

Coaching Abuse Experiences in Young Elite Female Artistic Gymnasts:  
An Ethical Appraisal

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Applied Health Sciences  
(Health and Physical Education)

Faculty of Applied Health Sciences  
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St. Catharines, Ontario

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## Abstract

Artistic gymnastics coaches continue to face criticism stemming from the training requirements they place on their young gymnasts. The purpose of this study is to discover and examine coaching abuse experiences of young elite female artistic gymnasts, and provide an ethical appraisal of such abuse using two distinct moral frameworks. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with former elite artistic gymnasts. Data analysis was guided by phenomenological methods and a textural description of the phenomenon was created. Findings revealed that gymnasts' experienced forms of physical, sexual and emotional abuse from their coaches, and attributed these experiences in part to a lack of coaching education. Furthermore, the shared experiences of the gymnasts were not consistent when two moral frameworks were applied to the data. Based on the ethical implications of coaching abuse in elite female gymnastics, recommendations for mitigating coaching abuse toward young female gymnasts and future research were also discussed.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to sincerely thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Danny Rosenberg, for guiding me through the entirety of this process. Our paths first crossed during the fourth year of my undergraduate degree, and he inspired me to pursue my academic goals and has given me the knowledge, support and courage needed to accomplish them. He was an attentive listener when times were tough, and raised my spirits when faced with defeat. He not only gave me the resources and knowledge needed to pursue my research, but always emphasized that I was part of something greater. It was an incredible experience to work with such a mentor who shared my excitement for the field and kept me on track to achieve my goals. I will forever hold Dr. Rosenberg in the highest regard, and I am so appreciative of the working relationship he and I were able to share over the course of my undergraduate and graduate degrees at Brock University.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Joyce Engel, Dr. Nota Klentrou, and Dr. Tim Elcombe, my external examiner. I am so grateful that I could take this journey with the on-going support and mentorship of these three incredible individuals. Dr. Nota Klentrou's expertise in the field of women's gymnastics greatly assisted me with designing my research, and she consistently made it known that she supported me throughout the entirety of the process. I would also like to thank Dr. Joyce Engel for her willingness to communicate with me when I experienced uncertainty. She not only assisted me with the methodology section of my research, but also provided feedback in such a kind and genuine way that made me incredibly comfortable, and for that I am incredibly grateful. This committee would not have been complete without Dr. Tim Elcombe's extensive knowledge of sport ethics and coaching, and his willingness to

assist me with this research. Thank you for agreeing to be the external examiner on my committee.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all my research participants who agreed to engage in this research. I would also like to thank my own personal gymnastics coaches, for giving me the tools needed to excel; not only within the sport of gymnastics, but in academia as well. This thesis is for you as much as it is for me.

These acknowledgements would not be complete without extending a sincere thank you to all my family members and friends who have supported, motivated and encouraged me throughout this journey. To my best friend Adriana, and to my boyfriend, Adryan, thank you for providing me with calm in even the worst of storms. And finally, to my Mom, Charmaine Clark, you are the reason that I've accomplished what I have. You are my biggest inspiration, and I hope I've made you equally as proud as an academic as I have as a gymnast.

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## Chapter One

### Overview

#### *Introduction*

Modern sport has been capturing the hearts of children and adolescents for decades and remains a popular free time activity for children (Weber, 2009). Most often, parents choose to enroll their children into organized youth sports at either the recreational or competitive level. Organized youth sport is defined as sport practiced by a child or adolescent outside of the school environment, yet officiated and supervised by adults (Torres, 2015). Supporters of organized youth sport argue that children and adolescents develop essential life skills like cooperation, stress management, unselfishness, perseverance, appropriate risk-taking, motivation to strive for success, respecting others and rules and the ability to cope with frustration (David, 1999; Donaldson & Ronan, 2006).

Despite the numerous benefits for children who participate in youth sport, an increasing number of children dedicate their free time to training year round in one sport with the hope of competing at an elite level (American Association of Pediatrics, 2000). Unfortunately, this may have adverse effects. Accomplished child athletes are often denied the opportunity to partake in a wide variety of sports while facing additional physical, physiological and psychological challenges stemming from intense training regimes, such as long training practices. Regardless of the benefits recreational sport contributes to the positive development of children generally, some advocates of children's rights claim elite young athletes may have their rights violated or undermined (David, 2005; Weber, 2009).

For the purpose of this study, I will solely examine elite sport. Elite sport is characterized by taking individuals out of a relaxed environment, such as playing at home with their siblings, and placing them into a formal environment which focusses on achieving peak athletic performance (Schubring & Thiel, 2014). Elite sport is known for influencing a number of psychological challenges for athletes, such as internal and external pressure stemming from various sources including parents and coaches, and is not always deemed a safe place for children and adolescents (UNICEF, 2010). Despite the risks, child enrollment in elite sports, such as artistic gymnastics, has gained popularity following the enormous praise 14-year-old artistic gymnast Nadia Comaneci received when she achieved a perfect score at the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympic Games. Following this event, artistic gymnastics was no longer viewed in an amateurish way and a professional attitude toward the sport became the new reality. Sport no longer existed to teach children critical life skills vital to their success, such as taking responsibility and teamwork, but rather emphasized the importance of striving for perfection and ultimately winning.

Following Comaneci's success, elite female artistic gymnastics transformed from being a graceful aesthetic sport dominated by women, to an extremely technical sport dominated by pre-pubescent girls. Female artistic gymnastics is identified by the incorporation of four different apparatuses—floor exercise, uneven bars, vault and balance beam—on which gymnasts are required to perform 30 to 90 second routines on each apparatus. Elite artistic gymnastics entails pre-adolescent females dedicate countless hours to their training to enhance their sport performance, as well as attending academic classes and staying on top of their school work. Additionally, success in modern artistic

gymnastics is often solely achieved through endless repetition of gymnastics' elements and routines, adherence to a coach's authority and countless hours of practice, while often training through injuries and pain.

From the moment a girl is considered to possess superior talent for gymnastics, she is required to adopt a sport ethic that encourages young females to strive for perfection and adopt a win-at-all-costs mentality. This mindset overemphasizes winning and overshadows other elements of sport like pleasure and fun, the development of social interactive skills with peers and adults and the enjoyment of healthy family relationships. The emphasis that the sports industry places on winning and striving for perfection makes anything less than perfect intolerable. Due to the high demands placed on young gymnasts, very few of these athletes perform at an elite level, and even fewer will make sufficient income from their sport to support themselves in the future.

At its best, elite artistic gymnastics provides thousands of children the opportunity to develop critical life skills, including increasing self-esteem and discipline. At its worst however, research has demonstrated that elite artistic gymnastics can result in life threatening physical and psychological harm, eating disorders and permanent illness (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014; Ryan, 1995). Evidently, the pressure elite female gymnasts feel to train for extensive periods of time and focus only on their sport does not only stem from internal sources, such as their own personal motivation to succeed, but has also been linked to the influence of coaching behavior toward athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

Coaches play a vital role in the lives of elite gymnasts, yet the specific duties and responsibilities of youth sport coaches are consistently debated. For example, Simon (2013) explains that the role of a coach may be simply to win; to be a winning coach is

perceived as a good coach. He also argues however that more is required of coaches, such as teaching athletes to value their opponents as equals, especially when working with youth sport participants. Some philosophers argue that if coaches are unable to adopt this kind of sport ethic, they may not be fulfilling their role as a coach (Torres & Hager, 2013). Coaches also exercise a considerable degree of power and authority over young athletes and others in the sport community like parents and organizers. At least two reasons can be given for possessing and asserting these resources. First, people generally presume coaches have sport specific expertise which young athletes require to achieve success in sport, and second, coaches possess and transfer knowledge that is useful inside and outside the context of sport. Unfortunately, the majority of youth coaches have minimal knowledge of child development issues, yet young elite athletes spend the majority of their time under their coaches' supervision and influence. The power and authority of coaches in elite female artistic gymnastics are highly significant in the lives of gymnasts, mainly due to the incredible demands required in and out of the sport. Even though coaches are necessary to attain an elite status, there are risks young athletes encounter in coach-athlete relationships in female artistic gymnastics (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

The relationship a gymnast shares with her coach as a young athlete is extremely influential on the development and well-being of the gymnast. While there is debate as to what a good coach-athlete relationship should entail, researchers agree that a high quality coach-athlete relationship is critical to achieve excellence in sport. Within elite artistic gymnastics, the coach and the gymnast usually engage in a critical or caregiving relationship, whereby the coach assumes the role of caregiver over the athlete because he

or she is entrusted with the health, safety and overall fulfillment of the athlete's needs (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Due to the requirements of artistic gymnastics, gymnasts often perform risky elements that have the capacity to leave them seriously injured. Therefore, a high degree of trust must be shared between the coach and athlete to execute all skills safely and effectively.

Despite the critical or caregiving relationship between coaches and athletes, research has demonstrated that a lack of trust also exists within this dynamic, as the coach may view a gymnast as a tool or object to achieve the coach's personal goals that might include success, prestige and sometimes an increase in salary (Simon, 2013). When coaches are mainly interested in attaining their own goals, they may subvert trust by shouting vulgarities at athletes, humiliating them and ignoring them if they make mistakes. Literature has suggested that the behavior and interpersonal skills of coaches can have a direct impact, both positive and negative, on the psychological, emotional and physical well-being of gymnasts (David, 2005; Davis & Jowett, 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2009). When this is paired with young gymnasts who heavily rely on their coaches, athletes are rendered vulnerable to the demands placed on them by their coaches. The environment in which gymnasts train may also lead to an increased likelihood of experiencing coaching abuse. Coaches often insist that gymnastics practices be closed to parents and onlookers. This contrasts with other sports like soccer where practices are open to spectators and parental involvement is encouraged. Without external oversight coaches can engage in abusive conduct toward gymnasts with impunity. In this closed situation, a severe power imbalance exists between coaches as authority figures and

subservient young and impressionable female gymnasts. Instances of physical, sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of the coach can and do occur in these circumstances.

Over the last decade or two, there has been a growing concern over the occurrence of child abuse and mistreatment within in sport, and mainly coaches as the abusers and athletes the victims. Until recently, the majority of abuse literature in gymnastics focused on sexual abuse and harassment. However, as training regimes intensified over the last few decades, additional physical and emotional health problems have been exposed. This development has led researchers to question if children now involved in elite female gymnastics experience various other forms of abuse. When abuse occurs within a caregiving relationship, such as a coach and a gymnast, it is considered relational abuse. Accordingly, a correlation between child abuse in elite athletes by their coaches can be said to exist when children undergo intense training and spend a considerable amount of time under the influence of coaches. This situation strengthens the bond between the coaches and athletes; however, it sometimes renders gymnasts vulnerable and open to abuse in the form of extreme dieting, autocratic coaching and corporal punishment in accordance with the coaches' orders. Experiences of sexual, physical or emotional abusive practices result from the vulnerability of gymnasts and the power and controlling influence of coaches.

This study seeks to explore coaching abuse experiences of young elite female artistic gymnasts, and more specifically looks at experiences of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse within coach-athlete relationships. The definitions of such forms of abuse will be further defined in the literature review in chapter three of this research. Research suggests that elite child athletes are not immune from suffering physical, sexual

and emotional abuse from coaches (David, 1999). Within the context of elite gymnastics however, very few studies have been conducted that examine physical and emotional abuse within the coach-athlete relationship because most almost exclusively focus on sexual abuse and exploitation. The necessary commitment to one's sport and intensive training regimes created by coaches have led researchers to question the safety of young elite athletes and ask whether or not it is physically and emotionally safe for a child athlete to participate in an elite sport such as artistic gymnastics (David, 2005). The literature suggests that the occurrence of extra familial abuse in elite female artistic gymnasts is not uncommon, however few studies have qualitatively investigated the experiences and perceptions of abusive experiences in this cohort, as well as the ethical implications of these and other types of abuse (Kirby & Greaves, 1996; Parent & Deemers, 2011).

This study will therefore collect, describe and analyze coaching abuse experiences as recounted and perceived by young, elite female gymnasts. It will then introduce two moral frameworks to assess the issue of abuse in the coach-athlete relationship within elite female artistic gymnastics. The first approach described by Torres & Hager (2013) emphasizes that presumptive normative values exist in sport. This mutualist approach to sport suggests that values like trying one's best, respecting the rules and one's opponent must be shared by all members of the sport community such that in its best light sport is pursued as a mutual quest for excellence through challenge. If these values are adopted by all members of the sporting community, young competitive athletes will perceive each other as moral equals who are also striving to achieve similar normative values as opposed to perceiving their opponents as enemies to be vanquished by any means. By

adopting a mutualistic approach to sport, competitive youth sport will serve an educational purpose where cooperative practices will flourish and animosity is reduced or avoided completely (Torres & Hager, 2013).

When all members of the sporting community adopt the mutualist approach to sport suggested by Torres and Hager (2013), the likelihood of coaches to engage in runaway individualism, which is an extreme form of individualism, is reduced and mitigated. Runaway individualism occurs when coaches exploit gymnasts for their own personal gain like boosting their image, financial circumstance or popularity. Mutualism combats the occurrence of runaway individualism by emphasizing that the interests or needs of a single individual cannot be arbitrarily privileged and that the good of all concerned stakeholders and the practice of sport must be considered when ethical issues arise (Torres & Hager, 2013). The mutualist approach to sport also minimizes the occurrence of self-aggrandizement. Consistent with runaway individualism, self-aggrandizement is an extreme form of individualism in which coaches exhibit themselves as all powerful beings, and at the youth level, young athletes are made to work endlessly to earn their attention. Self-aggrandizement most prominently presents itself in the form of advantage seeking, which can be seen through a coach's expectations on how much time an athlete should spend conditioning, or how long a coach requires an athlete to spend on skill development. When coaches adopt a mutualist approach to sport and exhibit the normative values in sport as discussed above, the risks of runaway individualism and self-aggrandizement on behalf coaches is often minimized (Torres & Hager, 2013).

The second moral framework to be described and employed in this study refers to the conception of the coach-athlete relationship as discussed by Bergmann Drewe (2003). In this model, she proposes that due to the amount of time athletes spend with their coaches in training, competitions and sporting and non-sporting events, the relationships coaches develop with their athletes span a continuum from utility to friends to lovers. That is, on one end of the continuum no friendship exists while on the other end an intimate or sexual relationship exists and in the middle lie several types of friendship. Furthermore, she questions whether or not it is possible that coaches and young athletes not be friends given the amount of time they spend together and the trust they share, and whether or not friendship is required to accomplish the goals of athletes in a particular sport. This ethical framework will be applied to the gymnasts' experiences found in this study to examine the type of relationship gymnasts have with their coaches and determine if it contributed to the occurrences of abuse.

### *Rationale*

Virtually no attention has been focused on the ethical implications of various forms of abuse in child athletes who participate in elite, individual aesthetic sports like artistic gymnastics. Most of the research analyzes the issue of abuse in sport in relation to sociological and psychological perspectives. Gearity and Murray (2011) recommend that a way to assess abuse in the coach-athlete relationship is through an interpretive study of the athletes' lived experiences, and one approach to accomplish this is to utilize a phenomenological research method. In addition, Stirling and Kerr (2013) state that to advance initiatives for protecting child athletes against abuse in elite sport, further evidence of abuse occurrences and their consequences need to be established in the

context of the coach-athlete relationship. Furthermore, much of the ethics literature examining competitive youth sport published thus far focuses on ethical problems in team sports in relation to such issues as cheating, the use of performance enhancing drugs and sportsmanship. Few studies have examined the ethical implications of abuse in individual sports such as gymnastics. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to discover and examine coaching abuse experiences of young elite female artistic gymnasts, and provide an ethical appraisal of such abuse using the two distinct moral frameworks explained above.

### *Research Questions*

The following main research questions will be asked:

1. What do female gymnasts report with regard to their general involvement with coaches during their early elite artistic gymnastics careers?
2. Given such experiences, what, if any, abuse experiences do young elite female gymnasts recall in working with their coaches?
3. What were the consequences and/or resolutions of such coaching abuse experiences and who did young elite female gymnasts approach to seek help regarding these experiences?
4. How did young elite female artistic gymnasts cope with any perceived or real coaching abuse experiences during their career?

### *Methodology*

Due to the sensitive topic of this research, qualitative research was utilized to encapsulate and share the lived experiences of the gymnasts participating in the study. Qualitative research is a situated activity that requires the researcher enter the study

environment and use interpretive and material practices to allow the world to be comprehended from various perspectives of human beings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study also incorporates several qualitative data collection procedures, including self-reflection by the researcher, notetaking during participant interviews, participant questionnaires (see appendix C) and a semi-structured interview guide (see appendix D) to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of gymnasts. By using qualitative research methods for this study, I was able to gather, interpret and analyze the experiences of each gymnast, and in doing so, express what occurred in the lives of these young athletes based on their own recollections of their experiences.

I chose to adopt an interpretive viewpoint for this study because interpretivism offers a researcher the ability to understand a particular phenomenon, rather than place an emphasis on discovering universal laws or truth. Adopting an interpretive viewpoint for this study was appropriate because I wanted to explore the gymnasts' own perceptions and recollections of their experiences of abuse within their coach-athlete relationships. Therefore, an interpretive paradigm allowed me to grasp the reality of each interview participant, and create a composite reality of the experiences of coaching abuse in elite female artistic gymnastics.

Within the interpretive paradigm, I chose phenomenology as the qualitative research methodology that was to be employed to answer the research questions stated above. Phenomenology is often utilized by researchers when exploring the lived experiences of a phenomenon, which in this study is coaching abuse as experienced by young, elite artistic gymnasts. This methodology focusses on robust, detailed descriptions of what people experience, and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences (Patton,

2002). This study primarily focusses on detailed descriptions of the experiences of the participants, but also includes interpretive qualities and features that will be evident in chapter four. By using phenomenology as the methodology for this study, I could place myself into the lives of each participant and understand the experiences as best I could. Additionally, I was able to collectively take their shared experiences of the phenomenon of the study yet present them in a way so they remained true, valued and distinct to each participant. Phenomenology also maintains that a person cannot reflect on lived experiences while living through a life episode, much like someone cannot reflect on one's anger when one is angry or a dismount from the balanced beam while dismounting (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the utilization of phenomenology as a research method helped me uncover coaching abuse experiences in young elite female artistic gymnasts and discover central features of such abuse of this phenomenon and set the stage for the ethical appraisal of such experiences.

### *Research Design*

Phenomenology does not require a minimum number of research participants; however, I chose to have six participants in this study to get numerous accounts of personal experiences of coaching abuse in elite artistic gymnastics. Participants in this study consisted of former female artistic gymnasts who trained at Gymnastics Ontario accredited facilities. These gymnasts were required to have competed at a high provincial, national or international level. Retired gymnasts had to be over the age of 18 prior to the interviews and had to be retired from the sport for at least 12 months to ensure they had time to reflect on any coaching abuse experiences.

Participants were recruited through Gymnastics Ontario accredited facilities by emailing a letter of invitation (see appendix A) to the gym managers located throughout the Greater Toronto Area. Due to the sensitive nature of the research and to protect the identities of the participants, the participants were required to only contact me by phone for the initial response to the letter of invitation. Following this, the participants were required to create an anonymous email for further correspondence regarding interviews or questions the participants had throughout the process.

The interviews for this study took place at various Toronto Public Libraries across the Greater Toronto Area in scheduled meeting rooms or offices within the libraries. Upon meeting at these various libraries, I thoroughly reviewed the letter of informed consent (see appendix B) with each participant, highlighting the various risks associated with the study. The participant was also required to sign the waiver of an on-site counsellor if they stated during our email correspondence that they did not want a counsellor on site for the interview process. Once the participant had signed all of the required documentation, the interview began and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Semi-structured interviewing was employed to allow the participants to share their full stories, while still answering the questions this research set out to explore. These semi-structured interviews were conducted once with each participant and lasted no more than 90 minutes in duration.

Following the interview process, I took notes immediately afterward to document my own personal feelings and reflections, as well as notes on the participants' body language, emotions and reactions to the questions asked. This task kept my personal bias in check throughout the data collection process. Once my own personal thoughts and

feelings were written down, I transcribed each interview verbatim before beginning data analysis. Data analysis for this study was guided by Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental Phenomenological Model of Analysis (TMPA). There are two phases to this approach, one specific to the researcher and the other phase specific to the data. In the researcher specific phase, called epoche, I documented my previous experiences and bias related to the field of elite gymnastics and coach-athlete abuse by journaling. I then performed a phenomenological reduction, where I bracketed non-reflective thinking and isolated phenomenological thinking. This process required me to be reflective and interpretive of my own experiences, as opposed to simply journaling my experiences with minimal thought. By doing this, I was able to control and limit my bias by noting my own experiences so they minimally influence the research. The methods I used to do this will be discussed in greater detail in chapter two.

The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen model was the second analytical guide specific to the data portion of the data analysis. This approach uses phenomenological reduction and includes the implementation of epoche together with horizontalizing, organizing invariant qualities and themes and constructing textural-structural descriptions. Following performing epoche and transcribing each interview verbatim, I read each transcript numerous times and began highlighting certain experiences that stood out to me. I then grouped these experiences based on their similarities, such as creating groups like "yelling" and "fear." These groups became themes and were linked together based on their similarities. These themes were then synthesized into a description of the texture of the phenomenon which was produced from the different perspectives of the participants. The preceding data analysis steps were applied for each participant in the study and all

the individual accounts taken together were integrated such that a universal description of coaching abuse experiences emerged. Once this universal description had been identified, the ethical appraisal phase of the analysis was conducted by applying the coaching abuse experiences of the gymnasts to the two moral frameworks discussed above.

### *Limitations and Delimitations*

#### *Trustworthiness*

Within phenomenological studies, establishing trustworthiness poses a critical issue because the methodology is subjective in nature. Therefore, throughout this study, credibility was maintained through the consistent following of the data analysis procedures in Moustakas's (1994) TPMA. Credibility is defined as accurately representing the findings in the data analysis phase and ensuring that they are believable and trustworthy (Charmaz, 2006). As the researcher, I explicated all possible themes within the data analysis phase of research to ensure trustworthiness within the data.

Additionally, member checking was employed in this study. Member checking allows data in the form of transcripts to be sent back to participants to ensure an accurate account of their experiences of the phenomenon is produced (Patton, 1990). The opportunity to participate in member checking was discussed during the interviews. After transcribing each participant's interview verbatim, I emailed a copy of the transcript to those participants who agreed to member checking. This gave some participants a chance to review their interview and change anything I may have recorded inaccurately. Participants had three weeks to send the transcripts back to me by email. This process ensures that the data accurately represents what each participant said throughout the

interview. Member checking closely mirrors Moustakas's (1994) concepts of validation of data which is another aspect to ensure trustworthiness is achieved in research.

Moreover, at the beginning of each participant interview, I shared my own background as a former elite gymnast and coach and why I had an interest in conducting this research. This helped the participants better understand my credentials as a former athlete and my educational and coaching background. I felt by sharing with the participants that I was a former elite gymnast as well as a coach we could reach a common ground. The participants were more comfortable sharing their experiences with me because I could understand them perhaps better than someone who was not involved in the sport. This disclosure to participants not only made the data collection process more comfortable but enriched the quality and trustworthiness of the data because information I received may not have been shared otherwise.

### *Generalizability*

One of the features of qualitative research, and more specifically phenomenological studies, lies in the inability to produce generalizable data (Creswell, 2007). As a consequence, a delimiting condition of this study is the inability to produce generalized findings and results applicable to other populations. Delimitations are the parameters that researchers purposely set so that the research is focused and greater depth of inquiry can be achieved. Such delimitations can include age, sex, type of sport or any other variable that the researcher can select and control to create greater specificity and investigative rigor within a study. In this study, participants were females, retired from elite artistic gymnastics for at least 12 months, who once competed at a provincial, national or international level and were affiliated with a Gymnastics Ontario accredited

facility. Participants were also at least 18 years old during the active years of their respective careers.

Males were not considered participants in this study due to differences noted in the literature that examined coach-athlete relationships in male sports compared to coach-athlete relationships in female sports (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). For example, male gymnasts rely less on their coaches when compared to female gymnasts. To increase consistency in this study, males were excluded from the participant criteria to focus exclusively on the experiences of young female artistic gymnasts. Additionally, gymnasts were not asked the gender of their coaches prior to sharing their experiences. Therefore, it is difficult to assess whether the gender of a coach influenced abusive behaviors towards the gymnasts. Perhaps both these dimensions of gender could be investigated in future studies to generate comparative results and conclusions. If the above delimitations were widened or altered, different findings would likely be discovered.

There were also several limitations within this study. Limitations refer to the conditions that are beyond the researcher's control. In this study, several parameters were put in place by the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB) to ensure participant safety and well-being due to the sensitive nature of this research. Such limitations included incorporating definitions and examples of abuse on recruitment material, such as the letter of invitation and letter of consent. At this stage, definitions and examples of abuse may have deterred those participants who felt they were not abused during their elite artistic careers from participating in this research. Also, having these definitions and examples outlined on recruitment material may have shaped the participants' ideas on what abuse is, and therefore may have resulted in the participants shaping their

experiences around the definitions and examples provided to them. While the results uncovered in this study may not be generalizable, the qualitative phenomenological methods employed here can still reveal relevant data between the lived experiences of participants and inform and recommend related future studies.

### *Reliability*

Reliability in qualitative research refers to a study's ability to produce similar data if the study is replicated by another researcher (Patton, 2002). According to van Manen (2007), phenomenological studies are unable to demonstrate high levels of reliability due to the nature of each phenomenon being embedded in the unique lived experiences of the participants taking part in the study. In relation to the phenomenon being examined in this research, the data I collected through the qualitative interviews is likely to be different if replicated by another researcher. This may be because every participant's perception and interpretation of a phenomenon is somewhat different; therefore, if this study were replicated at some future date, a different set of data would likely be collected.

### *Authenticity of Data*

Authenticity requires the researcher to describe a participant's experiences in the most faithful way possible. As a qualitative researcher, this is a critical ethical obligation I have to my participants. As discussed above, one of the most useful strategies when conducting a phenomenological study is the implementation of epoche. By following Moustakas's (1994) TPMA, researchers must separate their own perceptions of the phenomenon under examination and restrict their biases as much as possible from the responses of their participants. Researchers who perform an epoche at the beginning of a study try to ensure the data is authentic and keep their research bias in check.

## *Chapter Development*

Chapter one of this thesis provided a brief explanation of the history and relevancy of elite artistic gymnastics, as well as the rationale for this study, the research questions posed, and a brief overview of the methods employed during data collection and analysis. Chapter two will provide an explanation of the research design and methodology utilized in the study. The main areas to be addressed are the nature of qualitative research, the interpretive paradigm, the phenomenological method, sampling, data collection procedures and the data analysis process. Chapter three will consist of a review of literature where each of the following themes will be described and critiqued in far greater detail than presented above: elite versus non-elite sport; a characterization of elite female artistic gymnastics; the role of the coach; coach-athlete relationships; types of abuse in elite female artistic gymnastics; and two moral frameworks for appraising abuse in sport. The fourth chapter will present, discuss and analyze the findings. It will state the main themes that emerged and account for the central features of coaching abuse as experienced and reported by young elite female artistic gymnasts. The core of coaching abuse refers to the relatively unchanging variable, or variables, that lie at the very heart of the phenomenon. For example, the basic features of coaching abuse would remain sufficiently consistent such that if changed significantly might result in a different outcome. The same chapter will also provide evidence, by way of selected verbatim quotes from the participants, to support the emergent themes and the universal descriptions that reflect the essence of coaching abuse. The final chapter will apply the two moral frameworks introduced above to assess coaching abuse from an ethical perspective. Not only will the essence of this phenomenon be evaluated from a moral

point of view but also specific instances in the experiences conveyed by young elite female artistic gymnasts. In this same chapter, several conclusions will be drawn as well as recommendations for reforms in artistic gymnastics and future research.

### *Reflexivity*

Before outlining the various components of the research design and methodology of this study, I will present a reflexivity statement as the researcher to explain why I chose to examine this particular topic. The following account supplements the rationale for conducting this study. According to Lincoln and Guba (2005), reflexivity is defined as “the process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher” (p. 99). My personal experiences of the phenomenon under investigation have had a direct impact on the research process.

When I was three years old, I was enrolled in a recreational gymnastics class every Saturday morning at a Toronto gymnastics facility. I immediately fell in love with everything about the sport, whether it was getting to play in the foam pit or getting to pick out a new leotard to wear to practice. After participating in the recreational classes for a few months, I was scouted by the head coach at gymnastics club to take part in a mini elite class, which entailed training between 8 and 12 hours per week. By the age of six, I was training 25 to 30 hours a week and competing on a provincial level at championship qualifiers all over the province. As I progressed in age and level, gymnastics quickly engulfed the entirety of my childhood and academics slipped onto the back burner. By the time I turned 11, my old gymnastics facility no longer had the capacity to adapt to my skill level and coach me at the level I was competing in. It was then that I was given an ultimatum that shaped the rest of my life.

When I was 12 years old, my family made the emotional and financial commitment to send me to the United States to train at newer and more suitable gymnastics facilities tailored to my skill level. I began training out of a top ranked gymnastics facility in California, where I dropped out of traditional schooling and was homeschooled by the family I was living with. I was training 40 to 50 hours per week and was allotted minimal time to complete school work, talk to family, or engage in “normal” teen activities. Despite my lack of time, my gymnastics performance level was increasing and I was being trained by a coach whom some would consider one of the top coaches in the United States. I quickly realized, however, that I was not happy.

By the time I turned 16, I was in full training mode for the 2008 Olympic games and that was the year when my sporting career came crashing down. The coaches I once trusted began uttering negative slurs at me, saying I needed to lose weight or if I gained another pound I would never qualify for the Olympics. Coaches belittled the elites, demonstrating their power over the athletes by calling us stupid, worthless and garbage athletes. Some coaches even went so far as to physically push athletes or exhibit their strength by smacking us around when spotting a skill. Judges constantly made remarks on our scoring cards regarding our body figure, facial appearance and attitudes. Upon even the slightest mention to my parents that I did not want to do this anymore, I was reminded of the amount of money and time they sacrificed for me to be where I was, and how they wanted me to be the next international success story.

However, I was forced to retire from the sport in June of 2010 because I suffered a double dislocation of both my knees requiring anterior-cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstructive surgery. My experiences as a young female elite gymnast prompted me to

critically examine the ethical implications of coaching abuse in sport because it is a phenomenon that I lived through. While my experiences in elite gymnastics may differ from others, an investigation of this kind may reveal similarities between research participants and my own career. It is and will be evident that my subjectivity is embedded in this study in terms of establishing its purpose, research questions, design and overall structure.

## Chapter Two

### Research Design and Methodology

#### *Qualitative Research*

Due to the nature of this research which aims to gather, analyze and explore coaching abuse experiences in young elite female artistic gymnasts and assess the ethical standing of these experiences, I will adopt a qualitative research design approach.

Qualitative research is not a single, monolithic type of research. Instead, it is a situated activity that places the researcher in the study environment and uses interpretive and material practices that allow the world to be comprehended from varied and particular perspectives of human beings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). By implementing a qualitative study, I collected, interpreted and made sense of the experiences of a particular phenomenon to understand the meanings people attribute to these experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Specifically, I captured and analyzed the lived experiences of young elite female artistic gymnasts, and in turn, expressed what occurred in the lives of these young athletes based on their own words (Patton, 2002).

#### *The Interpretive Paradigm*

For the purpose of this study, I adopted an interpretive viewpoint, which offers a holistic worldview and provides a way of understanding the complexities of the real world (Patton, 2002). An interpretive worldview regards the nature of reality as socially constructed whereby research is grounded in an understanding of a particular phenomenon rather than placing an emphasis on discovering universal laws or truths (Willis, 2007). In essence, the interpretive paradigm understands reality from the lived experiences of human beings. This approach is appropriate because the goal of this study

is to explore perceptions and experiences of coaching abuse as perceived by elite female artistic gymnasts. I wanted to not only understand the experiences of these gymnasts, but learn if they considered the ethical implications of these experiences without asking them directly. This was done by comparing their shared experiences to two moral frameworks that will be introduced and utilized in chapter five. The interpretive paradigm is appropriate to answer my primary research questions because I engaged with participants in this study, was immersed in their experiences and understood what those experiences meant to them.

