

**PERSEVERANCE THROUGH MENTAL BLOCKING:
EXPLORING COACH-ATHLETE DYADIC RELATIONSHIPS**

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ABSTRACT

Collective case study (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 1995) was used to explore the journey of coach-athlete dyads who were able to successfully maintain their training and interpersonal relationships throughout the course of the athlete enduring a mental block. Three coach-athlete dyads, plus one additional athlete, completed in-depth one-on-one interviews, discussing their coach-athlete relationship before, during, and after the mental block. All dyads were same sex, nationally ranked coach-athlete pairs, from sports involving mandatory elements that include both twisting and flipping components. Categorical aggregation of participant statements lead to the formation of five main themes associated with dyads successfully overcoming a mental block (where success was defined as the athlete regaining the ability to perform the skill that they had previously been unable to do on account of the mental block and the dyad maintaining their training and interpersonal relationship): 1) Get to Know Your Athlete: The Need for High Quality Communication; 2) Be a United Front; 3) Mistakes and Miscommunications Happen: Recovery is Key; 4) Seek Outside Resources; 5) Be Patient. Results suggest that an environment for success can flourish when each party is open, honest, and self-aware of their own limitations. It is suggested that future research utilize the 3 + 1Cs Model of the coach-athlete relationship in exploring how dyads can successfully overcome a mental block.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most important relationships in an athlete's life is the relationship with his or her coach (Jowett, 2003; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). This relationship has the power to build up or crush an athlete's motivation and overall sport satisfaction (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). It is a crucial component of athletes' physical and psychosocial development (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002) and is a primary determinant of athletes' practice and competition performance (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). This relationship continues to affect athletes beyond the sport realm; a high-quality coach-athlete relationship is beneficial to an athlete's overall life happiness (Lafreniere, Jowett, Vallerand, & Carbonneau, 2011).

This study explored coach-athlete dyads and how their relationships persevered throughout the course of the athletes enduring a mental block. As a coach myself now, I understand some of the struggles involved when working with athletes. Being involved in an acrobatic sport, I have worked with several athletes who have suffered from mental blocks. While there are many differing definitions and terms for mental blocks, the general idea is that an athlete is no longer able to perform a skill which they were at one point able to perform with ease (Day, Thatcher, Greenlees & Woods, 2006). The loss of a skill can be disastrous for athletes' achievement, which in turn can cause great amounts of stress and anxiety (Collins, Morriss, & Trower, 1999). For these reasons and many more, I have come to find myself extremely interested in and curious about the experiences of coach-athlete dyads as they navigate together through a mental block. Throughout this study, I learned about the strength of each dyad's relationship before the onset of the block, how the relationship persevered throughout the block, and how the relationship either facilitated or hindered the athletes' progress through the block from both the coaches' and the athletes' perspectives.

As an athlete who has suffered from a mental block and as a coach who has worked with athletes while trying to overcome a block of their own, I understand firsthand the stress a block can put on a coach-athlete relationship. When I was an athlete, I found myself unable to perform my back tuck (a back flip commonly performed in cheerleading and gymnastics) when my coach was not on the mat. Physically, I was able to do the skill. I could perform the skill while doing drills or when my coach was present, but as soon as she stepped away, I was unable to make myself throw the back tuck. While my coach understood for the most part, she sometimes became frustrated and did not understand what was so different when she was not there. What I found to be most frustrating was not being able to explain to her why I could not perform; I did not understand it either. As a coach, I try to remember the feeling of confusion I felt over my lost skill when I am working with athletes who are experiencing a block of their own. Having had this experience as a young athlete, I find that I tend to be more empathetic towards blocking athletes than perhaps some of my coaching peers without that same experience might be. I have also noticed that I can be quite protective and compassionate towards athletes experiencing mental blocks. The first time I recognized this behaviour was when a coach and an athlete, at the gym that I work at, were in conflict over how to address the athlete's mental block and about the amount of effort the athlete was putting into regaining her lost skill. The coach felt that the athlete was not contributing to their joint effort of regaining the lost skill, because she was not doing all of the homework the coach had provided between training sessions, as asked. I was not involved in the actual conflict but when the coach came to discuss how to move forward with the athlete, I found that my instinct was to alleviate the athlete of any blame or wrong doing, even though the athlete was at fault for not completing her homework. Another instance where I recognized I was being easier on blocking athletes was during team placements a few seasons

ago. In the sport of all-star cheer, teams are divided by both age and level. Each level has a specific set of skill requirements. To make a specific team, athletes must be of the appropriate age for that team and be able to execute all the necessary skills for the level of the team. There was an athlete who was trying out for a level four team, but she was blocking on multiple level four required tumbling skills, meaning she did not meet the team requirements necessary to make the team. Even though I was completely aware that she could not execute the necessary skills at the time of tryouts, I still found myself trying to make a case to my fellow coaches as to why she deserved a spot on that team over other athletes, some of whom already had the ability to execute all of the necessary skills. For these reasons, and many more, I found myself interested in learning everything I could about how coaches and athletes worked through the mental block experience together.

1.2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The coach-athlete relationship is a unique interpersonal relationship that has been defined as the situation in which coaches' and athletes' emotions, thoughts, and behaviours are mutually and causally interconnected (Kelly et al., 1983 as cited in Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Research tells us that the ultimate goal of this relationship is to produce a combined outcome of an improved performance (Jowett, 2003). However, I believe that this statement over simplifies the importance of the coach-athlete relationship. There is so much more than simply improved performance that each party can gain from this relationship. In strong coach-athlete relationships, the coach can be seen as a mentor; someone who not only trains the athlete physically, but who also nurtures the person as a whole (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). When this type of bond forms, each party gains trust and respect for the other. They have shared experiences of commitment, dedication, and sacrifice, all of which can benefit each individual far beyond the world of sport

(Jowett & Meek, 2000). The coach-athlete relationship is very complex, and there are many characteristics and personal qualities that each half of the dyad contributes to result in a positive, healthy relationship. To achieve a strong coach-athlete relationship, the dyad must share reciprocal respect, trust, and communication (Gillet, Vallerand, Amoura, & Baldes, 2009; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), as well as commitment and understanding (Jowett, 2003).

Recognizing the need for a sport-specific framework to further explore coach-athlete dyads, Jowett (2007) created the 3 + 1Cs Model of the coach-athlete relationship, an expansion of the previous 3Cs model (Jowett, 2000). The constructs of Closeness, Commitment, and Complementarity are collectively the 3Cs, with the “+ 1C” of the model being Co-orientation. Within the model, closeness refers to the emotional connection felt between coach and athlete and encompasses components of trust, concern, respect, and emotional and social support. It has been operationalized as an affective or emotional interdependence. Within the sport setting, the amount of time spent together training, travelling, and competing provides the time necessary for coach-athlete dyads to develop a strong interpersonal relationship (Martens, 1987; Seefeldt & Gould, 1980). One way in which coaches can promote feelings of emotional connectedness with their athletes is by exhibiting autonomy-supportive behaviours (Keegan, Harwood, Spray & Lavalley, 2009; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004). Autonomy-supportive behaviours are “behaviours performed by the authoritative person (i.e., the coach) that take into account the other’s (i.e., the athlete) perspective, acknowledges the other’s feelings, and provides the other with pertinent information and opportunities for choice, while minimizing the use of pressures and demands” (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003, p. 886). These types of behaviours also allow the athlete to feel as though she is being understood by her coach; thereby further strengthening the closeness between the two.

Commitment refers to each party's intent or desire to maintain the partnership over an extended period of time. The third "C" of the model, complementarity, refers to the way in which dyad members cooperate and negotiate interactions towards one another in regards to two main interpersonal relationship issues (Jowett, 2007). The first relationship issue is how friendly or hostile each individual will be towards the other and the second relationship issue is how much control each member will have during each encounter. A highly complementary dyad will be very cooperative and will engage primarily in actions that aid the performance of the counterpart or which contribute to facilitating the way in which members coordinate efforts. Complementarity has been operationalized as the type of interaction the dyad perceives as cooperative and effective.

Lastly, the "+ 1C" of the model, co-orientation, refers to the members of the dyad sharing similar views of the world or approaching situations from a shared common ground. Both of these can evolve through negotiation, agreement, and understanding, which often occur during periods of adjustment, when the dyad is learning how to work as a unit. Co-orientation has been operationalized as "the coach and athlete's verbal interactions whereby its exact nature is sought and addressed" (Jowett & Meek, 2000, p.159).

The coach-athlete bond is a unique relationship that requires balance and effort from both sides of the dyad. Even a strong relationship can be offset by the introduction of a stressor. A stressor in a coach-athlete relationship can be anything that causes interpersonal conflict, such as a disagreement in training plan, a change in competition routine, or any other possible conflict provoking situation. When coach-athlete dyads encounter states of interpersonal conflict, the members experience changes in stress level, confidence, motivation, self-esteem, and performance accomplishments (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Jowett, 2003;

Pocwardowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2003). Interpersonal conflict can arise due to many different situations: an athlete disliking a coach's personality or coaching style (Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991), issues such as training, power struggles, or technical training (Greenleaf et al., 2001).

Another potential source of stress for a coach-athlete dyad is when an athlete goes through a mental block. There are many terms for mental blocks: psychological blocking, Lost Move Syndrome (Day et al., 2006), loss of trust (Moore & Stevenson, 1991; 1994), performance blocks (Hauw, 2009; Orlick & Partington, 1988), jamming (Moore & Stevenson, 1991) and paradoxical performance (Lobinger, Klampfl, & Altenmuller, 2014). There are also many theories as to why skills are lost: deterioration of technique (Collins, Morriss, & Trower, 1999), loss of automaticity of the skill (Day et al., 2006), lack of trust in the skill (Moore & Stevenson, 1991; 1994), difficulties cognitively with memory retrieval (Brady, 2008), and challenges in coping with fear, anxiety, and evaluation (Hanin, 2008). Each term and each theory has its own corresponding definition. The definition adopted for this study is that a mental block occurs when an athlete is no longer able to perform a skill which at one point he or she was able to perform automatically (Day et al., 2006). This definition speaks to skills that are lost due to psychological causes, such as those listed above, not to skills that are lost due to attrition of athletic ability (e.g., skills lost due athletic retirement or cessation of training). While there are many conflicting findings in this area, one commonality is that mental blocks are quite prevalent in sports involving complex motor skills, such as gymnastics, diving, and trampoline. It has even been suggested that up to 70% of high level gymnasts will encounter a blocked skill during their athletic career (Anonymous, 2009).

Mental blocks can hinder even the most consistent athletes. While exploring the mental readiness of Canadian Olympic athletes from the 1984 games, Orlick and Partington (1988) found that athletes who had exceptional track records, were expected to do well, and wanted to do well, performed far below anticipated marks. These subpar performances, or performance blocks, were caused by three major interruptions: changing familiar patterns that had worked in the past, being selected to compete late, and being unable to block out distractions. As the Olympics approached, many athletes found that their usual training regime was changed to include additional training hours, more intense training, or new training plans. These changes were found to disrupt the athletes enough to trigger performance blocks. Day and colleagues (2006) also found that as elite trampolinists approached important competitions, any changes in training added increased stress to athletes already experiencing mental blocks. Changes in familiarity, especially last minute changes in game plans, put athletes into unfamiliar patterns that are often not well practiced (Orlick & Partington, 1988). New patterns and non-dominant responses increase the chances of performance failure. Athletes strong in mental toughness can handle failure better than those who are mentally weak; mentally strong athletes will use failure to gain knowledge and learn how to better respond in future situations, while mentally weak athletes are more likely to allow failure to become an issue or a source of a mental block (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2007).

Mental blocks can be caused by more than external factors, such as distractions and changes in training patterns; internal factors, such as loss of trust, can also be the cause for a lost skill (Moore & Stevenson, 1991). Trust has been described as a psychological skill requiring athletes to release conscious control over movements, in turn allowing the automatic execution of the skill as it has been trained. As a skill is first learned, cognitive focus and control is

necessary, but with extensive practice, there is a shift from controlled processing to automatic processing (Schneider & Fisk, 1983, as cited in Moore & Stevenson, 1991). As this shift occurs, the athlete is able to free herself from any fear of mistakes in execution and outcomes. Once a skill has reached the point of automaticity and the athlete has achieved trust in the skill, any tendency to cognitively control the movement interferes with execution and must be blocked out. During the automatic execution of a skill, any cognitive control can be seen as excess cognitive activity; this excess of activity jams receptors, preventing clear information processing, resulting in jamming, or blocking on skill execution.

While sometimes performance difficulties and blocks begin with a lack of trust, other times the skill seems to simply disappear. Collins, Morriss, and Trower (1999) contend that when an athlete blocks on a skill, she loses the ability to cognitively retrieve the previously automatic skill execution program. When this occurs, the athlete is still in possession of the appropriate motor program and is still physically able to perform the skill successfully, but is unable to retrieve the program necessary for automaticity. Having lost automaticity, the athlete is required to increase awareness of the skill components. When awareness is increased the athlete may start to over-think the skill, have perceptions of inadequacies, increased anxiety, and fear of failure (Day et al., 2006); all of these elements lead to decreased instances of successful performance of the skill. While exploring Lost Move Syndrome (LMS) in elite trampolinists, the primary causes of lost skills included injury concerns, increased conscious control of skill execution, and inability to access the correct motor program for the desired skill (Day et al., 2006); all of which are outcomes of elevated levels of performance awareness.

Knowing the influential role coaches play in their athletes' lives, it can be expected that during the course of a mental block, coaches play an important role in athletes' well-being.

