator:  
Jeff Sauvé  
School of Kinesiology  
University of British Columbia  
Contact Number: [redacted]  
E-mail: [redacted]

Dear [*Name of Participant*]

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to share our evidence-informed findings and practical implications from our recently completed studies regarding elite athlete well-being. We will share this information with senior executive leaders from Canadian Multi-Sport Organizations (MSOs). Additionally, the purpose of this study is to examine, through individual interviews, these leaders' thoughts and impressions concerning the findings and practical implications of our studies. We will also explore these leaders' perceptions regarding the barriers and opportunities to implementing the practical suggestions to support elite athlete well-being as put forward in our studies.

**Involvement:** Should you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview with the co-investigator, Jeff Sauvé. It is anticipated the interview will last 30-60 minutes and will be completed over Zoom. You will be provided with a Zoom link, and a virtual waiting room will be used to ensure you are the only participant admitted to the meeting. You can turn off your camera during the interview if you prefer. Regardless, only the interview audio (not video) will be recorded. As a basis for this interview, you will be sent an executive summary of the studies described above, as well as two journal articles (from which the

executive summary was prepared) to review if you are interested in reading in greater detail. If you review the summary and journal articles, it is anticipated that the total time to take part in this study would be between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours.

**Confidentiality and Research Ethics:** Before the interview we will discuss the level of anonymity that you would like to have. If you would prefer to not have your identity revealed within any publication or report to derive from this study, then your name and your organization's name will not be referred to in any of the documents emerging from the completed study. Any audio-recordings and transcripts will be encrypted and stored on a password-protected computer in the Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab (Room 122, War Memorial Gym) for a minimum of 5-years. Only the principal investigator and co-investigator will have access to the stored audio-recordings and transcripts.

**Future Use of Data:** The use of audio recordings and transcripts from our interview will be used to produce a report. Once this report is written, participants will not be able to withdraw their interview responses. This report will be included in the co-investigator's PhD dissertation which will be accessible (open access) through various online research repositories.

**Participation:** Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and you may decline to answer any question(s) that you choose. There are no known psychological or physical risks associated with participation. You may also withdraw your participation at any time throughout the course of the interview.

If for ANY reason, you do not want to take part in this interview, that's fine; you don't have to. It is up to you if you want to take part or not. You are also free to withdraw at any time without having to give any reason. If you decline participating or drop out, you will not experience ANY negative consequences at all.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact either Jeff Sauvé ([redacted]; [redacted]) or Dr. Mark Beauchamp ([redacted]; [redacted]). Alternatively, if you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

***Consent:** By signing below, I am acknowledging that the study has been explained to me, I understand what is involved, and I agree to take part in this study. It also means that I understand that my participation in this study is entirely my choice, and that I may pull out from the study at any time without having to give any reason for doing so and without experiencing any negative consequences. I understand that that if I do not wish to answer any question, I may refuse to answer.*

**By signing this form, you have consented to participate in this study.**

SIGNED:

NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS:

DATE:

### **C.3 Elite Athlete Well-being: Knowledge Translation Project – Executive Summary**

#### **Elite Athlete Well-being Knowledge Translation Project - Executive Summary**

Prepared for:

*[Participant Name, Title]*

*[Participant Organization]*

## Introduction

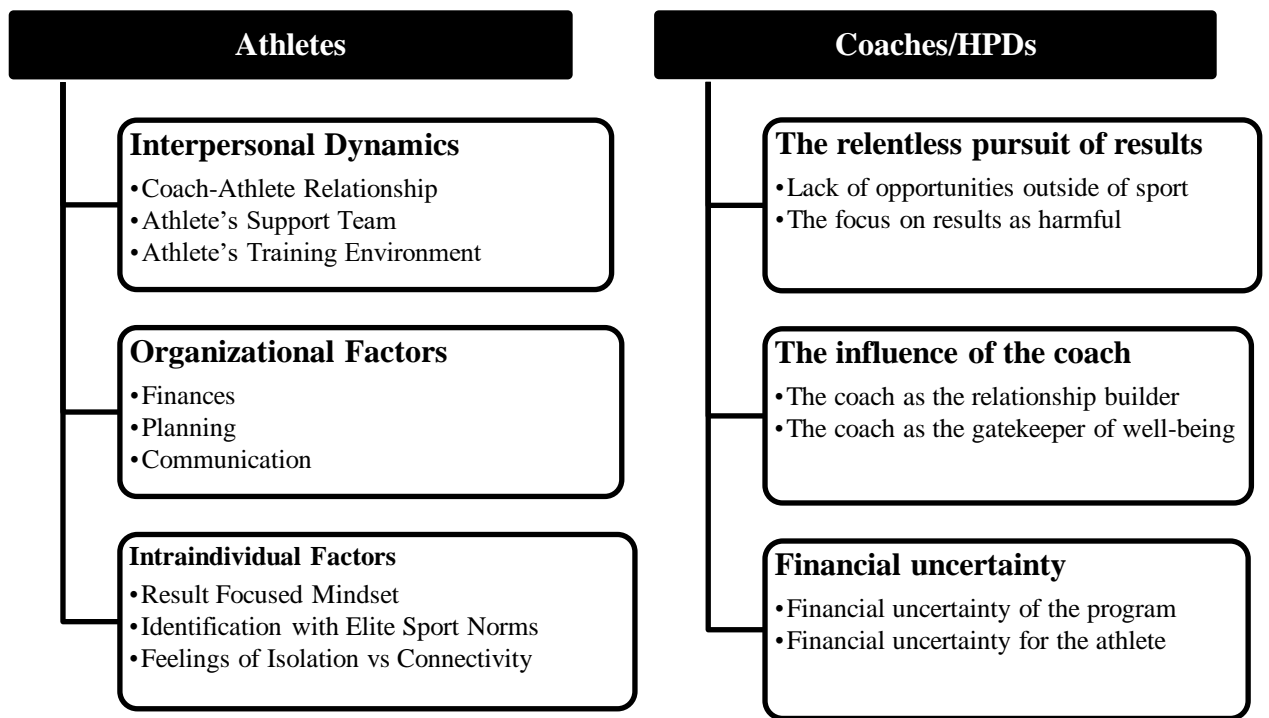
The demands of Olympic-level sport can substantively influence the well-being of our elite athletes. In a recent article published by the IOC<sup>1</sup> elite athletes were identified as experiencing a greater overall risk of factors that negatively impact their well-being such as psychological abuse,<sup>2</sup> stigma in seeking mental health support,<sup>3</sup> and well-being challenges due to injury or transitioning out of sport.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies have highlighted how Olympic athletes sometimes (although, not always) struggle with balancing the demands of sport<sup>5</sup> and may compete in a sport environment in which abuse exists alongside irresponsible leadership.<sup>6</sup>

By acknowledging these challenges, the IOC has committed to work with member nations to meaningfully improve the quality of life of their athletes. In Canada, initiatives such as *Game Plan* are designed to support athletes with educational guidance, financial planning, and career development.<sup>7</sup> Efforts to date are important (and noteworthy), but we know there is a substantial amount of work to still be done to better support athlete well-being. With this in mind, we recently conducted in-depth interviews with twelve (12) recently retired Canadian Olympians, twelve (12) Canadian Olympic coaches, and twelve (12) Canadian National Sport Federation (NSF) High Performance Directors (HPDs). The purpose of these interviews was, to examine factors the participants felt supported and/or thwarted elite athlete well-being. We also explored how the participants view athlete well-being. Our findings provide invaluable insight into Olympic-level athlete well-being, and we are excited to share these findings with leaders of the COC and CAC. Furthermore, we are interested in any thoughts, impressions, and recommendations these leaders have regarding the research findings. As such, the information below is intended to serve as a primer for these discussions.

## Findings

In adhering to established academic standards, approval to conduct this research was obtained through the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board, participants signed a consent form, and steps to ensure participant anonymity were taken. The data analysis process led to the identification of various themes (see Table 1), which were categorized in terms of various higher-order and lower-order themes.

**Table 1: Higher & Lower-Order Themes of Perceived Factors Influencing Elite Athlete Well-Being**



The main take-home (i.e., practical) findings from this research are provided below in Table 2.

**Table 2: Key Findings**

Athletes....	Coaches and HPDs...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• highlighted that their motivation was influenced by their coach, and related to coaches’ autonomy supportive behaviours:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ described coaches who did not employ autonomy support (enabling athletes to exhibit choice, and have input into decision-making processes) as negatively impacting their well-being.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• discussed that their relationship with their sport psychologist allocated by their NSF was, at times, problematic:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ expressed concerns and frustration regarding the psychologists’ focus on performance and results, to the exclusion of discussing personal matters and support for their overall well-being.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• suggested athletes desire input into the long-term planning and communication of decisions (policy and operational) that affect their experience in sport.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• felt uncertain about how they can support athlete well-being.</li> <li>• displayed a lack of awareness of their responsibilities as coach or HPD in supporting and/or thwarting the well-being of their athletes.</li> <li>• acknowledged they prioritized results over well-being, despite awareness that not supporting athlete well-being can negatively impact performance (conversely, supporting well-being would improve results).</li> <li>• were unanimous in their perception that the relentless pursuit of results negatively impacts athlete well-being:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ highlighted education as a life domain that is often neglected as a trade-off to pursuing results.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• emphasized a disproportionate focus on results over well-being because of the underpinning financial structure:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ PDs highlighted that investment into the system is not allocated for well-being</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reflected on the (in)capability of their NSF to communicate with athletes and listen to their concerns and suggestions related to factors that directly influenced their sport environment.</li> <li>• highlighted finances as a substantive stressor, related to both the amount and inconsistency of funding from their NSF.</li> <li>• described a lack of awareness of factors that they later realized thwarted their well-being.</li> <li>• explained that the cultural norms of elite sport system perpetuate an emphasis on results.</li> <li>• sometimes felt that the elite athlete mindset involves over-conforming to the norms of elite sport (e.g., excessive training, win at all costs) and that these norms can negatively influence athlete well-being (e.g., injury, missed opportunities outside of sport, and fractured relationships).</li> <li>• described struggling with long-term impacts of their (over)conformity to the cultural norms of elite sport.</li> </ul>	<p>programs, rather targeted at initiatives perceived by funding agents as more directly aligned with winning medals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• positioned the relationship between results and well-being as an ‘either/or’ proposition, acknowledging that results are prioritized (over well-being) in the Olympic sport system.</li> <li>• identified the coach as the central figure within the sport environment responsible for serving as the ‘gatekeeper’ of athlete well-being.</li> <li>• suggested they are unclear how the coach should support athlete well-being: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ more PDs than coaches displayed a lack of understanding how the coach can support well-being.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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## Practical Implications