An interpretive approach to research also presupposes an antifoundationalist stance, which means there is no solid footing or base that researchers can use to decipher between what is true and what is false (Willis, 2007). The concept of antifoundationalism is reflected in interpretive research because interpretivism is grounded in an empathetic and subjective understanding of everyday lived experiences of individuals, and therefore, no concrete foundation of truth is present (Neuman, 2006; Willis, 2007). Such a stance however, may not preclude deep commitments to the demands of a particular practice. For example, elite sport at its best requires the execution of exceptional skills, the pursuit of excellence and competition against worthy opponents (Simon, 2013). These are presumptive normative values that athletes, coaches and others must adhere to for elite sport to even exist. While the truth value of lived experiences is typically accepted unquestioningly within an interpretive paradigm, they cannot completely defy such presumptive normative values. These presumptive normative values include, but are not limited to, trying one's best, pursuing excellence and showing up to practice. A gymnast's shared experiences cannot defy these values because these values are those

that were designed and accepted to allow elite sport to exist. If a gymnast reported in an interview that she did not go to practice, try her best and chose not to pursue excellence, one may argue that she did not participate in elite sport. Therefore, the truth value of the participants' experiences will not be doubted, as long as their experiences do not defy such presumptive normative values that are congruent with elite sport. Using an interpretive paradigm allowed me to grasp the reality of each interview participant and create a composite reality of the experiences of coaching abuse in young elite female artistic gymnasts.

### *Phenomenology*

Within the interpretive paradigm, phenomenology is the specific qualitative methodology that was employed to answer the research questions in this study.

Phenomenology is a popular qualitative methodology utilized by researchers to explore the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon, which in this study is coaching abuse in elite female artistic gymnastics. Phenomenology, as characterized by van Manen (2007), describes “the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a something what it is – and without which it could not be what it is” (p. 22). Essentially, phenomenology is a “sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence—sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and supposition intoxication” (van Manen, 2007, p. 13). It does not create intellectual models, but rather “aims to open up possibilities for creating formative relations between being and acting, between who we are and how we act, between thoughtfulness and tact” (van Manen, 2007, p. 13).

A phenomenological study focuses on detailed, robust descriptions of what people

experience and the meanings they ascribe to what they experience (Patton, 2002). This study was designed to incorporate both descriptive and interpretive features which are both present in chapter four of this study. Phenomenology offers researchers insights, described as the “in-seeing” into the “heart of things” through qualitative techniques such as interviewing, which cannot be achieved through quantitative measures (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 2007, p. 22). Despite the confusion when attempting to define the meaning of phenomenology due to the several approaches that may be taken up, various phenomenological methods all share a focus on exploring how human beings make sense of an experience and transform experience into consciousness both individually and as shared meaning (Patton, 2002). This approach also maintains that a person cannot reflect on lived experiences while living through a life episode, much like someone cannot reflect on one’s frustrations when one is frustrated or execution of a cartwheel while one is cartwheeling (Patton, 2002).

In the application of the phenomenological approach, an individual’s perceptions of a phenomenon act as vital primary sources of data that cannot be typically doubted. While the individual’s understanding of their experience cannot be doubted, the truth value of the individual’s experience may be questioned, as indicated above where one might try but cannot wholly reject the presumptive normative values of elite sport, for example, being committed to train in a disciplined manner. This means that during the data collection phase of this research, I have refrained from doubting the participant’s lived experiences as much as possible to understand the meanings they attribute (Moustakas, 1990) to the phenomenon of coaching abuse.

Phenomenology is differentiated from other methodological approaches by at

least one distinct attribute, which is the assumption that there is an essence of essences to shared experience (Patton, 2002). As explained above, this essence refers to the core features of the phenomenon, such that without these core features, the experiences of the phenomenon may be different. Within phenomenology, it is vital that the researcher be constantly reminded of the original questions one poses and be consistently concerned with revealing the lived experiences that enable the researcher to ask questions such as “what was it like?” (van Manen, 2007, p. 24). This research method leads to what Moustakas (1994) calls a transcendental phenomenological analysis, which will be discussed later. The utilization of phenomenology as a research method helped me uncover coaching abuse experiences in young elite female artistic gymnasts, discover the underlying essence of this phenomenon and set the stage for the ethical appraisal of such experiences.

### *Participants*

Participants for this study consisted of retired elite female artistic gymnasts over the age of 18, and who were affiliated with Gymnastics Ontario. These gymnasts had to compete at a high provincial, national or international level. Gymnasts needed to be retired from the sport for a minimum of 12 months prior to data collection to ensure participants were reflexive in nature, without still being heavily influenced by their experiences in the gymnastics environment. Participants engaged in this study voluntarily and were able to read, understand and comprehend the letter of informed consent that was required to be completed prior to participating in the study (see appendix B). The consent form outlined the purpose of the research, the role of the participant, time requirements, ethical considerations and potential benefits and risks of partaking in the study.

### *Recruitment*

To recruit participants, I employed purposeful sampling, where I sent a letter of invitation out to selected coaches, gymnastics administrators and gym managers within Gymnastics Ontario via email. I asked these gatekeepers to pass out the letter of invitation to any former elite gymnasts they felt may have an interest in participating in this study. This eliminated the risk of participants feeling obligated or coerced to participate in this research due to the sensitive topics being discussed. Despite eliminating the risk of coercion, there is the potential to encounter self-selection bias while following the above recruitment process. Due to restraints imposed on the recruitment methods by the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB), gym managers were required to send the letter of invitation out to former gymnasts they felt may want to participate in this research. This means that gym managers could have chosen specific former athletes they knew would speak highly about their facility, or those who still have ties to their facilities as coaches themselves. Such a selection process may have also encouraged participants who were critical of and wanted to speak out against the practices of their coaches. Therefore, the parameters mandated by the Brock University REB may have influenced selection bias in this research. Once the gym managers and administrators sent out the letter of invitation, the prospective participants were asked to contact the researcher by telephone only for the initial response. The phenomenological method of inquiry does not require an exact number of participants to ensure rigor and a comprehensive research design. Six participants who met the criteria outlined in the invitation letter responded back to me by phone and were welcomed to participate in this research. These participants were then asked to create an anonymous email address that I used throughout

all aspects of the research process (i.e., arranging interview dates/locations, answering any questions the participant had throughout the process, member checking if they wish to receive their transcript via email). This email address consisted of any arrangement of letters or numbers and did not have to reflect the participant's identity whatsoever. For example, an email a participant chose was abcdefg123@hotmail.com. Once the participant had created an anonymous email, all communication between the researcher and the participant occurred using this email.

Additionally, participants were not required to directly state their age on the questionnaire, but rather circle an age range they fell under. The participant was notified that the minimum age of participation is 18 years old. This minimum age requirement is outlined on both the letter of invitation as well as the letter of informed consent.

Additionally, the questionnaire at the beginning of the interview process required participants select the age category they fell into (the minimum age category begins at age 18). Prior to participating in the interview process, the participant was required to show the researcher a piece of government issued ID (i.e., health card, driver's license, etc.) that has their picture and birthdate. Please note that the participants were notified to show the researcher just their birthdate and picture. This was done by using the participant's thumb to cover all other information (i.e., name, address, etc.).

### *Data Collection*

Once the research participants agreed to participate in this study and had created their email as described above, I corresponded with the participants via email to establish a meeting place that was accessible and convenient for both of us. Once again, the letter of invitation for the study was attached to the email and outlined the potential risks and

benefits of the study. The letter also mentioned that a qualified counsellor could be requested at the interview should any serious emotional reaction occur. This point will be addressed in greater detail below. The interview process took place at various public libraries within the City of Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area. Specifically, once the participant and I had agreed at which public library to meet, I booked private rooms or spaces within the library to conduct the interviews. This was done to ensure the participant's comfort and well-being and maintain confidentiality.

Upon meeting at the various public libraries where interviews occurred, I introduced myself to the participant and gave her a little background information about myself and the research I was pursuing. Following this, I went over the letter of informed consent with the participant in detail which highlighted the time commitment, potential emotional and social risks that might arise and the possibility of the participant engaging in member checking. Each participant was then asked if she had any questions or concerns prior to the interview, and was once again reminded that her participation was voluntary. Once the participant fully understood the study and interview process, she was asked to sign the informed consent form. Once the informed consent form was signed and returned to me, the participant was asked to complete a brief questionnaire in which she was asked to disclose some basic demographic information about herself, including her age range, education level, age of entry into gymnastics and her age of retirement from gymnastics (see appendix C). Semi-structured interviewing was then employed to achieve breadth and depth, which other, more formal types of interviewing techniques fail to achieve (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Semi-structured interviews involve the use of conversation, discussion and questioning to gain insight into the participant's experiences

of coaching abuse, without being bound to a strict interview script. The semi-structured interviews were conducted once with each participant and each interview lasted roughly between 60-90 minutes in duration.

The purpose of interviewing in the phenomenological method of inquiry is to attain a deep understanding of participants lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. Despite being embedded in the culture of gymnastics, I refrained from expressing my own bias during the interview process to ensure my perspective did not impact the participants' responses. I will comment below in the data analysis section regarding the strategy I used to keep my bias to a minimum throughout the data collection process.

Following each audio-taped interview, I took notes immediately afterwards to document my own personal reflections, as well as the participant's body language, facial expressions and pauses. These personal notes often included feelings I felt during similar encounters with coaches. For example, when a participant shared an encounter they experienced with their coach that was similar to what I experienced with my former coach, I wrote it down following the interview to avoid interrupting the participant's narrative. This helped me keep my bias and own personal experiences in check throughout the data collection process. Once I had written down my own personal reflections and field notes, I began producing the verbatim transcripts that were utilized in the data analysis portion of my research. Member checking, along with data analysis measures will be discussed in the subsequent section.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis for this study was guided by Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental Phenomenological Model of Analysis (TPMA). The word transcendental in this context

means to look at the phenomenon with an open mind which allows the researcher to acquire new knowledge about a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The stages of this model include two phases, one specific to the researcher and the other applied to the data. In the first phase, the researcher executes epoche and a transcendental phenomenological reduction. Epoche requires the researcher to document all of his or her previous experience and bias pertaining to the particular phenomenon being studied. Epoche is performed as a method for the researcher to evaluate her own experiences to avoid bias or judgment that can occur in later phases of data analysis. To do this, I kept a journal of my own thoughts, experiences and emotions of the content discussed throughout each interview and during the data analysis process. Some of these thoughts were related to situations participants described similar to my own when I as an elite gymnast. For example, these journal entries included retrospective thoughts of my own experiences as a gymnast that displayed emotions such as anger, disappointment and denial.

The second process carried out by the researcher when following TMPA refers to a transcendental phenomenological reduction which extracts the essences found in my own lived experiences by separating them into structural and intuitive experiences. I did this by bracketing straightforward, non-reflective thinking and isolate phenomenological thinking. This process required me to be reflective, retrospective and interpretive of my own experiences, as opposed to simply stating what I experienced. For example, I looked back to a time where a coach had called me stupid when I was afraid to perform a skill. I became concerned with why my coach said it, and what she wanted the outcome of saying it to be. I also questioned if I did something to deserve being called stupid, and if

being called stupid now still triggers memories of past experiences. Rather than reminisce about my past by simply thinking back to what I experienced, I began to question what made those experiences stand out for me, and without those key elements, what experiences would I have had if circumstances were different. Through this researcher-based phase, my lived experience and the interpretive meaning of such experiences were analyzed concurrently with those of the research participants.

When describing the second part of the data analysis process, Moustakas (1994) emphasizes that “knowledge is constructed by systematically collecting and analyzing the participants’ experiences and feelings, and making meanings through discourse” (p. 53). He outlines two different frameworks for analyzing the data, namely the Van Kaam Model and the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method. The latter analysis was utilized for this study because it accounts for the close ties a researcher may have to the research topic, which holds relevancy to my past experiences with elite artistic gymnastics. Additionally, in this model, the researcher is the first to contribute to the research through epoche and this is followed by an analysis of the participants’ experiences as recorded in the verbatim transcripts. The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method is a very popular data analysis technique among qualitative researchers and the following outlines some of its features (Creswell, 2007).

The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method uses phenomenological reduction which includes the implementation of epoche, horizontalizing, organizing invariant qualities and themes, and constructing textural-structural descriptions (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). As mentioned previously, epoche requires the researcher to document all previous experiences with the phenomenon under investigation to minimize researcher bias that

could adversely influence later phases of the data analysis. As explained above, epoche was implemented through journaling and dedicating time to understand and reflect on my experiences as a former elite artistic gymnast. Second, horizontalizing refers to assigning equal value to relevant statements in the data that represents a segment of meaning. This means that all shared experiences of the participants will be respected, valued and are equally important. This occurs during the grouping phase of data analysis.

Immediately following each of the six interviews conducted, I transcribed each interview verbatim. The grouping phase of data analysis in this research was performed by hand, so that I thoroughly submerged myself into the data. Once each of the six interviews had been transcribed, I immediately re-read each transcript and began making notes in relation to my first thoughts. For example, these notes often included my reaction to an experience or any questions I had about any described experience. I read each transcript numerous times and began highlighting certain experiences and grouping them. For example, groups included “yelling” or “fear.” Once all the segments of meaning had been identified, they were clustered into themes based on their similarities. For example, I uncovered many instances of coaches yelling at, threatening and humiliating athletes which were clustered into the theme of emotional abuse. These segments and themes were then synthesized into a description of the texture of the phenomenon which refers to the “whatness” of the phenomenon. This textural description was generated from the varied, collective perspectives of the participants which then produced a description of the structure or the “how” of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The outcome was a textural-structural description that represented the central, core features of the lived experiences of coaching abuse within elite female artistic gymnastics.

The preceding data analysis steps were applied for each participant in the study, and all the individual accounts taken together were integrated such that a universal description of group experience emerged. Once this universal description was identified, the ethical appraisal phase of the analysis was conducted by applying the two moral frameworks discussed earlier. Not only were general themes and descriptions held up to presumptive normative values and issues of autonomy, power and the coach-athlete continuum, but specific episodes related to the lived experiences of elite female artistic gymnasts and coaching abuse were scrutinized under these ethical parameters.

Member checking was also employed in this study. Participants were notified in the letter of invitation (see appendix A) and the letter of informed consent (see appendix B) that they could participate in member checking. This process ensures the data accurately represents what each participant said throughout the interview. Due to the sensitive nature of this study, participants were offered the choice to participate in member checking. If they chose to participate, the transcribed interviews were sent back to the participants using one of two methods; via e-mail or through mailing them a hard copy to a desired address. This was put into place to minimize the social risks of member checking. The participants were also asked if they wished to review their transcripts in the presence of the researcher or a counsellor to minimize any emotional distress or offer support if transcripts were read alone. No participants chose the latter. For those participants who agreed to partake in member checking, I sent the transcribed interviews to the participants within two weeks of their interviews. In exchange, I requested that the amended transcripts be sent back via e-mail or the post office within three weeks of the send out date. If transcripts were not returned, or were returned after the three-week

period, I assumed there were no changes to the account and the original interview transcript was used for the purpose of data analysis.

Finally, participants were asked if they would like to receive the results from the study. If they agreed, they were asked which delivery method was preferable (i.e., post office or e-mail). All relevant information regarding the results of the study were kept securely in a password-protected folder on my computer to ensure confidentiality. The participants of this study were informed that the results of this study would be available twelve months after the completion of the interviews.

### *Research Ethics*

Research ethics guidelines were followed through the completion of Brock University's Research Ethics Board's (REB) CORE Ethics tutorial, meeting all requirements established by the REB, and receiving formal REB approval (#15-069) for this study to proceed (see appendix G). Liamputtong (2009) states that "ethical issues have become an essential aspect of research" (p. 32). Furthermore, when conducting research with people, caution needs to be taken to avoid unnecessary physical and psychological harm to participants (Fontana & Frey, 2005). In reference to this study, no participants were coerced or manipulated into participating. I did not hold any potential power socially, personally or professionally within the gymnastics field that participants may have perceived as coercive in their participation. Additionally, I was not in direct contact with the participants during the recruitment process, and therefore no coercion during that phase of the study. To further avoid harm, participants were reminded of the option to withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences and the interview process at any time with no repercussions. To avoid potential conflicts of interest

between the researcher and participants, participants did not receive any form of remuneration, financial gain or employment from partaking in this study.

As someone conducting research with females who may have experienced coaching abuse, extra precautions were put into place to ensure the safety and emotional well-being of the participants. It is not the act of interviewing that may expose participants to harm, but rather the retrospective act of re-living their past experiences that may result in emotional distress (Liamputtong, 2009). Several parameters were therefore implemented to protect the participants and me as the researcher in the study.

To begin, the letter of invitation (see appendix A) clearly stated that the research seeks to investigate experiences of coaching abuse in elite artistic female gymnastics. The same letter outlined potential risks from answering the questions, including social risks such as the loss of status and reputation, along with the potential for emotional pain to occur during the interviews. A sample question taken from the interview guide (see appendix D) was included in the letter of invitation (see appendix A). This ensured that the prior to choosing to engage in this study participants were aware of the nature of the questions and understood the potential risks of engaging in the research.

Participants were also notified in the letter of invitation (see appendix A) that the interview process could take place in the presence of a certified, on-site counsellor should professional counselling or assistance be required during the interview process. This counsellor was sought from a professional organization located in Toronto, and would remain on-site, in a room outside the private space rented for the interview, should the need for professional assistance arise. If the participants refused to have the on-site counsellor present, they were given a waiver form to complete which outlined the risks of

choosing to decline the presence of the on-site counsellor. This waiver form was required to be submitted prior to the interviews (see appendix E). All participants in the study signed this waiver.

The letter of informed consent (see appendix B) also acted to ensure participants knew the risks of the study prior to the interviews. The letter of informed consent (see appendix B) outlined the same risks explained in the letter of invitation (see appendix A), yet it was reviewed with each participant in the presence of the researcher. Participants were reminded that they had the right to stop the interview at any time, refuse to answer a question or voluntarily withdraw from the study at any point with no repercussions. The participants were asked if they had any questions regarding the potential risks prior to the interviews. The participants were then asked to sign the letter of informed consent, and submit their signed waiver if they chose to decline the presence of the on-site counsellor. All of this required documentation was implemented to maintain the safety and well-being of the participants and protect me as the researcher.

Following the interviews, the participants were given a list of resources they could contact if they felt the need to seek further counselling due to sharing their experiences with me (see appendix F). These resources were accessible through telephone numbers, walk-in facilities and online services. The organizations and individuals listed on the resource sheet were contacted prior to data collection and all agreed to be listed as resources for the participants to use if needed. Based on the numerous strategies implemented in this research to mitigate any potential harm to the participants, I strongly believe the above criteria was critical to ensure the welfare of the participants and me as the researcher during the recruitment and data collection process.

### *Informed Consent*

As a qualitative phenomenological study, it is hard to predict what an interview is going to uncover and therefore participant consent is an on-going, transactional process (Polit & Hungler, 1999). Additionally, the lived experiences of participants may render participants vulnerable and less likely to act autonomously; the researcher must pledge not to exploit but be sensitive to these vulnerabilities (Cook, 1995). As mentioned above, all participants within this study were informed of any potential risks of engaging in this research, including social risks and the potential for emotional pain. Participants were also given the opportunity to exercise their free choice by voluntarily consenting to or declining to be involved in the study prior to agreeing to meet with the researcher by reading the letter of invitation (see appendix A) which also outlined the potential risks of participating in this research.

### *Participant Confidentiality*

In following the guidelines established by Brock University's REB, it is the researcher's sole responsibility to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity of participants are upheld (McHaffie, 2000). Where possible, confidentiality and anonymity should always be held as vital components of data collection (Polit & Hungler, 1999). To comply with these requirements, the data collected was treated so no traceable source can identify the identity of the participants and who they spoke about. In order to prevent a breach of confidentiality within this research study, I did not ask participants for their names. I assigned a pseudonym to each research participant, which was used when analyzing the data. Similarly, the interviews took place at local public libraries in private spaces or offices to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Data collected during

this study was stored within an encrypted computer file. Any hand-written notes taken during the interview were typed out, printed and then placed in a secure file cabinet. Once typed out, the notes were shredded to mitigate any risks of a breach of confidentiality. Audio recordings, along with other data, will be kept for six months after the study is completed, at which time it will be disposed of in a secure way. Participants were also reminded before interviews to maintain the confidentiality of clients, peers and colleagues when re-living and sharing their experiences during the interview process.

### *Information Storage*

The REB also required that participant information be securely stored from any potential third party access. For the purpose of this study, the verbatim transcripts were electronically stored on my personal computer in a password-protected folder. Dr. Danny Rosenberg, my thesis supervisor, and I were the only ones who had access to this folder. All names on the transcripts are pseudonyms I created to protect the identity and ensure the confidentiality of the participants. The qualitative questionnaires were stored and locked in Dr. Rosenberg's faculty office at Brock University. All criteria of the REB were met prior to and during the study to protect the welfare of participants and the researcher. The following chapter explores the existing literature on the subject of this thesis and supplements the rationale for conducting this research.

## Chapter Three

### Review of Literature

#### *Introduction*

Children love to play, whether informally with peers in the community or formally in adult organized youth sports program (Weber, 2009). Children play a vital role in the success of sport today as participants and spectators (David, 2005). In North America, 20 million children and adolescents participate in organized sports programs each year (Weber, 2009). Youth sport is defined by Torres (2015) as a sport practiced by a child or adolescent, but officiated and taught by adults. Additionally, organized youth sport is an extracurricular program that occurs outside of the school environment or physical education classes, and often involves travelling teams and competition (Torres, 2015). Through participating in organized sport, it is believed that children and adolescents develop essential life skills that include cooperation, stress management, unselfishness, perseverance, appropriate risk-taking, motivation to strive for success and the ability to cope with frustration (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006). David (2005) also notes that generally, participation in organized sport proves to be highly beneficial to advancement the physical and mental development of children. Participation in organized sports aids this process by improving coordination, increasing awareness of a child's body, improving social interaction skills, respecting and abiding by a set of rules and facilitating the act of taking responsibility (David, 2005).

The benefits of competitive sport for children have led to an increase in the number of young athletes who dedicate year-long training in one sport in the hope of competing at an elite level (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000). Unfortunately, this

development may come at a high price. The United Nations defines a child athlete as an individual who is under 18 years of age (Oliver, Lloyd & Meyers, 2011). Child athletes who specialize in one organized sport year round are denied the opportunity to partake in a wider variety of sports and non-sport activities, while facing physical, physiological and psychological harm and challenges from intense training regimes and competition schedules (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000). Regardless of the benefits of recreational and competitive sport contributing to the physical, mental and social development of children, several international bodies acknowledge that the rights of children may be violated when involved in intense training and competition at a young age (Weber, 2009).

#### *Elite versus Non-Elite Sport*

Sport can be described and structured in several ways. In academia, differentiating between elite and non-elite sport is useful conceptually, yet concrete characterizations of these terms are far from clear (Lorenz, Reiman & Lehecka, 2013). For the purpose of pursuing research within the sport context, sport is defined as an embedded aspect of culture due to its “intrinsic values in relation to joy, mastery, and achievement, along with engagement and enthusiasm (Skille & Osteras, 2011, p. 191). Additionally, Skille and Osteras (2011) maintain that sport contains instrumental values such that sport is viewed as a means to an end activity, whether the end be socialization, social integration or health. Sport is often utilized in a preventive context and can serve as an intervention to address public health issues such as obesity, crime and social inclusion (Stafford, Alexander & Fry, 2013). While participation in sport at a non-elite level is correlated with the healthy development of children and adolescents, elite sport entails health risks

for pre-adolescent athletes including injury, burnout and poor eating habits (Schubring & Thiel, 2014; Shanmugam, Jowett, & Meyer, 2013).

In contrast to the above descriptions, Lundqvist and Sandin (2014) refer to elite sport in relation to an increased number of psychological challenges to athletes, including internal and external pressures, stressors stemming from transition phases of organizational standards and setbacks caused by injury or performance plateau. To clarify further, Schubring and Thiel (2014) differentiate elite from non-elite sport by noting the context of elite sport means athletes are in an environment that focusses on achieving peak athletic performance. While participating in sport may have benefits for the healthy development of children, elite sport may not always be a safe place for children and adolescents (UNICEF, 2010). In the modern world of elite sport, motivated athletes are taught to feel pain over feeling pleasure (Reinboth, Duda & Ntoumanis, 2004). As the requirements for elite sport have increased over the years, so too have the demands placed on child and adolescent athletes (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

### *Elite Athletes*

Since the 1970s child involvement in elite sport has gained popularity. When 14 year-old gymnast Nadia Comaneci achieved a perfect score and gold medal at the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympic Games participation in artistic gymnastics soared (Schubring & Thiel, 2014). Since this monumental event, elite gymnastics changed drastically (David, 2005). Child athletes played an integral role in the transition to the professionalization and commercialization of high performance sport (Schubring & Thiel, 2014). Amateur sport became a thing of the past and scientific, high achievement sport became the model for organized sport at all levels (David, 2005). Winning no longer

represented only an athlete's hard work, dedication and countless hours of training, but it had commercial, financial and personal prestige rewards. If gymnastics coaches noticed children exhibited natural talent, they recruited, trained and molded them to become the next Nadia Comaneci (David, 2005). Unfortunately, young children who participated in elite sport were often the victims of this revolution, and coaches were no longer questioned regarding "how sport could benefit the child, but rather how children could benefit the sport" (David, 2005, p. 63).

For the purpose of this study, an elite athlete is defined as an individual who trains or competes at the provincial, national or international level in their designated sport (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Furthermore, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has defined an elite child athlete as "an individual who possesses superior athletic talent, undergoes specialized training, receives expert coaching, and is exposed to early competition" (Oliver et al., 2011, p. 73). In keeping up with the evolution of modern day elite sport, more demands are continuously placed upon elite athletes (Gervis & Dunn, 2004) and growing up in an elite sport poses enormous challenges for pre-adolescents (Schubring & Thiel, 2014). Young elite child athletes are primarily between the ages of 8 and 16 and train upwards of 30 hours per week in their given sport (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Ludqvist and Sandin (2014) state that young elite athletes commit a significant amount of their time into physical training and give up other activities in order to achieve exceptional performance. Additionally, child athletes endure mental and social stresses when involved in serious competitive sport (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

There is a wealth of existing literature that demonstrates that elite child athletes take, and are expected to take, very serious risks with their health (Murphy &

Waddington, 2007). The quest to become an elite athlete blinds pre-adolescents to the point where they subject themselves to numerous medical issues and injuries in the pursuit of becoming the next Olympic champion (Schubring & Thiel, 2014). Lavallee, Gordon and Grove (1997) found that the exceptionally high demands of elite sport can limit athletes from participating in activities that influence developmental tasks needed later in life, including those needed to establish a healthy self-identity. Young elite athletes have very little time to participate in self-exploration, and therefore, often do not develop the necessary skills to make appropriate decisions and life choices (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). This proves to be problematic as young athletes develop dependency traits, struggle with decision making, and make poor career choices (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). In order to become “real athletes,” pre-adolescents need to have an athletic disposition reinforced by a “mechanical perception of the body, ascetic denial, high pain tolerance, and a readiness to make sacrifices, challenge limits and take risks” (Schubring & Thiel, 2014, p. 319). These characteristics outlined by Schubring and Thiel (2014) closely mirror the findings that Ryan (1995) uncovered regarding the demands, struggles and abuse elite female gymnasts endure in her book, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*.

#### *A Characterization of Elite Female Artistic Gymnastics*

According to David (2005), elite artistic gymnastics transformed from being a graceful aesthetic sport to an extremely technical and highly demanding sport over the last few decades. Weber (2009) further states that of the 20 million children enrolled in sports each year, 2 million partake in various levels and styles of gymnastics with artistic gymnastics being the most common. Elite gymnastics often entails pre-adolescent

females dedicate countless hours to enhance their sport performance, in addition to keeping up in school work, attending classes and taking additional correspondence courses (Krane, Greenleaf & Snow, 1997). Success in modern elite gymnastics is often only achieved through endless repetition of gymnastics skills and routines, strict adherence to the authority of coaches and countless hours of practice, often while training and competing through injuries and pain (Barker-Ruchti, 2008; Krane et al., 1997). From the moment children are identified as talented gymnasts, they are lured to accept a sport ethic that encourages them to consistently strive for perfection and adopt a win at all costs attitude regardless of the consequences (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Krane et al., 1997).

Krane and colleagues (1997) clarify that the win at all costs mentality overshadows more important concerns including that athletes have fun, develop appropriate social interaction skills with peers and adults, and have healthy family relationships. Some top pre-adolescent female gymnasts must maintain a particular body shape and optimal weight to achieve high performance levels. These demands can negatively influence their sense of self contrary to a well-rounded pre-adolescent female (Tan, Bloodworth & McNamee, 2014). Through the media, we are consistently reminded of athletes like Nadia Comaneci and Mary Lou Retton, but there are thousands of other elite child gymnasts who suffer and sacrifice just as much without Olympic success (David, 2005). The emphasis that the sporting industry places on winning and striving for perfection makes anything less than perfect intolerable and demeaning for athletes (Krane et al., 1997). Therefore, when coaches promote winning as the only thing, among other exclusive goals, experiences of abuse are not rare in elite gymnastics. Weber (2009) adds that most elite athletes do not make it, very few go on to achieve an “elite status,” and an

extremely small percentage of elite gymnasts make enough from their sporting activities to support themselves in the future. For every young girl that succeeds in elite gymnastics at the national or international level, the vast majority do not (Ryan, 1995).

Artistic gymnastics has always been thought of as a female dominated sport (Eagleman, Rodenberg & Lee, 2014). It is recognized by its incorporation of four different apparatuses or events whereby gymnasts are required to perform 30-90 second routines on each apparatus. Artistic gymnastics has had its fair share of criticism in recent years. The sport was harshly criticized in the latter part of the 20th century due to a consistent decrease in age of participation and the frailty of athletes' figures (Eagleman et al., 2014). To be competitive as an elite gymnast, the Olympic selection process often begins before a child athlete has finished elementary school, with Olympic training camps available to children as young as age five (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000). According to David (2005), the average age of the top three European gymnasts in 1965 was 25-years-old, 20 in 1969, 18 in 1973, and the number fell to 14 years old in 1976. Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) note that due to the nature of elite gymnastics, young girls must "maximize their career into the years before they hit puberty" (p. 127). This means that child athletes striving to be elite gymnasts around the world usually enroll in recreational gymnastic programs at three, competitive programs by the age of five and are introduced to serious, intensive training programs by the age of ten (David, 2005; Tofler, Stryer, Micheli & Herman, 1996). Additionally, these intensive training programs employ training regiments that are often excessive even for adults, yet pre-adolescent children are exposed to such intense training and competition (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2000).

At its best, elite artistic gymnastics provides thousands of children an opportunity to develop physical and important life skills that include increasing their self-esteem and discipline and assisting with shaping them into well-adjusted adults in their later years (Sterling & Kerr, 2007). Research has demonstrated that at its worse, elite gymnastics can result in life threatening physical and psychological harm, eating disorders and permanent illness (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014; Ryan, 1995; Tofler et al., 1996). Pre-adolescent elite female gymnasts are required to train four to six hours a day at the age of five (David, 2005). Gymnastics serves as the main priority in the lives of these girls such that school, homework and social activities with family and friends take a back seat. One researcher describes this situation as “a childhood of sacrifices to meet the demands of parents, trainers and federations to become a respected champion.” (David, 2005, p. 212). In addition, in the constant pursuit of success, gymnasts are under constant pressure to train longer at an earlier age (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2000).

In 2007, Lavalley and Robinson (2007) conducted a qualitative study to examine retirement from artistic women’s gymnastics in which participants were interviewed about their experiences. When a participant was questioned about her involvement in elite gymnastics, she responded, “If you start gymnastics when you’re five, what are you? You’re a gymnast. This is how gymnasts walk. This is how gymnasts stand. This is how gymnasts behave, and even though you really do want to be one, it’s also getting indoctrinated in you all the time (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007, p. 130). Olga Korbut, a Belarusian gymnast, earned a gold medal in artistic gymnastics at the 1972 and 1976 Olympic games competing for the Soviet Union team (Murphy & Waddington, 2007). In a study conducted by Murphy and Waddington (2007), Olga Korbut wrote “my strongest

memories of being a child in elite gymnastics are fatigue, pain, and the empty feeling of being a fly whose blood has been sucked out by a predatory spider” (p. 242).