When exploring mental blocks in elite level trampolinists, Day et al. (2006) found that athletes going through a block reported at the onset of the block that their coach was understanding and encouraging but as time progressed and the skill did not return, the athletes perceived their coach as pressuring and unsupportive. Athletes also reported that as the block persisted they would have liked to receive praise from their coach in other areas to counteract the disappointment of the mental block. In addition, athletes reported needing more support from their coach while going through the block, as they felt they could not receive appropriate support from family and friends, in addition to feeling alienated from teammates.

Despite the wide range of research in the area, there is a lack of information regarding the experiences of mental blocks from coaches' perspectives in particular. While a block is understandably a challenging experience for athletes, little to no attention has been focused on the experience of coaches. Furthermore, it has yet to be explored how coach-athlete dyads navigate this experience together and how their relationship, both interpersonal and training based changes, if at all, while going through this difficult process.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PURPOSES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to explore the journey of coach-athlete dyads that have successfully maintained their training and interpersonal relationships throughout the course of the athletes enduring some form of mental block. I examined the relationship from both the coach and athlete perspectives and explored the relationship and training dynamic before, during and after the block. The primary focus of the study was on the experience of navigating through a mental block from both the coaches' and the athletes' perspectives.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 METHODS

In the sport psychology literature, the exploration of the coach-athlete relationship is not a new interest, nor is the topic of mental blocks. How these topics intertwine however, is relatively under researched. Due to the exploratory stages of this topic, a qualitative study was conducted, more specifically, a collective case study. Generally defined:

A case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme, or system in a “real life” context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic..., programme, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or to inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action. (Simons, 2009, p. 21)

There are several types of case studies: intrinsic case study, which aims to holistically understand one specific case; instrumental case study, which aims to provide insight to a larger topic through the use of an individual case; and collective case study which can provide insight into a particular question by studying more than one case (Stake, 1995). More simply put, collective case study research involves studying multiple cases that all share some sort of commonality (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), which in the case of this study was the successful navigation through a mental block as experienced by coach-athlete dyads. For the purposes of this study, success was defined as the athlete regaining the ability to perform the skill that they had previously been unable to do on account of the mental block and the dyad maintaining their training and interpersonal relationship throughout the entirety of the mental block. Cases were selected if: 1) they were relevant to the quintain (the larger group of cases); 2) they provided

diversity across context; and 3) they provided opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts (Stake, 2005).

For this research I have approached all components of design and execution from a social constructivist worldview. Within this worldview it is believed that individuals seek understanding of their world and develop subjective meanings of their unique experiences (Creswell, 2014). My goal was to ask questions that provided participants the freedom to share their views. I wanted to hear about how they constructed meaning from their experiences instead of simply hearing the facts about training and interacting within the dyad during a mental block.

2.1.1 Participants

Participants for this study were three coach-athlete dyads, where two dyads involved the same coach, plus one additional athlete. Of the four athletes, two had retired from sport at the time of data collection. All dyads were same sex, nationally ranked coach-athlete pairs. All athletes involved in the study were at least 17 years of age at the time of recruiting and had competed in at least one national or provincial level competition event before the onset of the mental block. Only dyads that had been working together for at least one full competition season before the onset of the block were included in the study. This duration of the dyadic relationship was to ensure both parties had ample time to get to know one another in both a personal and training setting. All dyads were established prior to the onset of the mental block and maintained their relationship throughout the course of the block. Lastly, all dyads were involved in sports which include acrobatic skills involving twisting and/or flipping elements.

2.1.2 Recruitment

The originally desired population was same-sex, elite level, coach-athlete dyads from aesthetically based, subjectively judged sports, involving mandatory acrobatic elements that involve both twisting and flipping elements; those sports being gymnastics, tumbling and trampoline, diving, and all-star cheerleading. By means of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014), competitive club managers, owners, or directors, and Provincial governing bodies from all eligible clubs of the listed sports, across Canada, were contacted via email and provided with information about the study. Within the email, club owners, managers, or board members were asked to pass along the study information to all eligible elite level coaches. Elite was defined differently based on the specific sport; for gymnastics and diving the athletes had to have competed at a national level or higher, while for cheerleading the athletes must have competed at level four or higher, based on the United States All-Star Federation levelling system. Information about the levels training within each club was gathered through club websites, national organization websites, and competition results pages. All sports combined, a total of 34 clubs across Canada were eligible to participate and were contacted. From the original email send out, 12 responses were received; however, only one athlete followed through with participation. The athlete's coach also showed interest in participating, but ended up withdrawing. After three weeks, all original contacts who had not responded were sent a follow up email. No additional participants were recruited.

Within the responses that I received, there was a wide array of questions, comments, and concerns that ultimately resulted in the respondents deciding against participation. Some responses were directly from athletes or parents of athletes, others were from coaches and club directors, and a few were from club owners. In each instance I did my best to address any concerns that were brought to my attention. One common issue that I could not resolve was that

coaches and owners did not want athletes to participate because they feared that participation would distract the athletes during competition season. A common concern from athletes that I was unable to resolve was that through the process of discussing and remembering the mental block experience in detail, they feared that the mental blocks would return. Even after addressing any concerns and questions, multiple participants set interview times and then either cancelled, rescheduled, and eventually decided not to participate, or did not show up to the interview at all.

Given these challenges in recruitment, two revisions to recruitment were made. Athletes who had competed at the provincial level were invited to participate as were co-ed dyads. The revisions were approved by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board before additional clubs were contacted. After the revision, an additional 17 clubs met the inclusion criteria and were contacted. Multiple responses were received, but no new dyads followed through with participation.

Subsequently, additional consideration was given as to other sports that could be included that involved many of the original inclusion criteria, including acrobatic skills involving twisting and flipping components. Keeping that element of the sport as a key inclusion criterion, pole vault was deemed a reasonable addition to the population. In pole vault, athletes must invert their bodies in an upward motion to get their entire weight over a suspended bar, as they go over the bar they rotate their body to eventually land on their backs (Frere, L'Hermette, Slawinski, & Tourny-Chollet, 2010). While this motion is not a complete twist or a complete flip, the sport does involve both of the mandatory elements that were originally of interest.

After the decision was made to include pole vault dyads, recruitment naturally evolved into snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is used to recruit participants when appropriate candidates for a study are difficult to locate (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). With snowball

sampling, an individual who has already been identified as an eligible participant informs others, who meet the same criteria, of the opportunity to be involved in the study. For this study, a member of the research team, who has connections in the track and field community, informed competitive pole vaulters of the opportunity to participate. Two athletes showed interest in the study and decided to participate. Their shared coach also joined the study but spoke to the differences between the athletes in the interviews. From there, through snowballing, the remainder of participants were successfully recruited.

The resulting participants included four athletes and two coaches; included were two pole vault athletes and their shared coach, one diver and her coach, and a gymnast whose coach chose not to participate. The athletes had a mean age of 25.75 years ($SD = 5.97$) and had been involved in their sport for a mean of 15 years ($SD = 4.06$). All dyads were same-sex and had been working together for a mean of 12 competitive seasons ($SD = 6.67$) before the onset of the mental block. Both pole vault athletes blocked on their take off, the component of their jump that launched them into the air and onto the pole. The diver blocked on dives involving more than three components and the gymnast blocked on backwards standing tumbling series on beam. Athletes experienced the mental block at a mean age of 19.5 years ($SD = 2.96$) and the block lasted a mean of 2.75 competitive seasons ($SD = 1.48$).

2.1.3 Procedures

In qualitative research, specifically case study, there are many available methods for data collection. For this study, one-on-one, in-depth interviews were used because they allow for a deep understand of the participant's experience (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In-depth interviews aim to produce the same type of rich insightful data that results from oral histories, except in-depth interviews involve both active asking and listening and they tend to focus on a

specific topic (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), which in this case was the journey through a mental block.

After receiving informed consent (see Appendix B) and having participants complete a short demographic survey (see Appendix D), one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted, using specific questions to guide the conversation in the right direction. This type of interview was utilized to keep the conversation focused on the appropriate areas of interest, while still allowing the participant the freedom to take the conversation in unplanned and potentially unexpected directions. The interview started with a brief explanation of the study's focus, specifically that I was interested in the participant's experience in navigating through a mental block with her coach or athlete. From that point, the interview moved on to discussions about mental blocks. Because there are so many existing terms and definitions for a mental block, each interview had the participant provide her own definition of a mental block.

Participants were then asked several questions about the nature of a mental block (e.g., *"How would you explain the difference between a mental block and a bad day?"*). Moving forward, the interview was organized in three phases; events before, during, and after the mental block.

Within each phase there were questions about training and about the state of the coach-athlete relationship. Athletes and coaches had similar but different interview guides (see Appendix E and Appendix F, respectively). In the first phase, participants discussed both the dyadic relationship (e.g., Athlete – *"Did anything change between you and your coach before you lost your skill?"*) and training (e.g., Athlete – *"Before the onset of the block, did you notice anything different in your training?"*) before the onset of the mental block. In the second phase, questions were focused on the experience while the athlete was in the middle of the mental block (e.g., Coach – *"Did your athlete start to act or respond to you differently during the block? If so,*

how?” Athlete – “Please tell me about your relationship with your coach during the mental block?”). In the third phase, participants were asked about the dyadic relationship after the block. Questions included topics such as how the dyad worked together to successfully overcome the block (e.g., Athlete – *“Do you feel that your coach helped you regain your lost skill?”*). Knowing that there is a power aspect involved in the coach-athlete relationship and that athletes may have modified responses if coaches were present in the interviews, the decision was made to interview coaches and athletes separately in an attempt to make each party feel comfortable discussing the dyadic relationship openly and honestly.

Participants were also invited to bring any piece of significant memorabilia that they may have, to discuss at the interview. Significant memorabilia was explained as any item that reminded them about the mental block experience. It could be something that helped them through the experience, something that reminded them of the feelings they felt when they overcame the mental block, or anything else that had significant meaning to them. While only one participant brought an item, others discussed items that held meaning and memories. All interviews were audio recorded, with participant consent, and lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. A pilot interview was conducted to ensure question clarity and both interview guides were peer reviewed prior to the first interview.

2.1.4 Data Analysis

All audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each participant was then given an opportunity to member check her transcript. Upon approval by the participants, checked transcripts were read and reread to ensure a holistic sense of the discussion was achieved (Creswell, 2014). Further analysis followed Stake’s (1995) guidelines for analysing case studies. Preliminary data analysis involved categorical aggregation of instances to search for meaning.

Stake explains that there can be individual events that carry great meaning, while other noteworthy events can be aggregated until something can be said about them as a class. Throughout the data analysis process, themes were formed to help identify important patterns and correspondence, which involves bringing the emergent patterns back to the research questions. It is important to note that I chose not to use a specific data analysis software program, because I felt that doing so would keep me closer to the raw data. Once themes were identified, transcripts were then reread to ensure the themes were accurately reflected in the data.

As recommended by Creswell (2014), themes were reviewed with an experienced qualitative researcher, or critical friend, to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. This critical friend was selected because of his experience with both qualitative research and sport psychology. As an individual with a strong coaching background as well as a strong academic background, he was the ideal candidate to provide feedback on the themes. Conversations evaluated how the themes reflected the transcripts and how they related back to the research question.

2.1.5 Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is far more naturalistic work than quantitative research, which comes primarily from a positivistic framework. For this and many other reasons, qualitative research cannot address the concepts of reliability and validity in the same ways (Shenton, 2004). Qualitative researchers must provide evidence to their readers that their work is trustworthy. Trustworthiness is essential for the rigor and quality of qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). To address concerns of reliability and validity, I will be addressing the four criteria which qualitative researchers should strive for to ensure trustworthiness in their qualitative research:

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Shenton, 2004).

Credibility addresses issues of internal validity by looking at how congruent the findings of the study are with real life. In this study multiple measures were taken to achieve credibility; I established an early familiarity with the culture of my participants before data collection by learning about their specific sports, including what the training and competition was like; I ensured that only participants who genuinely wanted to participate in the study were included, by giving each participant ample opportunities to refuse or withdraw at any point; and all participants member checked their transcripts prior to data analysis. Lastly, as previously stated, all interview guides were peer reviewed prior to data collection and all themes were reviewed by a professional with experience in qualitative research.

The second criterion to establish trustworthiness is transferability. Transferability is most closely related to external validity and evaluates the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to separate but similar situations. This was established by providing thick descriptions of the phenomena under investigation. By using thick descriptions, readers are able to fully understand the phenomena and potentially recognise similarities across situations (Shenton, 2004). The current study also includes participants from several different sports, thereby expanding the diversity of participants' experiences of the same phenomena. While efforts are being made to suffice this criterion, I would like to remind the reader that the goal of this study and qualitative research in general, is to gain a deep understanding of a specific event, not breadth.

The last two criteria are dependability, which is most similar to reliability, and confirmability, which is most similar to objectivity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) brought attention

to the fact that in qualitative research, credibility and dependability are closely tied. They further explained that a strong demonstration of credibility goes a long way in ensuring dependability. Shenton (2004) explained that in order to fully address dependability, the researcher must report the process of the study in detail, so much so, that future researchers could repeat the work. By reporting every step of recruitment, data collection, and data analyses, I have tried to create as much of a template as possible for any future researchers wishing to recreate this study. I have included what was originally planned, how the research evolved, and finally, how it was executed. I have done so in the attempts of creating dependability within my research.

Confirmability aims to reduce researcher bias to ensure the participants' stories are being told in their truest form. Shenton (2004) suggested that to achieve confirmability, the researcher should engage in ongoing reflexive commentary. In the case of this study, to ensure researcher bias was kept to a minimum, all decisions were discussed with a professional with experience in qualitative research, prior to implementation. The purpose of this conversation was to ensure decisions regarding the research process were as free of bias as possible. While the nature of qualitative research takes into account the unique experiences of the researcher, the aim of these conversations were to look at every component of the research design to ensure the experiences of the participants would be accurately collected and analyzed. In addition, to ensure participants' true stories were told in the way they intended, all participants were provided the opportunity to review and edit their transcript as they saw fit. Any edits were made before data analysis took place.