These findings point to various practical implications that *may* help to inform the support of elite athlete well-being. Recommendations for NSFs include a focus on fostering healthy relationships (built on trust) while being aware of the interpersonal power dynamics within an athlete's sport environment (e.g., coach-athlete and sport psychologist-athlete relationships), establishing longer-term program plans that are effectively communicated to the athletes, and exploring opportunities to re-envision and integrate athletes into decision-making processes. Furthermore, international and national sport governing bodies could look to better align and implement (or enhance) programs that provide support for athletes' lives *outside of elite sport*, and *while athletes are still in the sport system*. It is important to note, sport organizations that design and deliver these programs do so within a sport system that is, at times, self-regulating. It is possible these organizations may have little incentive to fully address athlete well-being, or only to the degree that these programs serve the pursuit of performance outcomes.<sup>8</sup> It is, of course, possible that leadership within sport organizations may not know *how to best support athlete well-being*. Our findings point to a lack of awareness by some leaders within the Canadian sport system as to how they can best support well-being, and particularly in the context of a sport culture that is perceived by those within the system (including athletes, coaches, and HPDs) as prioritizing an athlete's results above all else.

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## C.4 Elite Athlete Well-being: Knowledge Translation Project – Interview Guide



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### Elite Athlete Well-Being Knowledge Translation Project – Interview Guide

*It is anticipated participants will have read the pre-interview executive summary provided and as asked of them in the invitation letter. However, to be certain, prior to asking the questions as outlined below, we will check that participants have read the executive summary. If they have not, a brief synopsis of the executive summary will be provided.*

*The following questions represent an overarching agenda for interviews with Canadian sport leaders. The questions will be pursued flexibly and may be altered and added.*

## QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

### *Introductions*

Before we start, I was wondering if you could let me know whether you read either, or both, the executive summary or the two journal articles I previously sent you.

Please tell me about your background in elite sport?

### *Themes*

Again, thank you for reviewing the executive summary provided. From the table of higher and lower-order themes on page 3 of the executive summary, are there any themes that stand out to you? If so, which ones and why?

As you review the table of themes, are there any themes, findings, or suggestions that you are surprised were not included in this research summary?

What are your overall thoughts and impressions of the themes related to the athlete interviews?

What are your overall thoughts and impressions of the themes related to the coaches and HPD interviews?

### ***Key findings***

From the key findings on pages 3 to 5 of the executive summary, are there any findings you find particularly notable? If so, which ones and why?

Of the key findings related to the interviews with Olympic athletes, are there any findings you find surprising?

Of the key findings related to the interviews with Canadian international coaches and NSF HPDs, are there any findings that were unexpected?

Was there anything in these findings that you found reassuring or concerning for the well-being of elite athletes? (follow up questions to probe for both – reassuring/concerning)

What are your overall thoughts and impressions of the key findings?

### ***Practical implications***

From the practical implications discussed in the executive summary, are there any recommendations for NSFs that you find particularly useful as a Multi-Sport Organization leader? If yes, which ones and why?

Are any of the practical implications highlighted in the report that you do not agree with? If yes, which ones and why?

Are there any practical implications you thought may be included, but were not? If yes, which ones?

To what extent do you feel the recommendations within the report should be considered (or further considered) by NSFs to implement?

Are there any barriers that you feel might impede NSFs from implementing these suggestions?

More generally, are there any barriers that you feel might impede NSFs from implementing initiatives that support athlete well-being?

***Final thoughts***

Are there any take away themes, findings, and/or practical implications (highlighted in the executive summary of the research) that really resonate with you?

To what extent does it matter that National Sport Federations focus on supporting athlete well-being?

What role do you think NSFs should be in supporting athlete well-being?

What role do you see for governing bodies external to NSFs playing in monitoring and supporting athlete well-being?

Are there any final thoughts you would like to share?