The pressure elite gymnasts feel does not only stem from within themselves, but have been also linked to the impact of coaching behaviour toward athletes (David, 2005). The demands placed on athletes by their coaches is often too much for children to handle (David, 2005). The world of gymnastics was critically exposed in 1995 when Joan Ryan published her book entitled *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*. This lengthy, in-depth and less than praiseworthy account of gymnastics and figure skating focused in part on the grueling training programs and devastating treatment elite female gymnasts faced growing up in the sport, especially in eastern-bloc countries (Ryan, 1995). *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes* not only focused on the shabby treatment of young elite female gymnasts but turned its eye on those who influenced them most, the coaches.

#### *The Role of the Coach*

Research suggests that regardless of the sport, coaches play a crucial role in the development of pre-adolescent athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Perhaps in the simplest terms, the role of the coach is to teach sport specific skills needed for progression in any given sport (Gearity, 2012). Gearity and Murray (2011) add that the role of an effective coach spans beyond teaching sport specific skills and includes increasing the self-efficacy and self-esteem of athletes, motivating players to achieve communal goals and decreasing anxiety and undue stress. These researchers further state that coaches should be knowledgeable of skills and tactics involved in their sport, individualize each coach-athlete relationship and plan effectively before practices and competitions. Coaches should also understand the institution of sport, its worthy traditions and values, and make

sport a fulfilling and pleasurable pursuit for athletes (Gearity (2012; Oliver et al., 2011). Simon (2013) relates the role of a coach to that of a moral educator, someone who is responsible for teaching character, respect and other vital life skills. If coaches cannot adhere to that level of responsibility, perhaps they should not be involved in coaching sports.

Coaches embody extreme forms of power that should never be underestimated (Stirling and Kerr, 2009, 2012). Brackenridge and Kirby (1997) compare the power of a coach to that of a priest; an authority figure whose words and deeds should rarely be doubted or challenged. A study conducted by Krane and colleagues (1997) questioned athletes about the authority of coaches and one athlete responded, “what he (the coach) says is gospel. I mean, he was just - he was a God like figure to me. He had that kind of power” (p. 59). Coaches may have power over elite child athletes due to their age, gender, access to various resources, their ability to reward and punish the athletes and based on their past success stories (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Generally, child athletes are in complete awe of their coaches due to the superiority they possess in relation to athletes. Coaches also assert their power over young athletes outside of sport in social settings like the home, on buses, in hotels and restaurants, at fund-raising events and banquets (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). What is unfortunate however, is that most coaches have minimal knowledge and experience of proper childhood development, yet young elite gymnasts spend a large portion of their adolescence training under the care and influence of coaches (Tofler et al., 1996). Given this lack of awareness on behalf of coaches, unrealistic and inappropriate demands are being placed on young, elite gymnasts (Tofler et al., 1996). While much research has explored the positive effects coaches can have on

the well-being of athletes, including developing autonomy and competence, recent findings in the literature suggest that there are several hazardous risks of young athletes exposed to in relation to their coaches in elite gymnastics (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

### *Coach-Athlete Relationships*

The coach-athlete relationship is one of the most influential associations that exist in the pre-adolescent years of a child's sporting career, and is deemed by many researchers as a critical area of inquiry (Stirling & Kerr, 2009, 2012; Tofler et al., 1996). Jones (2005) classifies the coach-athlete relationship as consisting of power struggles, conflict and a lack of support towards the athlete. In contrast, Lavallee and Robinson (2007) argue that the coach-athlete relationship within elite gymnastics is rooted in an extreme power imbalance. Several researchers agree that a high quality coach-gymnast relationship is critical to achieving excellence within the sport (Collins, Lauer, Chung & Gould, 2007; Davis & Jowett, 2014). Recently, Stirling and Kerr (2013) argued that coaches and child athletes are engaged in critical or caregiving relationships. Coaches assume the role of caregiver because they are entrusted with the health and safety of athletes in a paternalistic way. They have significant influence over athlete trust, a sense of safety, physical and emotional states, and the overall fulfillment of the athlete's needs (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Yet despite this parental sentiment, elite gymnastics contains potentially dangerous and risky maneuvers and routines that can lead to serious, even life-threatening injury (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). The coach-athlete relationship therefore has to maintain a delicate balance between risk and trust.

Coaches must be able to attain and maintain high levels of trust when athletes are introduced to and execute new skills and routines. Such development must always occur

under safest and most effective conditions. Despite the caregiver relationship that should exist between coaches and athletes, Lavalley and Robinson (2007) argue that a lack of trust can exist within this dynamic because some coaches view gymnasts as objects to achieve their own personal goals. Coaches are also known to undermine and abuse the athlete trust by shouting profanities at athletes, humiliating them and ignoring them when they make a mistake (Kerr & Dacyshyns, 2000).

The literature suggests that the behaviour and interpersonal skills of coaches often have a direct impact on the psychological, emotional and physical welfare of athletes in positive and negative ways (Reinbooth et al., 2004). Other literature has shown that young elite female athletes have drastically different relationships with their coaches when compared to young male elite athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). This may be due to the coach-female athlete relationship being more personal, emotionally expressive and confidential (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Female athletes are also characterized as having a greater reliance on intimate relationships to develop their own self-identities, making them more vulnerable at the hands of coaches (Rice, 2001). As stated by Tofler and colleagues (1996), female elite gymnasts are overwhelmingly in awe of their coaches and will often do almost anything asked of them by their coaches and to win their approval. Due to the power imbalance and authoritarian role of coaches, the literature in gymnastics has demonstrated that young elite athletes are not immune from experiencing various types of coaching abuse, including physical, sexual and psychological abuse (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Tofler et al., 1996).

The factors described above are mostly dependent on the coaching style of coaches and how this style translates to interaction with athletes. Irina Viner, a Russian

gymnastics coach was quoted by Jones (2005) saying, “My relationship with the young girls is like a master slave until 14, then it looks like general-soldiers until 16-years-old, and then after that we enter into a partnership” (p. 380). Unfortunately, this is the typical portrayal of the majority of coaches in elite gymnastics who employ an autocratic coaching style like that of Irina Viner. It is not uncommon for such coaches to monitor and tease gymnasts by referring to their weight and eating habits (Jones, 2005). Lavalley and Robinson (2007) found that autocratic coaches acted as if they owned the gymnasts and were only interested in their successes rather than the well-being of athletes.

Since the publication of Ryan’s (1995) expose on elite gymnastics and figure skating, there has been extensive media coverage on what lies behind the smiles and glory of elite gymnasts. In their study, Krane and colleagues (1997) found disturbing accounts of eating disorders, intensive training regiments that led to severe injury or death, coaching abuses and exploitation of young, female elite gymnasts. Additionally, gymnasts not only feared their coaches in training, but also in competition. While many elite gymnasts experience extreme disappointment when they fail to make the Olympic team, this disappointment is compounded because exploitation, punishment and abuse at the hands of coaches were also part of their development as elite athletes. Some coaches in elite gymnastics will do whatever it takes for young prodigies to attain gold medal success at the Olympic Games, regardless of the short term and long term effects it has on their physical and emotional well-being (Krane et al., 1997). Coaches have been known to misuse their power and authority and place young athletes at risk within a sheltered and often closed environment, especially in training sessions. (Weber, 2009). It is no surprise therefore that research has shown that elite gymnasts have and do suffer

physical, emotional and sexual abuse within the coach-gymnast relationship (Stirling & Kerr, 2007).

### *Types of Abuse in Elite Female Artistic Gymnastics*

#### *Overview of Abuse*

Over the last decade, there has been a growing concern over the occurrence of child abuse and exploitive coach-athlete relationships in sport (Waddington & Murphy, 2007). Occurrences of abuse are not rare in elite gymnastics, and have been perceived as part of the sport. Until recently, most of the abuse literature in gymnastics has focused on sexual abuse and harassment within the context of elite gymnastics (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Since training regimes have intensified over the last few decades, awareness of physical and emotional health concerns have gained greater attention (Pinheiro, Pimenta, Resende & Malcolm, 2014). Therefore, it is possible that children who partake in elite gymnastics training programs may experience various forms of child abuse (Pinheiro et al., 2014). For the purpose of this study, child abuse is defined as:

all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power (World Health Organization, 2010).

The threshold level for child abuse is reached when a relationship between a child and an adult, such as a gymnast and a coach, is regarded as unacceptable and has not undergone some form of intervention (Glaser & Prior, 1997). The literature suggests that athletes in different sports experience abuse (Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997; David, 2005;

Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Ryan, 1995; Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2009; Stirling, 2013; Tofler et al., 1997). Accordingly, a correlation between child abuse in elite athletes and their coaches can be said to exist when children train intensely and spend more time with their coaches than they do with their parents, siblings or friends (David, 2005; Weber, 2009). This situation strengthens the bond between coaches and the athletes, sometimes to the point where athletes are dependent and vulnerable to the whims and dictates of coaches. When this happens, coaching abuse may include forced dieting, extreme diets, autocratic coaching, corporal punishment, abuses such as emotional, psychological, physical, sexual and verbal ones, and being forced to train and compete while injured (David, 2005; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2009; Stirling, 2013; Waddington, 2000). Coaches engage in the aforementioned forms of abuse to assert their power over gymnasts, vent their frustrations, set an example to warn other gymnasts, motivate athletes to perform better, demand obedience, manipulate gymnasts and instill fear. Some believe these techniques are legitimate because they achieve superior performative results. Others maintain such behaviour is unethical, deplorable and criminal in some cases because it exploits vulnerable young female gymnasts. The normalization of coaching abuse also makes ethical coaching practices and reforms difficult to conceive and implement.

A female participant in a study conducted by Gearity and Murray (2011) spoke about coaching abuse by saying “I just adapted to it. I still think that’s a bad thing, but like I said, being here five years I’ve just learnt how to adjust and adapt to it. I take the good and the bad. It still happens, but I just learned how to deal with it now” (p. 217). Stirling and Kerr (2009) found that in a survey of 210 female student athletes who were

questioned about their experiences of abuse and exploitation in sport, 18% reported receiving sexist or negative remarks from coaches, while 2% reporting physical, sexual or verbal advances by a coach (Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Stirling, 2013). Research has shown that athletes who are obedient to the commands of coaches tolerate greater pain, continue to train and compete while injured, accept and deal with various forms of abuse, and participate in restrictive diets. This subservience is carried out to avoid harmful sanctions from the coach and prove their commitment to the sport (Stafford et al., 2013).

Child abuse literature has demonstrated that experiencing sexual, physical or emotional abuse can result in long term, harmful effects on the individual's cognitive, physical, behavioral and psychological development (Pinheiro et al., 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Additionally, upon retirement from sport, many former child athletes are left with long term issues such as low self-confidence and self-efficacy (Pinheiro et al., 2014). Literature pertaining specifically to physical, emotional/psychological and sexual abuse will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

#### *A. Physical Abuse*

Sport researchers have noticed a lack of literature on physical abuse in sport, which also indicates little has been written about abuse experiences young athletes in various sports (David, 2005). For the purpose of this study, physical abuse is defined as “the deliberate physical injuring of a person, or the willful or neglectful failure to prevent injuries (Weber, 2009, p. 60). Additionally, David (2005) notes four types of physical abuse that young athletes may be at risk of experiencing during their elite careers:

1. excessive intensive training
2. violence due to participating in competitions

3. peer violence
4. physical violence or exploitation by a coach

Weber (2009) states that physical abuse by coaches is not a rare occurrence, and puts elite young athletes in greater potential danger to suffer harm. Up until the mid-2000s, most research conducted on physical abuse targeted elite adult athletes rather than the experiences of physical abuse in young elite athletes (David, 2005). Emerging research conducted by Stafford and colleagues (2013) suggests that elite child athletes are not immune from suffering physical abuse within elite gymnastics, and can be afflicted with serious physical, physiological, psychological harm (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000; David, 2005). Within the context of elite gymnastics, very few studies have been conducted that examine physical coaching abuse toward athletes, but instead focus on sexual abuse (Murphy & Waddington, 2007). Many studies have found that experiencing pain and injury, accepting physical abuse from coaches, physically abusive peers and being aggressive towards each other are part of all components in an emerging sporting culture (Stafford et al., 2013). These practices gradually come to be accepted by athletes and are embedded into the practices of elite sport (Coakley, 2007).

Anecdotal accounts by athletes regarding physical abuse include being hit, slapped, beaten or kicked by their coaches (David, 2005). Stafford and colleagues (2013) also discovered that 24% of all elite child athletes experienced one type of physical abuse and 55% had experienced at least one instance of physical aggression by their coach. One of the participants in this study was quoted as saying, “if you were injured, you weren’t allowed to stop. The coaches would guilt you into continuing” (Stafford et al., 2013, p. 290). The necessary commitment to the sport and intensive training regimes created by

coaches have led researchers to question the safety of elite athletes, and whether or not it is safe for young athletes to participate in elite sport (American Association of Pediatrics, 2000).

### *B. Emotional Abuse*

It has been argued that emotional abuse is a critical element at the root of any type of childhood trauma (Kent, Waller & Dagnan, 1999). Examining emotional abuse within the sporting context is a particularly new area of research relative to other forms of abuse, particularly sexual abuse (Kent et al., 1999; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Emerging studies are finding that emotional abuse within coach-athlete relationships does exist, and perhaps is the most dominant type of abuse in sport (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling, 2013; Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2009). For the purpose of this study, emotional abuse is described as intentional, non-physical behaviours occurring within a critical relationship between an individual and a caregiver who has the authority to put the athlete at risk of harm (Stirling & Kerr, 2007).

As mentioned earlier, a critical or caregiver relationship is one where an authoritative figure, usually an adult, is entrusted with the safety and well-being of a child (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). When abuse occurs within a critical relationship, Stirling and Kerr (2009) note that it is considered relational abuse between the coach and the athlete. Emotional abuse therefore does not refer to a series of specific occurrences, but rather to the ebb and flow of a relationship (Glaser & Prior, 1997). In the sport context, Stirling and Kerr (2007) define emotional abuse as “a pattern of non-physical behaviours directed at an athlete by any person acting in *locus parentis*, or in a critical relationship role, that results

or may result in emotional harm” (p. 92). Stirling and Kerr (2009) note that in order for a coach-athlete relationship to be considered abusive, all the following criteria must be met:

1. Behaviours within the coach-athlete relationship have the risk to be harmful to the athlete’s emotional and psychological well-being (including belittling, humiliating, threatening, screaming, derogatory comments)
2. The above behaviours occur on numerous occasions over a given length of time
3. The above behaviours occur within a critical relationship, such as the coach-athlete relationship
4. The relationship is not limited to age, and must be similar to the parent-child relationship
5. The behaviours are intentional
6. No physical contact behaviours are present

Within the coach athlete relationship, emotional abuse has been noted as a “threat to the psychological well-being of the elite child athletes” (Gervis & Dunn, 2004, p. 215). In addition to the above criteria, Gervis and Dunn (2014) state that the most prominent forms of emotional abuse present in the coach-athlete relationship in elite sport include belittlement, threats and humiliation. By comparison, Sterling and Kerr (2007) note that emotional behaviours emerge in three ways: through verbal behaviours, physical behaviours and coaches denying athletes attention and support. Murray and Gearity (2011) found that coaches often lied, degraded, insulted and were consistently negative towards their athletes. The same study reported coaches uttering slurs such as “you’re so horrible,” “you suck,” “you’re not doing it right, get out,” or “we want someone else” to their athletes (p. 251). Stirling and Kerr (2007) uncovered similar findings with athletes

reporting coaching abuse in the form of yelling, throwing objects in a rage, silent treatments and creating distress (p. 95). Emotional abuse tends to become more pronounced over the course of the elite athlete's career which essentially means it worsens over time (Sitrling & Kerr, 2007).

Within the context of emotional abuse in elite sport, eating disorders and psychopathy often emerge because of a coach's comment or pressure to adopt a certain image (Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Iwaniec, 2003). For many elite athletes monitoring their weight is a vital component of their sport performance, especially in aesthetic sports like artistic gymnastics (Krane et al., 1997). Evidence of disordered eating within elite gymnastics is not a newly discovered phenomenon (Iwaniec, 2003; Krane et al., 1997). In some female-dominated sports, especially elite gymnastics, a fixation on the athlete's body is often excessive and overwhelming and can lead to anorexia or bulimia (Weber, 2009). Eating disorders in sport are associated with emotional or psychological trauma experienced due to the pressures, demands or requests made from various sources (Fairburn & Brownell, 2002).

Additionally, Krane and colleagues (1997) note that coaches in aesthetic sports like gymnastics often create an environment where a particular body image serves as the standard for all participants of the sport. A participant from the above study was quoted as saying, "the girls were supposed to be very thin and petite, and my food intake was scrutinized by my coaches" (p. 60). Another participant stated, "we had a diary, and if we ate something that he (the coach) did not approve of, he would tell our parents. He would make us feel so ashamed in front of everybody. He used public humiliation, and it worked" (Krane et al., 1997, p. 60). Weber (2009) estimates that in elite gymnastics,

diving and figure skating, 35% of all participants have eating disorders. As mentioned earlier, emotional abuse can continue to have a detrimental effect on elite athletes after retirement. More research is needed to fully understand emotional abuse among elite athletes and especially as it relates to coach-athlete relationships (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

### *C. Sexual Abuse*

Similar to physical abuse, sexual abuse is not an infrequent occurrence within sport and puts athletes in a position of severe danger (Weber, 2009). In the early 2000s, several cases of child sexual abuse in sport came to light and caught the attention of the media (Burke, 2001). Parent and Demers (2011) note that sexual abuse in sport is classified as extrafamilial sexual abuse and is responsible for most sexual abuse occurring in children and adolescents. Within this extrafamilial relationship, the abuser is often a familiar non-family person who holds a superior or authoritative position relative children or adolescents (Parent & Deemers, 2011). In sport, coaches are often this figure who oversees and is in charge of the welfare of vulnerable and impressionable young athletes (Parent & Deemers, 2011). Athletes are taught from a young age to listen and look up to coaches whose word and control should never be doubted or questioned (Burke, 2001; Waddington, 2000).

As mentioned earlier, coaches often spend more time with athletes than parents do because of the intensive training programs and long hours needed to excel (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). The actions of coaches are rarely held to account by parents because of the repercussions to their children that may arise. The control and authority coaches wield in a relatively secluded environment especially in practice sessions create a climate for acts of sexual abuse to go unnoticed or kept quiet (Parent & Deemer, 2011). Burke (2001)

also provides rationale for why coaches may sexually abuse young athletes. First, coaches enjoy various forms of power, including “reward power, traditional power, charismatic power, expert power, coercive power, and power related to his or her sex, age, and race” (p. 292). Coaches prey on the fact that their goals coincide with the goals of athletes to build up trust and a dependency relationship (Burke, 2001). Second, elite coaches often view their athletes as their own personal possessions (Burke, 2001). Coaches may place numerous restrictions on athletes normally reserved by their parents (Burke, 2001). In elite sport, accepted behaviours like blind loyalty and obedience are part of the sport ethic, and therefore athletes, parents and sporting officials openly accept these restrictions with few, if any, questions (Burke, 2001). A study conducted by Kirby and Greeves (1996) examined the occurrence of sexual abuse in retired Olympic gymnasts. It was found that 21.8% of all participants had experienced sexual abuse from a figure of authority within their sport (Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997). While sexual abuse within the coach-athlete relationship has been shown to be present, little research has investigated the experiences of elite gymnasts in relation to sexual abuse.

#### *Two Moral Frameworks for Appraising Abuse in Sport*

Organized youth sports in North America are haunted by numerous ethical problems like cheating, fraud, violence and coaching abuse, most of which are manifested at the elite level of sport (Torres & Hager, 2013). In this study, two moral frameworks will be described and utilized to assess the issue of coaching abuse in elite female artistic gymnastics. The first approach emphasizes that sport is a social practice so constituted such that presumptive normative values can be shown to exist in sport. These presumptive normative values refer to particular standards that should be maintained and

promoted in competitive sport. Thus, sport is at its best, ethically speaking, occurs when such values are accepted and shared by all participants in the sport community. For example, respect for rules, pursuing excellence and trying one's best to win are or should be mutually held values expressed by all stakeholders invested in competitive sport. Without adherence to some or all of these values, the possibility of competitive sport is unlikely. When sport is organized to encourage and promote such values, it serves an educational purpose whereby youth learn how to ethically compete against one another, such that cooperative practices and friendship may flourish and competitive animosity is reduced or avoided (Torres & Hager, 2013). This moral framework will be further discussed in chapter five.

The acceptance of a presumptive normative (moral) framework to assess coaching abuse in elite female artistic gymnastics contains two additional benefits, besides the identification of core values, specifically pertinent to this study. First, the values intrinsic to and embedded in sport at its best, like the ones mentioned above, can act as yardsticks to measure the ethical veracity or accuracy of sport as a social practice. For example, if the rules of sport are not respected and are circumvented or bent, there is room to interpret the rules within particular contexts to evaluate what is in the best interest of participants and sport itself. The interpretive feature of the presumptive normative (moral) framework being proposed here is consistent with the qualitative research design of this study which is also an interpretive one. This means that one can identify the purpose of competitive sport, such as elite female artistic gymnastics, which is not necessarily to defeat one's opponent, but to compare athletic performance as a mutual quest for excellence through challenge (Torres & Hager, 2013). This mutualist approach

suggests that athletes need to recognize the value of their opponents as moral equals who are also trying to achieve and affirm common normative values. Therefore, sport at its best possesses normative values and when shared within a mutualist-interpretive ideology can be adopted by coaches, athletes and others in the sport community

A second benefit of the presumptive normative (moral) framework is its resistance to a tendency known as runaway individualism that is often found in athletes and coaches. Runaway individualism is defined as an extreme form of individualism in which a person's interests, rights and needs dominate and often disregard the concerns of others and other social duties. As mentioned earlier, coaches often use their gymnasts for their own personal gain and success, which is an example of runaway individualism. Since the moral framework described above identifies mutually shared core values and stresses the significance that all sport participants are moral equals, such an approach mitigates against runaway individualism. It does so by emphasizing that the interests or needs of a single individual cannot be arbitrarily privileged and that the good of all concerned stakeholders and the practice of sport must be considered when ethical issues arise (Torres & Hager, 2013). This counterweight to runaway individualism has particular relevance because this study examines an individual aesthetic sport where egoism is often a contentious ethical concern amongst coaches and athletes.

The second moral framework to be described and employed in this study refers to the conception of the coach-athlete relationship as discussed by Bergmann Drewe (2003). She argues that there is a difference between coaches and athletes in terms of viewing what constitutes an ethical issue and what does not. For example, in gymnastics, taking a performance enhancer may not be an ethical issue for the coach, but the gymnast may

perceive such a practice as unethical. This example demonstrates in part differences of autonomy between the coach and athlete, and the type and amount of power each possesses within the coach-athlete relationship. Moreover, the concept of autonomy, which generally means to act, choose and exercise one's will independently and free of coercion, is also associated with gender differences between coaches and athletes. Clearly, issues of autonomy and power are relevant ethical dimensions of the coach-athlete relationship.

In addition to the latter point, Bergman Drewe (2003) also proposes that the ethics of a coach-athlete relationship can be conceived on a continuum between intimate relationships and those construed as merely for technical, utilitarian support and training. She borrows meanings from Aristotle's understanding of friendship and from the literature on the ethics of teacher-student relationships to formulate her conception of the best sort of coach-athlete association. She argues that the ideal coach-athlete relationship should be based on a utility friendship where the performance goals and aspirations of athletes are congruent with the expertise and knowledge of coaches. What should be avoided is a close or deep friendship between coaches and athletes while both are active sport participants (Bergman Drewe, 2003).

By utilizing the moral frameworks of Torres and Hager (2013) and Bergmann Drewe (2003), a holistic approach to sports and the coach-athlete relationship will be advanced. This means that the lives and personalities of coaches and athletes will not be viewed as compartmentalized or dualistic, and instead will be perceived as whole and complex. As such, there is a recognition and assumption that the interests, needs, aspirations and desires of people can vary in particular ways, while shared values and

goals also exist between people. The above two moral frameworks will inform the ethical appraisal of the findings of this study in chapter five, while acknowledging that all human beings and the ethical situations they find themselves in are complicated and messy.

## Chapter Four

### Findings and Discussion

#### *Introduction*

Throughout the data analysis process, twenty-six themes emerged, which have been grouped into five clusters that seek to answer the four research questions described in the first chapter. The five clusters are: (1) description of general involvement with coaches; (2) occurrences of abuse; (3) recognition and rationalization of abuse; (4) resolutions of abuse; and (5) coping mechanisms utilized by gymnasts.

The first cluster includes themes that address what gymnasts experienced with their coaches in their early, elite artistic gymnastics careers, and what it was like to experience the phenomenon of being an elite gymnast. The themes within this cluster seek to answer the first research question posed, what do female gymnasts report regarding their general involvement with coaches during their early elite artistic gymnastics career? Most gymnasts reported facing adversity with coaches early on in their elite gymnastics careers. Participants described that as their training and skill level increased in intensity, their relationships with their coaches were negatively impacted. Within this first cluster, six themes were identified and will be discussed below.

The second cluster seeks to address the question: given such experiences, what, if any, abuse experiences do young elite female artistic gymnasts recall in working with their coaches? More specifically, this cluster provides an introduction to the types of abuse the gymnasts recalled in working with their elite coaches, and why the gymnasts believed the abuse was occurring. All participants reported experiencing at least one of the three types of abuse included in this study, which are physical, sexual and emotional

abuse. The participants reported experiencing abuse at times when they were most vulnerable, such as when they were afraid to perform a skill or when dealing with an injury. The participants also recalled that coaching abuse was more likely to occur in the absence of their parents. Additionally, three core features of coaching abuse arose, which include power, vulnerability, and fear. These three core features will be evident underlying characteristics shared by the experiences of the gymnasts. In this second cluster, six themes emerged.

The third cluster includes themes related the participants' ability to recognize the occurrences of abuse in their elite gymnastics careers. Themes within this cluster continue to address the question: given such experiences, what, if any, abuse experiences do young elite female artistic gymnasts recall in working with their coaches? Many of the participants thought the coaching abuse they were experiencing was normal, or they rationalized the occurrence of abuse based on what other gymnasts were experiencing and saying in the gym like "it could've been worse, so it's not that bad." Gymnasts also rationalized coaching abuse by comparing it to the behaviours their parents exhibited towards them. The participants reported that they could now recognize that coaches abused them and that the abuse they received should not have been condoned. Within this cluster, five themes were discovered.

Themes within the fourth cluster emerged when answering the question: what were the resolutions of such coaching abuse, and who did young elite female gymnasts approach to seek help regarding these experiences? All gymnasts reported that most of the coaching abuse they experienced was left unresolved. Gymnasts rarely took the initiative to seek a resolution to problems with their coaches because they feared them.

Those participants who had a coach that talked to one-on-one to resolve a conflict recalled this method being extremely effective. Within this cluster, four themes were identified.

The fifth cluster includes themes that address the coping mechanisms gymnasts used to deal with any perceived coaching abuse during their elite career. Themes within this cluster attempt to answer the question: how did young elite female artistic gymnasts cope with any perceived or real coaching abuse experiences during their career? Given that all participants experienced at least one form of coaching abuse during their early gymnastics career, there were many different coping methods gymnasts employed. Regardless of the coping method each utilized, all participants reported using similar coping methods. The techniques they used during their careers as young, elite female artistic gymnasts carried over into their everyday lives after retiring from gymnastics. Within this cluster, four themes emerged.

This chapter therefore will explore each of the twenty-six themes within the five clusters, providing verbatim examples from the participants in the study. The explanation of each theme includes a textural description of what the participants experienced and a structural description of how it happened as explained by the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

#### Cluster One: General Gymnast Involvement with Coaches

##### *1.1 Gymnasts' paternalistic views of coaches*

Gymnasts in this study shared feelings of confusion and were upset from having to be separated from their parents for lengthy periods of time to participate in elite gymnastics. Given this situation, gymnasts reported that they saw their coaches in

paternalistic ways like their parents who looked out for their interests and knew what was best for them. As such, gymnasts felt similar obligations to their coaches as they did to their parents. For example, gymnasts felt it was their duty to trust, listen to and respect their coaches in the same way as their parents. Ava stated:

Michael was the head coach, so I looked up to him more as a – I guess as a father figure – because he was there for me all the time, and he'd pick me up and drop me off at school and stuff like that. He would take us for ice cream on hot days, and he would even buy it for us. I was always really close and comfortable with him. I just felt like he was my dad.

Similarly, Ashton recalled, "We spent a lot of time together. Helen was like my second mom. I would say our relationship was very mother-daughter oriented."

Participants noted that coaches even began to engage in activities outside the context of gymnastics. As Parker described, "The coaches would take us for pizza, or they'd take us for ice cream too. I looked up to her as my mom. She fulfilled all of the mandatory mom duties." The parental role coaches assumed extended to the point of protecting athletes from harm. Ava stated:

I was the youngest in my group, and I was competing with maybe six other athletes. One of the older girls was really nasty to me, and the other girls always followed what the nasty girl said. When my coach realized one of the girls was really nasty to me she put a stop to it immediately. She really helped me a lot. We were like a family.

Gymnasts explicitly described that this closeness resulted because of the long hours spent with their coaches, and the high level of trust and reliance on the coaches.

Parker explained:

Gymnastics is a dangerous sport per say, so you put a lot of trust into your coaches. When you're throwing flips on a four-inch surface, or on a bar 10 feet off the ground, you kind of have to trust the person beside you, spotting you. So I think the hours and the time spent together, you definitely bond with them.

When asked about the nature of the bond between her and her coaches, Parker responded, "It was interesting. I felt like I knew about them and they knew more about me than my own mom did." All participants noted that trust was the foundation of their relationships with their coaches. Madison described, "I was one of the taller girls in the group, and I needed someone strong. I trusted him [the coach] so much. I just needed him to be there for me. Even if I didn't need [him to] spot, I just needed him to stand there for me." Jessa recalled instances where her usual coach was absent, "I like consistency. I wanted to see my coach, not someone else. You get used to your coach, and trust them to protect you." As the above gymnasts reported, the amount of time spent with coaches and the high degree of trust between the coach and the athlete influenced the gymnast to view their coaches in a paternalistic manner.

### *1.2 Personality shifts between early elite coaches and peak elite coaches*

The gymnasts in this study spoke more kindly of their early elite coaches in comparison to their peak elite coaches, even when they were the same coaches. For the purpose of this study, early elite coaches refer to coaches who taught the fundamental skills of gymnastics like stretching, body and landing positions, tucks, rolls, jumps,

tumbling, handsprings, and who introduced basic equipment like low, padded balance beams and low bars. Peak elite coaches refer to coaches who are focused on high level competition and producing champions by demanding exceptional performance in training and competition, as well as refining more complicated maneuvers and routines.

Parker recalled, “my early elite coaches were great – we had so much fun! We just went for the heck of it, and the only authoritative position they had over us was to make sure we didn’t get hurt.” Similarly, Madison described her early elite coach as “really fun” and “always making you laugh and try new skills.” Jessa added, “My early elite coaches were really friendly and super casual – just focused on basic skill development and having fun.” Gymnasts noted their coaches had a laid back attitude due to the lack of pressure in their early elite careers. For example, in this period, most gymnasts reported that the main focus was on skill development and not on competition. Therefore, they explained that competitive results did not matter as much as the progress the gymnast made toward skill improvement. Hannah described her coach as extremely empathetic and supportive in her early years as she struggled with anxiety growing up. She also recalled, “as I got older, the coach I once thought I knew took a turn for the worse.”

The transition between a gymnast’s early elite career and peak elite career proved to be challenging for the participants in this study. Parker compared her early elite career to her peak elite career by explaining,

Earlier on in my elite career, my coach never threatened me or pushed me in the sense that ‘this is what you have to do, and if you don’t get a first place finish at this competition, it’s your butt when we get back to the gym.’ I went from having

someone I trusted in my early elite career to someone I feared in my peak elite career.

Most of the participants reported similar stories, explaining that their coaches transformed from caring and supportive individuals with whom they spent most their time, to individuals who put the gymnasts' well-being second to the success they were expected to achieve in competition. Ashton described this personality shift,

In my peak elite career, everything seemed more important. The coaches got tougher on you when you weren't doing skills properly, or you didn't have straight legs and pointed toes. It was more focused on perfection. It was more repetition, but most of all, it brought way more pressure and a lot of stress coming from coaches. They got meaner – but not in a good way. They no longer cared about what I wanted. Instead, they only thought about what would look best when I competed. It was so frustrating.