CHAPTER 3

3.1 RESULTS

As previously discussed, participants were four athletes (i.e., April, Ryan, Kyle, and Sara) and two coaches (i.e., Liz and Ron); including two pole vault athletes and their shared coach, one diver and her coach, and a gymnast whose coach chose not to participate. In addition to the use of pseudonyms, to further help protect participant confidentiality, the sport of each participant, along with who comprised each dyad, specifically will not be reported. After thoroughly reading and rereading the transcripts, categorical aggregation of instances led to the formation of five main themes associated with dyads successfully overcoming a mental block, where success was defined as the athlete recovering the lost skill and the dyad maintaining both the training and interpersonal relationships. For the dyads involved in the study, the common themes found within their success included: 1) Get to Know Your Athlete: The Need for High Quality Communication; 2) Be a United Front; 3) Mistakes and Miscommunications Happen: Recovery is Key ; 4) Seek Outside Resources; 5) Be Patient. Prior to a reporting of the details of these five themes, a description of the participants' definitions of a mental block is presented.

Interviews were set up to discuss the mental block experience in three chronological stages: before, during, and after. The results however, are reported in five main themes that were evident across all three stages. During the data analysis process, it became evident that for the participants, there were no significant differences between the stages. The themes that you see were apparent throughout the entirety of the mental block experience.

3.1.1 What is a Mental Block?

With the vast number of terms, definitions, and theories about mental blocks in the current literature, it was important to ensure that everyone involved in the study was on the same

page about what was being discussed. The definition of a mental block that was adopted for this study was adapted from Day et al. (2006) who used the term Lost Move Syndrome and defined it as the situation when athletes are no longer able to perform a skill which at one point they were able to perform with ease. During the interview process, each participant was asked what he or she felt a mental block was and how it differed from simply having a bad day. This discussion occurred immediately after rapport was built, and the participants were not provided with the mental block definition before they responded to the question.

When asked how they would define a mental block in their own words, some athletes were easily able to explain the experience while others found it to be a bit more challenging. The athletes who were able to easily explain the experience were the ones who simply explained that a mental block involved losing the ability to execute a skill that used to be easy for them. The athletes who had difficulties providing explanations were the athletes who attempted to explain why they lost the ability to execute their skills. Overall, the athletes shared the same general consensus; a mental block is a psychological obstacle that is hard to overcome and impacts physical performance. Athlete Ryan explained a mental block as the “prior experience of being able to do something physically and then for some reason, not physical, you’re unable to achieve the movement pattern that you’d previously done before.” The athletes also agreed that a mental block involves components of decreased confidence and feelings of being physically stopped from performing the desired skill. Athlete Sara explained that it felt as if “there was a wall behind [her] that wouldn’t let [her] move.”

Coaches shared the belief that a mental block involves decreased confidence, but beyond that, they differed slightly in their definitions. The coaches felt that a mental block was more so an event or situation that the athletes perceived to be a stumbling block or a significant

challenge. Coach Liz believed that with a mental block, the athlete experiences a complete breakdown of confidence that results in “[becoming] tentative and fearful about things that [she wasn’t] tentative and fearful about before and then that becomes a snowball.” When asked about the difference between a mental block and a bad day, everyone was on the same page that a mental block is persistent and is not generally caused by the daily stressors (e.g., a failed test or a fight with a boyfriend or girlfriend) that can cause a bad day.

Throughout the literature, and even throughout this thesis, there seems to be great variation in what athletes experience while going through mental blocks. Some athletes have specific triggers that start the blocks, while others have slow declines in skill execution; some athletes block on skills for a single season or less, while others block for five seasons or more. As a coach, I have seen athletes regain lost skills in an eclectic mix of methods and I have seen tools that work wonders for some athletes do next to nothing for others. For Athlete Kyle, the onset of the block was instant. During a practice there was an incident that resulted in injury and a short break from the sport to allow time to recover. Upon returning to practices, nothing that he tried resulted in successful skill execution. Kyle had lost all trust in his ability to safely execute the skill. For Athlete Ryan, while he identified his experience as a mental block, in that he could no longer execute a skill he had previously mastered, when he explained the experience, he told me that he never felt like the skill was truly lost or that he was actually incapable of doing it, he simply could not create the ideal state he needed for successful execution. He explained that every time he attempted the skill, there was always something just a little bit off and without feeling like all steps leading to the skill were perfect, he could not execute. For the other two athletes, they shared the experience of have a slow decline in skill execution. The gymnast had a bad day with a backwards standing series on beam, which turned into a bad week, which turned

into not being able to do those skills on the high beam, which eventually turned into not being able to do the series on any height of beam and eventually not even being able to do the series on the floor. For the diver, the experience was explained as a season long lull, where everything felt hazy and unfocused. Skills were lost slowly and the loss started as poor execution and eventually turned into constant balking, or attempting but not actually going for a dive.

Even though it was not a specific topic within the interviews, athletes and coaches alike kept mentioning the stress involved in dealing with mental blocks. The athletes experienced stress and anxiety when going to practices during the block; they were concerned about letting their coaches down because they were unable to execute necessary skills. They were also concerned that their skills may never return and the blocks may be career ending. While the athletes had different experiences in skill loss, recovery, and block duration, they all seemed to share the same elevated levels of stress. For the coaches, they shared feelings of stress that if they were unable to get the athlete through the block, the athlete may quit and leave the sport forever.

3.1.2 Get to Know Your Athlete: The Need for High Quality Communication

She and I talk a lot. I brought her in and... basically the main thing you have to do when a kid gets to this point, in my opinion, is... they have to recognize what's going on and the only way you recognize what's going on is to talk through it and you can't just talk through the workout, you have to talk through their life. Because ultimately we all are human and we carry ourselves around and as much as we can compartmentalize some, the bottle of compartmentalization is only so big to put things in. So it was really more of an intervention about her life, her

goals, her disappointments, her insecurities, her entire life... [Sport] being a component of that. – Coach Liz

As a coach, Coach Liz understood and stressed the importance of communicating with her athlete and creating an opportunity for genuine dialogue. She spoke to the fact that coaches need to look beyond sport and into the athletes' lives in order for them to know that coaches care about them as people, not just as competitive athletes. Through genuine dialogue, Coach Liz was attempting to get to know her athlete and understand what was going on in the athlete's life outside of sport. Coach Ron further explained the importance of knowing what was going on in the athlete's life outside of sport at the onset of the mental block, "You start to address things and try to see whether it's just fatigue or 'Oh, I've got a new girlfriend' or if it's a 'Hey, I'm not enjoying this anymore, I want to quit' or if something is just not clicking." When coaches approached their athletes to discuss life outside of sport, they ultimately created an environment where athletes were able to go to coaches with anything that was needed. Inadvertently, coaches made it known to their athletes that it was socially acceptable within the dyadic relationship to discuss more than sport strategy and skill technique, a completely new line of communication was opened. Athlete April expressed that when she first started to fall into the block, her coach was very supportive and immediately looked beyond sport life to see how she could help, "[She was] very, very supportive, kind of looking at all different aspects of life. 'Okay what is it in school that you're doing? Are you happy?' ... she was trying to help me and be like 'Well you could explore different options if you're not happy with this'..." Athlete April felt that her coach genuinely cared about her and wanted to know her better, which facilitated future communication.

Coaches shared that one of the reasons they explored what was going on with their athletes outside of sport was because they felt that in most cases, the mental blocks were not caused by sport related issues. Coach Liz felt that “what her [athlete’s] block really had to do with was not [sport]. It was a symptom.” Coach Ron had similar beliefs that a sport performance struggle is not always the result of a sport related issue. He acknowledged that his athlete had a full life outside of sport in addition to a heavy training and competition load and without acknowledging that, he would have been missing a key component in how to help his athlete through the mental block. At the same time Athlete April’s block started, she shared that she had a lot going on in her personal life that her coach never would have known about had she not taken the time to ask, “My grandma got sick that year too and she was in the hospital. I also just moved out from the dorms into a house so that was another change.”

In addition to knowing what was going on in their athletes’ lives, coaches also needed to know the athletes’ personalities so they could effectively coach the athletes throughout the mental block. “If I coached 100 athletes, there were 100 different personalities. And just being able to have enough variety in your repertoire to appeal to multiple different kids... what works with one doesn’t at all work with another.” Coach Ron believed that to coach effectively, you need to coach specifically to the individual. Coach Ron found that what will work with one athlete will not necessarily work with another athlete, especially when it comes coaching an athlete who is going through such an individualistic experience as a mental block. He stressed the importance of coaches really knowing their athletes. Having a close interpersonal relationship with her athlete made it much easier for Coach Liz to spot the warning signs of the mental block:

She was the golden haired child and all of a sudden some things started happening and it kind of rocked her foundation of who she was, what she was doing, and where she was going. All of a sudden she was getting emotional. All of a sudden she was balking. All of a sudden she was crying. Her general demeanour was a lot more sullen. She was frustrated with herself, so her mood swung between anger and sadness. Those are all tell-tale signs. – Coach Liz

Coaches explained that in their sports, there are quite often fears associated with the acquisition of new elite level skills. The more advanced the athlete becomes, the more likely the athlete is to become fearful of skill execution. When athletes were asked to explain the difference in fearing a skill and having a mental block, they explained that if they were afraid of a skill, execution was always a choice. On the other hand, with a mental block, it felt as though they did not have the option to execute the skill. Athletes further explained that during the mental block, they felt like they were being physically stopped from performing their skills. Athlete Sara explained that when she would attempt to perform her skill, “It felt like there was a wall behind [her] that wouldn’t let [her] move backwards.” Coaches acknowledged the difference in fear and a mental block and addressed how their coaching would change depending on the situation. Coach Ron explained that “from a coaching perspective your approach would be very different. Knowing your athlete would assist you in determining if you are dealing with fear or with a block.” Coach Ron also acknowledged that because fear was a common part of the sport, it was important to be able to recognize what the athlete was feeling, “Just by being involved with an athlete for a longer, for an extended period of time, allows you as a coach to get to know his little idiosyncrasies and it’s easier to recognize if he’s fearing injury, fearing something, or having a

mental block of other proportion.” This ability to recognize what was truly going on assisted Coach Ron in making appropriate coaching choices for his athlete during the mental block.

Coaches also spoke to the importance of paying attention to the athletes’ needs and motivations. Athlete Ryan emphasized that during the block, because he and his coach had such a strong relationship, sometimes he felt that his coach knew what he needed as an athlete better than he himself knew. His coach “Did everything [he] would expect him to do. Support when [he] needed it, to be strong when [he] needed it, and to not put up with crap when [he] needed it.” Athlete April also felt that her coach was in tune with what she needed as an athlete, “If I just needed to be yelled at... sometimes that’s what you need too.” Based on the athletes’ personalities, coaches were able to judge what they could handle, when they needed to be pushed, and when they needed a break. Athlete April recognized this in her coach and was grateful for the personalized support:

She was definitely able to relate and was never willing to push you into what you weren’t ready for. So she was definitely reasonable in that aspect, where I feel like lots of [other] coaches are willing to just push, push, push, push, push until you kind of fall off that deep end and don’t always understand your emotional and psychological wellbeing. – Athlete Sara

Athletes expressed that this type of personalized support was one of the ways in which they felt understood by their coaches in addition to feeling like coaches had their backs through thick and thin. When asked what the most helpful thing was that her coach did for her during the block, Athlete April answered, “Most helpful... I think just sticking by my side, you know, not kind of giving up but I think just being respectful and being willing to give me that resting time.” Ron stressed the importance of never falling into a lull where you feel like you sufficiently know

your athlete, “You think you know your athlete but you absolutely don’t. My [athletes] tell me things even now [after working together for over a decade] where I go ‘Really? Wow. Gee, didn’t know that.’” He explained that knowing an athlete is a never ending, ongoing process.

Athletes shared that many of the conversations that went on during their blocks would not have been possible had they not felt like they had a strong relationship and could openly communicate with their coaches. One of the ways that Coach Liz accomplished this was by trying to make initial conversations as comfortable as possible for her athlete, “She and I would meet, and there was a lot of communication that was more kind of sisterly, than coach-[athlete] stuff; and sometimes that’s all someone needs.” She further stressed the importance of athletes being comfortable enough to talk to their coaches, “We were very close and that was good because she could talk to me and tell me what she was actually thinking, I don’t know what she would’ve done if she was with a coach who didn’t put a lot of value on the mental aspect of the game... that could have been a disaster. A career ender actually.”

3.1.3 Be a United Front

When coaches and athletes really knew one another and were able to openly communicate, dyads were able to work together to come up with plans of attack to handle the blocks. Athlete Sara recalled that while she was going through her block, she and her coach would collaborate about training, “During the block [my coach] was trying to help me, she would give me time to do stuff, but it’d be different than the other people... she made a specific work out for me.” Athlete April also shared that after conversations with her coach, her training was modified to try to help ease her stress, “She would let me skip out on morning practices and stuff like that and we developed a way of, before meets, not to come into morning practice. We actually kept that for the rest of my career.” Athlete Kyle also shared that he and his coach would

always work together to have a plan before practice, “I [felt I] had access to my coach 24/7 so... having that, you could discuss and you could figure something out and, actually, before you even get [to practice] again you’d have some new, you have a conglomerate of sport psych, coach, and athlete putting something [out there].”

For Coach Liz, after her dyad’s original plan of attack was unsuccessful, additional conversations showed her that maybe the athlete’s training load needed to be lessened, “Sometimes if you back up a little bit and slow things down and take the pressure off of something in their life. She couldn’t change out of classes, so it had to be all [in training]. She wasn’t really doing anything in her private life that needed correcting; she wasn’t spending too much time with a boyfriend or you know what I mean, but there wasn’t a lot of correction in her private life so really the only place that she could correct thing or could have a break was [at practice].” Dyads shared that they worked through the mental block as a team instead of as individuals.

Both sides of the dyads also expressed the importance of coaches and athletes being on the same page in regards to the goals that the athletes were working towards. All of the athletes involved in the study were self-aware and self-motivated; they all described specific goals that they were working towards. These goals were the driving force behind finding the strength and determination to push through the mental block struggles. Even at the most difficult point in their block, the thought of achieving their goals was sufficient enough to keep the athletes pushing through. For Athlete April, as she was going through her block, she started to feel like she was losing her identity that had made her a valued teammate the year before:

I’m not the youngest one anymore... I had a pretty good year and they had really put a lot of pressure on me as this ‘Freshman Phenom,’ so I was like ‘I’m no

longer that individual anymore.’ You know? You kind of need that new identity and kind of felt that pressure to keep going. So you had the new kids coming in and you don’t want them to outshine you and you want to keep it up. – Athlete April

Athlete Kyle spoke multiple times to the importance of coaches knowing their athletes’ goals and contributing in the achievement of those goals. In each instance he would mention how great his coach was at helping athletes work towards their goals:

Even when [athletes] were difficult... his number one goal was always to get those athletes to their goals... He genuinely wanted that other person to achieve whatever goal it was that he wanted to achieve... His number one goal was always to get that athlete to his goals. – Athlete Kyle

Together dyads felt that all goals were attainable, including recovering the athletes’ lost skills.

3.1.4 Miscommunications and Mistakes Happen: Recovery is Key

While athletes were going through their blocks, they were in elevated states of stress and negative emotions; and as a result, miscommunications occurred. Many conversations and interactions athletes had with their coaches were perceived as negative experiences, adding even more stress to an already challenging situation. While athletes were going through this stressful time, even the most innocent comments had the potential to be misperceived. Conversations that were perceived as negative were often events that, under normal circumstances, would not have bothered the athlete:

I do remember after finishing my freshman year, my coach was very... she’s a very tiny lady and she was very honest about our weight. Being in an aesthetic

sport, she would always kind of hint. She would be like, ‘It’d be nice if you maybe lost five pounds for the next season’ and that took a toll on me. We are quite fit individuals and you know, you could always do better and be better, but to add that onto my plate was another thing to worry about. – Athlete April

Athlete April shared that in her sport, weight was a common topic of discussion, but during her block she found that these types of comments upset her much more than usual. Athlete April shared that she and her coach got along great, but these comments really bothered her. The way that Athlete April was able to move past these comments was that her coach would also share similar experiences she had had as an athlete and demonstrated to Athlete April that she was able to relate to what she was going through. Her coach’s recovery from the hurtful comments was what reassured Athlete April that maybe she was being oversensitive to the remarks and what allowed her to move forward without resentment.

During the block, coaches’ frustrations were also occasionally misperceived as being directed towards the athletes or as being caused by the athletes. Athletes shared that while they were going through the block, if coaches expressed frustrations during training, athletes usually perceived the frustrations as being directed towards themselves. Athletes started to feel as though their coaches were mad at them for not performing their skills or for not trying hard enough to get through the block. Athlete Sara recalls feeling as though her coach felt she was faking or not performing her skill by choice, “I thought that I was annoying her by not doing it, like *wanting* to make her frustrated. I think maybe she thought that sometimes... that I was doing it on purpose, which I wasn’t. She would get frustrated and then I would get frustrated.” Athletes shared that quite often coaches would express frustrations but also express that the athletes were not the sources.

Coaches shared that, more often than not, their frustrations were about not being able to help the athletes overcome their mental block struggles. “I think anytime the pattern continues in a particular direction, negatively, you question yourself. You try to make the corrections, you try to make them with the athlete and then at times frustration will manifest itself,” Coach Ron shared about the frustrations surrounding not having the tools to be able to help, or seeing that the tools he had tried were not working. Coaches expressed that they tried a multitude of strategies to help the athletes through their blocks, but each coach felt unsure about how to move forward at one point or another, because with everything they had tried, the athletes still showed no progress. Coach Ron shared that at times he would turn to others and admit that he was stuck, “I would have conversations with [other coaches] of course, about the athletes and I would go, ‘Hey, I’m at a loss.’” For the coaches, their frustrations were due to feelings of inadequacy and an inability to fix the problem, not that the athletes were not performing to their full potential. When dyads conversed about frustrations at practice any misperceptions were quite often easily resolved.

To cope with the negative perceptions that were not immediately resolved, some athletes felt the need to start blocking out some of what they were getting from their coaches. Athlete Kyle explained that sometimes it was difficult to deal with the feedback from his coach during the block, “Do you listen to what your coach is telling you? Yeah, I maybe listened, but do I absorb it all? No. There comes a point when you have to *not* absorb it all and you have to take the pieces that you need. You have to almost filter some of it.” Athletes expressed that during the block, one of their frustrations with their coaches was that they technically knew what was going wrong with the skill and how to fix it, but due to the mental block, they were just not able to physically make the changes necessary to perform the skills. Athlete April explained that there

were, “Days where you don’t want to be there, don’t want to hear correction, because you *know*.” Athletes were not filtering feedback from coaches as a form of disrespect. They explained that hearing corrections that they knew needed to be made but were physically unable to correct, increased their levels of frustration. Selective listening was simply a coping mechanism used to try to deal with the stress and frustration associated with the mental block. While filtering coach feedback was a coping mechanism used by athletes, it could be seen as a mistake because coaches could have misperceived the action as disrespectful; it was often the coaches who recovered from this mistake when it was made. Coaches shared that they knew when athletes were not taking correction the way they were able. Rick shared that in instances where his athlete was shutting down, sometimes in an attempt to proactively avoid a dyadic dispute, he would end practice early, or provide the athlete with individual work that did not require coach involvement. Through listening to the coaches stories and experiences, there were instances where coaches would recover a situation simply by proactively preventing an argument or athlete frustrations. These recoveries helped maintain the strength of the dyadic relationships.

3.1.5 Seek Outside Resources

“I am not the be-all-to-end-all to everybody. You can’t be. You know I have certain strengths, but other people are professionals. They’ve got strengths, and if you can tap into those, that’s where you go.” Ron spoke to the importance of seeking out additional help when needed. He also stressed the importance of, “Not being so prideful that you think you’ve got all the answers.” Coaches and athletes both stressed the importance of seeking outside resources when dealing with a mental block, as the load of a block was too much to bear all alone. When speaking with athletes, there was a general consensus about the importance of seeking help beyond their coaches. Some of the athletes were advised by coaches and some made the choice

on their own, but all athletes mentioned the importance of seeking additional resources of some type. Some athletes turned to friends and family to vent frustrations and concerns. Athlete April encouraged athletes, “Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Whether it be from your parents, whether it be from your coach, whether it be from any other support staff, friends, any other family members, you know, you don’t know until you ask.” Other athletes turned to teammates for additional support both inside and out of practice. Athlete Kyle found that having a teammate as a source of motivation was a great help in pushing through the block, “He was my training buddy and when we’d show up to practice it was all or nothing, all the time.” In addition, Athlete April even decided to seek medical attention to see if the block was being caused by any physical deficiencies, “I went to the doctor because it was just like okay something has to be wrong.”

While there were many different resources that athletes used, the two most common resources were other coaches and mental skills consultants. Most athletes found that occasionally working with a coach other than their primary coach provided an opportunity to hear different feedback from what they had been previously hearing. Athlete Sara shared her experiences working with other coaches, “When other coaches would try to help me, I often responded to them very positively and because it was like a new voice and new insight.” Athlete April had a similar experience in that her coach would sometimes have other coaches work with her during practice, “We also had a couple other support staff around, you know if something wasn’t working with her she’d try to get somebody else to coach me and maybe just say something a little bit differently and then it probably clicks. You know even if you’re taking a class in school and somebody just comes in and finally explains it just a little bit different ... the light bulb turns on, and I think we did turn to that a little bit.”

The other common resource athletes turned to was the assistance of mental skills consultants. Kyle found that sport psychology was the most helpful resource:

[My coach and I would] try new things all the time, but just nothing ever really got it there, until [my mental skills consultant] came along actually. It was hit and miss all the time. Sometimes I'd have all the stuff that I needed and still not [go for my skill]. Not until [my mental skills consultant] came and brought some new tools. I never really progressed without it. – Athlete Kyle

Athlete Ryan had a similar experience working with a mental skills consultant:

I had a feeling that because [the mental block] was kind of engrained that I would probably be needing sport psych help, I did come and immediately made an appointment with [a mental skills consultant] and that was pre-training I made. I decided to sit down and do whatever was possible to start training mentally... Because in the end it wasn't my physical problems, it was my mental. I knew that would be my major aspect to work on. – Athlete Ryan

As important as it was for athletes to seek out additional help, it was just as important for coaches to do the same. Athletes were very in tune with their coaches and were able to tell when coaches were at a loss. Athlete Kyle noticed that his coach “Was frustrated and... that he was a little bit lost in knowing how to deal with [the mental block].” As Coach Ron expressed earlier, coaches recognized that they did not have all the answers for their athletes. Coaches sought out second opinions from other coaches, went to mentors in the field to expand their knowledge, and even reviewed original learning materials. Coach Ron shared that through knowing his own limitations, he was better able to help his athlete succeed:

Learning my limitations helped me seek out the experts in every field to help me, help the athlete. That's one of the biggest, one of the biggest things is, you know, like coming to recognize my limitations. I was always kind of seeking more knowledge about the event, about the sport, about whatever in order to, you know, deal with every different personality. – Coach Ron

3.1.6 Be Patient

When asked what piece of advice she would give to coaches who were working with an athlete who is going through a mental block, Athlete April quickly and without hesitation, replied, “patience is a major, major thing because it might not be the next day and it might not be the next week.” Getting through the mental block was not a quick process. For the dyads involved, there were good days and bad days and a roller coaster of emotions. There were successes and failures, steps forward and continual setbacks, moments of unity and moments of opposition. Sometimes Athlete Kyle found the strength to go for his skill under specific situations, but it wouldn't always work. Consistency was elusive, “I needed my [coach] to hold my hand basically. He didn't necessarily have to [spot] me, he just had to be there in the ready position.” Athlete Sara also mentioned the slow progress, setbacks, and inconsistency day to day, “I'd go and try to work through it myself and try to get from [one step to the next]. I would get there sometimes, but the next day or the day after that I would probably not be able to do it again.” Coaches acknowledged the struggles in moving forward. Both Coach Ron and Coach Liz mentioned the necessity of going back to basics with their athletes. “Sometimes to move forward you have to step back for a minute,” explained Coach Liz.

Frustrations arose for both halves of the dyad. Athlete Kyle shared that sometimes the tension between him and his coach became too much to handle, “There were definitely days

when the frustration between us would shut it down. [My coach would say], ‘You’re done for the day, go home. You’re not getting anywhere. You’re just making bad habits.’” Athlete Kyle acknowledged how difficult he may have been to work with during this time:

I had a lot of frustration towards [my coach], not because he couldn’t get me [to do my skill] but because he wouldn’t let me exhaust my frustration you know? I think it made me short with him. But I don’t remember feeling like, ‘This is all [his] fault.’ I would be short with him. I wouldn’t listen to what he said. I’d snap at him if he tried to help me through stuff or try something new that I’d already tried it. It’s hard... you’re not mad at him. You’re just mad. You’re just mad and frustrated. But it’s not at him. Sometimes the anger gets directed towards him because he’s the first person to talk to you, but you’re not mad at him. – Athlete Kyle

Athlete Kyle was not the only athlete who recognized his behaviours towards his coach were not always fair. Athlete April also admitted, “I did get to that point where I was angry and you always want to put blame on somebody, somebody else. I felt like I’d been trained into the ground.” She further elaborated, “You can get angry at different people or different things and be mad at her but, you know it wasn’t, when you look back, it definitely was not her fault or anybody’s fault.”

Even with athletes lashing out at their coaches, and coaches’ messages being misperceived, not a single participant ever mentioned leaving the dyad because of the other person. Instead they simply tried one tool after the next, patiently pressing on to get the athletes to their goals. There were many failed plans, but everyone kept trying. More plans failed. And then they modified and tried again. “It definitely wasn’t as smooth as what I’d hoped for. It was

definitely a roller coaster and I was absolutely exhausted by the end,” Athlete April shared. Athletes recognized that even when their coaches’ plans did not work, the coaches never gave up. “How do you fault a guy who’s always open to trying something new? Yeah he might be frustrated and you might have yelling matches right there [at practice] but, still at the end of the day, he still wants you to get where you want to go,” Athlete Kyle said of his coach, “It’s hard to say he hindered [getting over the block] when he was always willing to *do* the next thing, get the outside help, work with it after hours. It’s hard to... hard to argue with that.”