This personality shift between gymnasts' early elite coaches and peak elite coaches were shared by most of the gymnasts, with Jessa recalling that her coach was a “power tripper, aggressive and careless.” Similarly, Hannah described her coach as “disrespectful, hard headed and stubborn.” Most participants attributed this personality shift of their coaches to pressures stemming from competition, and the need to succeed. In contrast, Parker believed the personality shift was due to the coaches' gymnastics background and personal experiences. Parker recalled,

In my competitive career, I had different coaches who were obviously gymnasts as children. One of them was a world champion, so she – she really had her – she knew where we were coming from in a sense? She pushed us because she knew

what she had to go through, but I think it was definitely on a different level than what she was pushed at. I think her coaches were harder on her, and so she took that harshness and aggression out on us, even though none of us were on track to attend the Olympics. So I think the higher I got in levels, the more she changed for the worse.

Madison was the only participant who noted that she did not experience a personality shift with her coach between her early elite career and her peak elite career. She recalled, “even at the highest level I ever competed, he [the coach] was always on my side, and always had my best interest.”

Most gymnasts recalled experiencing a negative personality shift with their coaches as they progressed to their peak elite gymnastics careers. Most gymnasts attributed this personality shift to increased pressure to perform stemming from competition, or to the coaches’ prior life experiences as gymnasts themselves. One participant did not notice a personality shift between her early elite and peak elite gymnastics coach.

### *1.3 Coach/gymnast relationships outside the context of gymnastics*

Even though coaches are primarily involved with gymnasts in the context of their sport, there are often situations where coaches and gymnasts form relationships outside the sport. The participants in this study recalled two very different coach-athlete experiences with regard to whether or not gymnasts had relationships with their coaches outside of gymnastics. Gymnasts who rarely saw their coaches outside of the gym reported not having as close a relationship with their coaches. This contrasted with those gymnasts who shared time with their coaches beyond the gym. The gymnasts in the first

group perceived their coaches in a functional sense, as someone who assisted them primarily with gymnastics. Madison described such a relationship as follows,

It was all gymnastics based. We never hung out one on one with our coaches outside of the gym. I remember one time in my gymnastics career, we all went to the lake to get ice cream. That was the only time I saw my coach outside of gymnastics, and that was with an entire group of us. We never ever hung out one on one...that's just weird. He was just my coach and I only saw him when I needed to.

Similarly, Hannah shared that she and her coach “never had a relationship outside of the gym.” Such a relationship did not develop until she retired and became a coach herself. When describing their coaches, in both early and peak elite stages, neither Madison nor Hannah referred to their coaches as parental figures, or reported any paternal bonds between them.

By comparison, the remaining gymnasts did refer to their coaches as parental figures, or described their relationship as a “mother-daughter” one, often using the word “family” to describe their coaches. Parker recalled instances where she and her coach would go out for ice cream one on one, or they would spend time together going on weekend getaways alone during her early elite career. Parker explained,

My coach and I always hung out outside the gym. She [coach] would take us for lunch – we'd always go sit on the grass field together. They'd [coaches] even take us for ice cream. I also got to go to a waterpark for a weekend, which I think, was a little out of the ordinary, but fun nonetheless.

Jessa recalled similar instances of engaging in a relationship with her coach outside of gymnastics. She described this relationship as “something special” and noted that when she and her coach were engaging in an activity outside of gymnastics it “brought her closer to her coach.”

In contrast to Madison and Hannah who never saw their coaches outside of gymnastics, Parker and Jessa both shared paternal feelings toward their coaches and often used the word “family” to describe their coach-gymnast relationships.

The remaining two participants rarely saw their coaches outside beyond the gym. Ashton recalled seeing her coach “once or twice outside of the gym, but that was at gymnastics based functions,” and her relationship with her coach was “solely within the constraints of the gym.” Ava also recalled only seeing her coach outside the gym when it was a club-organized gymnastics function. Ava described,

I saw my coaches at like, gymnastics banquets and events like that. Or if we went to a competition, my entire team would go out to dinner after and my coach usually came. But parents and my other teammates always surrounded us, so I never saw him alone for any reason. That’s just weird....

Similar to the participants who reported engaging in coach-athlete relationships outside the context of gymnastics, Ashton and Ava both referenced their coaches in paternal ways, describing their relationships as being “mother-daughter” oriented and made reference to their coaches being a part of their “family.” The four participants who engaged in some form of relationship with their coaches outside of gymnastics all referenced their coaches as “family,” or having some sort of paternal influence over them. In contrast, the two gymnasts who reported not having any type of relationship with their

coaches outside of the gym made few references to their coaches as paternal figures or members of their family.

#### *1.4 Behavioural differences of coaches in summer versus winter training*

Gymnastics is a sport that requires year-round training and is typically divided into summer and winter training. For this study, summer training refers to the gymnasts' off-season, which means that the gymnasts are only training and do not participate in competitions. Winter training refers to the gymnasts' competitive season, which runs through the winter and into the spring, and usually lasts five to seven months of the year. The participants in this study expressed a significant difference in their coaches' behaviour and their coach-athlete relationships in the summer season when compared to the winter season.

The gymnasts generally described summer training as “easier,” “fun,” and a time when they learned new skills and did extra conditioning to maintain their strength for the competitive season. Ava described summer training this way,

It was a lot lighter, a lot more – fun I guess you could say. Because we played games and stuff like that. You got to work on new skills, and you do a lot more conditioning of course. But um, we never had to work on routines and our coaches were so much nicer. It was amazing.

Similarly, Hannah recalled that “summer was much more laid back,” and despite having to still do skill repetitions, coaches were “more slack” and training was “a lot more fun than competition training.” Summer training often required gymnasts put in more hours working on their skills, or they attended camps that lasted anywhere from 4-6 weeks. Madison recalled,

In the summer, I trained more than I did during competition season. I was training up to 40 hours a week, and on Wednesdays we'd have 10-hour days, including camp. So in the summer, we were trying to learn new skills, so it was more fun!

With gymnasts spending more time with coaches during summer training when compared to winter training, gymnasts also saw a different, and perhaps nicer side of their coaches. Parker mentioned that in the summer she engaged in novel activities with her coach such as designing and producing gymnastics leotards out of model fabrics. These experiences were described as “bonding with my coach,” and she felt closest to her coach during summer training. Jessa also spoke about summer training which allowed her to trust her coach more because she was executing skills she had never performed before. All of the gymnasts recalled having fun during summer training, despite being required to spend more hours training. Gymnasts felt closer to their coaches than they did during competition season.

The gymnasts remembered the winter or competition season as far more demanding even though there were fewer training sessions. Parker recalled, “things got more serious and a lot more intense, especially before qualifiers or major competitions.” Similarly, Jessa described winter training as “stricter, with more of an emphasis on repetition and perfection than on fun.” Gymnasts frequently used “perfection” to describe winter training, as skill repetition and execution was vital during this time of year. For example, Madison described winter training as being “all about perfection, precision, repetitive routines and skill execution.” Ashton stated her experience of winter training as “solely meant for striving for perfection.”

Due to increasing and varied demands in the competition season, gymnasts felt pressure from their coaches to achieve perfection. Ava recalled,

They [coaches] trained us so hard and spent so much of their time with us because they wanted us to do well. So when I struggled with a skill during competition season, it seemed like I wasted their time and it was all for nothing. I always felt like I was letting them [coaches] down.

Gymnasts recalled that coaches pressured them to internalize a zeal for executing skills to such a degree it resulted in extensive self-pressure. For example, Hannah stated,

Sometimes, it was like I wanted something so badly, so she would push and push and push me, but sometimes it was mentally a little hard to take. I was already putting pressure on myself, and then when she [coach] put pressure on me too, I always hit my breaking point. She always sent me over the edge.

This pressure often became too much for the gymnasts to bear, causing them to emotionally react once practice ended. Ava recalled,

I would go home and cry and say to myself ‘get your head in the game because you know you can do it’. I wasn’t upset because I was letting myself down. What killed me the most was that I was letting my coach down, too. It was just the worse feeling ever.

Most of the gymnasts also noticed a drastic change in their coaches during competition season. Parker stated, “everything changed – the coaches were stricter, and way more uptight.” Gymnasts also noticed a difference in the way criticism from their coaches was delivered. Parker explained, “during competition season, there wasn’t as much yelling that occurred, but more hurtful critiquing.” Hannah recalled that her coach

“became mean at this time of year. She would yell at us all the time, and she was way tougher.” Madison was the only participant who reported that she did not feel pressure stemming from her coaches during competition season, and did not experience any noticeable changes between summer training and winter training. Due to the increased demands coming from their coaches, most of the gymnasts felt extreme pressure to achieve perfect performances during competition season. Most gymnasts also noticed an evident shift in their coaches’ personalities and behaviour, and described them as “mean” or “hurtful” towards them.

### *1.5 Strict training schedules*

Due to the nature of gymnastics, it is recommended by coaches and gymnastics professionals that young females begin participating in recreational gymnastics classes by the age of two or three, with specialization starting by the age of five. Most often, a gymnast is recruited by a coach to enter the competitive stream of gymnastics, and if the gymnast shows potential, the coach will often fast track the gymnast into being an elite athlete. Gymnasts in this study described their training schedules as early elite athletes, and how these experiences and training schedules progressed as they entered their peak elite careers. Additionally, the participants shared how these training schedules impacted various aspects of their lives outside of gymnastics, including academics and relationships with their friends and family.

All the gymnasts in this study described entering gymnastics at the recreational level, where they were introduced to the basics of the sport. Further, all gymnasts described being asked by coaches, either directly or through their parents, to increase the number of hours they were training to improve their skill level. Madison stated,

I was four when I started and I loved it. It was just like a once a week recreational type class where I was only there for an hour or two. I had lots of opportunities to do other sports and I never did because I loved gymnastics so much earlier on. I just kept getting picked by the head coach to move into the group above because they thought I was that good.

Hannah shared a similar transition between her early elite and peak elite career.

She stated that “the competitive coaches kept watching me and told me I should move up to elite – so I tried out and I made it!” Most of the gymnasts mentioned that it did not take long for the coaches to notice their potential. Most gymnasts were encouraged to move up within a few weeks of being in recreational classes. Jessa described that it only took three weeks for the head coach to take notice of her, and approached both Jessa and her parents about moving into the fast track elite program. All gymnasts in this study reported that once a coach suggested they move into a higher level, the gymnasts and their families accepted the coaches’ offer, and the gymnasts began training at a higher intensity. Below is a chart that identifies the participants in this study, the competitive level they reached and the days and hours per week of training.

PARTICIPANT	LEVEL	DAYS/WEEK	HOURS/WEEK
Ava	Junior National	5	32
Jessa	Junior National	5	30
Parker	Pre-National	5	25
Ashton	Provincial 9	4	22
Hannah	Provincial 8	4	20
Madison	Provincial 8	4	18

*Figure 4.1*

At the early elite level, participants in this study reported training approximately 8-12 hours per week. This meant gymnasts had to attend practices three to four times per week. As the gymnast progressed through the higher levels, coaches often requested that the gymnast spend more time training to further improve their skill level. Ashton recalled experiencing a “huge jump” during her transition from training in her early elite career in contrast to her peak elite career. The participants in this study recollected that as they got older and became more skillful, they were required to spend more hours in the gym to improve their competency. As the chart above indicates, all of the gymnasts trained a minimum of 18 hours per week, with some gymnasts training over 30 hours per week at the peak of their elite career.

All the gymnasts reported that balancing their training schedules during their peak gymnastics career was challenging because gymnastics often overlapped with outside activities. Some of the gymnasts stated that their coaches required they modify their school schedules to attend longer training sessions. Jessa describes her experience of missing school to attend gymnastics,

One day a week I would be out of school for the afternoon, and on the other four days, I'd leave an hour early so I could make it to gym on time. My parents made my schedule around gym class at school so that I wasn't always missing math, English or science. I usually missed art and gym, or music and gym.

Similarly, Ashton describes her day-to-day experience of being an elite gymnast, and what it was like to miss other extracurricular activities:

I had no free time ever. I literally would have school, school sports, gymnastics, maybe fifteen minutes for homework, go to bed, wake up and finish my homework, and then go back to school. I used to begrudge the fact that I couldn't go to sleepovers and I couldn't go and spend a full day doing whatever, unless it was a special occasion because there was no time.

Madison was the only participant who did not report having to miss any school-related events. She explained her peak elite training experience by saying, "I definitely made sacrifices. School always came first, but gymnastics came second. Everything else I didn't mind missing because it didn't matter as much."

Gymnasts training at the elite level are required to make sacrifices, both academic and extra-curricular; however, how they reacted to making these sacrifices differed between participants. Most of the participants regretted not being able to attend extra-curricular events, such as formals, sleepovers and family events. Often, coaches really asserted their authority when they required gymnasts modify their school schedules to accommodate longer training sessions.

#### *1.6 Coaches' behaviors gave the gymnasts a sense of identity*

Due to the significant amount of time gymnasts spend with their coaches during their elite careers, participants reported that their coaches' behaviours began to shape a "gymnast identity." As the demands coaches placed upon them increased, the gymnasts in this study developed a specific identity. That is, they were required to handle situations that were often tougher than they would normally experience in their lives outside the context of gymnastics. For example, participants recalled assuming this "gymnast identity" during training sessions leading up to competitions, where coaches placed

higher than normal training demands upon athletes. Participants remembered how they coped with various situations, such as a coach yelling at them, that directly related back to this “gymnast identity.” Ashton described the “gymnast identity” phenomenon,

Competitive gymnastics was extremely tough. It was like, I could call myself a gymnast now that I was in competition and being pushed really hard by a coach I guess. I just took the sport, and myself, way more seriously.

As mentioned above, gymnasts also recalled assuming this “gymnast identity” when they had to deal with adversity from their coaches. For example, Ava remembered how she handled difficult situations with her coaches, and explained “he pushed me so hard, but not to the point where I couldn’t handle it. After all, I was a gymnast – I could handle anything.” This “gymnast identity” was also internalized when coaches encouraged gymnasts to move to a higher level of gymnastics. Madison recalled, “when a coach picked me to move up to the next level, I was always so happy with myself. It was like I was finally a gymnast! I was just so proud and felt like a completely different person.” As the gymnast progressed to higher the levels, the more the idea of the “gymnast identify” sank in. Ashton described this by saying, “I thought I was a [real] gymnast because at my peak, I was being asked to train over 20 hours a week at the gym. And I took my job very seriously as a gymnast.”

High training demands and strict coaching behaviour were not the only factors that influenced the participants to develop this “gymnast identity,” their parents were also influenced by this phenomenon. For example, many participants in this study remembered telling their parent(s) about a gymnastics related issue, such as an injury, excessive training hours or questionable coaching practices. In response, they were

reminded they were a gymnast, which referred to this “gymnast identity” notion. Ashton recalled, “I would always tell my parents I was tired and hurting from all of the training, and my parents would always be like, suck it up, you’re a gymnast now. Get a grip.”

The idea of the “gymnast identity” was created based on the extended hours of time spent with coaches and the increased demands they made as gymnasts moved through elite levels of their sport. The gymnasts internalized this ideal as a way to cope with the stresses of high performance and training. The “gymnast identity” also rationalized or excused any complaints gymnasts had about their coaches and their behaviors. Even parents bought into and accepted the “gymnast identity” phenomenon to minimize any sense of criticism or falling short of optimum performance.

#### Cluster Two: Occurrences of Abuse

##### *2.1 Experiences of physical abuse*

Three participants in this study reported experiencing at least one type of physical abuse during their early and peak elite gymnastics careers. As defined earlier on, physical abuse refers to the deliberate physical injuring of a person, or the failure to prevent physical injuries (Weber, 2009). Additionally, there are four types of physical abuse child athletes may experience during an elite career path, including excessive training, peer violence, physical violence by the coach and violence due to participating in competition. The most prominent form of physical abuse participants reported experiencing in this study occurred when coaches asked a gymnast to complete additional repetitions of a skill knowing that she was injured and unable to perform safely. For example, Ava commented,

I remember there was a time when I was doing a double pike on floor, and it was maybe a week out from nationals, and I did a double pike right to my face and I broke my ankle. My coach basically said get up, let's go and do it again. So you know, I'm crying and in so much pain, but there's nothing I can't handle as a gymnast. So I limped back and I tried to do it again, but was obviously unsuccessful. He [the coach] told me to do it three more times before I could go ice it, and I thought whatever, that's just something that happens. Maybe I wasn't done for the night and needed to just do three more, regardless of my broken ankle.

Similarly, Parker experienced a situation where she felt she was being overworked while injured and cited an example when she trained on the uneven bars, We were always overworked when we were injured. I never wore grips on bars, which is quite unheard of for an elite gymnast. Because I chose not to wear them, my hands would hurt, rip and bleed all the time. I would always show my coach that my hands were bleeding and ripped, and my coach would say, "Well you haven't completed enough routines yet. How do you expect to qualify for nationals if you're complaining about a little rip on your hands?" She would always make me complete at least another five routines, and then make me clean the blood off the bar.

Jessa also shared an experience where she had approached her coach to explain that her ankle was really bothering her, and her coach assumed that she was faking the injury in order to get out of performing additional vaults. She explained, "my ankle really bothered me on vault, but it just so happened that I was also scared of vault, so regardless

of my injury, she [the coach] wouldn't let me leave until I did five.” Jessa further stated that because of the ankle pain and knowing she had to complete five vaults, she would skip over performing a set prior to rotating her Yurchenko vault. She did this to not experience more ankle pain from the five vaults she would have to complete. She explained, “I didn't even care about my own safety at that point. I just did the five vaults to stay in my coach's good books and avoid getting reamed out.”

When gymnasts were asked to complete repetitions while injured, they often completed the repetitions to avoid punishment if the repetitions were not performed. Ava also noted that being asked to complete additional repetitions of skills while injured was not an infrequent situation. She recalled, “The situation with my broken ankle occurred a lot. If I was hurt, coaches always told me to get up before asking if I was OK – it's sad to say, but this happened a lot.” When a coach asked a gymnast to perform additional repetitions while injured, the gymnast would complete the repetitions to oblige the coach's request in an effort to please the coach and avoid repercussions from the coach.

Similar to coaches asking gymnasts to complete additional repetitions of skills while the gymnasts were injured, some participants also reported that they were instructed to complete skills while they were exhausted and not in their best shape. For example, Ashton shared a situation where she reported telling her coach that she was exhausted, yet her coach still instructed her to complete additional repetitions. She described,

Sometimes, I'd just fall from being so tired and I didn't really care at that point.

There were so many days where I'd straddle the beam, and I had to keep getting

up and doing it again until I finished my five routines. I told her [the coach] that I couldn't do it, but she made me."

It was not unusual therefore for coaches to ignore conditions like injury and exhaustion and insist gymnasts continue practicing skills and routines. Issues of safety were often overlooked and many gymnasts perceived this behaviour to be coercive and abusive at times, and they followed instructions to avoid punishment and please the coach.

Two participants in this study also described that coaches refused to spot specific skills that were new to the gymnasts, and in doing so, put the gymnasts' safety at greater risk. For example, Jessa struggled to execute a specific skill on the uneven bars, and she needed her coach to spot her during the first repetition she completed. Her coach often refused to spot Jessa for this skill. She explained, "I wouldn't do my shoot overs, and I would ask for a spot and she'd [the coach] be like, no I'm not spotting you. If you want to waste my time, I can waste yours." Jessa also felt unsafe when she was learning new skills for the first time. She described, "I hated shoot overs, and it was my first time learning them, so I literally lost my spotter when I needed her the most. I didn't feel safe." Similarly, Ashton recalled her coach telling her that she was "too tall" for her to spot her, and wouldn't find another coach that was capable of doing so. The coach sometimes left Ashton alone to learn unfamiliar skills. As Ashton recounted,

I needed a spotter. I wasn't ready to do them by myself, and she [the coach] knew I couldn't do them by myself, yet she still made me try them by myself because she couldn't spot me. Looking back now, I don't understand why she put my safety at risk and didn't just get someone else to spot me.

The two participants who shared instances of their coaches refusing to spot them while learning new skills felt unsafe in their coaches' care. Both gymnasts expressed feelings of fear and believed their coaches lacked competency. Yet despite these perceptions, the gymnasts were still asked to complete repetitions of the skill without the assistance of a coach.

Two participants in this study also reported that their coach was "rough" or "aggressive" when spotting skills. Ava recalled that her coach would pinch, or hit her when spotting a skill to depict what parts of her body needed to be tighter during a specific element on any given apparatus. Ava shared, "my coach was super aggressive with me, and she'd smack me while spotting a skill to let me know that I messed up." The participants also recalled that their coaches left marks, including bruises, on their bodies from their aggressive behaviour while spotting. Parker described,

I definitely came home a few days with bruises and stuff all over my body, but not from a malicious standpoint – more from a "you need to squeeze this here, or I'm going to pinch that part of your body," or "I'm going to smack this when you don't do it properly, or you need to be tighter." I definitely came home with bruises and welts, and one time my friends at school even questioned it.

In addition to some coaches using physical forms of feedback to correct their gymnasts' wrongdoings during a skill, some participants reported their coaches taking away certain entitlements, including lunch and water breaks, when they were unable to perform a specific skill correctly. Parker described a situation where she was unable to perform a back handspring connection on the balance beam, "I wasn't allowed to go on break to eat a snack, or to go get a sip of water, or even use the bathroom." Similarly,

Hannah described a situation where she was exhausted after performing two floor routines consecutively, yet was denied a water break by her coach because she didn't land one of her tumbling passes perfectly. She explained, "all I wanted to do was go to the bathroom and get a sip of water, but she wouldn't let me because my routine wasn't perfect." Both participants reported that the denial of these basic entitlements negatively impacted their performance and rendered them more vulnerable to injury.

One topic that many of the participants in this study shared was the idea that an injury was legitimate only when a physician declared it so. Therefore, coaches would only reduce strenuous training when a doctor examined and documented the injury, that is, the injury was made official. Otherwise, the coaches would expect the gymnasts' training to continue as normal despite the gymnast informing their coach of an injury. Participants commented on the notion of doctor-declared legitimacy in relation to additional repetitions of a skill while injured. Ava recalled an instance where after breaking her ankle, she repeatedly asked her coaches if she could take it easy, and would always be told no. She explained, "Once I got a doctor's note, the coaches would always ask me if I was OK, and made modifications to my training schedule."

Gymnasts also mentioned that the idea of doctor-declared legitimacy was most prominent when they were performing skills on an apparatus they were uncomfortable with. For example, Hannah experienced a chest injury while learning the flexibility component of her floor routine. Upon telling her coach that she was injured and needed to take a break, her coach requested that she continue learning the choreography. Hannah recalled,

I had a really bad pain in my chest, and I told her [the coach], but she didn't even believe me. I guess it's something really random, but I told her so many times that I didn't feel well and that it hurt to breathe. She kept telling me I wasn't hurt, brushed it off and then told me I had pulled a muscle.

After a trip to the hospital, Hannah had learned that she had popped one of her ribs out of place and needed to take a six-week break from training. Hannah explained that, "It was only once I had that note from the doctor that she [the coach] cared or even believed I was in pain." Ashton experienced a similar situation, in which she had tripped on an escalator and hurt her knee. After explaining to her coach that she was experiencing pain while vaulting, her coach had accused her of "picking and choosing" what she wanted to do in the gym, and using the injury as a way to get out of performing certain skills. Ashton recalled, "I was an 11-year-old athlete, how was I going to articulate that it hurts when I do this, but not when I do something else?" Her coach only allowed her to take time off once her doctor had written her a note that outlined the amount of time she needed off to recover. Gymnasts who expressed they were injured to their coaches also reported that they were less likely to inform their coaches of an injury they experienced in the future. For example, Ashton remarked,

I don't tell coaches when I'm injured now, and the injury just gets worse and worse. It seems that they [the coaches] all think I'm lying. And so if I tell my coach I'm hurt, they're going to think I'm lying and just don't want to do something. But then if I keep practicing and it gets fractured or broken, it's like, I'm actually hurt now because there's a cast on it. That way, they could visibly see that I'm hurt.

Some gymnasts in this study, including Hannah and Ashton, attributed the idea of doctor-declared legitimacy to the age they were when the injury occurred. Hannah described, “if you don’t get a doctor to say you’re hurt, then you’re not hurt and no one will believe you – especially when you’re younger; they think you make things up.” Gymnasts described that if they had been older at the time of the injury, they could have better articulated the pain they were experiencing, and then their coaches may have taken them more seriously. Based on this idea of doctor-declared legitimacy, the gymnasts reported that they were less likely to approach a coach about an injury or pain they were experiencing until a doctor legitimized the pain they were feeling.

## *2.2 Experiences of sexual abuse*

Most gymnasts in this study did not report experiencing any form of sexual abuse stemming from their gymnastics coaches. Further, most of the participants acted quickly in stating that a gymnastics coach had never sexually abused them. This definitive statement was made prior to discussing any other form of abuse they did experience from a gymnastics coach. Only one of the six participants reported experiencing a form of sexual abuse stemming from their gymnastics coach. Parker recalled that she was exposed to sexually explicit images for the purpose of health education; a subject that Parker explained was not part of her gymnastics training. She explained,

My coach used to make us sit in an office one by one, and make us watch slide shows with extremely explicit images. It always made me really uncomfortable because I was only a 9-year-old girl at the time, and my parents didn’t expose me to such images ever. It scared me for a little while. And like, I knew it was wrong

at the time, but I didn't say anything because I didn't want to get in trouble, until right now.

Parker also reported that this type of exposure to sexually explicit images was not an infrequent occurrence, but rather happened every few months. Parker was the only gymnast in this study who reported experiencing any form of sexual abuse from a gymnastics coach throughout her elite gymnastics career.

### *2.3 Emotional abuse*

All the participants in this study reported experiencing at least one type of emotional abuse stemming from their coaches. Emotional abuse is defined as intentional, non-physical behaviours occurring within a critical relationship between an individual and an authoritative caregiver which puts the athlete at risk of harm. Emotional abuse does not refer to a series of occurrences, but rather refers to the dynamics of a relationship (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Some gymnasts were quick to say their coaches had never abused them because they did not recall experiencing physical and sexual abuse. This declaration led some to diminish the severity of emotional abuse. For example, when Hannah was asked if she had ever experienced any abusive situations when working with her elite coach, she responded, "I was never physically or sexually abused, ever. When I think of emotional abuse, it happened but it all seemed so normal." Within the theme of experiences of emotional abuse, there will be five sub-themes, which will be presented to demonstrate what elite gymnasts recalled in terms of experiencing emotional abuse within their coach-athlete relationship.

### *2.3a Denial of attention*

All participants in this study felt they did not receive the attention they deserved from their coaches; however, this was manifested in two different ways. The first way in which the denial of attention was described was from two participants who felt that their coaches had more important priorities outside of being the gymnasts' coach. For example, these participants felt their coaches were absent at times when the gymnasts needed them to be present, such as when learning a new skill or at a competition. Ashton recalled,

She [the coach] wasn't there as a coach anymore, and we would always have sub coaches. She would only talk about herself. As young teenagers, it used to be about us, but it seemed like, as we got older, we didn't matter any more. She made me feel neglected, and that I wasn't good enough for my gymnastics career to actually matter.

The participants who described feeling abandoned by coaches attributed this change to two major factors. First, neglect due to a major change in their coaches' lives such as the addition of a child to their family. In this situation the coach was often not present or she was distracted and not fully focused or able to assist the gymnasts. A second factor was the coaches' realization that the gymnast lacked the necessary qualities to achieve greater success and move up the elite ladder. Hannah stated that when her coach was pregnant, she was absent from practices a lot and was unable to spot her for the skills she needed assistance with. She recalled, "she'd [the coach] offer to put her hand there, but you know if you're about to fall, that's not going to save you." Similarly, Ashton recounted that her coach was much more involved with her prior to starting her

own family. She explained, “she was our coach for so long, and then she had a baby and we didn’t matter anymore.” Ashton also believed that the lack of attention she received from her coach was caused by her coach’s realization that she did not have what it took to make it to higher levels of gymnastics. She explained, “she [the coach] made me feel neglected, and like I wasn’t good enough, and that my gymnastics career didn’t really matter anymore.”

The second way in which gymnasts described the denial of attention was in relation to being ignored by their coaches. For example, many participants stated that if they were unable to properly execute a skill, they received the “silent treatment” or were blatantly ignored by their coaches as punishment. Hannah recalled, “If I was showing a beam routine, and I fell on any of my skills, I was immediately ignored. Parker recalled a similar situation, where she felt her coach exclusively focused attention on other gymnasts when she was unable to execute a specific skill on the uneven bars. She explained,

Sometimes my coach got frustrated with me and she needed to cool off, and then would only pay attention to the other gymnasts. And she did it really blatantly.

Like, if I asked a question, I never got a response, or if I was finally successful at doing that particular skill, I didn’t get recognition or anything. She’d [the coach] just pretend like she didn’t see it I guess? So, I was always ignored.

Participants similarly recalled fighting for their coaches’ attention for various reasons, such as differences in body size between gymnasts in the same group. For example, Jessa was the tallest gymnast in her practice group and constantly had to practice specific events by herself because modifications to the apparatus had to be made

to accommodate her height. Making simple modifications to the apparatus, such as raising the uneven bars or using a different springboard for a vault caused Jessa to train alone and away from her group members. She described, “it was so frustrating because no one ever paid attention to me. I was just off doing my own thing because I was taller than everyone else.”

Many participants also experienced the denial of attention when coaches used the silent treatment as a form of punishment towards them. This occurred when a gymnast was unsuccessful completing a skill. Ava described that experiencing the silent treatment from a coach was not an infrequent occurrence, but occurred numerous times throughout a typical practice. She recalled, “I got the silent treatment a lot. A lot of “ok, just go over there – just go. Do something else. Go over there and let me focus on better people.” When asked how this made Ava felt, she responded, “it definitely hurt... a lot. She [the coach] would even send me to a different coach and wish them good luck in dealing with me.”

Different forms of attention denial by coaches were often perceived by gymnasts as having a negative effect on their emotional well-being. Whether family circumstances, the coach’s determination that the gymnast would not advance sufficiently, practical considerations or as a kind of punishment like the “silent treatment,” these factors contributed to feelings of emotional distress.

### *2.3b Negative slurs yelled at athletes*

All of the participants in this study reported experiencing being yelled at by their coaches throughout their early and peak elite gymnastics careers. Ashton recalled, “We would absolutely get yelled at and reamed out. It didn’t matter who was around or when

she [the coach] did it.” The extent of what was said varied from participant to participant, however most gymnasts reported their coaches swearing, making threats or trying to make them feel guilty to get the gymnasts to perform a specific skill. For example, Jessa stated that her coach would use guilt as a method to get her perform a skill. She recalled, “He [the coach] would yell at me and tell me not to waste his time. He came all the way here. He [the coach] told me not to waste his energy, or be a waste of space.” Other gymnasts recalled their coaches swearing at them in an effort to get them to complete skills successfully. Parker described,

When you’re standing on a four-inch surface with your arms above your head for 10 minutes, and a coach is yelling right in your face saying “get your shit together. If you can’t do it, just go home,” that was definitely so frustrating. I hated it. I just felt so defeated.

Similarly, many gymnasts mentioned their coaches would yell threats at them when they were unable to perform a given skill. Jessa said her coaches would tell her to go home, give up or try an easier sport. She described, “She’d [the coach] say let’s go, what are you waiting for, get your shit together. She was basically telling me I sucked.” Further, Madison recalled that her coach would call her names, like crybaby or pussy, when she was unable to perform her switch split on the balance beam, and attributed this to her coach not understanding the fear she felt. Hannah remembered a situation in which she experienced a mental block and was unable to perform a skill that she had been able to complete before,

There was one time in level eight, you had to have two backwards passes on the floor, and I couldn’t do my layout full anymore. She pulled me aside by the arm

and yelled in my face, saying that if I didn't do it, I was never competing again.

That was super hard, because it psyched me out even more and I knew I had to do it. I felt like if I did do it, I'd get injured, but if I didn't, I'd get yelled at even more or kicked out of the gym for good".

Jessa stated that her coach would switch back and forth between yelling, to walking away, to threatening her to go home. She described, "It made me feel terrible. The fact that I was working so hard and then he [the coach] wanted me to go home." Parker also shared her perception of her coach yelling at her,

Sometimes, they'd [the coaches] even send you home and completely give up on you. They'd yell in your face and tell you you'd never be good enough. They'd threaten to call your parents and get them to stop sending you to gymnastics. They knew the only other way of hurting me beyond yelling was calling my parents and getting them to stop sending me [to gymnastics].

Some participants also perceived that their coaches were yelling at them simply to let out their own frustrations. Thus, the likelihood of the gymnasts getting yelled at was dependent on the mood of the coach. Madison explained,

Some days, I'd go in there after he [the coach] had coached the provincial boys, especially in the summer, and he'd be so grumpy because of them and took it out on us. So he'd yell at me and punish me because he was frustrated with them. It was so wrong.

Many of the participants perceived a coach yelling at them as an ineffective motivational tool. Often this approach did not lead the gymnasts to successfully perform a skill they had struggled with. In contrast however, Madison described feeling

encouraged and motivated when her coach yelled at her when she was unable to successfully complete a skill. She expressed this by saying, “As much as I hated it, it really made me see they cared about me, and really wanted me to succeed.” Thus, unbecoming verbal assaults and yelling on the part of the coaches played on the emotions of gymnasts, kept them on edge and belittled them. This technique only produced a motivational outcome in one case, while the remaining gymnasts claimed it was not an effective way to enhance performance.

### *2.3c Coaches taunting gymnasts*

In this sub-theme, gymnasts felt their coaches were taunting or provoking them by asking rhetorical questions that the gymnasts perceived as being hurtful. Gymnasts reported that the taunting was more likely to happen when the gymnast was unable to effectively perform a given skill due to fear. Parker recalled a situation in which she was unable to perform a skill on the balance beam and described being antagonized by her coaches,

It was like she [the coach] wanted me to fail. She’d stand there and say, “Why are you crying? What are you crying for? Are you a baby? There’s no point in crying. Go home and cry, but don’t waste my time crying.” It was so negative. She already knew why I was crying and how badly I wanted to do this skill, but I just couldn’t.

Participants also described eventually believing what their coaches were saying to them while being taunted, and began to think it was true. Hannah described,

Sometimes, my coach would say you’re not ready for competition. You’re not going to get the score you need. You’re not going to succeed. The way you’re

acting you're going to fail, which in my mind I began to believe. I always thought I was good at gymnastics, but when she used to say those things she just made me doubt everything. It was like she wanted me to fail.

Gymnasts who described being taunted by their coaches with rhetorical, negative questions and comments mentioned emotional reactions like crying. Such emotional responses did not benefit their performance or ability to successfully complete specific skills or routines.

### *2.3d Embarrassing gymnasts in front of peers*

Participants in this study described experiences in which their coaches embarrassed them or singled them out in front of their peers during regular practices. Gymnasts described that this type of emotional abuse was most likely to happen in large group settings, when coaches would yell negative slurs or criticisms targeted at a specific gymnast across the gym for others to hear. Jessa recalled being “humiliated in front of everyone” when her coach yelled at her across the gym when she was unable to perform one of her tumbling lines on the floor. Coaches were most likely to demonstrate this type of behaviour when a gymnast was struggling to properly execute a skill out of fear. For example, Jessa recounted,

When I was on vault and I was scared, I'd just be doing sets and she'd [the coach] yell from across the gym “that's enough, GO! You just did sets 20 times, time to flip it or get out.” Then I'd ask for a spot, and she'd scream in front of everyone, “No! Time to act your age and grow up”.

When Jessa was asked how this made her feel, she responded, “I was mortified. Everyone can hear her. It made me even more scared to go.” Gymnasts also recalled their

coaches embarrassed them in front of their peers by pointing out their flaws, whether they were based on skill execution or aesthetics. Ashton remembered instances where she was asked to perform beam routines in front of the entire gym and her coach would yell out deductions as she performed. If Ashton reached one full point in deductions she was asked to get down from the beam and do five extra routines. She recalled, “It was so awful. Everyone was watching and if I kept getting deductions, everyone else [the onlookers] had to stay at the gym until I completed my five routines.” As the tallest gymnast in her group, Jessa noted that sometimes her coach refused to raise the height of the uneven bars for her. She explained, “When I tried to do my giants, my feet would smash against the ground, so I’d have to bend my legs.” When asked how this made her feel, Jessa responded, “it was just so embarrassing because everyone else could do them, but they just weren’t willing to raise the bars for me.”

Some gymnasts also recounted situations in which their coach embarrassed them in front of their peers when they were injured. For example, Ava recalled:

I knew I was hurt, but when you’re hurt, you’re not allowed to block the path of the other people. Then I heard him [the coach] yell, “get out of the way and do it again! Don’t be a baby” in front of everyone. So I moved over, wiped my tears away, chalked up and I just did it again – regardless of my broken ankle. I didn’t even care about the pain; I was just so embarrassed.

Despite coaches embarrassing the gymnasts in front of their peers, some gymnasts reported that they would perform skills regardless of the outcome just to get the embarrassment to stop. For example, Jessa recalled, “the only reason I’d do the skill was to just get him [the coach] to shut up and stop embarrassing me, even if it meant I’d get

hurt doing the skill.” Gymnasts therefore often risked their own safety in an attempt to deflect negative attention caused by their coaches in front of others.

According to the gymnasts in this study, public embarrassment by coaches was used as a tool to elicit a motivational response, yet the emotional, hurtful feelings this evoked were mostly devastating. In other words, performance rarely improved and gymnasts carried on to alleviate the embarrassing situation coaches created.

### *2.3e Body image*

Many participants in this study shared experiences in which their coach had made negative comments with regard to their bodies, either directly or indirectly, thus influencing their respective body image. For example, Ashton recalled an instance where her coach had directly questioned her about her weight. She recalled, “I had my coach ask me if I had gained weight, which obviously meant that he thought I did. Otherwise, why would he have asked it?” When asked how this made Ashton feel, she shared:

I was very young, and I didn’t think that I had, but if he was asking me, I assumed that I had. At first, I was like OK I’ll eat less. It certainly made me restrict my food intake for a while. It was really hard because it was at the time where I was going through puberty, so I was only maybe 14 when he said it. Not to mention I was already six inches taller than everyone else in my group.

Some gymnasts stated they were not directly questioned about their weight by their coaches, but rather that their coaches indirectly targeted their bodies by making negative comments towards them. Jessa commented that because of her height, coaches had told her that gymnastics should not be her sport and that she should start looking to find another sport where she might be more successful. Similarly, Hannah recalled

instances where her coach would constantly comment on the appearance of her legs. She shared, “I have thick legs. That’s part of who I am. They were strong, but apparently they were too big to be the legs of a gymnast.”

Participants also remembered their body image was influenced indirectly in relation to the apparel they wore in practice or competition. Parker shared an encounter she had with her coach regarding her competition leotards:

It was the beginning of a new season and we were getting new leotards, and our colours were black and white, but I thought black and white were such lame colours because every other club had like red, green, and pinks, and I always wanted to wear what they got to wear, you know? Then I asked my coach one day why we had to wear black and white, and I remember her saying, “tubby girls can’t wear those colours, so that’s why you wear black and white”.

When asked how this made her feel, Parker explained, “I was four foot something, and I weighed under 100 pounds. I didn’t understand how I was tubby.” Some of the coaches’ comments resonated with gymnasts years after their retirement from the sport. For example, Parker recalled, “Even as I got older, I still to this day stray away from bright colours to avoid looking tubby.”

Some comments coaches made about the bodies of their gymnasts had little to do with the technical aspects of skills and refinement of performance. Instead, coaches sometimes criticized the appearance or aesthetic quality of the gymnasts’ bodies which led gymnasts to question their bodily self-image. Whether these comments were overt disapprovals or subtle hints, they more often than not had the effect of gymnasts developing a poor and doubting body image.

#### *2.4 Perceptions of why the abuse was occurring*

Participants in this study perceived the occurrence of abuse in two main ways. When the participants were questioned as to why they believed the abuse was occurring, most participants stated that their “God-like” view of their coaches made it difficult for them to advocate for themselves, therefore enabling the abuse to occur. When the gymnasts were asked to reflect on why they believe the abuse had occurred, many participants described their coaches using words like authoritative, superior and God-like.

For example, Ashton believed the abuse occurred due to a power differential between she and her coach. She described, “They’re a person [coach] who is an authoritative figure. So who am I to talk back to them? I’d always just allow it to happen.” Similarly, Hannah referred to her coach as God-like when she said “I would just allow it to happen because I would never think to tell them they were doing something wrong. It was hard, because they’re like God. You’re just taught to never question anything they do, or you’ll be the one to pay the price for it later.” Parker also related her coach’s presence to that of a “godly being” by explaining, “Getting pinched or smacked while being spotted definitely set me back a little, but they’re [coaches] like a second family, and have this godly sense about them. You have to allow it.”

The authoritative position the coaches held over the athletes led gymnasts to assume an unquestioning, obedient posture toward the coach. Parker described why she felt the abuse she was experiencing was occurring,

I just looked up to her [coach] so much that there never came a time where I felt I could advocate for myself, or talk back because they just did so much for me and

were such authoritative people. No matter what they wanted me to do, it wasn't a matter of whether or not I'd do it. Without thinking, I'd just say yes.

The second way gymnasts perceived occurrences of abuse was through a lack of coaching education. Many participants claimed that elite gymnastics coaches required more than just superior technical knowledge and experience. They also needed a deep understanding on how to coach young, female athletes effectively. In other words, successful training required technical elements and relational skills. Jessa explained this by saying, "my coach didn't know enough about – not gymnastics itself, but about being a coach. Like you don't know how to talk to your athletes, and how to deal with your athletes." Similarly, Madison described that, "it's often not enough to simply coach the skills, but rather that coaches also need to foster young females and ensure their well-beings are the top priority." A few participants questioned whether or not it was the responsibility of a coach to foster an athlete's emotional and overall well-being. Ava described this as, "It may or may not be their [coaches] responsibility to guide us down the right path, but if it is their responsibility, I got none of it."

The gymnasts in this study recommended that coaching education include performance-related training as well as subjects that consider the physical and emotional well-being of athletes. Toward this end, participants felt that coaches should enroll in mandatory yearly seminars that educate coaches on the importance of fostering an athlete's emotional well-being and other relational competencies.

### *2.5 Parental involvement with abuse*

In this sub-theme, participants described the role their parents played in dealing with abusive situations with coaches. Many gymnasts believed their parents acted as

enablers for the coaching abuse to occur. For example, a few participants tried to speak to their parents about the abuse they were experiencing, and their parents often dismissed the severity of the abuse and assumed what they were experiencing was part of the “gymnast identity” explained earlier. Parker shared,

I think coming home and showing my parents bruises on my bum, or on my inner thighs, they’d just say, “What happened?” And I’d say, my coach pinched me or smacked me, and they’d be like, “well you’ll survive.” I don’t think they thought it was out of the norm, but more so that it was what all gymnasts went through.

Ava recalled a similar instance, where she had explained to her parents that her coaches had made her complete extra repetitions following sustaining an ankle injury during her floor routine. She described her parents’ reaction,

My parents were always like, “well come on Ava, you know you can do it and they only want you to be successful”. They would just give me words of encouragement to keep going, but never really took anything that I said about my coaches treating me poorly seriously.

Many gymnasts reported that when they approached their parent’s regarding encounters with their coaches that they felt uncomfortable with, their parents were quick to tell them to “suck it up.” For example, Ashton recalled, “Whenever I approached my parents about something negative going on in the gym, they’d always say suck it up, you’re a gymnast.” Ashton also recalled an instance where she described that her parents had acted as enablers for physical abuse to occur. She explained,

When I had a knee injury, I remember my mom saying not to tell anyone the severity of my injury because they wouldn’t let me train anymore. She told me to

tell them [coaches] that it hurt, but not to tell them [coaches] exactly what was wrong with it. It's like she wanted me to get more hurt.

A few gymnasts described that their parents overlooked experiences of emotional and physical coaching abuse, and only reacted seriously if there was any sign of sexual abuse. Ava described this by saying, "Obviously, my parents aren't going to allow my coach to sexually abuse me. But everything else seemed fine." Similarly, Parker described, "I showed my parents the bruises on my body, and they just didn't care. Maybe if I was being sexually abused, they would've said something."

Gymnasts also described that their parents were never fully aware of what went on during practice because spectators were not allowed in the gym during practices. Additionally, gymnasts report that their interactions with their coaches were completely different in the presence of their parents. Jessa described this change by saying,

My coaches always treated me so differently in the presence of my parents, and I always thought, don't treat me any differently because my parents are here. They never saw what I actually went through.

This change in the coaches' behaviour was most prominent in competition settings when the gymnasts' parents were spectators. Gymnasts explained that they found their coaches to be understanding and compassionate at competitions, which was a drastic change from regular practices. Jessa explained,

At competitions, she [coach] was amazing. She totally calmed me down, and would spot me for whatever I needed. There were no questions asked. Whatever I wanted, she gave to me on competition day. Probably because my parents were there watching her [coach]. It was a huge change and I used to wish everyday was

a competition because my parents could've watched me and none of what happened would've happened.

Ashton similarly described that she was less likely to get yelled at for making a mistake during a competition because her parents were watching her. She described that, "If I fell off the beam at a competition, she wasn't going to ream me out like she would at the gym because my parents were there." Madison, Ava and Hannah also said they were less likely to experience abuse in the presence of their parents, and that they noticed a dramatic shift in their coaches' behaviour during competitions. Hannah described why she thought her coach was less likely to abuse her during a competition,

I feel like if she [coach] were to completely yell at me and freak out on me like she did in training, it would not have gone over well. There were parents watching, judges watching – it would've just looked bad on her, on me and on my gym.

For the most part, the parents of these gymnasts did not take seriously any reports of alleged abuse. They assumed the attitude that coaches needed to be stern and demanding even when athletes showed their parents they were physically bruised or injured. Parents advised their children to cope with any undue physical or emotional trauma inflicted by the coach. This dismissive approach enabled coaches to persist in their behaviour, but only in the privacy of closed practices. At competitions, when parents were in the stands, the conduct of coaches shifted noticeably and no signs of verbal or emotional abuse was evident. Thus, the role and responses of parents contributed to a climate where the potential for coaching abuse was ripe.

### *2.6 Occurrences of abuse in relation to the vulnerability of gymnasts*

All of the participants in this study felt more prone to coaching abuse when they were in vulnerable situations, such as being frustrated with their inability to perform a skill, or when experiencing a mental block. Hannah described,

Most of the time when I would get yelled at, it'd be when I was frustrated and unable to properly do a skill because of a mental block or something. Like one time, I wasn't able to do my layout full on floor. At that point, she [coach] would refuse to spot me, start yelling at me, and it always got the attention of everyone.

Similarly, Ava described situations where she felt she was more likely to experience getting yelled at or ignored by her coach,

If I wasn't getting something, or I was frustrated with myself, they [coaches] would either ignore me or yell at me – it always went either way. It really sucked though, because I was trying so hard to make them [coaches] proud and show them [coaches] that I was capable of doing a specific skill, and I would just get sent to a line to focus on myself when all I wanted was for them [coaches] to tell me that I could do it.

Participants explained that instead of their coaches positively reassuring them at times where they struggled with fear or mental blocks, coaches escalated the situation by reacting negatively. Ashton explained, “There were days I cried non-stop when I got home from gym. I just felt like I sucked at everything. Then when you already felt like you sucked, your coach would just reassure the fact that you sucked.”

Many of the participants felt, as they got older, they were more prone to experiencing mental blocks due to fear, which they feel rendered them more vulnerable to experiencing coaching abuse. For example, Parker recalled her inability to perform new

skills as she got older, and that this had a negative impact on her relationship with her coach. She explained, “My mind wouldn’t let my body do new skills and I would chicken out half way through and stuff. That’s when it got really bad with my coach and I.” Madison also referred to her age being a prominent factor in her inability to perform certain skills, and commented, “The older I got, the more mental blocks I got and I couldn’t do things the way I wanted to anymore. That’s when I’d get yelled at by my coaches, and that’s why I quit.”

Similarly, a few participants believed their coaches were more likely to abuse them when their coaches were dealing with stressful situations, whether inside or outside the context of gymnastics. Jessa shared a situation where her coach was trying to deal with her fellow group member:

One of my teammates would literally cry for the entire five-hour practice, and my coach would literally get so annoyed by it, yet allowed it to happen. I remember sitting there thinking how are we supposed to do our skills when our coach is already stressed out from dealing with that? Then my coach was frustrated with my teammate, so she [coach] took it out on us. It always just seemed like mission impossible to do anything right.

The vulnerability of young, elite female gymnasts was a real factor that heightened the susceptibility to coaching abuse. Whether fearful of learning and trying new skills or having mental blocks that diminished performance, such occurrences exposed gymnasts to unfavourable treatment by the coach. Coaches would also exploit these stressful conditions by sometimes heaping on more abuse, instead of diffusing these situations to enhance the welfare of the gymnasts.

## Cluster Three: Recognition and Rationalization of Abuse

### *3.1 Rationalization of abuse based on what other gymnasts were experiencing*

All of the participants in this study rationalized their experiences of coaching abuse based on what their fellow teammates were experiencing. They did this by adopting a “if it’s happening to them, it’s OK that it’s happening to me” mentality. Furthermore, gymnasts reported feeling comfortable with the coaching abuse they were experiencing because their peers were also being abused in similar surroundings. Parker clarified this,

I was there with all of my friends, and it was definitely a comfortable environment for me, so I never felt that I was in extreme danger, or extreme harm because everyone else was going through the exact same stuff that I was.

Similarly, Ava recalled thinking that because she saw her coaches treating her fellow teammates in the same way she was being treated, it was normal and acceptable behaviour from the coach. Ava described,

I wasn’t singled out when my coaches would smack us to be tighter. Like, I definitely saw it happening to other people so it wasn’t uncommon for it to happen to me. With it all going around I thought it was normal and something I just had to get used to.

Many participants stated they always compared how their coaches treated them in relation to their teammates and adopted an “it could be worse” mentality. For example, the gymnasts felt the coaching experiences they encountered did not compare to the experiences of their teammates. In other words, this rationalization minimized the

perceived severity of their own coaching abuse because in comparison to others “it could have been worse.” Hannah describes this by saying:

I know there were other gymnasts who had it way worse. It was so bad in my gym. Like, I had it pretty bad from my coach, but I definitely was much luckier compared to those people who had different coaches in our gym. As much as I went through with my coach, I could’ve had it way worse.

Gymnasts were quick to compare their experiences of coaching abuse to others around them; despite the extent of the coaching abuse they were experiencing. For example, Jessa recalled a situation in which her coach yelled into her face and threatened to pull her from an upcoming competition. She explained,

There was this girl at my gym that got yelled at all the time. I just think about that one time in particular that Joe [coach] yelled into my face, and I’ve never been so scared in my entire life, and this poor girl went through it once a week! I just can’t imagine. It was literally the scariest thing ever. I’m still haunted by that one time, but for my teammates it was way more. But it only happened to that extent to me once, so I suppose it could’ve been worse and what I went through that one time didn’t really matter in the grand scheme of things.

Similarly, Ava explained, “I was a pretty good athlete to be honest, so out of my peers I got yelled at the least. And even then, getting yelled at the least, it still happened often.” All participants in this study recounted that by comparing their experiences of coaching abuse to the experiences of their teammates, they felt more comfortable with what they were going through. This rationalization, perhaps one may say self-deception, contributed to the normalization of coaching abuse.

### *3.2 Normalization of the occurrences of coaching abuse*

A few participants felt their coaches' abusive behaviour towards them was normal and just a condition that came with being an elite gymnast. These participants also described that because they were exposed to abusive coaching behaviours from such a young age, they were brought up to accept the abusive behaviours as normal. For example, Ava described a situation where her coach would smack her while spotting an element on bars, "It just seemed so natural and happened so often and since I was so young that coaches were supposed to treat me like that." Similarly, Hannah described an instance on the floor apparatus where she felt the demands on her coach were normal and acceptable,

After hurting my rib, my coach had asked me to do three more repetitions of my floor routine, and I was crying and in so much pain, but there was nothing I couldn't handle. I thought training while injured was just something that happened. I just thought that they knew best no matter what and so despite my broken rib, I got back up and did three more. I just thought it was something that happened as a gymnast.

All of the participants who described the normalization of coaching abuse stated that age was a relevant factor. If they were exposed to such behaviour at a relatively young age, then coaching abuse was more or less accepted as normal as the gymnasts' careers progressed. Parker described this by saying, "At that age, I never thought of it as abuse. By the time I got old enough to realize it was, I was retired from the sport."

### *3.3 Rationalization of abuse based on what coaches had done to the gymnasts and their teammates previously*

Similar to the gymnasts rationalizing coaching abuse in comparison to the treatment of teammates, a few gymnasts rationalized their coaches' conduct based on what other coaches had done to them previously. Here, the rationalization involved a self-reflection whereby the gymnast believed "it had been worse" under past coaches. Ava shared her experiences with a past coach, and contrasted it to her experiences with her elite coach,

I trained at a different gym prior to coming to the gym I went elite at, and oh my goodness. I trained with a different coach, and she [coach] physically abused me, mentally abused me and threatened me all the time. It was horrible. So despite some of the experiences that I went through at my new gym, I give my elite coach so much love because they could've done so much worse to me.

When asked if Ava felt her coach was a great coach or if she was saying that her coach was a good coach in contrast to other coaches, she responded with, "that's tricky. I mean, there were worse coaches out there, so in contrast I guess he wasn't so bad, but that doesn't make him a good coach." In this instance, young, female elite gymnasts coped with abusive coaching behaviour by recalling their experiences with previous coaches who apparently treated them worse. Such rationalization likely resulted in erecting a protective shield to manage and perhaps minimize abuse from elite coaches.

#### *3.4 Gymnasts felt they deserved the abuse they received*

Two participants in this study reported they felt they deserved the abuse they received from their coaches. In other words, they blamed themselves. Ava described this by saying, "I'm not sure, maybe I was being silly. Maybe I deserved to get yelled at, or

pinched when I wasn't doing something right. Maybe it was something I was doing that made them do it." Similarly, Jessa blamed the coaching abuse on a health issue she had,

I struggled with anxiety a lot, so I went through periods where I would say I'm not doing something, or I'm too scared. So maybe that's why they [coaches] abused me? To this day, I still don't know what I did to deserve it.

That gymnasts felt they deserved being abused is a not uncommon response from victims of abuse. Feelings of self-blame indicate how severe the consequences of abuse are. Such inward-looking emotions shelter the perpetrator of abuse because the victim believes the abuse is deserved, or they cannot understand why they are being victimized. It is not surprising that in this study some young, elite female gymnasts blamed themselves for the coaching abuse they experienced.

### *3.5 Gymnasts can now retrospectively recognize abuse*

In hindsight, all participants looked back on their experiences as elite artistic gymnasts and recognized they experienced various degrees of coaching abuse. Each gymnast arrived at this realization of coaching abuse in a distinct way. For example, Jessa now recognized coaching abuse when she stated, "Looking back now, I can acknowledge that the refusal to spot a child when they're incapable of doing alone is not OK, and shouldn't be allowed." Similarly, Parker recounted the way she interpreted her abuse,

I definitely look back and think that they [coaches] shouldn't have pinched me, or I don't think they should've yelled at me or hit me and so on. But definitely, when you're in a handstand on bars and they squeeze or they smack or pinch your butt, of course you're going to squeeze your butt because they're hurting you. So I

think that there's a method behind it, but inflicting pain on a child isn't appropriate.

While acknowledging the abuse, a few participants understood that coaching abuse is not a constitutive or necessary element of elite gymnastics as they once believed. Ashton made reference to this by saying, "Now that I'm not in the sport anymore, I can look back and think that these things [abuse] weren't positive. This isn't gymnastics. This isn't supposed to happen to everyone, you know? It's just bad coaching, but it isn't part of the sport I loved." Hannah also referred to coaching abuse in this way, "I know that I was abused. I try not to think about it, because it really takes away from the sport and how much I loved it. Being abused doesn't have to happen to be a great gymnast." Further, Madison explained that she was successful in other endeavors following her retirement from elite gymnastics that did not involve negative coaching behaviour. She explained,

I moved onto doing another sport once I retired from gymnastics, and I was more successful in that than I was in gymnastics, just without all the negative coaching experiences I had as a gymnast. I still managed to be successful.

The recognition that coaching abuse is not a necessary factor in elite gymnastics requires stepping back from the sport. This can be done either through retirement, experiencing other sports or learning about the meaning of abuse and engaging in serious reflection on one's abuse experiences. When immersed and committed to the sport, it is difficult to realize the unethical behaviour of coaches and the scope of influence such conduct had on the gymnasts.

## Cluster Four: Resolutions of Abuse

### *4.1 Coach initiated resolutions of abuse*

Participants in this study experienced different resolution methods that their coaches used in an attempt to manage conflict. These methods were perceived as either effective or ineffective. Many participants recalled that when their coaches were frustrated with them, they would send the gymnast to a line to continue practicing their skills or to a different coach in an effort to resolve the conflict. Madison recalled, “He’d [coach] tell me to step away, think about what I was doing, get my head out of my butt and then come back and try again.” Gymnasts, however, did not view getting sent to the line as an effective resolution. Rather, they felt that coaches had given up on them. Jessa explained this by saying, “She’d [coach] just send me to a different coach and tell them to deal with me.” Further, Jessa recounted that if she was not sent to a different coach that her usual coach would tell her to give up on herself. She explained, “She [coach] didn’t want me to succeed. She’d just tell me to give up after a whole lot of yelling and persuasion.” Ava remembered that her coach often passed her off onto a different coach, and when asked if she thought this was an effective method of resolving conflict, she responded,

Getting talked to in the office was effective, but getting sent to a different coach just made me want to give up and not even try anymore. I felt so useless, kind of like I was just bothering him [coach] and now I was going to be passed onto someone else and become someone else’s problem.

Two participants had wished their coaches resolved their conflicts orally and on a one-on-one basis. For example, Parker recalled, “I think just saying something verbally

might have been more effective for resolving conflict than what I went through.”

Similarly, Jessa mentioned wishing her coach used verbal resolution methods to de-escalate tense situations rather than the ineffective methods her coach used. Jessa remembered an instance when her coach asked her to write an apology letter, explaining that she was sorry for her behaviour,

They [coaches] made me write an apology note. I went back the next day, gave it to her [coach], but I was still so mad and I definitely wasn't sorry, but I was being made to do this and I learnt I couldn't say no. When I gave it to her [coach], she said thank you. And then it was done, because there was nothing else to do. I wasn't even sorry and it didn't make me feel better. Just sucks looking back that the bigger person had to be the teenage girl instead of the thirty-something coach.

Some gymnasts, however, reported that when a coach talked to them personally to resolve a conflict it was very effective. Ava demonstrates stated,

My coach was the head coach, and you don't want to disappoint him. When you disappoint him, it's in yourself – in your heart. It's just like, wow, I really messed up. That's why when we had any sort of conflict. it worked so well when he talked to me in private.

Similarly, Jessa recalled a situation when her coach had publically humiliated her at a competition by yelling at her and threatening to pull her from the competition if she did not execute her routine perfectly. She related how her coach resolved the situation,

After my routine, he [coach] pulled me aside and apologized and said he was sorry and that he didn't mean to yell in my face or embarrass me, but he needed to get me to do the routine perfectly. Then we just moved on.

Most participants recalled situations where coaches initiated conflict resolutions that were effective and ineffective. Success or failure depended on the method the coach chose to implement. The participants felt that when their coaches used verbal resolution tactics, like talking to the athletes one-on-one in private, the conflict was likely to get resolved in a way that made the gymnasts feel they could move past the conflict. In contrast, the participants felt that non-verbal resolution methods, which included writing apology letters, or being sent away from their principal coach to another coach or athlete line, were ineffective and did not resolve the conflict.

#### *4.2 Gymnast initiated resolutions of abuse*

Most of the participants in this study stated that when a conflict arose between them and their coaches, the gymnasts were rarely the ones to initiate any form of resolution to a tense situation. Madison said, “I generally would never instigate an apology. I just waited for him [coach] to see how frustrated I was and come over and tell me to move on.” The gymnasts explained that they would never question anything the coaches did as young females in the sport, and therefore they would not initiate any form of resolution due to a fear of what the coach may do or say in response to their resolution attempt. Parker recalled being afraid to verbally confront her coach to ask why she was being smacked during a skill on the uneven bars,

I would never question anything she did. Even when she [coach] would be smacking me around on the bars, I would never go up to her and say why are you doing this to me? You should stop, because I don't like that. I would never go up to a coach and tell them they were doing something wrong out of fear of what would happen to me if I did.

When Parker was asked to elaborate on what type of fear she was referring to, she responded,

The fear of retaliation, I guess? It was the fear of them getting angry. I never knew how far they'd be willing to go to hurt me. I just never knew the consequences that were going to come from that. If I told someone else, and it got leaked back to the coach, I would fear when they come in the gym the next day as to what their actions would be towards me.

Similarly, Ashton shared a situation where her entire group was yelled at for not performing the conditioning exercises they were expected to do quickly enough. She explained, "After getting yelled at, no one was going to say anything back to her [coach]. We all just stood there silently, and when we were done getting yelled at, we continued where we left off." Jessa also described being afraid to stand up to her coach because of her age. She reflected, "Looking back now, I would've told the coach that them hitting me was bullshit, but that's me speaking now. As a child, I wouldn't have said a word."

Jessa was the only participant who stated she once tried to initiate a resolution with her coach over a conflict, but that she never did so again because of her coach's negative response. Jessa explained that when she stood up to her coach and said she was too tired to execute a skill safely, her coach kicked her out of the gym. She recalled,

One time, I was doing a skill on beam and I said I didn't feel comfortable doing it without spot. She specifically said, "You're not allowed to say no to me". There was a long lecture about respect after that, and I still said no, I really don't feel comfortable doing this skill. She sent me home right after that. All because I didn't feel comfortable doing a skill and I voiced how I felt.

The power imbalance between the gymnasts and their coaches and the authoritarian role of their coaches intimidated the gymnasts in this study. So much so that the gymnasts felt they could not approach their coaches to resolve conflicts between them. The young age of the gymnasts also contributed to this circumstance. In most instances coaches exploited the fear gymnasts experienced which gave them license to verbally abuse and punish the athletes with impunity.

#### *4.3 Non-verbal apologies*

The theme of non-verbal apologies is a type of resolution gymnasts described whereby they would show their coach that they could perform specific and difficult skills. Successfully executing such skills was perceived as a form of apology when the athlete and coach were caught up in a tense situation. Ava described this form of resolution,

Instead of saying sorry, I would just do whatever skill caused the conflict. I would ask my coach if I could show him the skill I was struggling with. It was like the only way it would be OK to get back into his [coach's] good graces...if I did what he wanted – regardless of whether I could, or even if I wanted to.

Similarly, Madison recalled that the cause of her coaching abuse experiences stemmed from her inability to perform certain skills. She explained, “The only way I could get back into his good books was to do what he was asking. Then I’d show him, and everything went back to normal and we moved on.”

Gymnasts reported that they only used this resolution approach to stop the coaching abuse they were experiencing. For example, Jessa described, “The only reason I’d do the skill was to just get him to shut up and stop yelling and embarrassing me.” All of the gymnasts used this sort of non-verbal approach to solve conflicts between them

and their coaches. Once coaches were satisfied gymnasts performed to their liking, the coach-athlete relationships went back to being “normal.”

#### *4.4 Unresolved conflicts*

Many of the participants in this study felt the conflicts they experienced with their coaches were left unresolved. When Hannah was asked about how conflict was resolved between her and her coach, she responded, “I wouldn’t resolve anything – I would just avoid it in the hope that when I came into the gym the next day, we’d be able to drop it and move on.” Similarly, when Ashton was asked how she resolved conflict with her coach, she stated, “Nothing was resolved. I would just sort of smarten up and not make the same mistake twice.” Gymnasts blamed the lack of resolving conflicts on the fact that both they and their coaches were often frustrated and unwilling to resolve problems. Jessa described,

Sometimes, I’d just stand on the beam for hours and cry and that would be it.

There’d be no problem solving because they [coaches] were frustrated with me and I was frustrated with them and with the skill, so the coaches would just yell at me and threaten me and I still wouldn’t do the skill. I would spend the entire four-hour practice standing on the beam crying because of how I was being treated.

Then at the end of the day, I’d go home. The next at practice, I still wouldn’t do it, so obviously it wasn’t an effective resolution strategy.

Parker felt her coach never apologized for any of her actions and that conflicts between them were never resolved. She asserted, “There was never an apology that happened or anything, because I think for coaches that’s just second nature. They would

just pinch you, or smack you, or shove you to get out of their way. Nothing was ever resolved.”