3.2 DISCUSSION

3.2.1 What is a Mental Block: Part Two

There is no denying that the literature provides varying views on what this phenomenon is and how it is both caused and overcome. For the purpose of this paper, Day et al.’s (2006) definition of Lost Move Syndrome was adopted as it seemed to be the closest to a general definition as currently available in the literature. While Day et al. (2006) used the term Lost Move Syndrome and this study used the term mental block, both seem to refer to the same experience. Within the literature, there are many different terms (e.g., loss of trust, Moore & Stevenson, 1991; 1994; performance blocks, Hauw, 2009; Orlick & Partington, 1988; jamming, Moore & Stevenson, 1991; paradoxical performance, Lobinger, Klampfl, & Altenmuller, 2014) for what seems to be almost the exact same experience: an athlete is unable to perform a skill which he or she was once able to perform with ease due to psychological causes, not attrition of athletic ability (e.g., skills lost due athletic retirement or cessation of training). Because of the variety in the literature, I felt it was important to give each participant the opportunity to also provide a definition. Within the definitions, athletes tended to side with Day et al. (2006) that a mental block was the inability to perform a skill they used to be able to do and knew that they

could still physically execute. Within the definitions, there were suggestions that the blocks may have been caused by lack of trust in the skills, which supports findings by Moore and Stevenson (1991; 1994) or by having challenges in coping with fear, anxiety, and evaluation, which support the findings of Hanin (2008). Despite the individualistic experiences of participants, based on their definitions of what they went through (i.e., not being able to perform a skill they had once performed with ease) I am confident that the use of Day et al.'s (2006) definition was used appropriately in this setting. All participants discussed components of Day et al.'s (2006) Lost Move Syndrome (e.g., knowing they were physically capable but feeling physically stopped) within their own definitions of a mental block. For these reasons I am confident that all participants were speaking about the same experience. Findings of this study suggest that while the overlying experience of a mental block may be generally defined as the inability to perform a skill that was once performed with ease, there is support for a variety of specific definitions and theories.

One topic that was not specifically discussed in the interview process is the role of fear in mental blocks. A significant component of the sport psychology literature discusses the multiple sources of fear athletes experience during sport performance, including fear of injury (e.g., De Pero, Minganti, Pesce, Capranica, & Piacentini, 2013), fear of failure (e.g., Day et al., 2006; Sagar & Jowett, 2012) and fear of negative evaluation (e.g., Button, Kounali, Stapinski, Rapee, Lewis, & Munafò, 2015). De Pero and colleagues (2013) found that in elite level gymnasts, fear of injury was negatively correlated with self-efficacy and positively correlated with anxiety. They discussed that athletes who were more confident in their technical abilities showed lower levels of fear of injury. Looking at the findings of the current study, it could be reasonable to suggest that athletes going through mental blocks might experience decreased levels of

confidence in their technical abilities and therefore increased fear of injury. This fear could be seen as an additional barrier in overcoming a mental block.

The athletes in this study also expressed that throughout the mental block experience they continued to chase the goal of executing their lost skill. Over the course of the journey, there were many failed attempts at achieving that goal. Sagar and Jowett (2012) explained that fear of failure is a “shame-based avoidance motive disposition [involving] cognitive, emotional, and behavioral experiences related to failure (that is, non-attainment of one’s goal) in evaluative contexts” (p. 63). Based on this definition, it could be suggested that athletes experiencing a mental block would be highly susceptible to fear of failure; the athletes were in pursuit of a goal and were repeatedly faced with non-attainment of that goal.

3.2.2 Thematic Review

The purpose of this study was to explore the journey that coach-athlete pairs took together through the mental block experience and how they stuck together to ultimately overcome the mental block. One-on-one in-depth interviews explored the journey from both the coach and athlete perspectives in three phases; before, during, and after the mental block, where each phase included discussions around training and the coach-athlete relationship. Five prominent themes emerged from the data: Get to Know Your Athlete: The Need for High Quality Communication, Be a United Front, and Mistakes and Miscommunications Happen: Recovery is Key, Seek Outside Resources, and Be Patient.

Within the first theme, Get to Know Your Athlete: The Need for High Quality Communication, findings of this study suggest that high quality communication between coach and athlete is of the utmost importance when trying to navigate through a mental block. Getting to know their athletes facilitated the coaches’ abilities to effectively approach the mental blocks.

Coaches stressed the importance of creating an environment where athletes felt comfortable coming to their coach with anything they needed, sport related or otherwise. Within the coach-athlete literature, the importance of communication within the relationship has been widely recognized. Some have even gone so far as to say that communication is the process by which the coach-athlete relationship is formed and maintained (Jowett, 2007). Focusing on the maintenance of the relationship throughout the mental block, it may be feasible to suggest that dyads involved in this study were able to maintain their relationships while navigating through the mental block because they practiced ongoing high quality communication. Furthermore, communication has been found to be a vital factor in effective and successful coaching (Jowett, Yang, & Lorimer, 2012) and has been found to contribute to positive relationship outcomes by enabling dyads to work more effectively together (LaVoi, 2007). In support of these findings, athletes involved with the current study shared that with increased dyadic communication they felt positive relationship outcomes such as feeling cared about by their coaches and feeling like their coaches understood their needs. Through increased communication, dyads were able to collaborate and establish modified training plans that successfully decreased athletes' levels of stress while simultaneously increased athletes' positive feelings towards training. By engaging in high quality communication coaches were able to share knowledge, provide feedback, and communicate expectations, while still allowing athletes the opportunity to provide feedback about their efforts, thoughts, feelings, and needs (Jowett, Yang, & Lorimer, 2012).

Macquet (2013) found that while communication was most frequently initiated by the coach, the information exchanged within the dyad was shaped by the social framework of the coach-athlete interaction. The current study supports Macquet's (2013) findings in that the high levels of quality communication demonstrated by the dyads may have created a social

framework where exchanges of thoughts (e.g., training suggestions) and feelings (e.g., frustrations) were socially acceptable exchanges, resulting in the dyads knowing each other on a more personal level. Understanding one another within the coach–athlete relationship is essential for successful and effective sport coaching (Lorimer & Jowett, 2010). Coaches shared that through knowing their athletes both in and out of sport, they were better able to tackle the mental blocks by knowing when to push their athletes and when to ease off. These findings support the literature which has found that a fundamental component of high quality coaching is the coach’s ability to understand and respond appropriately to the athlete’s needs (Lorimer & Jowett, 2010). Athletes expressed that having personalized support that was tailored to their individual needs made them feel more connected to and understood by their coaches. It could be suggested that coaches knowing their athletes on a more personal level may facilitate the ability to successfully navigate the athletes through a mental block.

An additional reason why it may be important for coaches to personally know their athletes is to try to improve their empathetic accuracy, which has been defined as “the capacity to accurately perceive, from moment-to-moment, the psychological condition of another, such as thoughts, feelings, and moods, and the motivations and reasoning behind behaviors” (Lorimer & Jowett, 2010, p. 12). Coaches in this study shared that during the mental block, athletes experienced mood swings, elevated frustrations, and increased sensitivity to constructive criticism. It could be suggested that with increased empathetic accuracy, coaches may be able to respond more appropriately to blocking athletes. By responding appropriately in stressful situations, athletes shared that they felt understood by their coaches. If coaches are able to increase their empathetic accuracy and the number of situations in which they are able to accurately respond to their blocking athletes, sensitivity to constructive criticism may decrease

because the athletes would feel a greater sense of understanding from their coaches. With all of the dyads in this study, they had worked together for an extended period of time and felt that they knew one another quite well. Lorimer and Jowett (2010) explained that with continued exposure to an athlete, a coach's empathic accuracy will increase. Findings suggest that dyads that have worked together for an extended period of time and have had increased opportunities to get to know one another and how each person reacts and respond in a variety of situations, may have improved empathetic accuracy, which in turn may increase the chances of the dyad successfully persevering through the mental block experience.

The second theme, *Be a United Front*, addresses the importance of dyads working through the block together and being on the same page about the goals they are pursuing. Throughout the mental block experience dyads worked together to create training plans that worked for the athlete. When coaches included athletes in decisions surrounding modifications to training they were engaging in autonomy supportive behaviours, which have been defined as “behaviours performed by the authoritative person (i.e., the coach) that take into account the other's (i.e., the athlete) perspective, acknowledges the other's feelings, and provides the other with pertinent information and opportunities for choice, while minimizing the use of pressures and demands” (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003, p. 886). As demonstrated by the athletes in this study, these types of collaborative behaviours allow the athletes to feel as though they were being understood by their coaches, thereby further strengthening the closeness between the two (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). As seen in the 3 + 1 Cs Model (Jowett, 2007), the construct of closeness involves components of trust, respect, and mutual like, all qualities that athletes in this study mentioned feeling towards their coaches. Throughout the mental block journey, both coaches and athletes spoke to the components of closeness; athletes shared that they needed to

have an unwavering trust in their coaches to continue pushing through the block and coaches shared that by showing respect to their athletes, they in turn received respect in regards to coaching decisions that they made. Increased feelings of closeness may have provided dyads with the type of relationship necessary to get tackle the mental block as a united front. Given the findings of this study, it may be suggested that in order for dyads to withstand the pressures of a mental block and persevere in their relationships, they need to be high on the closeness construct of Jowett's (2007) 3 + 1Cs Model. Further exploration of this suggestion is needed to be sure.

The third theme, Mistakes and Miscommunications Happen: Recovery is Key speaks to the misperceptions that occurred during dyadic interactions throughout the mental block and how those situations were recovered. Athletes shared that during their blocks they experienced heightened sensitivity to constructive criticism and corrections, and that they mistook normal interactions with their coaches as being negative or confrontational. Olusoga et al., (2010) found that when coaches were under extreme states of stress (e.g., trying to get an athlete through a mental block) they felt that their moods, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors were negatively affected. Furthermore, they felt that these responses to stressors (e.g., showing frustration) had a negative impact upon their athletes. Findings of this study support Olusoga et al., (2010) in that coaches shared that they felt frustrated because they did not know how to help their athletes and in turn the athletes misperceived those frustrations as being directed at themselves. While it was seen that coaches negative emotions were felt by the athletes and had negative influence on the athletes, within this study, it was also seen that coaches were able to recover from these situations and somewhat alleviate the negative impact on the athletes in several different ways (e.g., proactively avoiding a controversy, demonstrating a sense of shared experience with the athlete, or showing the athlete the coach had his or her back). It could be suggested that coaches'

recoveries of misperceptions increased the likelihood of dyads being able to maintain their relationship throughout the mental block experience.

With the increase of negative perceptions and misperceptions within the dyadic relationship during the mental block, it is also plausible that the athletes may have self-presentation concerns (Lorimer, 2014). Self-presentation is explained as the efforts of an individual to control the way in which they are perceived by others (Leary, 1992). It has been found that athletes are influenced by perceptions of how their coaches see and evaluate them, which in turn has the potential to affect how they view their own performances and achievements (Lorimer, 2014). Leary and Kowalski (1990) explained that the motivation to control others' perceptions of the self can come from an individual being placed in a social situation where they perceive some form of evaluation (e.g., attending practice where they know they will be expected to attempt their blocked skill) in regards to an aspect of themselves they see as important (e.g., performing their skills to their full potential). In the name of self-presentation, athletes are likely to make efforts to be perceived by their coaches in as positive a way as possible (Lorimer, 2014), which could explain why athletes going through a mental block search out praise from their coaches in other areas to counteract the disappointment, or misperceived disappointment, of the mental block (Day et al., 2006). In support of the literature, this study found that athletes attempted to share non-sport related successes (e.g., academic successes) with their coaches, possibly in attempt to receive praise for something other than skill execution.

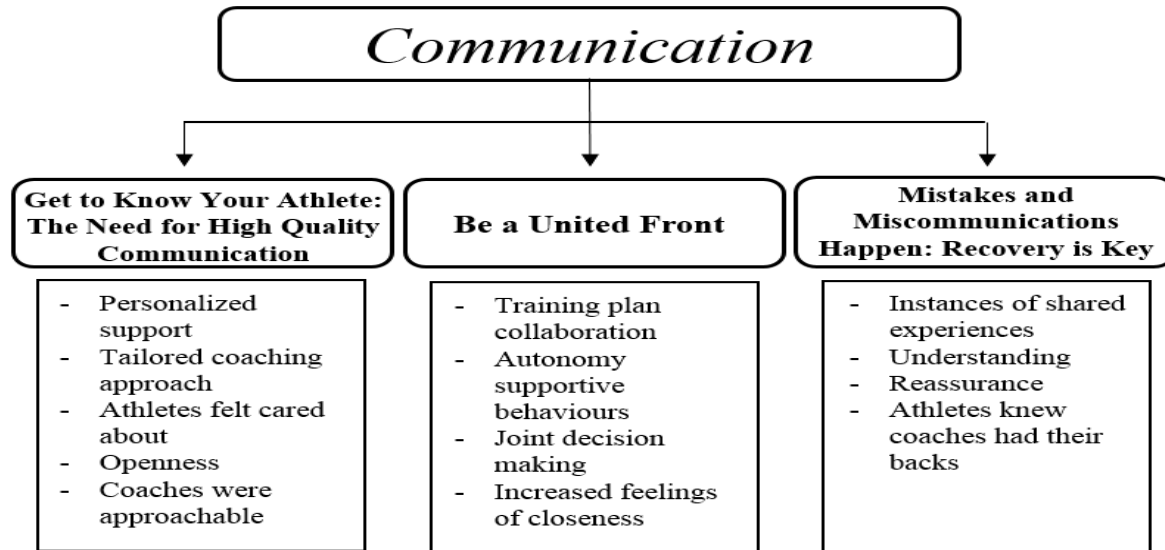


Figure 3.1. Communication as a higher order theme for Get to Know Your Athlete: The Need for High Quality Communication; Be a United Front; and Mistakes and Miscommunications Happen: Recovery is Key including a summary of the communication components within each theme.

In discussing the first three themes, it can be seen that communication emerges as a possible higher order theme (see Figure 3.1). All three themes relate back to the importance of communication within the dyad. In the first theme, quality communication involved coaches being approachable so that the athletes could go to the coaches with whatever they needed. This theme also spoke to the importance of coaches knowing their athletes in and out of sport. Coaches were able to create personalized support for their athletes through knowing their athletes on a personal level. Athletes shared that personalized support from coaches made them feel as though their coaches cared about them. In the second theme, dyads shared how they tackled the mental block together. Through collaboration and mutual support, coaches shared instances of autonomy supportive behaviours which athletes expressed made them feel closer to their coaches. The third theme addressed the importance of recovering from negative situations such as misperceptions and miscommunications, which were common occurrences for the athletes during the mental blocks. Ways in which coaches recovered from negative situations

included showing the athletes they were understood through instances of shared experiences and providing the athlete with reassurance that they had their backs throughout the blocks.

The importance of high quality communication reported by the participants is in line with the current literature; the importance of communication has been widely noted both within the sport literature and beyond. Interpersonal communication serves many purposes; it is the way in which we create our reality (Corbin & White, 2008), it has the potential to positively change our emotional state (Gable & Shean, 2000), and it allows us to receive help and attention from our teachers and coaches (Hargie, 2011). Corbin and White (2008) described 13 principles of interpersonal communication. Most, if not all, of the principles can be seen within my research, but there are three that stand out more than the others. The first principle is *Communication is Irreversible*; this principle speaks to the seriousness of our interactions. We need to remember that we matter to others, as do our words. When a coach or an athlete who is invested in the dyad spews frustration or anger towards the other, even though unintentional, that communication carries the potential to hurt the other person and never be forgotten. The second principle is *Interpersonal Communication Involves Ethical Choices*, and it speaks to the choices we make within interactions each day. Participants shared instances of ending practices early, or training in isolation to avoid conflict. These types of actions can be considered ethical choices in interpersonal communication because they are choices made to avoid irreversible unintentional hurt. The third principle is *Interpersonal Communication Develops and Sustains Relationships*/ Corbin and White even go as far to say that “Communication equals relationships” (p.23). Hence, this principle explains that sustainability of relationships (e.g., our coach-athlete dyads) does not simply happen; instead, we make it happen through engaging in effective communication.

Communication, unfortunately, is not always a positive interaction. As seen in the third theme of this research, sometimes dyadic issues arise; stemming not from the literal communication that occurred, but from the perception of the interaction. Kristiansen, Tomten, Hanstad, and Roberts (2012) explained that perceived ineffective communication (e.g., miscommunication, lack of communication) has the potential to become a major source of strain for elite athletes. Furthermore, Greenleaf, Gould, and Dieffenbach, (2001) found that US Olympians reported poor coach-athlete communication as having a negative impact on their Olympic performance. As mentioned by the participants of this study, it is important to recover from communication errors and misperceptions to be able to move forward in a positive direction.

The fourth theme, Seek Outside Resources, addresses the need for dyads to search out additional assistance in dealing with an athlete's mental block. For over 20 years there has been a growing concern over the stress involved in sport coaching (Frey, 2007; Olusoga, Butt, Maynard, & Hays, 2010; Taylor, 1992). Coaches are expected to plan meticulously for training and competition, execute training plans with the flexibility to adapt, and cope with the pressure to produce results (Olusoga, Maynard, Butt, & Hays, 2014). For the coaches involved in this study, they had to cope with all of these stressors, in addition to also focusing individualized attention on an athlete going through a mental block. Olusoga et al. (2014) found that coaches under high levels of stress looked for social support as a coping method. Current findings showed similar results in that coaches went to their peers to vent frustration and find additional coaching assistance. In addition to seeking social support, Olusoga et al. (2014), found that coaches utilized negative coping strategies to deal with stress (e.g., venting and self-blame), prior to participation in a mental skills intervention. Coaches involved in the current study demonstrated

similar coping strategies. When coaches were not able to get the athletes through the blocks immediately, they initially felt that they had insufficient coaching knowledge (i.e., self-blame) to help the athletes. While the coaches of this study did acknowledge the need for assistance in dealing with the blocks, findings suggest that the use of a mental skills training program for coaches (Olusoga et al., 2014) may better equip them to utilize positive coping strategies when working through the high levels of stress associated with mental blocks.

Coaches were not the only ones needing additional assistance in navigating through the mental blocks; athletes also shared the need to seek help beyond the dyad. As much as this study stressed the need for athletes to seek out additional resources (e.g., sport psychology consultants or other professionals) beyond their coaches, this is not a new revelation in the sport world. Weinberg, Neff, and Jurica (2012) stated, “There is a great need to bring mental training to the majority of competitive athletes who are non-elite, such as athletes participating in high school youth sports, select clubs, and the majority of NCAA athletic programs” (p. 183). Barker and Winter (2014) further stressed that through the acknowledgement and appreciation of sport psychology professionals, athletes, right from a youth age, can improve their opportunities for athletic success. While all of the athletes in this study sought out additional assistance beyond their primary coaches, not all of them turned to a mental skills consultant or sport psychology professional. Barker and Winter (2014) found that athletes were more likely to view sport psychology in a positive light if they perceived their coaches to be open-minded about it as well. In support of these findings, all of the athletes who sought out assistance of a mental skills consultant shared that their coaches, at one point or another, had stressed the importance of the mental side of sport. These findings suggest that coaches may want to speak openly about the

benefits of sport psychology with athletes who are going through a mental block, in the hopes of increasing the probability that athletes will utilize sport psychology as a resource.

The fifth and last theme, Be Patient, addresses the struggles dyads faced with regaining the lost skills and the ups and downs they had to patiently wait out while overcoming the mental blocks. Based on the definition of burnout by Freudenberger (1980, p. 13, as cited in Frey, 2007) “a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward,” the dyads in this study were at high risk of experiencing burnout. Looking at the definition of burnout, the relationship (i.e., the coach-athlete relationship) was failing to produce the expected reward (i.e., improved performance), which put the members of the dyad at risk of burning out. Based on the actions of the dyads throughout the mental block, there are multiple suggestions as to how they avoided burnout and were able to maintain their relationships. One of the possibilities is that the coaches involved in this study were highly resilient individuals. Resilience in coaching has been explained as the ability to positively adjust to adversity (Young, 2014). If the mental block was viewed as adversity, the positive adjustments demonstrated by coaches included changing practice plans, reaching out to other professionals for assistance, and always showing support to their athletes. These actions suggest that coaches were acting in resilient ways.

A second possibility as to how the dyads were able to maintain their relationships throughout the mental blocks is the use of relationship maintenance strategies. Rhind and Jowett (2010) found that coach-athlete dyads utilize seven different strategies in an attempt to maintain, repair, and/or improve their relationships: conflict management, openness, motivation, positivity, advice, support, and social networks. Dyads shared instances of relationship maintenance strategies during the interview process, even though it was not a topic of focus. One of the

strategies utilized by the dyads in this study was openness. Openness includes discussing issues outside of sport, talking about anything, and making an attempt to understand how the other member of the dyad is feeling (Rhind & Jowett, 2010). While openness was the most prominent maintenance strategy utilized by the dyads, there were also shared instances of motivation, positivity, advice, and support. These findings support Rhind and Jowett's (2010) findings that use of these maintenance strategies can help dyads maintain their relationships even throughout a stressful experience (e.g., a mental block).

3.2.3 Summary

For some of the athletes, the mental block started instantly with one specific trigger, but for others, it was a slow gradual decline in performance. No matter how the block came to be, all of the athletes shared the slow road to skill recovery. Even with small successes and positivity from their coaches, it was still a slow process as described by Coach Liz:

It was a slow sliding slippery slope to get down to the bottom and then it took some time for her to dig out and she had to have some positive experiences you know at practice and of course me talking to her and saying 'See you can do it and you did it really well today.' Build on that. 'Remember this practice tomorrow, then come back tomorrow and let's just add a little more.' So it's a gradual thing going down the hill and it's a gradual thing coming out of the... you know, climbing the hill.

If dyads were to be explored using the 3 + 1Cs Model (Jowett, 2007), it could be reasonable to assume that these dyads would be high on the construct of commitment, as their statements imply that they intended to stick with the dyadic relationship even when times were difficult. While the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize the findings, there are lessons that we can take from the shared experiences of these participants. Athletes shared stories in such

a way, that I am lead to believe that the coaches were able to make their athletes feel like they were always in their corner, had their backs, and were their biggest cheerleader through all the successes and failures, could do no wrong in the eyes of the athletes. Ron said it best when he shared, “I don’t consider myself anything other than the athletes’ coach... Without the athlete I’m not a coach.” While the themes presented certainly do not represent a “how to guide” about getting an athlete through a mental block, they do suggest that with sufficient, on-going communication, additional external resources, and a persisting sense of patience, support, and understanding, coach-athlete dyads hold the potential to successfully overcome a mental block together.

3.2.4 A Special Group of Participants

Before discussion can begin about the journey dyads took through the mental blocks, I wanted to first explore what might make my sample a bit unique. First and foremost, it is important to ask the following question: Was I really able to recruit a sample of dyads or were they simply dyad-like? The participants who shared their stories in my research did not necessarily match perfectly the selection criteria identified when I first set out on this research journey. My “goal” was not to recruit two athletes who shared a coach, as I wanted each coach to speak specifically to the experiences with her or his one blocking athlete. However, the reason that I chose to include the mental block triad is that the coach was able to speak to each athlete’s experience separately. Throughout the conversations, it was clear that that coach was able to speak to each athlete’s experience as distinct and individualistic. Alternatively, the gymnast’s coach chose not to share her side of their journey, so only one half of the dyad participated in one of the cases. While the purpose of this study was to explore the dyadic journey through the mental block experience, I felt that what the gymnast’s story had to offer was no less valued

because her coach was not involved. The athlete was able to provide her experiences, and I was not about to thwart her desire to provide insight to such a unique journey.

Given the multitude of recruitment challenges in my research, I was left wondering why these six individuals were willing to share a story that no one else was. When creating the interview guides for this study, I did not think to include a question about why participants actually chose to participate; now I wish that I had. However, in my last interview, I asked Athlete Sara what made her want to tell me her story. She responded that going through her mental block was one of the most difficult experiences her and her coach had ever gone through. She told me that hindsight is 20/20 and looking back there were things both her and her coach would have changed and done better. She felt that through sharing their experiences she could help other dyads get through the experience with fewer rough patches.

Unfortunately, as mentioned I did not ask any of the other participants why they chose to share their stories, so I was left to speculate. At the time of the interviews, only Sara was still a competitive athlete; all of the other athletes had retired from sport. Keeping in mind that some coaches did not want athletes participating out of fear that they would be distracted from competition and some athletes chose not to participate out of fear that their mental blocks may return, I am left wondering if my resulting group of athlete participants were willing to go through the process because they had no fear that participation may result in decreased competitive focus or ultimately, return of the mental block. Maybe the deterrent of participating was fear; fear that the experience would repeat itself. When thinking about how this influenced the findings of this study, I wonder if I may have missed an important component of the dyadic experience. In future studies, dyads still competing in sport should be asked about the experience of continuing in sport after a mental block.

There is also the possibility that this group of athletes and coaches might have been highly motivated; motivated to overcome their struggles, motivated to stay together, and motivated to share their experiences with the hopes of helping others. While it was not included in the interview process, within my reflection, I regret not asking each participant about their motivation to overcome the block and persevere within their dyadic relationship. Each participant spoke to the negative outcomes associated with the mental block journey, so what was it that motivated them to continue to push through?

Another interesting thing about the participants of this study was that two of the athletes had the same coach. During the interview process, the coach spoke about each athlete and each experience separately. He shared that he had a unique relationship with each athlete and navigating through the mental blocks were very different experiences with one from the other. The coach shared that through getting to know each athlete on a personal level, he knew that what would work for one athlete would not work with the other, so the two approaches bared little to no similarities. When speaking with the athletes, their experiences mirrored what their coach had said; both athletes had a completely individualized experience, even though they shared the same coach. Each athlete felt that their coach took the time to get to know them and what they needed.

3.2.5 Challenges

While there were many notable strengths of this study (e.g., inclusion of multiple sports, in-depth interviews that provided rich insightful data, and a strong sense of credibility), there were also several challenges that should not be overlooked. The primary challenge of this study was the recruitment strategy and the need to have a resulting evolution of that strategy. The original recruitment strategy was a purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014) attempt that involved

reaching out to club directors, managers, or owners, with the hopes that the invitation to participate would be passed along to eligible coaches and athletes. Unfortunately, this effort was unsuccessful. Hence, the majority of participants involved in this study were recruited by word-of-mouth, meaning that they heard about the study directly from an individual who was either part of the research team or who had connections to the primary researcher. The gymnast involved in the study heard about the opportunity through her coach; but the coach was provided with study information from a peer of the researcher, not from her club manager, who was a part of the original recruitment email. The pole vaulters in the study were also provided with study information from a member of the research team. The last participant was recruited through means of snowballing (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), as she knew one of the other athletes who had participated. Because of the challenges in recruitment, the desired population changed, as did the inclusion criteria. For future research involving a similar population, it would be suggested to gain ethical approval to contact eligible coaches directly.