Leaving problems between athletes and coaches unresolved was a common occurrence in elite female artistic gymnastics. Perhaps by not addressing conflicts gymnasts were kept on edge and coaches could always use any uncertainty about these situations to their advantage. It could also be that large and small issues and problems were so commonplace that resolving them all would take too much effort. In this sense, only serious conflicts were addressed and problems were managed rather than resolved.

#### Theme Five: Coping Mechanisms

##### *5.1 Lying to or deceiving coaches to avoid future abuse*

The most prominent coping mechanism participants reported using was deception. To avoid getting yelled at or punished, gymnasts would lie about whether or not they did what the coaches asked of them. Ava demonstrated this by recounting,

Sometimes, I could do a flyaway, and sometimes I couldn't do a flyaway. It was just a mental block because I would always hit my feet on the bar, so I was just really scared. I would be so terrified at times that I would cheat. I would say that I did it, even though I didn't, because I was just so scared of what my coach was going to say or do to me if he found out that I wasn't doing them.

Similarly, Parker shared, “I learned to lie about stuff that went on in the gym. It was something that seemed so much easier to do instead of getting reamed out for not being able to do something.” Gymnasts also stated they often lied to their coaches as a way to move onto the next skill and continue their skill development. For example,

Hannah recalled lying to her coaches about how many repetitions she performed of a skill on the balance beam so she could move onto her other skills,

I always lied to her [coach]. I said I did fifteen reps, but I only did five. I just couldn't keep up with their [coach's] demands, and I was not about to get punished for not doing it, so I lied. Lying was easier than like, getting hit or yelled at in front of everyone.

A few gymnasts also shared that their parents would also lie to coaches about why the gymnasts could not attend practices as a result of being screamed at, experiencing mental blocks or being emotionally upset. Ava remembered,

If I was super upset about something that happened at the gym, or I didn't want to go in and get yelled at, I would just stay home. I just wouldn't go to training that day. My parents would call my coaches and make up some excuse as to why I couldn't go, but they obviously knew why I didn't want to go.

Participants who spoke about lying and deception as a way to deal with their experiences of abuse shared that it was an effective coping strategy. This form of coping may be understood as a form of self-preservation either physically or emotionally. If gymnasts were afraid to execute particular skills or wanted to stay away from the gym to avoid coaching abuse, then lying and deception were perceived as justifiable.

### *5.2 Gymnasts using each other to cope with abusive experiences*

A few participants in this study relied on their teammates as a cope with coaching abuse. These participants described that by sharing personal experiences of coaching abuse with other gymnasts, they were able to relate to and comfort one another. Jessa

recalled, “we were all pretty close in the fact that if someone was crying over a coach, we’d all be like oh she sucks anyways, you’re all good it’s fine.” Ashton described,

I guess we talked amongst ourselves as athletes, and that’s how we coped and blew off steam. We’d be like, oh my goodness she [coach] was so mean today. But if you’re talking to people with the same experiences as you, how much advice can they really give you, right? I just did it more to be understood.

Participants shared their experiences and feelings about coaching abuse with teammates. This created a cathartic effect and enabled gymnasts to cope with stressful situations with their coaches. By sharing their knowledge and experiences of coaching abuse, gymnasts understood the various forms of this phenomenon and were somewhat reassured they were not the only victims of abusive coaching behaviour.

### *5.3 Parental coping mechanisms*

This sub-theme refers to gymnasts telling their parents only about positive experiences in gymnastics and neglecting to mention “bad days” in the gym. Gymnasts explained that they felt uncomfortable sharing negative experiences they had in gymnastics with their parents for two main reasons. First, gymnasts did not want to re-live any abusive coaching experiences, and second, they were sensitive to the financial commitments their parents to support them in gymnastics. Parker described,

I would always get in the car after practice and my mom would ask how training went. And I’d say fine, even if it wasn’t fine. But if it was a really bad day, I would just keep it to myself as opposed to if I had an awesome day. If I got a skill on an event, I’d be like I did it! But if I was standing on beam for two hours not

being able to do a back tuck getting yelled at and getting a piece torn out of me, I wouldn't come home and tell them that.

When asked why Parker did not share her bad days with her parents, she explained, "I didn't want to re-live it. It happened. There was no point dwelling or sharing it knowing nothing would come out of it." Similarly, Ava explained that when she had a good day at the gym and positive coach-athlete interactions, she would share that with her parents; yet when she had a bad day, she recalled, "I would just blame my sour mood on myself, or school, but I'd never tell them what really happened." Jessa agreed with the latter sentiment when she stated, "I never told my Dad anything. He would pick me up from gym and we'd just listen to the radio on the way home and pretend life was peachy."

Two gymnasts noted that they did not share negative coach-athlete interactions with their parents because of the financial commitments their parents made to support them in gymnastics. Madison recalled, "I never missed gymnastics no matter what was going on. The reason I was always there, getting yelled at and taking everything in, was because I knew how much money it was." Hannah also described her dad's financial commitment to gymnastics when she said, "I understood and knew my dad was working an extra job for me to do gymnastics. I just thought, why would I tell him something that would put all of that to waste?"

Shielding parents from the negative experiences the participants in this study endured in elite gymnastics not only removed parents from the reality of the sport, but denied them an opportunity to advocate for the welfare of their children in the sport. Gymnasts also felt guilty about squandering their parents' financial investment in them as

elite athletes. To carry such burdens at a young age added to pressures and strain of being top performers.

#### *5.4 Gymnasts turned a blind-eye to the abuse*

Finally, a few gymnasts in this study expressed they coped with, and still cope with their experiences of coaching abuse by turning a blind eye to the abuse. Often to the point of pretending that it did not happen. Jessa described, “I just don’t think back to it [abuse] often. I just try to pretend like it never happened.” Similarly, Hannah explained that while she was a gymnast, she would push the occurrences of abuse out of her mind and pretend that it was not happening. She explained,

I always just went home after being yelled at and threatened and told myself that I was crazy, and that what I was going through wasn’t actually happening. I feel like it was just so much easier to pretend it didn’t happen, you know? Because admitting you were being abused isn’t an easy thing to do.

Gymnasts also mentioned that they now look back retrospectively on their experiences and still turn a blind eye to the idea that they were abused. Ashton described, I look back and think in retrospect, and I’m like yeah, that wasn’t supposed to happen like that, and it wasn’t acceptable. They [coaches] weren’t supposed to do that. And if it ever happens again, I’ll do this next time. And then you sort of brush it under the rug and get over it, you know? I just pretend it wasn’t real.

#### *5.5 Summary*

This chapter presented what the participants in this study had to say with regard to coaching abuse experiences as young, elite artistic gymnasts. The themes explained above include gymnasts’ early experiences within the sport, their peak elite experiences,

the dynamics of their coach-athlete relationships, any instances of abuse they experienced, the resolutions that were used to solve conflict and the coping methods the gymnasts' created to deal with abusive situations that arose. The following chapter will apply two moral frameworks, by Torres & Hager (2013) and Bergmann Drewe (2003), to the findings presented in this chapter to assess the ethical implications of coaching abuse, draw a number of conclusions and make several recommendations.

## Chapter Five

### Ethical Considerations, Conclusions and Recommendations

The themes related to coaching abuse that emerged in this study and discussed in the previous chapter are largely supported by the existing literature on coach-athlete relationships in elite female gymnastics. This study provided a qualitative approach to examine physical, sexual and emotional abuse between coaches and gymnasts. In this the final chapter, two ethical frameworks, as explained in chapter three on methods, will be applied to the emergent themes. The elucidation here will draw relevant connections between the moral frameworks and the findings. The chapter will close by stating a number of conclusions regarding coaching abuse in elite female artistic gymnastics, suggesting a number of reforms to reduce and hopefully eliminate these terrible, unconscionable experiences, and making several recommendations.

#### *Mutualism as a Conception of Sport*

The first moral framework to assess the ethical implications of abuse in female artistic gymnastics is outlined by Torres and Hager (2013) and is known as mutualism. As stated in the methods chapter, this framework argues that sport is a social practice so constituted such that there are presumptive normative values in sport. For example, values such as trying one's best and pursuing excellence are and must be mutually held values by all stakeholders of any given sport, including athletes, coaches and officials. Furthermore, the acceptance of what Torres & Hager (2013) refer to as a mutualistic approach to sport should lead to sport serving an educational purpose. As such, youth learn to ethically compete against one another in a way that cooperative practices and friendship flourish, and competitive animosity or the need to win at all costs is reduced or

avoided. This mutualistic approach suggests that athletes need to recognize and accept their opponents as moral equals who are also trying to affirm sport's embedded normative values.

The acceptance of a presumptive normative (moral) framework like mutualism mitigates the risk of an egoistic tendency known as runaway individualism which is sometimes present in athletes and coaches (Kretchmar, 2005). Since mutualism emphasizes that all stakeholders need to accept, share and reciprocate core values in sport, the needs of a single individual cannot overshadow the interests of all stakeholders. Mutualism provides a counterweight to runaway individualism and is especially important in aesthetic sports such as elite gymnastics where egoism often exists among coaches and athletes and contributes to abusive relationships.

Mutualism as presented by Torres & Hager (2013) will be applied to elite female artistic gymnastics and assessed in four sub-sections. First, I will provide a description of the role of the coach from a moral point of view in competitive youth sport. Second, I will discuss the mutualistic approach to sport proposed by Torres & Hager (2013) in greater detail. This discussion will include an explanation of broad internalism, the normative values of sport that mutualism promulgates, and how these values lead to a mutual quest for excellence through challenge (MQEC) (Simon, 2010). Third, I will apply the above concepts to the perceived abuse experiences of the elite female gymnasts in this study. Here, the normative values mutually shared by participants and coaches will be highlighted in relation to runaway individualism and self-aggrandizement, and how these concepts contributed to abuse within the coach-athlete relationship. Finally, I will critique the recommendations Torres & Hager (2013) offer on how to mitigate the risks

of runaway individualism and coach-athlete conflicts. In other words, what are the limitations and shortcomings of mutualism with reference to abuse in elite female gymnastics. For example, mutualism encourages a particular conception of sport whereby athletes and coaches learn to see competitors as partners and not as enemies. This is similar to the Kantian moral dictum that others should always be viewed as ends and not merely as means. Still, there may be other reasonable ethical conceptions of sport that differ from mutualism. These different ideas of sport may have alternative views of abuse.

### *The Role of the Coach*

Many different opinions exist when it comes to defining the role of a coach. Simon (2013) explains that the role of the coach is sometimes technical, which means that a coach has an obligation to teach athletes the mechanics of the sport needed to achieve athletic success. Based on skills and success, a good coach can be defined as someone who wins, because winning is the ultimate goal of athletic competition. As many philosophers argue however, winning is not the only ethical duty of a coach. For example, coaches that win may have great reputations in the sport community, but Simon would argue they may not be good coaches. This would be the case if they do not satisfy the ethical requirement of teaching their athletes age appropriate strategies or game awareness (Simon, 2013). Therefore, I will presume coaches should not be evaluated solely on their ability to technically train athletes who win.

Moreover, youth coaches are often entrusted with responsibilities that mirror the values parents teach their children. These include morals, ethics, tolerance and respect for both themselves and others (Boxill, 2013). It has also been argued that coaches have

greater influence on young athletes when compared to their parents, teachers, peers or religious leaders (Boxill, 2013). Due to the impact coaches have on athletes, athletes often view their coaches in a paternalistic manner. In this study for example, Ava trained over 30 hours a week and stated, “the gym was a second home for me, and my coach became part of my family.” Therefore, coaches are not only required to be technical instructors, but similar to teachers, they should act as positive ethical role models because their influence is pervasive and leaves deep impressions on athletes (Simon, 2013).

As this chapter will reveal, philosophers maintain that coaches, especially in youth sport, have an obligation to teach and demonstrate to athletes several moral values. These include respect for themselves, opponents and officials; the promotion of sportsmanlike behaviours on and off the field; and the cultivation of enthusiasm, generosity and altruism in sport (Simon, 2013). Coaches have a platform to teach values such as the preceding ones due to the authority they wield over athletes (Boxill, 2013). For example, gymnasts in this study viewed their coaches as “God-like beings” because of the power their coaches held over them. Similarly, when describing their coaches, some gymnasts used terms like superior or authoritative. Therefore, if a coach is entrusted with this level of power and is responsible for teaching values beyond technical skills to their athletes, the coach must model this behavior by exhibiting integrity and good character in all circumstances.

The overarching goal of coaches is to assist youngsters so they become accomplished athletes and moral individuals who pursue excellence in their given sport (Boxill, 2013). Many examples of these ideal coaches are present in youth sport, but unfortunately, the opposite exists as well. For example, Boxill (2013) describes that while

coaches view themselves as promoting internal values of sport, such as building character and self-esteem, athletes may see their coaches emphasizing winning at all costs and defeating their opponents mercilessly. Therefore, a moral evaluation of the role of coaches, their goals and moral obligations are paramount to ensure athletes are properly trained under safe conditions and the well-being of athletes is never undermined or exploited. In the following section, four approaches to the moral evaluation of coaches will be examined.

#### *Four Approaches to the Moral Evaluation of Coaches*

In an article by Simon (2013) entitled, “The Ethical Coach: An Interpretive Account for the Ethics of Coaching,” he proposes four different approaches to the moral evaluation of coaches. These are: (1) winning as the only thing, (2) the Kantian approach, (3) the ethical coach as a person of practical wisdom, and (4) the interpretive approach to coaching. Furthermore, Simon (2013) explains that what constitutes being an ethical coach will depend on the level of sport. For example, a professional coach may display ethical coaching methods very different from that of a high school coach. I will now briefly explain and apply each of the four approaches to morally evaluate coaches.

The first approach to moral evaluation is described as winning as the only thing. Simply put, an extremist may suggest that a good coach is one who achieves the goal of coaching, which is to win and promote victory. Simon (2013) emphasizes that winning may not be the only symbol of a good coach, despite the central goal of winning within athletic competition. He argues that despite a winning record, other requirements need to be satisfied, like fairness and respect, which are important values when evaluating the moral nature of coaching.

The importance of winning is dependent on the level of sport being played. For example, when coaching young children, Simon (2013) argues it is important to teach required movement skills, appropriate strategies, body awareness and promote excitement in the participants that results in lifetime enjoyment. This will drastically contrast the significance of winning in elite amateur and professional sports where a heavier emphasis is placed on winning. As Simon (2013) points out, winning cannot be everything considering there are ways to win without satisfying the ethical requirements of coaching. For example, athletes and teams can consistently compete against weaker opponents or use insider information to ensure winning records. A more in-depth explanation of the ethical requirements of coaching will be discussed in a subsequent section when we discuss the mutual quest for excellence through challenge (MQEC) and the normative values that should be promoted in sport. Simon (2013) concludes by emphasizing that winning is not everything, nor does it fulfill all of the ethical responsibilities of a coach.

As presented in chapter four of this study, gymnasts experienced being pressured to win by their coaches early in their elite careers. Most gymnasts recalled that while participating in recreational gymnastics they were taught to have fun, learned fundamental movement skills needed to progress and followed safety guidelines set out by coaches to avoid injury. Ava described this transition by saying, “earlier on [in her gymnastics career], my coaches never threatened me in the sense that if I didn’t get first place at a competition, I’d be punished when I got back to the gym.” Similarly, Ashton recalled experiencing the pressure to win from her coach, “I got so nervous when I didn’t win. I almost wanted to say I was sorry, but like, what was I sorry for?” The pressure to win from coaches was also apparent in the behaviours the gymnasts began to adopt. For

example, Ava stated, “I won a lot of competitions. If I got ribbons, I’d be so upset with myself that I’d throw them in the garbage. They meant nothing to me.” Most gymnasts discussed the heavy emphasis their coaches placed on winning, and the pressure put on them to live up to their coaches’ high expectations during their elite careers. Ava recounted, “when I didn’t win, I’d go home and cry to myself and beat myself up. I wasn’t just letting myself down, but more importantly, I was letting my coach down too.” In relation to Simon’s view that winning should not be at the forefront of competitive youth sports, it is evident that the experiences of the young female artistic gymnasts in this study were inconsistent with what is expected of a coach who satisfies the ethical requirements of coaching.

The second approach to morally evaluating coaches is the Kantian approach. While a detailed explanation of Kantian ethics will not be presented here, a major tenet of this approach states that human beings should not be used or exploited merely as a means to achieve a goal, but they must always be treated as an end where their integrity is respected. Therefore, coaches should not treat athletes primarily as a means to win or achieve athletic excellence, but must be accorded respect at all times by virtue of being persons (Simon, 2013). Simon identifies ways athletes are treated as mere means.

First, individuals should not be treated in a way they would not consent to being treated. For example, if athletes knew that a coach’s motive to win was the desire to be coach of the year, would athletes consent to abusive coaching behaviour to achieve that goal? In most cases, athletes would not consent to such coaching practices in these circumstances. Second, an individual should not be exploited or taken advantage of in ways that violate their dignity as a person. The latter might include public humiliation or

embarrassment, or unreasonable punishment. Last, an individual should always be valued as a person, and not simply a pawn that exclusively fulfills interests and provides greater net utility or benefit to someone else (Simon, 2013). An example of a coach treating an athlete as a means rather than an end can be seen when a coach instructs a player to deliberately injure an opponent to benefit the team and improve the coach's winning record. Coaches who demand such actions from athletes treat both the perpetrators and victims as means and distort the ethical practice of sport competition. Simon (2013) concludes by stressing that coaches are not to use, exploit or abuse athletes as mere means because they undermine the value of human dignity.

Several gymnasts in this study shared experiences where they felt their coaches violated the Kantian approach to coaching. For example, when gymnasts were told by their coach to complete numerous repetitions of a skill while injured or their coach did not believe them when they said they were injured without a doctor's report, many felt their integrity as persons was being called into question. Additionally, several gymnasts stated they would often be sent to other coaches when their coach became frustrated with them. These examples demonstrate how coaches can undermine human decency in their treatment of athletes. Giving someone the benefit of the doubt or accepting what she or he says is true are basic ways to respect the integrity of people. Yet in these instances, where presumably trust and mutual interests are paramount between coaches and athletes, the ill treatment of athletes prevailed.

Gymnasts also recalled instances where their coaches took advantage of their authority by getting them to do whatever the coach wanted. For example, if a coach wanted the athlete to perform a certain skill, the coach knew he or she had the means to

manipulate the athlete into doing the skill, regardless of what it took, because of the power the coach held over the athlete. Sometimes this power was manifest as overt threats by the coach or making the athlete feel guilty or ignoring the athlete. These were different strategies coaches used to exploit the vulnerabilities of athletes and undermine their integrity as human beings. In sum, I will conclude that based on the gymnasts' shared experiences of their coaches' behaviours, many coaches in this study did not live up to the Kantian approach to coaching.

The third approach to morally evaluating coaches is what Simon describes as a virtuous ethical coach who possesses practical wisdom. This means that a coach must "be a master of spontaneous responses" in many circumstances without relying on a rigid set of rules or principles (Simon, 2013, p. 49). A coach who exercises practical wisdom is someone who is able to adapt and make judgments in any given situation using "virtues such as passion, fairness, and sensitivity" (p. 49). For example, such a coach may be able to motivate an athlete who is struggling with the execution of a particular skill without crossing the line from effective criticism to verbal abuse. This virtuous approach to ethics was proposed by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and insists that once a coach internalizes certain virtues, like those mentioned above, she or he has the tools to act properly without resorting to steadfast rules or tenets. The virtuous coach who acts with practical wisdom may be contrary to the Kantian approach because the virtues, not cardinal principles, guide how others ought to be treated in any given situation. In a dynamic setting like elite sports, where performance and many other demands are evident in practice and competition, ethical coaching responses within a myriad of situations may be optimal. Still, this approach is not without its drawbacks.

For example, if a coach acts solely with practical wisdom, he or she may find it difficult to justify their judgments to parents, teammates, fans or the press. Decisions to start, feature or substitute certain athletes and not others may be determined by the coach's personal sense of fairness or wisdom that may be questioned by critics. Second, coaches need to assess not only individual decisions, but their decisions over time to ensure their judgments are consistent and reasonable. The virtuous coach who acts on a case by case basis may be criticized if his or her decisions appear uneven or are fraught with exceptions. Finally, coaches are not infallible and make mistakes. Virtuous coaches who exercise practical wisdom may not recognize or be reluctant to admit such shortcomings because they would claim their decisions are embedded in "deep seated traits of character" (Simon, 2013, p. 51). It is often hard for people to honestly acknowledge and amend personal failures of character. Moreover, critics of the virtuous coach approach would argue that if complex situations arise, as they often do in elite sport, where the virtuous coach has difficulty deciding how to act, no philosophical or ethical theory will be of much assistance to arrive at sound judgments (Simon, 2013).

In light of this approach and its criticisms, the shared experiences of the gymnasts in chapter four lead to the conclusion that the coaches discussed in this study did not, for the most part, exhibit practical wisdom and commendable virtues. Coaches did not always display virtues such as fairness and sensitivity when interacting with athletes. For example, all gymnasts in this study stated they were verbally and emotionally abused by their coaches. This was the case in situations when they were most vulnerable, especially when struggling with the execution of a skill in practice or during competition. Jessa described an instance where her coach had attempted to motivate her at a competition,

There were definitely times that he [coach] yelled at me, but I'll never forget the time he [coach] yelled in my face at a competition when I was scared to compete my yurchenko, It was my first level 10 meet, and I was so scared. He [coach] freaked out on me, got into my face, and screamed in the loudest voice I've ever heard telling me to do it. I literally thought he [coach] was going to kill me right then and there. I guess this is the only way he [coach] knew I'd go and do the vault.

Based on the experience shared above, it is evident that Jessa's coach did not act in a way that exhibited virtues such as fairness, [com]passion and sensitivity. One might also argue that Jessa's coach crossed the line between motivating his athlete and verbal abuse.

Coaches of gymnasts in this study did not act as persons of practical wisdom when they threatened, taunted, bribed and singled out athletes in front of their peers as a means to motivate gymnasts to execute a particular skill. Similarly, coaches lacked sensitivity when gymnasts reported that their coaches sometimes refused to spot skills when they felt unsafe or uncomfortable executing them by themselves. Further, when the gymnast refused to execute the skill, the coach would occasionally ignore the gymnast as punishment. Through the gymnasts' experiences shared in chapter four, I would argue that the coaches mentioned in this study were on the whole neither virtuous nor displayed practical wisdom. In many of their encounters with athletes they failed to exhibit the virtues necessary to positively motivate and encourage their athletes in their athletic endeavours.

The final approach Simon (2013) proposes to morally evaluate coaches is known as broad internalism which is based on an interpretive and presumptive understanding of

sport. This perspective claims that the basic nature of sport ought to be understood as a “mutual quest for excellence through challenge” (MQEC) and refers to the fact that athletes voluntarily compete against one another and must subscribe to a core set of internal values embedded in sport (p. 52). Therefore, it is incumbent athletes perform at their best, respect the rules, opponents and officials, compete against worthy adversaries, train to achieve excellence and mutually share the goal of trying to win. Yet while adhering to these internal values of sport there is room to interpret rules and unique situations if such interpretation promotes the MQEC in sport. For example, a referee in soccer can decide unilaterally when to apply the advantage rule and refrain from calling a penalty that would stop a rush on goal. Golfers are known to call penalties against themselves based on an honor system in the game. Tennis players are known to admit committing fouls and reverse mistaken calls by the umpire and linesmen. These actions encourage the MQEC within a broad internalist framework, and if such a conception of sport is tenable, one may gauge ethical problems in sport in a presumptive manner. That is, actions may be judged morally permitted or inappropriate if they advance or detract from expressing sport’s internal values which are presumed to be held necessarily by those in the sport community. Moreover, broad internalism has a decidedly educational feature whereby competitors desire to test each other and compare their relative performance to determine athletic excellence (Simon, 2013).

As a particular viewpoint to understand the nature of sport where certain values are presumed must be upheld, broad internalism may be applied as a yardstick to assess ethical issues in sport. Thus coaches who choose to follow the MQEC and broad internalism must be committed to certain values and behaviors within their coaching

practice. Simon (2013) explains that such coaches must adopt an interpretive stance when making difficult coaching decisions. In part this means that coaches must respect the integrity and well-being of athletes at all times. Furthermore, Simon (2013) argues that broad internalism can act as an evaluative tool for assessing coaches by establishing a set of standards to determine what is expected of coaches and how these expectations further meaningful athletic competition (p. 53). For example, if a youth basketball coach achieves a winning record by purposely scheduling matches against less talented teams, his or her behavior would undermine the MQEC. Those in the sport community want to experience fair competitive challenges to then claim a win was well deserved, and a loss was well fought (Simon, 2013).

In addition to the internal values listed above, like playing one's best, respecting the rules and trying to improve, coaches also need to ensure athletes see their opponents as moral equals who "freely enter into a mutually acceptable activity in order to create a challenge" (Simon, 2013, p. 53) Athletes should view competitors as facilitators in relation to their own athletic development and not as mortal enemies. Simon (2013) argues that the MQEC and broad internalism approach is applicable at all levels of sport, from Olympic to youth sport, because they share core internal values and can be incorporated by coaches in their teaching practices. For example, at the 1994 Winter Olympics Tonya Harding's proxy attack against Nancy Kerrigan may have been prompted in part by coaches overemphasizing winning as the only goal and her reckless zeal to fulfill that goal. If so, this would undermine the MQEC and the internal values of sport and reject any attempt to advance sport at its best.

Broad internalism is not without its critics, however. Simon (2013) presents broad internalism in a way that exhibits its ability to withstand criticism from diverse populations, and that it is “regarded as justifiable for all reasonable people” (p. 24). Simon (2013) further explains that broad internalism is truly “the best interpretive theory...and ought to be accepted by all sporting communities” (p. 24). He is right in part when he argues that broad internalism has withstood much criticism from diverse perspectives, however there are individuals who think differently. For example, Morgan (2013) accepts many features of the broad internalist framework, yet rejects its universalistic, ahistorical implications. In contrast, Morgan (2013) argues that “any consensus about justification in sports applies to specific social and historical contexts” (p. 24). He states that sports were viewed very differently in the nineteenth century, and therefore, “proponents of these different views would be unable to engage in discussion with one another, or reach a consensus based on reason since they lack common premises on which to argue” (p. 24). Despite Simon (2013) proposing broad internalism as a strong, justifiable interpretive framework, it is also important to note that this theory is criticized in the literature. As one can see, broad internalism is a conceptual and normative theory that does not diminish the importance of winning in sport, but it tempers the pursuit of winning, whether by coaches, athletes or anyone in the sport community, in practice and competition, so only ethical means are utilized to achieve success. It also fosters the notion coaches ought to be seen and evaluated as educators, as well as technical instructors, who must respect the welfare of athletes at all times (Simon, 2013).

Many of the participants in this study felt their coaches placed a heavy emphasis on winning during their careers as elite gymnasts. This was a dramatic transition from the time they were in recreational gymnastics where they learned fundamental movement skills and a love for the sport. Due to the overemphasis on winning, gymnasts perceived the value of competition in a negative light. Their dislike and fear of competition may have resulted because other internal values of sport, not just winning, were distorted. For example, Madison described, “I hated competition. It was so much pressure – like pressure from my coaches and the pressure to win. I wish I could’ve trained and never competed.” One might say that because winning was so highly stressed Madison did not view competition as a mutual endeavour where meaningful challenges were shared with fellow competitors.

Moreover, perhaps we can propose that the extreme pressure to win stemming from coaches led in part to occurrences of abuse as described by the participants in this study. This claim is supported in view of the fact no gymnast recalled instances of abuse when enrolled in recreational and pre-competitive gymnastics, where coaches were involved in skill development and promoting enjoyment of gymnastics. One could say many internal values of sport were reasonably taught and encouraged at this level. In contrast, once gymnasts reached an elite level coaches began to emphasize winning as the primary core value in the sport. At this point gymnasts began to experience instances of emotional and physical abuse as discussed in chapter four.

One can surmise that a broad internalism approach was not adhered to by coaches when gymnasts blamed occurrences of abuse on poor coaching education. For example, gymnasts admitted their coaches knew how to technically and effectively teach skills

needed to succeed in the sport, but struggled in other areas of coaching, such as teaching athletes life skills and to respect themselves and others. These recollections conform to what Simon (2013) describes as the technical component of coaching, which is to teach necessary skills in order to win. For example, in gymnastics, a coach would teach a gymnast the mechanics of how to do a cartwheel. As Simon (2013) points out, coaches should not be evaluated solely on their ability to win and be technical instructors. They need to also satisfy ethical requirements such as teaching athletes to respect opponents, be good sports, and show enthusiasm for promoting the best sport has to offer.

Furthermore, Boxill (2013) explains that because of the immense amount of time coaches spend with athletes, coaches have similar duties to that of a parent. Such obligations may include teaching life lessons, tolerance and respect for themselves and others. Coaches must not only be teachers of skill, but should be viewed as role models who display positive values and behaviors, even non-sport ones, for their athletes to mirror. The participants in this study were taught technical skills to succeed in gymnastics, however many indicated they learned negative sport and non-sport values from their coaches. For example, Jessa described her coach's behavior, "My coach didn't know enough about – not gymnastics, but about being a coach. Like, they didn't know how to talk to and train gymnasts, despite being certified". Similarly, Madison reflected, "Maybe they [coaches] just don't know enough about how to be a coach. Sure, you can spot skills and stuff, but it's another thing to know how to foster young females and ensure their well-being." Lastly, Ashton related her perception of the role of her coach, "I was with my coaches more than my parents. It may or may not be their [coaches'] responsibility to sort of guide us down the right path, but I didn't get any of it." These

comments indicate gymnasts in this study expected coaches to behave and express values beyond the technical aspects of the sport—values related to decency, respect and leading a moral life.

To conclude this section, let us reflect on what it means to be a coach and the role a coach ought to assume. Simon (2013) argues that the role of a coach is to win by fair and honorable means; yet there are other ethical requirements that need to be satisfied to fulfill this role, such as teaching values internal to sport. Furthermore, we can evaluate a coach based on the four different methods outlined above. Simon (2013) is a proponent and advocate of the broad internalism approach to coaching because of its interpretative and presumptive dimensions, commitment to the MQEC and the internal values of sport, and service as a yardstick to judge ethical issues. He also insists this approach be held to public scrutiny and welcomes criticism to refine its assumptions and conclusions when applied as an ethical tool.

Unlike the tenets of broad internalism, the gymnasts in this study saw their coaches place a heavy emphasis on winning whereby they did not view training and competition as sites of educational opportunity in the full sense of this phrase. As such, competitors and teammates were not seen as moral equals who mutually and voluntarily agree to participate in a sporting contest for the purpose of enhancing one another's performance. Based in part on the coaches' win at all costs mentality, all the gymnasts experienced at least one form of abuse at the hands of their coaches during their elite careers, whether it was physical, emotional or sexual abuse. Therefore, I propose that if coaches adopt a broad internalist approach, such that sport is an educational activity and athletes are taught values internal to sport like fair play and the pursuit of excellence, the

risk of coaching abuse may decrease. When coaches, athletes and the sport community accept the MQEC and a broad internalism perspective, sport is a mutual endeavour, the value of winning is tempered, and the internal values of sport can and must be shared and exemplified which includes respect for the rules and those in the sport community. Simon (2013) concludes by stating that the primary and only goal of competitive sport should not be to win, but rather it should more broadly foster and educate athletes on important ethical norms embedded in competitive sport.

#### *The Case for Interpretivism in Sport*

An elaboration of Simon's broad internalism approach is provided by Torres and Hager (2013) who prefer the term interpretivism. This word is selected to describe broad internalism because the practice of sport requires that its structure, goals and rules be interpreted. Such rules include constitutive ones that define the nature of competitive sport generally (e.g., athletes must try to win) and particular sports (e.g., no touching the ball with the hands in soccer), as well as other game rules and social conventions that shape the character of sport (e.g., body checking in elite male ice hockey) (Torres & Hager, 2013). Therefore, to make sense of sport certain conceptions must be presupposed together with the evolution of rules and traditions of particular sports, and these dimensions are open for interpretation. Interpretivism also maintains that no other reason or motive need be given to accept the underlying principles that define competitive sport and the ethos of specific sports other than to make that particular activity possible. So, if one's principal motive to engage in competitive basketball is for health purposes, to make friends or have fun, these are all external, personal reasons contingent on more basic

conditions, like trying to win, creating challenges and entering cooperative and adversarial relationships, which all basketball players must accept to play the game.