A second challenge involved changes to the procedures and data collection. In the original study proposal, there were three types of data collection: one-on-one interviews, group interviews, and collection of audio-visual materials (Creswell, 2009). By using several data collection methods to explore the mental block experience, the study would have had a triangulation of methods, which in turn would have increased the study's credibility (Houghton et al., 2013). However, due to the challenges in recruitment, two modifications were made that ultimately changed the data collection process. The first modification made was that participants from all across Canada were invited to participate, thereby increasing the logistical challenges of having a group interview at all. The second modification was that the group interview was provided as an optional component of participation. This modification was made in hopes of

decreasing the time burden on participants, thereby in turn, increasing the likelihood of gaining participants. The result of these modifications was that no one chose to participate in a group interview, eliminating one of the sources of data collection. When it came to collecting the audio-visual materials, in the originally proposed procedures, it was suggested that at the end of the first interview, once a rapport was built between participant and researcher, the participant would be invited to bring a piece of significant memorabilia (i.e., audio-visual materials) with them to the second interview if they felt comfortable. When the group interview became optional, it was unknown if participants would have the opportunity to bring the memorabilia to a second meeting. To ensure participants had the opportunity to share their memorabilia, they were invited to bring it along to the first interview. Only one participant felt comfortable enough at first meeting to bring a personal memorabilia, thereby nearly eliminating the third source of data.

There were quite a few methodological changes throughout the process that I was initially concerned about how they would affect the findings of the study, primarily the introduction of pole vault to the population. I was concerned that it did not meet the same criteria as the other sports (e.g., aesthetic and subjectively judged). However, after conversations with other members of the research team, I realized that those criteria might not be important to the research question; the elements that mattered most were that the athlete went through a mental block and that the coach-athlete relationship was maintained throughout its entirety. When analyzing the data and discussing the findings, I noticed that the findings could potentially be applicable to any sport, as they were appropriately focused on the research question, not on extraneous details (e.g., judging style or level of competition).

3.2.6 Recommendations for Future Research

This study shed light on a relatively under researched cross-section in the sport psychology literature, but there is still a lot of exploration to be done in the area of mental blocks and the coach-athlete relationship. Maintenance of the coach-athlete relationship is not simple and requires significant effort from both parties to sustain a quality relationship (Rhind & Jowett, 2010). Future research should explore what role the COMPASS Model of maintenance strategies (Rhind & Jowett, 2010) plays in dyads successfully overcoming mental blocks. The COMPASS Model was proposed as a framework for enhancing and maintaining the quality of the coach-athlete relationship and suggests that the use of seven maintenance strategies (i.e., conflict management, openness, motivation, positivity, advice, support, and social networks) can have a positive effect on the quality of a coach-athlete relationship, as defined by Jowett's (2007) 3 + 1Cs Model. Rhind and Jowett (2010) found that relationship maintenance strategies are primarily embedded within the communication component of the 3 + 1Cs Model. Remembering that one of the most commonly discussed components of the coach-athlete relationship within this study was the importance of high quality of communication within dyads, it would be interesting to explore if high quality communication could facilitate the use of the COMPASS model, thereby increasing a dyads opportunity for successfully maintaining their relationship throughout the mental block experience.

So much of what has been learned in this study has revolved around the importance of high quality communication within the dyad, but woven within the data are glimpses of all four constructs (i.e., closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation) of Jowett's (2007) 3 + 1Cs Model of the coach-athlete relationship. Examples of closeness can be seen in the high levels of trust athletes put in their coaches and the returned respect. Dyads demonstrated

commitment by intending to stay together no matter what and following through on that intent, even when the mental block was at its most challenging points. Through cooperation and collaboration on training plans and strategies, the dyads were demonstrating complementarity and lastly, the shared common ground that the mental block was something they could conquer together demonstrated components of co-orientation. Taking these findings into account, it would be interesting to explore if being high on all four constructs of the 3 + 1Cs Model may improve the chances of dyadic success in overcoming a mental block. To explore this suggestion further, it would be interesting to utilize the 3 + 1Cs Model to compare the relationships of successful versus unsuccessful dyads to determine which constructs of the model, if any, are associated with increased probabilities of success.

Another important finding of this study was the expressed need for coaches and athletes to go beyond the dyadic relationship to seek additional resources while coping with the mental block. While there are multiple studies addressing the need for sport psychology resources to be more readily available to the masses (e.g., Weinberg, Neff, & Jurica, 2012; Weiss, 1998), few discuss the need for sport psychology resources, specifically mental skills training, for coaches (Olusoga, Maynard, Butt, & Hays, 2014). Olusoga et al. (2014) found that after having coaches complete a mental skills training intervention, they self-reported having a significantly improved ability to relax and improved levels of self-confidence. If coaches are better able to relax under stressful situations (e.g., coaching an athlete through a mental block), they may be able to better control frustrations that may arise (e.g., not knowing how to resolve the block), in turn, decreasing the probability of athletes misperceiving those frustrations as being directed at themselves. Future research should explore if mental skills training interventions aid coaches in

maintaining a holistically positive environment (e.g., low stress and anxiety, high positivity) while working with athletes going through mental blocks.

Another option utilizing sport psychology could be that athletes receive the mental skills intervention. If athletes experiencing mental blocks were encouraged to participate in a mental skills intervention at the onset of the block, they may be better equipped to positively cope with the stress of going through a block. If athletes were able to better cope, they may be more likely to avoid some of the miscommunications and mistakes (e.g., misinterpreting coach frustrations or blocking out coach feedback) that were shared by the participants of this study. However, this option would require that mental skills training consultants also be knowledgeable and skilled in helping athletes overcome mental blocks.

3.3 TAKE HOME MESSAGE

In addition to contributing to the current discussion about mental blocks in sport and the role of the coach-athlete relationship, this study provided a forum for coaches to share their thoughts, challenges, and strategies in navigating an athlete through a stressful event. This study provided suggestions for the type of coach-athlete environment that may be conducive to dyadic success in overcoming a mental block and shed additional light on the important role a coach plays in an athlete's life. Within this study, there are suggestions for coaches about the importance of communicating with and supporting athletes. This study also provides coaches with the support and encouragement to not feel like they must be the sole resource for athletes going through mental blocks. This study also highlights the need for mental skills consultants or sport psychologists in sport. These professionals can assist athletes and coaches alike and can be a welcome resource if made more readily available. Competitive sport programs should not hesitate to reach out to a mental skills consultant if an athlete is struggling with a mental block.

Knowing that a mental block can be disastrous for an athlete's achievement, which in turn can cause the athlete great amounts of stress and anxiety (Collins, Morriss, & Trower, 1999), it is important to learn as much as we can about how to successfully get an athlete through the experience and back to the enjoyment sport can offer. The goal of this study was to explore the journey of coach-athlete dyads that had successfully overcome a mental block while maintaining their relationship and to see what could be learned from their experiences. Results suggest that through on-going support, communication, and a whole lot of patience, it is possible for dyads to persevere through their experience. This research should serve as a reminder to coaches about the important role they play in athletes' lives and should guide future research towards better understanding how coaches can reduce or even alleviate the stress of a mental block in their athletes' sport experience.

3.4 EPILOGUE

As a researcher this study has opened my eyes to the both the strengths and challenges of qualitative research. Throughout this process there was an ongoing struggle to get people to share their experiences, but with each new participant I further understood the depth of knowledge that can be gained through in-depth interview. I always felt that I was a pretty good listener, I was engaged and responded at the appropriate points, and felt that I took away everything that I could. Through this process I learned what it was to be engulfed by another person's experiences. During the interview process, I felt like I had a genuine connection with each participant and sincerely cared about collecting every detail to ensure that I accurately shared their stories, not a version of my own.

This research has taught me so much about myself as both an athlete and a coach. Listening to the athletes share their stories and reflect upon their own experiences really made

me reflect upon my own mental block journey as an athlete. I realized in hindsight that what I thought was such a huge deal in my sport life was really quite minor on the scale of what some athletes go through. For the pole vault athletes, getting over the bar is the sole objective of their sport. Without being able to take off, they are unable to compete. For me, I was lucky enough that in my sport there were so many other contributions that I could make to the team other than just tumbling. I feel that had I understood that my inability to perform one skill was not the end all to be all of my athletic career, I may have been able to relieve some of the pressure I was putting on myself and may have been able to overcome the challenge. I also realized through self-reflection that I had put the sole responsibility of getting through a mental block on the shoulders of my coach. I relied on her to lead the way and to guide me down the path to skill recovery; I took little to no ownership of the experience. The dyads involved in this study showed me that getting over a mental block has to be a collaborative effort, with ongoing communication and evolution of strategy.

While this process further strengthened my belief that no mental block experience is the same for any two athletes, I was able to see some of my own experiences within the athletes' stories. I was most able to relate with Athlete Kyle's experience. He experienced an instant onset of the block following an injury which resulted in him completely losing trust in his skill. In addition, like Athlete Kyle, I was able to go for my skill when my coach was there spotting, or "holding my hand," as he described earlier. Where we differed in experiences was that Kyle's entire athletic career hung in the necessity of him overcoming his block and mine had only minor repercussions. When noticing the similarities between the participants' stories and my own experiences, I was left wondering which of my memories were accurate recollections and which were potentially reconstructed memories, possibly as means to feel more connected to the

participants. For me, it has been almost 20 years since I went through a mental block, a far more substantial amount of time than for any of the participants. As in any recollection, there is the possibility of incorrect memory reconstruction within the participants' stories as well, but as the data demonstrates, the perception of the experience and interactions is often more important than the actual happenings, so there is little to no fear that reconstructed memories will have any influence on the findings of this study.

As a coach, I learned that the role that I play in athletes' lives is likely greater than I ever could have imagined. Even through my own experiences of being an athlete, I never reflected on my relationships with my coaches as the participants in this study did when looking back on their dyadic mental block journeys. The athletes in this study gave me insight about both the highs and the lows they had with their coaches and I have taken what they shared to heart and modified the ways in which I coach since the interview process. From the coaches in this study I have learned that it is okay to not have all the answers. I am not the first coach to doubt my abilities, nor will I be the last. They have taught me that I am better than I think and I am, more capable than I will ever know, and the athletes reinforced that so long as I have my athletes' backs, they will have mine. Through this process I have learned how to be open to new experience and new ideas that are different from my own. I have learned how to evolve and be flexible and most importantly how to accept collaboration as help, not as a hint that I am doing it wrong. Had this project gone as smoothly as I had originally hoped, I feel the findings would not have been nearly as insightful.

Even the ways in which I coach have changed since commencing this study. One of the most significant changes I have made is that I am more patient and attentive with my athletes. I feel like I used to come into practices with tunnel vision. I would have a goal, or sometimes

multiple goals, I wanted to achieve each practice and any tangent from those goals was considered an unnecessary distraction, even an interruption from the task at hand. Now I understand that the moments when my athletes want to share something with me, be it an idea about practice, an opinion about technique, or even a tidbit from their day; those instances are not going to derail my practice plan. Instead, they are opportunities to bond, build trust, and generally improve the dyadic relationship between myself and that athlete.

A second change I have noticed is that I am more thoughtful in the words and tones I use when conveying messages to my athletes. I take more time to delivery my coaching message in a way that is tailored to the specific individual to increase the likelihood of that message being successful and having an impact. I now know that what matters more than the message itself, is the way in which the message is perceived by the athletes. I feel like I now take the time to think about how my actions, words, and interactions will be perceived and I take the appropriate effort to ensure they will never have a negative impact on my athletes. The change that I am most proud of is that I am now more accountable for my errors and I own up to my mistakes. I take the time and put in the effort to rectify any situations that may not have gone as positively as I had hoped, as I now know the implications my actions have.

Reflecting on everything that I have learned throughout this process and from the stories shared by the participants, I feel that the most important things I have taken away are the modifications in my coaching and the understanding that I was never a bad coach or a mean coach before going through this, I simply had a misconception about the influence I had on my athletes. I now know how important collaboration and communication are within a coach-athlete dyad and I hope dyads walk away from reading this study feeling positively about the roles they play in one another's lives.

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Participant Consent Form

Perseverance through Mental Blocking: Exploring Coach-Athlete Dyadic Relationships

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled **Perseverance through Mental Blocking: Exploring Coach-Athlete Dyadic Relationships**. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to email or call the researchers with any questions you might have.

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Purpose and Procedures of the Research:

The purpose of this study is to explore the journey of coach-athlete dyads who have successfully overcome a mental block, where success implies recovery of the lost skill and the continuation of their dyadic relationship. This study will provide insight on how coach-athlete dyads cope with mental blocks and what strategies coaches and athletes are using to overcome blocks.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you do choose to become involved, your participation will be required in two phases. Each phase will be conducted at a time that is convenient for you, either at the Physical Activity Complex at the University of Saskatchewan, or via the internet web-conferencing service, Skype, and will be led by a female researcher (i.e., Chelsey Moore). In Phase 1, a one-on-one interview will be held with Chelsey Moore that will last an estimated 45-60 minutes. Discussions in the interview will include topics such as sport background, the concept and definition of mental blocks, training during a block, and the coach-athlete relationship. In Phase 2, you will be involved in a dyadic (coach and athlete) discussion, which will last approximately one hour. During this phase, the group will further discuss the topics addressed in the one-on-one interviews. In addition, you will be asked to bring a meaningful item that reminds you of the mental block experience to the second interview. You will be asked to share the meaning and significance of this item. Producing such an item is not necessary for participation. There will be no penalty of any sort for not having an item to share, or for choosing not to share a meaningful item with the researchers.

Both phases will be audiotaped, and field notes may be taken. The audiotapes will be transcribed (written out) word for word in order for the research team to review what was said

and develop themes. You will have the opportunity to review all of your personal transcripts to make any additions, changes, or extractions you see fit.

Potential Benefits:

Although no benefits of participating in this study can be guaranteed, there is the potential for participation to provide the opportunity for an increased understanding about the coach-athlete relationship and the role of that relationship (if any) in overcoming a mental block.