Torres and Hager (2013) also explain interpretivism in relation to the work of John Russell who introduces two related principles. The first principle states that the rules of a sport are “interpreted to generate a coherent and principled account of the point and purpose that underline the game, attempting to show the game in its best light (p. 172). The second principle states, “rules should be interpreted in such a manner that the excellences embodied in achieving the lusory [winning] goal of the game are not undermined but are maintained and fostered” (p. 172). Based on these principles, Russell argues that the goals and rules of sport must be interpreted in a lucid and just way to realize sport at its best by exemplifying excellences toward the goal of winning (Torres & Hager, 2013).

Another point Russell makes to explain interpretivism in sport is related to the virtue of integrity. By internalizing and expressing the virtue of integrity, interpretivism presupposes moral equality within the “context of competition” (Torres & Hager, p. 172). This means that participants in competitive sports are entitled to equal concern and respect and are obligated to “pursue genuinely worthy adversaries” and to “take reasonable measures to promote conditions that would allow competition to function with worthy adversaries” (p. 173). Therefore, interpretivism demands that all participants be treated as moral equals and that competition genuinely foster that sport be seen in its best light.

While Russell (2013) highlights the moral dimension of sport, Torres and Hager (2013) argue that interpretivism should also include the aesthetic features of sport.

Therefore, an interpretive, optimal conception of sport would be best understood from a moral-aesthetic point of view. Just as moral demands are grounded in principles and conditions linked to the goals and defining aspects of sport, the effort to display sport at its best requires an aesthetic concern (Torres & Hager, 2013). For example, soccer is perceived worldwide as “the beautiful game,” yet when players dishonour this view by undermining their moral obligation to avoid committing acts of violence let’s say, the game is seen as “ugly.” Soccer, and all sports to one degree or another, contain aesthetic characteristics and these, together with moral aspects, must be maintained and promoted through an interpretive method to realize sport at its best (Torres & Hager, 2013).

Simon (2013), Russell (2013), and Torres and Hager (2013) agree that sport is a mutual striving for excellence, and that winning is not the sole purpose of competition but rather the relative comparison of the quality of athletic performance. Furthermore, the moral dimension of competitive sports represents fairness and moral equality among athletes. The aesthetic dimension introduces an additional intrinsic property of sport, and together these aspects represent a mutualistic effort to “promote and honour excellence and the integrity of sports’ best interpretation” (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 174). An interpretivist approach to competitive sports does not view athletes as enemies to be vanquished, but as worthy, respectful opponents who share in a mutual striving for excellence through challenges that contain moral and aesthetic dimensions.

### *Applying Interpretivism to Youth Sport*

Before we can apply the interpretivist approach to youth sport specifically, we must first philosophically define what the term youth means. As mentioned in chapter two, there is no set definition of youth, and therefore it is challenging to determine who

should be labeled as youth. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years, whereas the United Nations breaks the term youth into two smaller categories of “teenagers,” who are individuals between 13 and 19 years, and “young adults,” who are individuals between 20 and 24 years (p. 174). Philosophically speaking, Torres & Hager (2013) broadly describe youth to represent the time between childhood and adulthood, and that youth is typically a synonym for “youngster” (p. 174). What’s important to note about these given definitions of youth however is that individuals under the age of 18 are still considered to be “children” (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 174).

Despite a lack of certainty when legally defining the term youth, we must attend to social, cultural and political meanings of the word globally that represents the time immediately prior to adulthood. When defining the term youth, Torres and Hager (2013) refer to Tamar Schapiro who based on Kantian ethics argues that “the condition of childhood is one in which the agent is not yet in a position where she can speak in her own voice because there is no voice which counts as hers” (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 175). Because Schapiro views children as “underdeveloped agents,” she maintains that a paternalistic posture toward children is justifiable because they lack the ability to work out a life plan “all at once” (p. 175). Therefore, Schapiro emphasizes “adults have a duty to overcome this normative predicament,” but understands that only adults have the power to help children develop a voice, create a life plan, and in doing so, become developed, mature agents (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 175).

The duties adults have to assist in the development of children contain positive and negative commitments. Positive obligations encourage adults to foster the

development of children in ways that will result in children being able to authoritatively rule over themselves without being overly dependent on adults. Schapiro warns that adults should “refrain from hindering them [children] in this effort (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 175). In other words, adults should not permanently treat or speak to children in ways that demean them and portray them as being less than human. Adults should neither treat children “as a permanent underclass,” nor should adults deliberately act in ways that obstruct the appropriate development of children (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 175). Within a Kantian ethics framework, Schapiro insists that adults treat children as ends and not merely as means to an end, they should bring awareness to the authority children have over themselves, and teach children how to exercise this authority properly. In other words, adults have an obligation to ensure children develop a voice for themselves, one that is an authoritarian self-rule voice and exercise their voice in situations where children can and should express themselves. To conclude, Schapiro emphasizes that “in order not to abuse our privilege as adults, we must make children’s dependency our enemy” (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 175).

Before I apply an adult’s obligation to a child in elite, artistic gymnastics, I will first relate these obligations to the interpretivist approach explained previously. The above duties assist youth on the last part of their transition to adulthood “by respecting their emerging authority over themselves, which includes opportunities to exercise and expand their authoritative capacities” (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 176). If we view the interpretivist approach to competitive youth sport as a mutual quest for excellence (MQEC), this requires youth question where they belong in this social endeavor. As mentioned in a previous section, Simon (2013) argues that competitive sport is never an

individual enterprise but fundamentally a cooperative one. Therefore, if interpretivism is credible to explain the nature of youth sport, participants should be given the opportunity to carve their own space in sport by exercising their personal authority and making their voices publically heard. What this means is that by adopting an interpretivist approach, youth are able to situate themselves not only among their peers, but also in relation to all stakeholders in competitive sports (i.e., coaches, managers, parents and sport administrators). Under this view then, we see that competitive youth sport acts as the foreground for self-discovery and self-creation, and provides participants the opportunity to exercise their own voices to make decisions for themselves (Torres & Hager, 2013).

I will now apply the obligations adults have to young competitive athletes under the conceptions discussed above and relate these ideas to elite, female artistic gymnastics. Specifically, reference to adults will be mainly limited to coaches, and the youth will be the participants in this study. As mention earlier, the goal of these obligations is to ensure adults (coaches) foster the development of children (participants) in a way that will result in children (participants) being able to authoritatively rule over themselves, without being overly dependent on adults [coaches]. When coaches abide by these commitments and accept an interpretivist account of sport, they create for athletes a foundation for self-discovery and self-creation that meets the very best of sport's virtuous moral and aesthetic standards.

As I explained in chapter four, all the participants described their coaches as strict authority figures who governed them and their peers. Due to the high level of authority of the coaches, the gymnasts were treated in a paternalistic manner, and the coach-athlete relationship was comparable to that of a mother-daughter or father-daughter relationship.

These associations developed due to the amount of time and trust the athletes shared with their coaches. For example, Parker recalled instances where her coach took her and her peers out for meals, outings and for overnight getaways. Similarly, the gymnasts' reported that their coaches controlled how many repetitions on each apparatus they did, the amount of time they spent on each apparatus and the attire the gymnasts wore to practices and competitions. The level of control and power exerted by coaches onto athletes filtered into virtually all areas of the gymnasts' careers. One may question whether or not the gymnasts were able to develop a voice for themselves when their coaches controlled most aspects of their lives both inside and outside the context of gymnastics.

This observation is contrary to what Schapiro insisted—adults should refrain from hindering the ability of youth to create a perspective of their own, and should not treat youth as a permanent underclass. Such directives are incredibly difficult to carry out in a sport like elite, female artistic gymnastics where coaches possess almost absolute authority over athletes. In this study, participants were fearful to stand up for themselves or question the teaching practices of their coaches. As Parker described,

I just looked up to them [coaches] so much that there never came a time where I felt I could advocate for myself, or talk back to them because they just did so much for me. No matter what they wanted me to do, it wasn't a matter of whether or not I wanted to do it. Without thinking, I would just say yes and never question it.

Similarly, Ashton recalled being unable to stand up to her coaches, “they're a person in authority, right? And so who am I to talk back to them? If they [coaches] said

it, I did it.” When gymnasts viewed their coaches as being “god-like” or “powerful” in the extreme, they were in a weaker and more vulnerable position within the coach-athlete relationship. They were usually submissive, their voices were not developed and were more often stifled. Therefore, the gymnasts were not only treated less humanely in their encounters with coaches, but were also unable to create their own voices because of the authoritative power their coaches held over them.

The level of authority held by coaches in elite, female artistic gymnastics led to other implications for the athletes. For example, athletes shared their inability to tell coaches when they were injured because the athletes thought their coaches believed they were lying. Ashton hid a knee injury from her coach because she feared her coach would think she was lying to avoid completing additional repetitions. She and other gymnasts in this study recounted their coaches only believed they were injured when a doctor’s report legitimized their injury. A personal disclosure of injury was insufficient. This episode is contrary to Schapiro’s directive that adults should not treat youth as a permanent underclass, but rather they should assist youth find and create a voice of their own.

Schapiro also emphasizes that adults should allow youth to act authoritatively in situations where adults believe youth can handle matters and face things on their own. However, one gymnast in this study who attempted to do just that was punished. Jessa described,

One time, I was doing a skill on the beam and I said I wasn’t comfortable doing it without a spot. And she [coach] specifically said, you’re not allowed to say no to me. There was a whole conversation about respect after that. She also sent me

home and made me write her [coach] an apology letter because I voiced how I felt.

Stories such as this one also go against another of Schapiro's instructions that states, "in order to not abuse our privilege as adults, we must make children's dependency our enemy" (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 175). By shutting down the voices of athletes, ignoring their attempts to be heard and punishing them with little cause, coaches often create a climate whereby athletes becoming overly dependent on them. As a result, athletes sometimes become helpless, docile and fear self-expression and independence; accept a blind obedient attitude; question their own sense of reasonableness and self-worth; and succumb to the whims of coaches without question.

These experiences would also be contrary to the tenets of broad internalism, mutualism, interpretivism and the MQEC where all stakeholders are moral equals and are owed utmost respect as human beings. Simon (2013) argues that it is vital for competitive youth coaches to adopt and promote a view of competitive sport where it is seen as a mutual, cooperative endeavour. Under this conception, athletes are provided "with valuable opportunities to carve out their own space among themselves, which demands deliberation to find their own voices and make them public (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 177). If athletes are able to grasp the concept of mutualism, they are less likely to engage in dubious means, such as cheating, to achieve victory in competitive sport. Additionally, internalizing mutualism may lead to athletes resisting unseemly stakeholder behavior, such as coaches who exploit athletes for personal gain. In this sense, an interpretivist approach to sport would presumably give stakeholders moral courage to do the right thing on many fronts like respect the rules and treat others as ends. As Torres & Hager (2013)

state, “through mutualism in sports, youths might learn that respecting themselves necessitates respecting opponents” (p. 176).

Moreover, exposing youths to mutualism introduces them to sporting practices where moral and aesthetic values exist. For example, moral values refer to notions like fairness and aesthetic values to standards of excellence in the realm of skillful, impressive movement—requirements in any sport. Simon (2013) also argues that when following mutualism, there are values that are indispensable to achieving athletic excellence. For example, Simon (2013) claims, “the inner moral component of competitive sports exemplifies a form of life worth aspiring to with undeniable educational characteristics and the potential to positively develop character” (p. 177). Simon (2013) elaborates on “a form of life worth aspiring to” by referring to William Morgan’s idea of “wholehearted engagement.” The latter differs from mundane engagement and may be characterized as,

Active, passionate engagement in some enterprise, of engagement that is more mindful and self-conscious than habitual and unreflective, and more touched by élan because of the higher sense of purpose and aspiration it embodies” (p. 177).

What this means for youth sport is that a mutualistic approach not only indicates what a good life is, but also what is required of sport participants to achieve it.

#### *Runaway Individualism and Self-Aggrandizement*

When coaches and athletes fail to adopt mutualism as an approach to competitive sport, two factors may contribute to the presence of abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. These two influences are known as runaway individualism and self-aggrandizement. Runaway individualism is an “extreme form of individualism in which individual rights, interests, and activities dominate and overwhelm social duties and

concerns” (Simon, 2013, p. 178). This concept and self-aggrandizement or self-promotion are reflected when coaches focus almost exclusively on goods external to sport such as profit and their reputation. By contrast, mutualism promotes goods internal to sport like fairness, appropriate social practices and worthy challenges. These should be adhered to if sport at its best is to be realized. While runaway individualism may be evident at all levels of sport, it is generally more prominent in elite or professional levels where coaches seek personal gain in the form of money, recognition, status or reputation. Athletes too may be overly focused on advancing their personal interests leading to harmful consequences. To better understand the perception of coaches by participants in this study, it would be helpful to examine runaway individualism and self-aggrandizement in greater detail.

Following the mutualism approach to sport often mitigates the risk of runaway individualism from occurring. However, as seen through the gymnasts’ account of their experiences, this view of sport was not manifest, and therefore runaway individualism was evident. For example, Hannah recalled being frustrated with her coach when she stated, “I could have competed at level 9 or even pre-national, but she [coach] always placed me at level 7 to make sure I’d win.” This example demonstrates that not only did Hannah’s coach fail to adopt mutualism and promote values internal to sport like striving for excellence, but also that perhaps the coach wanted to ensure goods external to the sport of gymnastics, such as winning, or protecting her reputation as a winning coach. Similar to runaway individualism, when competitive youth coaches do not adopt mutualism, the opportunity for self-aggrandizement is likely to occur.

Consistent with runaway individualism, self-aggrandizement is an extreme form of individualism whereby coaches assert their power and authority when interacting with youth, and in doing so, young athletes work tirelessly to earn their attention. Self-aggrandizement is most prominent when the expectations of coaches are related to the length of time an athlete should spend on conditioning or skill development. As seen in the accounts presented by the gymnasts in chapter four, self-aggrandizement was present when coaches often added additional training sessions on top of an already excessive training schedule to ensure skill perfection during the winter (competitive) season. Additionally, conditioning tasks were handed out to the gymnasts as a form of punishment when they disobeyed their coaches' demands. Lastly, self-aggrandizement was seen when coaches required gymnasts to complete numerous routines or skill repetitions while injured; all in an effort to achieve the athlete's best performance. This mindset and the actions resulting from it taught youth to accept a particular ideology of sport without question. Mutualism, on the other hand, may mitigate the harmful effects of self-aggrandizement by pursuing excellence and winning within the context of values such as trying one's best, fairness and respecting those in the sport community.

When competitive youth sport is adopted and understood as a mutual quest for excellence through challenge, it is harder for runaway individualism and self-aggrandizement to occur. If values embedded in mutualism are promoted, the win at all costs mentality that typically characterizes self-aggrandizement is tempered and not held as a pillar of athletic competition. As mentioned earlier, mutualism is not a platform for self-aggrandizement, instead it tries to promote self-discovery and self-creation so that athletes develop their voices as autonomous beings and relate to others with mutual

respect. It is the role then of competitive youth sport coaches to ensure they act as more than just sport technicians who only teach the technical aspects of a given sport. Rather, youth sport coaches should mentor young athletes so they understand and appreciate the internal goods of sport and standards of excellence that can be attained through competition. As such, youth sport coaches who adopt and facilitate this mutualistic approach to sport promote a life of wholehearted engagement and minimize the harmful effects of notions such as runaway individualism and self-aggrandizement.

*The Coach-Athlete Continuum: How Close is Too Close?*

Besides mutualism as a specific conception of sport that can be employed to assess and deal with ethical problems and issues in sport, a second moral framework, advanced by Bergmann Drewe (2003), will be introduced and applied in this study. Few dispute the fact elite athletes spend an inordinate amount of time with their coaches due to training, competition, and sport and non-sport events like a fund raiser. As such, Bergmann Drewe conceives the coach-athlete relationship on a continuum. On one side an extreme utilitarian relationship exists and on the other side an intimate and/or sexual relationship exists. In between lies different levels of friendship between coaches and athletes (see figure 5.1 below). Furthermore, she questions whether or not coaches and athletes should be viewed as friends given the amount of time they spend together and the trust they share, and whether or not friendship is required to accomplish the goals of athletes in a particular sport. To examine this more closely, Bergmann Drewe (2003) identifies the positive and negative aspects of friendly and intimate relationships between coaches and athletes in elite sport. The source for her inquiry into coach-athlete relationships in elite sport and the continuum model derives from literature on professor-



the presence of sexual intimacy. Bergmann Drewe (2003) argues that the origin of these intimate feelings is influenced by the strong passion the coach and the athlete share for their sport. For example, were a coach and an athlete to develop intimate feelings for one another it may result from the dedication and sacrifice they each exhibit within the sport. The intimate end of the continuum does not come without risks. Bergmann Drewe (2003) notes there are two “danger” areas when it comes to coaches having intimate and/or sexual relationships with their athletes (p. 189).

The first danger area is the power differential between coaches and their athletes. In relation to the sport context, this power differential is not confined to an area of expertise, such as a career choice, but rather a position of expertise, meaning that the coach is in a position of power. The power held by the coach allows him or her to provide the athlete with additional playing time, demand extra requirements from the athlete, or choose not to play that athlete anymore (Bergmann Drewe, 2003, p. 189). With this power differential being constant, the relationship between the athlete and the coach can never be equal. Furthermore, the imbalance of power leads us to question whether the athlete can make an autonomous decision. That is, can the athlete make a free, informed choice, to engage in an intimate relationship with his or her coach when the coach controls aspects of their sporting career such as playing time? If the athlete fears repercussions from the coach for denying sexual or intimate advances made by the coach, this may lead to sexual harassment, which is morally wrong. Bergmann Drewe (2003) applies this to the professor-student relationship, and states, a strong argument against intimate and/or sexual professor-student relationships is based on whether or not the

student is able to truly provide consent, and therefore, she deems these relationships as morally inappropriate.

Some may argue that despite the power differential, professors and students can engage in intimate and/or sexual relationships as autonomous, consenting agents. However, as Bergmann Drewe (2003) argues, the potential conflict of interest between coaches and athletes is a more conclusive objection as to why intimate relationships should not occur. This conflict of interest often occurs unconsciously such that, in the context of a professor-student relationship, the professor may grade the student he is intimate with more generously without deliberately or consciously doing so. When applied to the sporting context, the coach may subconsciously provide his or her intimately-linked athlete more playing time, more attention or place more of an emphasis on the athlete's well-being. There are also instances where onlookers perceive coaches as treating their so-called preferred athletes more harshly to avoid the appearance of favouritism. Regardless of which scenario occurs, the athlete in such a relationship is being treated unfairly (p. 190).

As noted in the previous chapter of this study, the only form of sexual abuse reported was in relation to an athlete being exposed to explicit sexual material content, and therefore, no athletes had engaged in intimate and/or sexual relationships with their coaches. However, as Bergmann Drewe (2003) argues, the main problem with the power imbalance between coaches and athletes is whether or not athletes can make autonomous decisions and grant genuine consent. This is so because coaches wield extraordinary power and are in control of many aspects of the athlete's sporting career such as playing

time. The power imbalance may also cause an athlete to fear the repercussions of the coach if he or she does not accept their advances.

In relation to the experiences of the gymnasts in this study, this position of power did not lead to sexual advances from a coach, but rather led to other forms of abuse, including physical and emotional abuse in elite gymnastics. For example, Ashton recalled a situation where her coach asked her to complete a skill while injured. When asked why she executed the skill knowing she could not perform it safely, she responded, “they’re [coach] a person who is in a position of authority, right? And so who was I to talk back to them? I’d always push through it.” Similarly, Parker was unwilling to stand up to her coaches and said, “I would never go up to one of my coaches and tell them they were wrong out of fear.” When asked what she feared, Parker responded,

The fear of retaliation. The fear of them [coaches] getting angry. I never knew how far they [coaches] would be willing to go to hurt me. I just never knew the consequences that were going to come from that. If I ever told someone else, or Gymnastics Ontario, and it got leaked back to the coach, I would have to fear when they [coaches] come into the gym the next day as to what their actions towards me would be.

The power differential and conflict of interest issues between coaches and athletes existed in elite gymnastics as recounted by the gymnasts in this study. Even though these factors did not lead directly to the development of an intimate and/or sexual relationship, other forms of abuse occurred and gymnasts were susceptible to being sexually harassed by their coaches. As such, I hold there should no place for intimate and/or sexual relationships between coaches and athletes in elite female gymnastics. Athletes are

unable to honestly consent to such relationships partly due to the fear of repercussions should they refuse to submit to such advances and the power coaches hold over athletes.

Now that the intimate/sexual end of the continuum has been examined, I will focus on the different levels of friendship that can exist between athletes and coaches. Friendships between coaches and athletes usually arise when they share details of their lives with one another, spend time together outside of the context of sport, eat meals together, and/or simply act “friendly” toward one another (Bergmann Drewe, 2003, p. 191). As mentioned in the previous section, all coach-athlete relationships are founded on a shared understanding and sincere passion for sport. Similar to that of the intimate side of the continuum, danger zones may also arise when coaches and athletes engage in a deep friendship with one another. The first question examines whether “unequals” can be friends, and secondly, whether the same conflict of interest discussed on the intimate side of the continuum also exists between friends (Bergmann Drewe, 2003).

Before we can answer the above questions, we need to define what it means to be a friend. To do this, Bergmann Drewe (2003) refers to Thomas (1987) who suggests that “one of the salient features of friendship is that neither party to the relationship is under the authority of the other” (p. 217). When applied to this study, coaches and athletes should not engage in deep friendship due to the fact that one person in the dyad holds a position of authority over the other. Thomas (1987) also views friendship in terms of its structure. For example, highly structured relationships exist between government officials where certain social conventions exist, in contrast to less-structured relationships, where deep friendships and intimate love relationships exist. In light of Thomas’s observations on friendship, Bergmann Drewe (2003) claims that the coach-athlete relationship should

differ from deep friends and lover relationships, but can be characterized by social norms and conventions like that of more structured friendships (p. 192).

As an alternative perspective, some philosophers have suggested that the coach-athlete relationship is like that of a parent-child relationship. However, it is unclear to what extent a parent can be friends with their children because this relationship lacks a certain sense of equality conducive to friendship. This inequality exists because children can never be as autonomous as their parents. Parents are the ones who shape their children's core values and decide what is in the best interest of their children. While coaches may not have the same influence over athletes as the parents of athletes, sport theorists acknowledge that the influence coaches have over young athletes is significant (Bergmann Drewe, 2003, p. 192). Therefore, like parents, coaches assume an authoritative role over athletes by deciding what is in their best interest within their sport. If athletes and coaches are friends, the authoritative role of the coach would not disappear. Likewise, as discussed above, coaches are likely unable to treat their friends impartially. For these reasons and the unequal balance of power, coaches and athletes should not be deep or close friends (p. 193).

Gymnasts in this study recalled experiences that might be classified as "deep friendship" with their coaches. For example, three gymnasts interacted with their coaches outside the context of gymnastics in non-sport situations, such as vacations or trips to the movie theatre. Other gymnasts perceived their coaches as part of their family or viewed them in a paternalistic manner. Jessa described the value of the coach's friendship when she said, "I'd hang out with my girlfriends from gymnastics all the time, but when I got to hang out with a coach outside the gym it was something special." The three gymnasts

that reported engaging in what they perceived as deep friendship were the three gymnasts who experienced the most abuse in their coach-athlete relationships. For example, Parker, Jessa and Ava all shared numerous occurrences of physical and emotional abuse, with Parker sharing the one instance of sexual abuse uncovered in this study. Perhaps we can assume then, that when athletes believe or know they have deep friendships with their coaches, they render themselves vulnerable to instances of abuse due to the power imbalance present in the relationship. This might also explain athletes' inability to say no to coaches out of the fear of retaliation as explained in an earlier section. I will conclude by stating that based on the experiences of the gymnasts reported in chapter four and Bergmann Drewe's (2003) notion of deep friendships between coaches and athletes, these types of relationships are not acceptable and should be avoided. Bergmann Drewe (2003) notes, however, that there may be more suitable types of friendships for coaches and athletes to engage in, which will be explained in the following.

The next type of relationship Bergmann Drewe (2003) proposes is the utilitarian one on the continuum and characterizes coaches as coaches and athletes as athletes. As mentioned above, here the coach serves mainly as a technical and strategic instructor toward the improvement of skills and performance. What this also means is that "power differentials between the two roles aren't acknowledged, no conflicts of interest arise, and there is no potential for harassment or abuse" (p. 194). Despite this type of relationship mitigating any risks of abuse to occur, the perceived danger here is that the coach-athlete relationship would be so formal that the coach may no longer be able to coach effectively (Bergmann Drewe, 2003, p. 195). The strictness of this relationship may lead to questions such as, is such a relationship possible, and if so, is it desirable?

For this type of relationship to be successful, athletes must be willing to share information about themselves with their coaches, yet coaches must avoid sharing information about themselves with athletes. Bergmann Drewe (2003) and Jowett and Meek (2000) both argue that this type of non-reciprocal relationship is not suitable for coaches and athletes because “in order for the coach and athlete to achieve their shared goals concerning their sport, the athlete must also know his or her coach” (Bergmann Drewe, 2003, p. 195). Furthermore, this dyad may not provide a suitable context for coaches to disclose their coaching methods and philosophies with athletes so the latter may anticipate what will be required of them in terms of training and competition. Thus, when applied to elite gymnastics, despite this relationship being able to mitigate abuse or harassment, coaches may be reluctant to share vital information about themselves with athletes, which in turn may compromise the ability of coaches and athletes to achieve their shared goals concerning their sport. Similar to deep friendships, these highly structured, formal relationships in which the coach assumes the role of the coach and the athlete assumes the role of the athlete should not be encouraged in elite gymnastics.

While relationships at the extreme ends of the continuum are not acceptable for coaches and athletes, three types of friendships may be more suitable for coaches and athletes when applied to elite gymnastics. The first type is the goodness friendship, whereby each partner loves the other partner for what makes that partner special such as their character, attitudes and/or goals. The second type of friendship is a pleasure friendship, in which each partner enjoys the company of the other partner and the purpose of this friendship is mutual pleasure seeking. Lastly, the third type of proposed friendship is utility friendship, which means each party loves the other because they provide

advantages to one another. Bergmann Drewe (2003) argues that coaches and athletes should create utility friendships, unlike the strict, formal utilitarian relationship described above, because these friendships allow coaches and athletes to share necessary information about themselves to mutually achieve their sporting goals.

Utility friendships are viewed as minimalistic friendships that when applied to sport benefit both coaches and athletes in achieving their goals. Utility friendships are not as valuable and deeply felt as goodness friendships which also mitigate the risk of abuse and harassment. Instead, each partner in a utility friendship mutually and respectfully seeks to appropriate goods like knowledge and skills from one another to achieve success. This relationship conforms with Torres & Hager's (2013) mutual quest for excellence through challenge conception of sport as explained above. There are two additional benefits of engaging in a utility friendship. First, Bergmann Drewe (2003) argues that "utility friendships teach social skills, in building community, and in preparing people for more challenging friendships," which also aligns with role of the coach proposed by Simon (p. 196). Secondly, utility friendships have the potential to develop into more valuable friendships in the future such as goodness friendships (p. 197). Such a progression may ensure the development of respect which is vital for the goodness relationship. Therefore, utility friendships between coaches and athletes establish relationships where partners achieve their mutual sporting goals, are respectful toward one another and create the foundation to develop a more valuable friendship like the goodness one in the future.

Utility friendships between coaches and athletes in elite gymnastics would ensure each group openly and respectfully share their sporting goals and methods with one

another. Such openness may lead to coaches explaining their coaching style to athletes with regard to training requirements, practice schedules and competitive goals. This would also mean athletes could openly question the decisions of coaches without fear of reprisals. Therefore, if utility friendships are encouraged between coaches and athletes in elite gymnastics, respect for one another would be enhanced and mutual advantages in the relationship would be recognized and prioritized. By way of contrast, often in goodness friendships, such as those with a spouse, one partner may say something critical to the other she would never dream of saying to a cashier let's say because the comment is inappropriate in the latter relationship. Utility friendships are more like those one has with a cashier which mitigate risks that might lead to inappropriate speech and behavior. This type of friendship is best suited for athletes and coaches due to the mutual respect and striving of shared goals both partners assume (Bergmann Drewe, 2003).

Based on the coach-athlete relationship continuum discussion, most gymnasts in this study did not have a utility friendship with their coaches, but rather they perceived their relationship to be either a deep or goodness friendship with their coaches. I would argue that perhaps the instances of abuse the gymnasts recalled experiencing occurred when the coach crossed the boundary between a utility friendship and a goodness friendship. When in the presence of spectators (i.e., parents, gymnastics officials, etc.), gymnasts in this study recalled their coaches treating them with respect and coaching them in a way that was beneficial to achieving their sporting goals. In contrast, during practices when they were away from outside spectators, coaches no longer displayed respect for the gymnasts and resorted to verbal and physical abuse. This change in comportment may describe a shift from a utility to goodness friendship, a change that

may occur with a spouse (Bergmann Drewe, 2003). A goodness friendship lacks the parameters necessary to mitigate the risks of abuse or harassment because there is a shared a level of comfort and trust with our good friends that is not necessarily present in a utility friendship. Therefore, when applied to this study, I argue that the gymnasts did not perceive their relationships with their coaches as utility friendships, but rather as goodness or deep friendships where the presence of abuse became acceptable or at least unquestioned. Young athletes should avoid developing deep or goodness friendships with their coaches to stay clear of the dangers that are attached to these types of relationships. Furthermore, the avoidance of these friendships is vital to the safety and well-being of the athlete.

To conclude, the research in this study supports Bergmann Drewe's (2003) stance that deep and goodness friendships have no place in sports and should not develop between coaches and athletes due to the imbalance of power and conflict of interest. To achieve optimal friendship between coaches and athletes, Aristotle's concept of utility friendship should be utilized so that coaches share needed required information with athletes to achieve their mutual sporting goals. Additionally, coaches and athletes engaged in utility friendships set the foundation for more valuable relationships, such as the goodness friendship, to develop outside the context of their sport in future years. Due to the likelihood of deep and goodness friendships occurring in the coach-athlete relationship because of the excessive amount of time spent together, Bergmann Drewe (2003) acknowledges the importance of new policies being put into place that correct situations where coaches and athletes become too close.

*Four Suggested Reforms to Improve Youth Sport*

As mentioned in the first moral framework, the paramount goal of youth sport coaches is to ensure they make child dependence their enemy (Boxill, 2013). Furthermore, the role of the coach is not to be just a technician of skill, but rather to bring awareness of and promote the values and goods internal to sport, and facilitate “a life of whole-hearted engagement” (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 179). In doing so, coaches must conduct themselves and speak in ways that allow children to develop their own voice, without constant guidance and pressure from their coaches. This means that coaches are responsible for creating and implementing coaching methods that encourage children to develop their own authority over themselves. To do this, coaches must evaluate what children are capable of doing in sport in the present and what they can reasonably pursue within a broader life plan (p. 179). In comparison, the gymnasts in this study did not perceive their coach-athlete relationships to reflect the ideal utility friendship proposed by Bergmann Drewe (2003). Similarly, as seen in chapter four of this study, gymnasts’ shared experiences did not align with the above role of the coach. Based on the disconnect between the gymnasts’ shared experiences and the two moral frameworks outlined above, it is evident that reforms need to be put in place to ensure that any risk of abuse or harassment in the coach-athlete relationship is mitigated.

To begin, I will present and reference four reforms outlined by Torres and Hager (2013) that were created based on the responsibilities youth sport coaches have as facilitators assisting young athletes and how this fits into the interpretivist framework outlined above. I will briefly explain each of the four reforms outlined by Torres and Hager (2013) and then apply each reform to the context of elite gymnastics to demonstrate how each can be utilized and carried out by elite gymnastics coaches. These

reforms are meant simply as suggested guidelines that allow room for interpretation from coaches and sport administrators. In-depth consultation and analysis with all youth sport stakeholders would have to be conducted to establish and implement these modifications. The breadth of the following reforms encourages coaches and sport administrators to create and apply their own strategies that are applicable for their specific sport.

1) Youth sport coaches should adopt a mutualist perspective of competition

This reform suggests that youth sport coaches should teach their athletes the moral duties they owe their opponents in a competitive setting (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 180). Furthermore, by emphasizing excellence over winning, coaches can teach athletes to view competition as a mutual quest for excellence, whereby opponents provide athletes with the opportunity to test themselves in their quest for excellence. In doing so, it is important that coaches teach athletes to view their opponents as partners in their quest for excellence, rather than enemies, who are worthy of respect even when unsportsmanlike behaviors make it appear otherwise. As described in chapter four, the gymnasts in this study felt their coaches placed too much emphasis on winning. The gymnasts also made winning a priority, and therefore, coaches often enforced unhealthy training methods to ensure the gymnasts achieved success such as training while injured or repeating skills and completing additional routines when gymnasts were exhausted.