Potential Risks:

There are no known or anticipated physical or psychological risks associated with participating in this study. You have the right to refuse to answer any question, at which point the discussion will be redirected. Not answering a question or withdrawing from the study will result in no penalty to you or anyone else. Although we do not expect any psychological risk, if we feel participation is placing you under undue stress (e.g., establishing mutual times for interview sessions) we will discontinue your involvement in the study, again resulting in no penalty. You are encouraged to contact the researchers at any time (before, during, or after the study) to ask any questions that you may have. In the event that you would like to further discuss your feelings regarding the issues discussed in the study, please select one of the resources below, based on geographical location and participant age, which can assist you:

Participants under the age of 20:

Kids Help Phone – 1-800-668-6868 (completely free, 24/7)
Speak confidentially to a counselor any day, any time
Available across Canada

British Columbia:

Crisis Line Association of BC Mental Health
Phone: 310-6789 (no area code needed)

Alberta:

Mental Health Help Line
Phone: 1-877-303-2642

Saskatchewan:

Mental Health Services
Phone: 306-655-7950

Manitoba:

Klinik Crisis Line
Phone: 1-888-322-3019

Ontario:

Good2Talk (for University students)
Phone: 1-866-925-5454

Ontario Crisis Line (Anyone over the age of 18)
(Within Ottawa) Phone: 613-722-6914
(Outside Ottawa) Phone: 1-866-996-0991

Quebec:

Montreal West Island Crisis Centre
Phone: 514-684-6160

Confidentiality:

The data from the study will be used as part of the student researcher's Master's thesis, as well as to produce a manuscript in hopes of publishing in a scholarly journal and/or being presented at a conference. However, *your identity* will be kept confidential. Although we might report direct quotations from the interviews, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym (made up name) and all identifying information (name, school, address, etc.) will be removed from our report. Only the research team will review the original audiotapes and transcripts. Names or other identifying information will not be discussed or made public outside of the research team. Audiotapes will be identified by code number and stored in a secure, locked office. The audiotapes and transcripts will be stored separately from the master sheet identifying names, pseudonyms, and code numbers. The master sheet will be shredded when data collection is complete and it is no longer required.

Although every effort will be taken to uphold your confidentiality, there are limits on the level of confidentiality that we as researchers can assure. Because you will take part in a dyadic interview, involving both you and your coach/athlete counterpart, it is possible that you may be identifiable to each other on the basis of what you have said. The researchers will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion in the dyadic interview, but cannot guarantee that other members will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other member of the dyad by not disclosing the content of this discussion outside the interview, and be aware that others may not respect your confidentiality. After your interviews, and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, alter, and delete information from the transcripts as you see fit. Also, it is important that you are aware that there are certain types of information that the researchers may be obliged to report to relevant authorities (e.g., child abuse, intent to do violence, etc.).

Storage of Data:

All research material will be stored securely in the office of Dr. Kent Kowalski at the University of Saskatchewan. Only the researchers will have access to the data. The data will be stored for a minimum of five years after completion of the study. This is standard protocol for any data that may be published in an academic journal and/or presented at a professional conference.

Right to Withdraw:

Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. Not answering a question or withdrawing from the study will result in no penalty to you or anyone else. You may withdraw from the study for any reason without explanation until the data is pooled and analyzed without penalty of any sort; and the decision to withdraw will not affect any of your current or future activities. If you withdraw from the study,

any data that you have contributed will be destroyed at your request. You will be advised of any new information that may have a bearing on your decision to participate. Prior to each interview, you will be asked if you still wish to participate.

Follow up:

Should you like to receive results of the study, please inform the researchers via email and they will provide all results once data analysis is complete.

Questions or Concerns:

If you have any questions concerning the research project, please feel free to contact the researchers. You are also free to contact the researchers if you have questions at a later time. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on _____. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office toll free at 1-888-966-2975 or ethics.office@usask.ca.

- You may contact the research team to find out the results of the study, request to be involved in the review of the themes that emerge from data analysis, or request a copy of the published manuscript. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

Continued or On-going Consent:

Participating in this study will involve two separate interviews; one individual and one with your coach or athlete counterpart. At the start of the second interview, you will be reminded of your freedom to not answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, and that you have the right to withdraw from the study until the data is pooled and analyzed without penalty.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix B – Transcript Release Form

Title of the Study: *Perseverance Through Mental Blocking: Exploring Coach-Athlete Dyadic Relationships*

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Dr. Kent Kowalski to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

Appendix C – Demographics Questionnaire

*Perseverance through Mental Blocking:
Exploring Coach-Athlete Dyadic Relationships*

Demographics Questionnaire

Athlete:

Pseudonym: _____ Age: _____ Sex: M F

Sport: _____ Years in sport: _____

Highest level of competition: _____

Sex of Coach: M F Years training with current coach: _____

Coach:

Pseudonym: _____ Age: _____ Sex: M F

Sport: _____ Years coaching sport: _____

Highest level coached: _____

Credentials: _____

Sex of Athlete: M F Years training with athlete: _____

Appendix D – Athlete Interview Guide

1. Issues Related to Consent

- a. Have the participant read and sign the consent form.
- b. Verbally inform the participants that they may choose to not answer any questions that they do not feel comfortable answering, and of their right to withdraw from the study until the data is pooled and analyzed without penalty.
- c. Remind the participant that the interview is being audio-recorded.
- d. Have the participant choose a pseudonym.

2. Rapport Building

- a. Discuss sport background (types of sport, level of sport, length of time playing sports, etc.).
- b. Engage in an icebreaker activity (the participant can suggest an activity they wish to do).

3. Introduce the study focus

- a. We are interested in the role of the coach-athlete relationship in your experience of navigating through a mental block. The mental block refers to the temporary loss of a previously mastered skill.
- b. Demographics Questionnaire

4. Mental Block Definition

- a. How would you define and explain a mental block?
 - i. How would you explain the difference between a mental block and a bad day?
 - ii. How would you explain the difference between a mental block and inability to perform successfully in a competition setting?
 - iii. How do you know the difference between a mental block and fear of progression or injury?

Addition

- Do you feel like you experienced and overcame a mental block?
- What skill did you lose/block on?
- How long did the block last?
- When was the block?
- How long have you had the skill back?
- Did you have the same coach throughout the course of the block?

5. Before the onset of the mental block

- a. Training
 - i. Please tell me about your training before the start of the mental block
 - ii. Right before the onset of the block, did you notice anything different in your training?
 - ii. Were there any changes in your life outside of sport?

- b. Coach-Athlete Relationship
 - i. Please tell me about your relationship with your coach before the onset of your mental block.
 - ii. Did anything change between you and your coach before you lost your skill, such as expectations, training pressure, or interpersonal interactions?
6. At the onset of the block
- a. Training
 - i. Please tell me about training the day you first noticed the mental block.
 - ii. When and how did you know you were suffering from a mental block?
 - b. Coach-Athlete Relationship
 - i. How did your coach respond when you were first unable to perform your skill?
 - ii. What did you and your coach do when you first acknowledged that you had a mental block?
 - iii. Did the onset of the mental block change the dynamic between you and your coach? If so, can you tell me how?
7. During the mental block
- a. Training
 - i. Please walk me through what training was like during your mental block.
 - a. How did you feel about going to practices?
 - b. How, if at all, was training different during this time?
 - ii. How long did the block last?
 - iii. How did the block affect every other area of your training?
 - b. Coach-Athlete Relationship
 - i. Please tell me about your relationship with your coach during the mental block?
 - ii. Did anything change between you and your coach?
 - iii. Did your coach start to treat you or respond to you differently during the block? If so, how?
 - iv. What was your coach like while you were unable to perform your lost skill?
 - v. How did you feel towards your coach?
8. Regaining the lost skill
- a. Training
 - i. Do you remember any changes in training, your sport life, or your personal life immediately before the return of the skill?
 - ii. What things did you try on your own within training to regain your lost skill?
 - iii. What strategies did you try outside of training, on your own to regain your lost skill?
 - b. Coach-Athlete Relationship
 - i. Please tell me about the role your coach played, if at all, in helping you regain your lost skill.
 - ii. Do you feel that your coach helped you regain your lost skill?

- a. If yes, please explain how your coach helped you.
 - b. If no, please explain why not.
- iii. Was there anything your coach did that you felt hindered your ability to regain your lost skill? Please try to remember as much detail as you can.

9. Post mental block

a. Training

- i. Please tell me about what training was like after you regained your lost skill.
 - a. How did you feel about training?
- ii. How did you know the block was gone?

b. Coach-Athlete Relationship

- i. Please tell me what your relationship with your coach was like once you knew the block was over.
 - a. How did your coach respond to the return of your lost skill?

10. Perseverance of the coach-athlete relationship

- a. Please describe how you perceived your coach to respond to your mental block, throughout the experience?
- b. Please explain to me, why you feel you and your coach were able to work together and maintain your relationship throughout the mental block?
- c. After everything we've discussed, what would you say is the single most important thing about you and your relationship with your coach that helped you overcome the mental block?

11. Additional Comments

- a. Provide the participant with the opportunity to make additional comments.

12. Significant Memorabilia

- a. Ask the participant to take some time between now and the next group interview to try and remember any significant piece of memorabilia (a piece of training equipment or attire, a photograph, a song, etc.) from the time when they overcame the mental block. Ask them to think about the meaning and significance of this item and to bring it with them to the next interview. At the start of that interview, a photo of the item will be taken and the participant will be asked to explain its relevance and meaning.

Appendix E – Coach Interview Guide

1. Issues Related to Consent

- a. Have the participant read and sign the consent form.
- b. Verbally inform the participants that they may choose to not answer any questions that they do not feel comfortable answering, and of their right to withdraw from the study until the data is pooled and analyzed without penalty.
- c. Remind the participant that the interview is being audio-recorded.
- d. Have the participant choose a pseudonym.

2. Rapport Building

- a. Discuss sport and coaching background (types of sport played and coached, level of sport, length of time playing sports and coaching, etc.).
- b. Engage in an icebreaker activity (the participant can suggest an activity they wish to do).

3. Introduce the study focus

- a. We are interested in the role of the coach-athlete relationship in your experience of navigating an athlete through a mental block. The mental block refers to the temporary loss of a previously mastered skill.
- b. Demographics Questionnaire

4. Mental Block Definition

- a. How would you generally define and explain a mental block?
 - iv. How would you explain the difference between a mental block and a bad day, in general, not for your athlete specifically?
 - v. How would you explain the difference between a mental block and inability to perform successfully in a competition setting, in general, not for your athlete specifically?
 - vi. How do you know the difference between a mental block and fear of progression or injury, in general, not for your athlete specifically?

Addition

- Do you feel like your athlete experienced and overcame a mental block?
- What skill did they lose/block on?
- How long did the block last?
- When was the block?
- How long have they had the skill back?
- Did you coach the athlete throughout the course of the block?

5. Before the onset of the mental block

- a. Training
 - i. Please tell me about the way you ran training before the start of the mental block.

- ii. Right before the onset of the block, did you notice anything different in your athlete's training?
 - b. Coach-Athlete Relationship
 - i. Please tell me about your relationship with your athlete before the onset of the mental block.
 - ii. Did anything change between you and your athlete before the block, such as your expectations, the way in which they responded to you, or interpersonal interactions?

- 6. At the onset of the block
 - a. Training
 - i. Please tell me about training the day you first noticed the mental block.
 - ii. When and how did you know your athlete was suffering from a mental block?

 - b. Coach-Athlete Relationship
 - i. How did you initially respond when your athlete stopped performing their skill?
 - ii. What did you and your athlete do when you first acknowledged that you were dealing with mental block?
 - iii. Did the onset of the mental block change the dynamic between you and your athlete? If so, can you tell me how?

- 7. During the mental block
 - a. Training
 - i. Please walk me through what training was like while your athlete was going through the mental block.
 - a. How did you feel about going to practices?
 - b. How, if at all, was training different during this time?
 - ii. How long did the block last?
 - iii. How did the block affect every other area of your coaching?

 - b. Coach-Athlete Relationship
 - i. Please tell me about your relationship with your athlete during the mental block?
 - ii. Did anything change between you and your athlete?
 - iii. Did your athlete start to act or respond to you differently during the block? If so, how?
 - iv. What was it like coaching an athlete with a mental block?
 - v. How did you feel towards your athlete during this time?

- 8. Regaining the lost skill
 - a. Training
 - i. Do you remember any changes in training immediately before the return of the skill?
 - ii. What strategies did you try during within training to help your athlete regain their lost skill?

- b. Coach-Athlete Relationship
 - i. Do you feel that you helped your athlete regain their lost skill?
 - a. If yes, please explain how your coach helped you.
 - b. If no, please explain why not.
 - ii. Was there anything you may have done that you feel hindered your athlete's ability to regain their lost skill? Please try to remember as much detail as you can.
9. Post mental block
- a. Training
 - i. Please tell me about what training was like after your athlete regained their lost skill.
 - ii. How did you know the block was gone?
 - b. Coach-Athlete Relationship
 - i. Please tell me what your relationship with your athlete was like once you knew the block was over.
 - a. How did you respond to the return of the lost skill?
10. Perseverance of the coach-athlete relationship
- a. Please describe how you feel you respond towards your athlete regarding their mental block, throughout the experience?
 - b. Please explain to me, why you feel you and your athlete were able to work together and maintain your relationship throughout the mental block?
 - c. After everything we've discussed, what would you say is the single most important thing that you did for your athlete that helped them overcome the mental block?
11. Additional Comments
- a. Provide the participant with the opportunity to make additional comments.
12. Significant Memorabilia
- a. Ask the participant to take some time between now and the next group interview to try and remember any significant piece of memorabilia (a piece of training equipment or attire, a photograph, a song, etc.) from the time when they overcame the mental block. Ask them to think about the meaning and significance of this item and to bring it with them to the next interview. At the start of that interview, a photo of the item will be taken and the participant will be asked to explain its relevance and meaning.