When applying this recommendation to elite gymnastics, I propose that coaches should de-emphasize the value they place on winning, and stress the importance of viewing the gymnast's teammates and competitors as moral equals who are also striving for excellence, and who worthy of respect. For example, instead of coaches promoting an exclusive training to win mentality, where the athlete is pushed to achieve perfection and

beat their opponent at any cost, coaches can promote an attitude that requires gymnasts to try their best and work each day to be better than they were the day before. With this approach, gymnasts may realize that competition is fundamentally a cooperative endeavor rather than a purely confrontational one in which opponents try their best in a mutual pursuit of excellence. If coaches in elite gymnastics choose to adopt the mutualistic approach to sport and promote the internal values of sport, like trying one's best rather than win at all costs, then perhaps the training methods of coaches would change in a way that sincerely promotes athlete welfare and mitigate the risks of abuse.

- 2) Youth sport coaches should focus on goods internal to sport, standards of excellence and virtues that foster their attainment

This reform suggests that youth sport coaches should teach athletes to be “vigilant stewards of their sport by encouraging them to consistently strive for excellence in ways that respect and honor their sports’ internal goods and standards of excellence” (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 180). To clarify, this means that coaches should teach athletes to focus on the internal goods of sport rather than external goods such as “fame and advancement” (p. 181). The promotion of these internal values will instill within athletes a realization that pursuing excellence is unachievable without taking moral responsibility. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the internal goods of sport promote whole-hearted engagement. If youth sport coaches in elite female gymnastics focus on promoting the internal goods of sport versus the external goods of sport, such as fame or financial gain, the risk of runaway individualism occurring on behalf of the coach is minimized because the external goods of sport are no longer emphasized. Furthermore, when a coach chooses to focus on the internal goods of sport and moderately pursue external values, gymnasts are

likely to adopt a similar attitude and focus on the internal goods such as trying one's best, and fixate less on the external goods such as recognition and popularity in the sporting community. Gymnasts would then be in a position to exercise and understand important values needed to live a good life and participate in sport in a mode of wholehearted engagement (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 181).

3) Youth sport coaches should seek to develop resolution seekers, not outcome seekers

If coaches follow the first two recommendations, Torres and Hager (2013) assume athletes will adopt a view of competition that places importance on the internal values of sports instead of goods external to sport or winning. This also means coaches would become and likely influence athletes into becoming resolution seekers, instead of outcome seekers. When coaches prioritize winning as the main goal of training and competition, they and athletes internalize this message and view their principal role as outcome seekers. That is, anything short of victory in athletic competition is deemed a failure and the obsession with winning clouds an appreciation for and realization of the internal goods of sports. Outcome seekers are coaches and athletes who are “ultimately not interested in how they solve athletic challenges or in establishing valid differences in performances” (p. 181). In comparison, a resolution seeker is someone who “does not merely hunt for favorable results regardless of athletic merit, but rather consider sporting contests as the sites in which athletic superiority is determined through testing excellence” (p. 181).

In following this suggested reform, elite gymnastics coaches should develop themselves and their athletes into becoming resolution seekers versus outcome seekers. Therefore, in promoting goods internal to sport versus those external to sport such as

winning, gymnasts would learn to overcome difficulties by setting realistic goals, working to make incremental improvements and being satisfied if progress is made and perfection is not reached. For example, coaches who are outcome seekers will sometimes overlook flaws in a gymnast's floor routine because she placed first at a competition. This oversight on behalf of the coach would occur because the goal of winning supersedes the quality of performance and the assessment of room for improvement. By comparison, a coach who is and develops resolution seekers would still correct the mistakes the gymnast made in her floor routine out of a "duty to the sporting practice and its standards of excellence, rather than a base appetitive desire to win" (p. 182). Therefore, in developing resolution seekers, elite gymnastics coaches should ensure their gymnasts focus on the internal goods to sport and promote skill development while pursuing athletic excellence. In doing so, elite gymnastics coaches may be deterred from developing outcome seeking gymnasts who may be blinded by the need to win at virtually all costs.

- 4) Youth sport coaches should seek to provide young athletes opportunities to develop authority over themselves

The final reform proposed by Torres and Hager (2013) involves youth sport coaches relinquishing some of their authority to young athletes so they develop their critical thinking skills and their ability to take responsibility for their own actions. Coaches often hesitate to share their power with young athletes out of fear athletes will act in ways detrimental to winning. Coaches can begin to relinquish some of their power by allowing athletes to make their own decisions in relation to certain aspects of their training sessions, and continue to increase the amount of authority the athlete has over themselves in an incremental manner. This means that youth sport coaches would not

simply transfer all their power over to young athletes because this may lead to harmful and unsafe situations and may overwhelm the athletes. This also does not mean coaches would abandon athletes when the latter make their own decisions. Coaches would still be required to “remain available, supportive, and even protective of their young athletes as required by the situation” (Torres & Hager, 2013, p. 182).

As seen in chapter four of this study, gymnasts felt their coaches embodied “God-like” power and they were taught neither to question their coaches’ training methods nor speak up for themselves when they were uncomfortable with what was being asked of them. This imbalance of power between the coach and the gymnast led to situations of abuse because coaches were unwilling to relinquish their power over athletes. Such behavior also denied gymnasts opportunities to exercise their own autonomy. In applying this recommendation to elite gymnastics, I would conclude that if coaches turned over some of their decision-making authority and power to gymnasts, athletes would develop their own voice and increase their self-confidence and esteem. This may well then lead to minimizing occurrences of abuse and foster better communication between coaches and athletes.

The relinquishment of some of the coaches’ power and authority is aligned with mutualism as proposed by Torres and Hager (2013). Under this conception of sport, if some decisions were left up to athletes, coaches might be less likely to lash out against and abuse gymnasts. I propose that coaches give athletes the authority to rule over small portions of their training regimen such as setting a minimum number of floor routines that a gymnast needs to complete and allowing the gymnast to choose how many more repetitions of a specific skill she feels is necessary. Once gymnasts have adapted to a

certain level of self-autonomy in a responsible way, coaches can continue to transfer some of their power over to gymnasts by having them choose their event schedules or particular skills they need to work on a specific day. By doing this, gymnasts can develop and exercise their own voices within a healthy utility relationship with their coaches and still pursue the mutual quest for excellence through challenge in sport and the realization of sports' internal goods.

By way of concluding this study, I would like to make several recommendations. Four of these refer specifically to elite female artistic gymnastics and the remainder for future research.

#### *Recommendations for Mitigating Abuse in Elite Gymnastics*

##### *Need for further coaching education*

Youth recreational and competitive gymnastics coaches are required to complete a National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) specific to artistic gymnastics designed and implemented by the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC). There are three separate components of the gymnastics foundation course, the first component is required to coach recreational level gymnastics in Ontario. These components include the foundations introduction course, foundations theory course and the sport specific course, which in this case is the artistic foundations course for artistic gymnastics. By completing the gymnastics foundation courses, the coach is certified to teach recreational gymnastics. When coaches wish to coach at the competitive level they are required to complete the NCCP level 2. Coaches must be at least 16 years of age, and complete modules related to theory, technical content and practical experience totaling 200 hours to be certified to coach women's artistic gymnastics at the competitive level. These courses however refer

to competencies on how to be an effective, technical coach. As mentioned above, some sport philosophers would argue that being a technical instructor is not the only role of a coach.

The gymnasts in this study felt that one of the reasons their coaches may have resorted to verbal and physical abuse was due to a lack of coaching education. For example, gymnasts explained that their coaches were effective in the sense they knew how to teach needed skills to succeed in the sport. By contrast, the participants also believed their coaches lacked the interpersonal skills necessary to deal with coach-athlete conflict effectively, and coaches did not know how to effectively motivate and encourage young female gymnasts.

Based on reports by gymnasts in this study, I would recommend an extension program to the NCCP courses to raise awareness among coaches about their role as a coach and teach them strategies on how to oversee young, female gymnasts effectively in a variety of sport related situations. For example, issues such as handling coach-athlete conflicts and how to motivate athletes can be discussed at a yearly seminar in each Gymnastics Ontario certified club in the province. Such a seminar could provide coaches with an annual reminder of their role as a coach including its ethical dimensions, discuss how to promote excellence within gymnastics based on a mutualistic conception of sport, and give coaches a forum to ask any questions about their coaching practices.

#### *Need for athlete education*

One of the most prominent reasons shared by gymnasts in this study for the presence of abuse was their inability to recognize they were being abused. For example, the gymnasts perceived the abuse as a normal, embedded part of the sport that affected all

the athletes to one degree or another. No one was completely immune from such speech and conduct that would have stood out as distinct. In light of this observation, I propose there is a need for athlete education much like the seminar for the coaches outlined above. If young gymnasts participated in a yearly seminar and were taught about what a positive coach-athlete relationship looks like, such as the utility friendship one, gymnasts would be able to compare between the ideal coach-athlete relationship and their own coach-athlete relationships. They would recognize situations where their vulnerabilities are exposed, how coaches take advantage of power imbalance and how conflicts of interest are exploited. They could also learn about mutualism in sport, voicing their concerns when conflicts arise and gain self-confidence and esteem while still pursuing high levels of performance. By doing this at an age appropriate level for gymnasts, coaching abuse can be identified and described, together with protocols for reporting any alleged abuse. Gymnasts should be presented with an image of what a positive, healthy coach-athlete relationship looks like. They would also have a standard to know what a negative coach-athlete relationship is, and have a means to report any uncomfortable or potentially abusive situations with parents, sport officials or other responsible adults.

#### *Need for third party assistance*

Throughout the study several gymnasts stated they wished there was someone they could have talked to regarding difficult encounters with their coaches. For example, Ashton explained, “I really wish there was someone there who wasn’t a coach and wasn’t a parent. I just wanted someone to talk things over with, and who wouldn’t judge me, or yell at me, or someone I wouldn’t be afraid of. I just wanted to seek advice from someone.” If Gymnastics Ontario appointed an ombudsperson, gymnasts could then

contact and speak to a dedicated, disinterested person in strict confidence about problems with their coaches. This individual could make periodic visits to certified facilities across the province to speak to gymnasts about their experiences with coaches, as well as be available for contact when gymnasts need support in dealing with a coach related issue, such as coach-athlete conflict. These suggestions heighten the oversight and monitoring needed in female gymnastics to minimize the risk of coaching abuse in the sport.

*Need for additional resources*

In addition to having an ombudsperson visit Gymnastics Ontario accredited facilities across the province, I would also recommend creating and utilizing additional resources for the athletes who may be having problems with their coaches. I would suggest making this information available to athletes on the internet by creating a website that is child friendly. The site would highlight topics such as positive coach-athlete relationships, handling conflict between athletes and coaches or peers, and steps athletes should take if they believe something is wrong in their relationship with their coach. A child friendly website that features a proper coach-athlete relationship would give young athletes a marker to recognize if something in their coach-athlete relationship does not measure up to the ideal type. Furthermore, by providing young athletes with the tools necessary to solve conflict in their coach-athlete relationships, we are setting the gymnast up for successful problem solving not only in the context of sport, but maybe in other aspects of their lives as well. Additionally, this website does not have to be targeted toward young gymnasts exclusively—it can be applicable to all sports. For example, a young athlete in hockey and a young gymnast can visit the same website, yet perhaps have sub-sections available to them regarding their sport for additional, sport specific

information. The gymnasts in this study sometimes expressed fear of their coaches, and with few options where to turn, a website may be a great educational tool to provide athletes with coaching abuse and other useful information. It could also provide additional steps to follow if athletes feel something is wrong in their coach-athlete relationships.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

While this research was exploratory in nature and one of the first studies to examine the ethical implications of abuse in an aesthetic sport, the results demonstrated that elite gymnastics coaches may not be following their ethical responsibilities in relation to young, female athletes. To gain a more thorough understanding of why abuse is occurring, I will recommend a few areas for future research.

First, I would suggest that future research investigate the perceptions of coaches of coach-athlete relationships. To do this, I would recommend creating a similar study in which coaches are asked about their coaching techniques and philosophies, such as what values they believe in and try to promote regarding their athletes. Such research could also examine if there are gender differences between coaches in relation to their coaching philosophy and practices. Based on the responses of the coaches, researchers might better understand what strategies need to be developed to ensure healthy coach-athlete relationships.

I would also recommend applying the same ethical frameworks utilized in this study and apply it to young male elite artistic gymnasts to see if similar or different perceptions exist within coach-athlete relationships. Perhaps by doing this, researchers could carry out comparative gender studies to learn if young girls are more likely to

experience coaching abuse in their coach-athlete relationships. Perhaps there are different patterns, intensity and frequency of coaching abuse in the case of young girl and boy gymnasts.

Finally, due to the paucity of research studies that examine the ethical implications of coaching abuse in aesthetic sports specifically, I would suggest applying the moral frameworks used in this study to other aesthetic sports, such as figure skating and diving. This research may disclose other perceptions athletes may have of coaching abuse and suggest alternative, appropriate strategies to mitigate against coaching abuse in related artistic sports.

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## Appendix A

### **Letter of Invitation**

**Date: January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

**Title of Study: Coaching Abuse Experiences in Young Elite Female Artistic Gymnasts: An Ethical Appraisal**

**Principal Investigator: Danny Rosenberg, Professor, Department of Kinesiology, Brock University**

**Student Investigator: Amanda Clark, Student, Department of Health and Physical Education, Brock University.**

I, Danny Rosenberg, Professor and principal investigator, from the Department of Kinesiology, Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled Coaching Abuse Experiences in Young Elite Artistic Gymnasts: An Ethical Appraisal

The purpose of this research project is to learn about your; experiences as an elite gymnast, relationship with your coach in your elite gymnastics career, and any abusive experiences you may have encountered within your coach-athlete relationship as a young elite female artistic gymnast, including physical, sexual, and/or emotional forms of abuse. Should you choose to participate, you will meet the student investigator (Amanda Clark) at a local library to complete the interview process face-to-face in a private space to ensure your comfort and the confidentiality of data. You will be asked to fill out a small questionnaire regarding demographic characteristics (ex. age range, level of education, years involved in gymnastics and your current connection with the sport). Despite not explicitly stating your age on the questionnaire, you will be required to show the student investigator a piece of government issued identification (i.e., health card, driver's license, etc.), to prove that you are over the age of 18. The student investigator will ask that you cover all other information on your ID using your thumb. You may also show the student investigator a photocopy of a piece of government issued ID with all other information blocked out, with the exception of your picture and birth date. Following the completion of the brief questionnaire, you will be participating in an interview with the student investigator. You will be asked a series of questions regarding your overall experiences as an elite gymnast, issues that arose within your coach-athlete relationship, and if you've experienced any form of abuse within that coach athlete relationship, including physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse.

A sample of a question you will be asked in the interview process is as followed:

Given the experiences you just shared involving you and your coach, can you please tell me if there were any abusive experiences (physical, sexual and/or emotional) that you encountered while working with your gymnastics coach?

\*In order to participate in the study you must have been retired from the sport for at least 12 months as a competitive athlete prior to participating in the interviewing process, and be at least 18 years old. The expected duration of this study is between 60-90 minutes. Within two weeks after the interview has been conducted, with your permission, the student investigator would like to either email, or send you a hard copy of the interview after it has been transcribed into words from the audio recording so you can review it and make comments. This reviewing process is not mandatory, and is completely optional to participate in. If you choose to participate, the student investigator would ask that you please make comments on a separate page and either email them, or send a hard copy back to me within a three-week period from the date the researcher sends them to you. If you feel it may be beneficial to review the transcript in the presence of the researcher, a time and date will be set up at the original interview site. Any transcripts not received within the three-week period will be assumed to have no changes, and the student investigator will use your original transcript for data analysis purposes. The purpose of this is to ensure what you said is correct, and that the student investigator's interpretations of your information are accurate.

Possible benefits from participating in this study include giving you the opportunity to disclose your experiences as an elite gymnast, which has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on the research participant. Additionally, learning about your experiences of abuse within your coach athlete relationship as an elite gymnast will contribute to new literature in the elite sporting context.

There may also be risks involved both during, and after this study including emotional distress from reflecting on past experiences that may have caused you physical or emotional pain. Upon completion of this study, the participant will receive a list of relevant resources for dealing with experiences of abuse during childhood that are accessible via online sources, over the telephone, or in person appointments if the participant feels further counseling or professional assistance is required. Additionally, an on-site counselor will be present during the interview process should their assistance be required. There is also the possibility for the presence of social risks within this study, such as loss of status and reputation. To mitigate these risks, protocols have been put in place to keep your identity completely confidential throughout the entirety of the research process.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics board [15-069].

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Officer (905 688-5550 ext 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca))

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you

**Danny Rosenberg**  
**Associate Professor**  
**905 688 5550 x4289;**  
**drosenberg@brocku.ca**

**Amanda Clark**  
**Graduate Student**  
**ac10bk@brocku.ca**  
**(289) 969-7192**

## Appendix B

### **Informed Consent**

Date: February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Project Title: Coaching Abuse Experiences in Young Elite Female Artistic Gymnasts: An Ethical Appraisal

Principle Investigator (PI): Danny Rosenberg  
Department of Kinesiology  
Brock University  
905 688 5550 x4289; [drosenberg@brocku.ca](mailto:drosenberg@brocku.ca)

Student Investigator: Amanda Clark  
Department of Health and Education  
Brock University  
[ac10bk@brocku.ca](mailto:ac10bk@brocku.ca)

### **INVITATION**

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to learn about your; experiences as an elite gymnast, experiences within the coach-athlete relationship, and any experiences of abuse you've encountered within your coach-athlete relationship as a young elite female artistic gymnast, including physical, sexual, and emotional forms of abuse. The minimum age of participation in this study is 18 years old.

### **WHAT'S INVOLVED**

As a participant, you will meet the student investigator (Amanda Clark) at a local library to complete the interview process face-to-face in a private space to ensure your comfort and the confidentiality of data. You will then be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire regarding demographic characteristics (age range, level of education, years involved in gymnastics and your current connection with the sport). Despite not explicitly stating your age on the questionnaire, you will be required to show the student investigator a piece of government issued identification (i.e., health card, driver's license, etc.), to prove that you are over the age of 18. The student investigator will ask that you cover all other information on your ID using your thumb. You may also show the student investigator a photocopy of a piece of government issued ID with all other information blocked out, with the exception of your picture and birth date. Following the above process, you will be asked to participate in an interview with the student investigator. With your permission, I would like to use an audio recorder during the interview to ensure all data is accurately collected and interpreted. You will be asked a few exploratory questions regarding your experience as an elite gymnast and your relationship with your coach. Furthermore, I will ask very exploratory questions regarding any instances of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse that you may have occurred within your coach-athlete relationship. Participation will take approximately 60-90 minutes of your time from start to finish. Within two weeks after the interview has been conducted, with your permission, I would like to either email, or send you a hard copy of the interview after it has been transcribed into words from the audio recording so you can review it and make comments. If you feel it may be beneficial to review the transcript in the presence of the researcher, a time and date will be set up at the original interview site. This reviewing process is not mandatory, and is completely optional to participate in. If you choose to participate, I would ask that you please make comments on a separate page and either email them, or send a hard copy back to me within a three-week period from the date the researcher sends them to you. Any transcripts not received within the three-week period will be assumed to have no changes, and the student principle investigator (SPI) will use your original transcript for data analysis purposes. The purpose of this is to ensure what you said is correct, and that the SPI's interpretations of your information are accurate.

A sample of a question you will be asked in the interview process is as followed:

Given the experiences you just shared involving you and your coach, can you please tell me if there were any abusive experiences (physical, sexual and/or emotional) that you encountered while working with your gymnastics coach?

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS**

Possible benefits from participating in this study include giving you the opportunity to disclose your experiences as an elite gymnast, which has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on the research participant. Additionally, learning about your experiences of abuse within your coach athlete relationship as an elite gymnast will contribute to new literature in the science context. There may also be risks involved both during, and after this study including emotional distress from reflecting on past experiences that may have caused you physical or emotional pain. Upon completion of this study, the participant will receive a list of relevant resources available to them for dealing with experiences of abuse during childhood that are accessible via online sources, over the telephone, or in person appointments if the participant feels further counseling or professional assistance is required. Additionally, an on-site counselor will be present during the interview process should their assistance be required. There is also the possibility for the presence of social risks within this study, such as loss of status and reputation. To mitigate these risks, protocols have been put in place to keep your identity completely confidential throughout the entirety of the research process.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study; however, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. The student investigator will be implementing member checking in this study. Participation in member checking is option and is not required of participants to partake in. One week after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript via e-mail or hard copy, to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. You also have the option to review your transcript in the presence of the researcher to mitigate any further confidentiality risks. Additionally, because of the possibility of other persons identifying you through geological factors, no names of people, places, organizations or any other potentially revealing information will be used in this study. You will then have two weeks from the date the student investigator sends the transcript out to you to send it back in any format you wish. If your transcript is not received within three weeks time, the student investigator shall assume you had no changes, and will proceed to data analysis using the original transcript.

Data collected during this study will be stored within an encrypted file. Any notes taken during the interview will be typed out and then placed in the secure file. Once typed out, paper notes will be shredded. Audio recordings, along with any other data, will be kept for six months after the study is completed, at which time it will be disposed of in a secure way. If at any point you choose to withdraw from this study, the data collected will be shredded within one week of your interview date.

Access to this data will be restricted to the student principle investigator (Amanda Clark) and the Faculty Supervisor/principle investigator (Danny Rosenberg).

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty. Should you choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected with respect to you will be destroyed within a week. Information that is on paper will be shredded and any computer-based data will be deleted accordingly.

**PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study can be available via email or hard mail dependent on the participants desired delivery method, if they so choose to review the results of this study. Feedback will be available roughly twelve months after completing your interview.

**CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Amanda Clark or Danny Rosenberg using the contact information provided above. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University’s Research Ethics board [15-069].

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

**CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Questionnaire

Coaching Abuse Experiences in Young Elite Female Artistic Gymnasts: An Ethical Appraisal

Date: February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016

1. What is your age?

- 18-20
- 21-24
- 25-29
- 30+

2. What is your current level of education?

- No High School Diploma
- High School Diploma
- College Degree
- Bachelor Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate Degree

3. At what age did you enter into gymnastics (at any level)?

- 0-2
- 3-5
- 6-8
- 9+

4. At what age did you begin competing as an elite gymnast (minimum provincial level)?

- 6-8
- 9-11
- 12-14
- 15+

5. At what age did you retire from elite gymnastics?

- < 10
- 10-12
- 13-15
- 16-18
- 19+

## Appendix D

### **Interview Guide**

“First, I’d like to thank you for meeting me today and taking time out of your busy schedule to assist me with my research. Before we get started, I’d like to give you a brief summary of the study I’m conducting and tell you a little bit about myself. I will also provide you general definition of abuse, following by an example of each type of abuse that may have been experienced within the coach-athlete relationship to clear any misconceptions that may exist. I will then have you read, understand, and sign the informed consent form prior to beginning the interview. You can expect this interview to last between 60-90 minutes.”

“The main purpose of this study is to discover and examine coaching abuse experiences of young elite female artistic gymnasts, and provide an ethical appraisal of such abuse by using two different moral frameworks. In particular, I am looking to explore instances of physical, sexual and emotional abuse that have occurred throughout a gymnast’s elite artistic gymnastics career. This isn’t to say however, that to participate in this study, you need to have experienced any, or all three types of abuse listed above. Keep in mind during this interview that the purpose of my research is to understand your perspective of your own experiences and no one else’s, so please try to avoid generalizations of what has happened to others. Do not worry about saying the right things or telling me what I’d like to hear, as I am thoroughly interested in examining your perception of your own experiences. Also, please be aware that if at any time you feel uncomfortable about a question asked, simply say pass and we will move on to something else.”

### **Examples of Different Types of Abuse in the Coach-Athlete Relationship**

#### *Abuse Definition:*

all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the individual’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power (WHO, 2010).

#### *Physical Abuse:*

Within this study, physical abuse refers to the deliberate physical injuring of a person, or the failure to prevent physical injuries (Weber, 2009). Additionally, there are four types of physical abuse child athletes may experience during an elite career path, including excessive training, peer violence, physical violence by the coach, and violence due to participating in competition (Weber, 2009).

In the weeks leading up to the national championships, you found yourself training more hours than usual, which resulted in you spraining your ankle upon improperly landing your dismount off the uneven bars. After icing your ankle for 15 minutes, your coach requests that you get up and attempt the skill again. Knowing that you will not be able to

effectively and safely perform the skill due to the immense amount of pain you are in, you voice your opinion to your coach. Your coach responds by telling you that in order to finish your training for the night, you must effectively perform five of the same dismounts before leaving the gym. Despite the amount of pain that you are in, you hesitantly get up and attempt the skill again.

#### *Sexual Abuse:*

Sexual abuse involves enticing or forcing a child athlete to engage in sexual activities, that may not include high levels of violence. Sexual abuse in child athletes may include physical contact, such as masturbation, kissing, inappropriate touching either on the inside, or outside of the child's clothes, or penetration, and can also include promoting children's participation in sexually inappropriate ways, such as the production of pornography (British Gymnastics, 2015).

You've been training at your gym with the same coach since you entered into competitive gymnastics at age 8. You are now 14 years old and your coach, Ben, invites you into the office to have a meeting with you about an opportunity he thinks you may be interested in. For weeks now, Ben has been attempting to launch his own gymnastics leotard line that he is hoping will be ready in the Spring. Ben then tells you that he has selected you to be the main model for his leotard line because you are the most attractive young woman on the team and that your body is perfect for the job. He then requests that you allow him to take a nude photo of you so that he can virtually place the leotards on your body using online technologies, versus you trying on each leotard individually. Before you have a chance to answer his proposition, he assures you that by participating in this opportunity, your chances of making the junior elite national team will drastically increase. Making the national team is all that you've wanted throughout your entire gymnastics career, so you hesitantly agree. Ben then informs you that this must stay a secret between the two of you, and if you tell anyone about it, he will ensure that your chances of making the national team are zero.

#### *Emotional Abuse:*

Emotional abuse does not refer to a series of occurrences, but rather refers to the dynamics of a relationship (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). There are several parameters that classify emotional abuse, including reoccurrence of behaviours, harmful behaviours stemming from the coach (including belittlement, humiliation, threats and screaming), and yet no physical contact behaviours are present at any time. Examples of these behaviours include coaches yelling, throwing objects in a rage, and performing the silent treatment toward their athletes.

As an elite gymnast, you are expected to execute skills with a high level of efficiency and accuracy. You are training for a national competition that is just a few weeks away, and it is critical that you do well so you can qualify for the national championships. As you are working on your beam routine, you continue to fall on a skill that you have struggled with for quite some time. On top of you becoming frustrated with your inability to stick the skill, your coach begins to yell criticisms at you from across the gym. Your coach yelling grasps the attention of your fellow gymnasts, and all eyes have fallen on you. You

attempt the skill yet again, and still remain unsuccessful. Your coach walks over to where you are, tells you that you are useless and that you'll never be good enough and walks away. You continue to attempt the skill again, but you are still unsuccessful. You ask your coach for feedback as to why you are falling, but he/she simply tells you that your efforts will never be good enough to achieve success and that you should give up on yourself. From then on, your coach begins ignoring you and makes it seem as if you do not exist.

“Ok, let's begin...”

Open-ended questions:

1. Please generally describe your involvement in the area of gymnastics. Please tell me what it was like.
2. Can you please explain to me what your training schedule was like during your early elite gymnastics career? How did it progress with time?
3. Please describe your relationship with your coach(es) during your early elite career in gymnastics. How did these relationships progress as your career progressed?
4. In your relationship with your coach, were there any experiences you saw as abuse, whether emotional, physical or sexual? If not, were there any experiences or instances that left you feeling “off”, or upset about something?
5. If so, what was that like for you? How did these experiences, or how do they now impact your life?
6. Please tell me if, and how, any of the experiences you have shared with your coach were resolved. What sort of help did you seek and at what period of time?
7. If you experienced difficulties with your coach in your career, why didn't you seek help?
8. Please describe if, and where you went to seek help regarding the experiences you've shared with your coach.
9. Based on your experiences, how do you cope with them on a daily basis?

Appendix E  
**Participant Waiver of an On-Site Counselor**

Date: February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Project Title: Coaching Abuse Experiences in Young Elite Female Artistic Gymnasts: An Ethical Appraisal

Project # 15-069

Principal Investigator (PI): Danny Rosenberg  
Department of Kinesiology  
Brock University  
[drosenberg@brocku.ca](mailto:drosenberg@brocku.ca)

Student Investigator: Amanda Clark  
Faculty of Applied Health Sciences  
Brock University  
[ac10bk@brocku.ca](mailto:ac10bk@brocku.ca)

As stated in all documentation pertinent to this study, both the principal investigator and student investigator have recommended that an on-site counsellor be present for the face-to-face interview to mitigate any risk to the participant. The risks that are involved both during, and after this study, may include emotional and physical distress from reflecting on past experiences related to the topic of this study. There is also the possibility for the presence of social risks within this study, such as the loss of status and reputation.

By signing this waiver, you are acknowledging and accepting the above risks may result due to your participation in this study, and have freely chosen to proceed with the interview process without the presence of an on-site counselor. Should the need arise, counseling information will be provided at the interview by the student investigator.

**CONSENT**

I was presented with the recommendation to have an on-site counselor present during the face-to-face interview with the student investigator. I agree to participate in the study outlined in the informed consent form and decline the presence of an on-site counsellor for the face-to-face interview conducted with the student investigator. I have made this decision autonomously and without the influence of either the principal investigator or student investigator. I understand that I may withdraw from this research study at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F

### Resources for Overcoming Experiences of Abuse During Childhood

#### **Online Resources:**

1. The Invisible Scar  
<https://theinvisiblescar.wordpress.com/suggestions-for-adult-survivors/>
2. HAVOCA - Help for Adult Victims of Child Abuse  
<http://www.havoca.org/resources/forum/>
3. Dealing with Past Sexual Abuse  
<http://www.familylife.com/articles/topics/life-issues/challenges/cultural-issues/dealing-with-past-sexual-abuse#.VSRQpUI-BAY>

#### **Telephone Hotlines:**

1. The National Domestic Violence Hotline  
<http://www.thehotline.org>  
1-800-787-7233
2. Mental Health Helpline  
1-866-531-2600

#### **Resource Centers Located in the GTA:**

1. The Gatehouse (Toronto)  
<http://www.thegatehouse.org/about-us>

#### **On-Call Psychologist:**

Caitlin Kawa, MA, CGAS, NCSP  
617-676-8882

#### **Reporting Abuse:**

##### **Physical or Emotional Abuse**

Children's Aid Society (GTA)

(416) 924-4646

##### **Sexual Abuse**

Contact your local police department to report any form of sexual abuse

## Appendix G

### Brock University Research Ethics Board Clearance



Brock University  
Research Ethics Office  
Tel: 905-688-5550 ext. 3035  
Email: reb@brocku.ca

Social Science Research Ethics Board

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#### Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

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DATE: 1/26/2016  
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: ROSENBERG, Danny - Kinesiology  
FILE: 15-069 - ROSENBERG  
TYPE: Masters Thesis/Project STUDENT: Amanda Clark  
SUPERVISOR: Danny Rosenberg  
TITLE: Coaching Abuse Experiences in Young Elite Female Artistic Gymnasts: An Ethical Appraisal

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#### ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED

Type of Clearance: NEW

Expiry Date: 1/31/2017

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The Brock University Social Science Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Clearance granted from 1/26/2016 to 1/31/2017.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before 1/31/2017. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Research Ethics web page at <http://www.brocku.ca/research/policies-and-forms/research-forms>.

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:

- a) Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- b) All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable implications for participants;
- c) New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
- d) Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research.

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Social Science Research Ethics Board

**Note:** Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.

Figure 4.1

Table of Participant Information

PARTICIPANT	LEVEL	DAYS/WEEK	HOURS/WEEK
Ava	Junior National	5	32
Jessa	Junior National	5	30
Parker	Pre-National	5	25
Ashton	Provincial 9	4	22
Hannah	Provincial 8	4	20
Madison	Provincial 8	4	18

