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# Perspectives of Canadian University Coaches on Integrating Sport Psychology and Mental Performance Consultants in Varsity Programs

Federico Cisneros Sánchez, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Hall, Craig, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Kinesiology

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## Abstract

Recently, sport psychology has become a more popular resource for athletes and coaches when looking to increase performance. It is unknown how many Canadian universities utilize sport psychology services in their athletic programs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with coaches of Canadian university varsity teams to learn about their opinions on sport psychology and mental performance consultants (MPCs). The research was approached from a pragmatic perspective. Results showed that MPCs are important to enhance performance and provide mental health resources. MPCs provide athletes with personal and leadership development, mental skills training, and mental health support. MPCs can also be a resource for coaches when it comes to professional development and staff support. Building strong, honest, and open relationships with athletes and coaches are keys for success. The inclusion of MPCs within integrated support teams complement the holistic approach provided to student-athletes in order to improve the high-performance model of Canadian universities.

Keywords: Canadian university sport; high-performance; integrated support teams; mental performance consultants; sport psychology.

## **Summary of Lay Audience**

Canadian university athletic programs are considered to be high-performance programs. They include resources for their student-athletes such as strength and conditioning, physiotherapy and sports medicine. Professionals in charge of providing these resources for a team are part of that team's integrated support team (IST). However, not every program provides their student-athletes with sport psychology resources.

Athletes spend the majority of their time training their physical skills to improve their strength, speed, technical and tactical skills. A lot of athletes recognize that the mental side of sport is just as important but neglect to dedicate the same amount of time to practice their mental skills. Some coaches also recognize the importance of including sport psychology as part of their program, but they do not prioritize it enough to overcome time commitment and financial barriers.

In this study, coaches of Canadian university sports teams were interviewed for the purpose of gaining perspective on whether sport psychology and mental performance consultants (MPCs) are beneficial to their sport program. It was found that MPCs are being hired and utilized in Canadian university athletic programs to enhance performance and provide mental health resources. Coaches believed it is important to prioritize sport psychology as part of their program. In addition, it was found that to reinforce this, coaches must show support and commitment to the MPCs. Likewise, MPCs must build strong, honest, and open relationships with athletes and coaches to increase their level of buy-in. These relationships will lead to productive work which can have many benefits such as aiding athletes with personal development, skill development (both mental and physical), and leadership skills. MPCs can also be an added resource for coaches when it comes to professional development and staff support.

The results of this study are not only applicable to the university sport setting. They can be transferrable to any other type of sport setting such as club, amateur, semi-pro and professional teams. They can also be applied to individual sports compared to team sports.

Overall, it was concluded that including MPCs as part of any athlete's or team's IST can be beneficial from a high-performance and mental health standpoint.

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## Introduction

Many athletes dream with one day becoming a professional athlete or making it to the Olympics. For most, competing in university athletics is a steppingstone in their sporting career before making it to the big leagues. Unfortunately, level of competition is negatively correlated with number of participants, meaning higher-level competition settings (e.g., professional/national teams) have fewer participants than introductory-level (e.g., grassroots/club teams) competition (NCAA Research, 2020). Physical abilities, and technical and tactical skills are important attributes when it comes to the selection of athletes into higher level teams, but mental performance is another determining factor for success (Joyce & Lewindon, 2014).

In Canada, USports is the national organization in charge of university intercollegiate athletics. They organize and regulate 12 sports across the country, played at 56 universities and by 20,000 student-athletes (USports, n.d.). In 2018, they revised their mission statement to be “Through delivering, governing, advocating for, and celebrating national university sport, we offer outstanding environments and opportunities for student-athletes to unlock their full academic and athletic potential” (USports, 2018).

Over the last few years, there has been a shift in the Canadian university sport model towards a high-performance model (Banwell & Kerr, 2016a). However, high-performance is difficult to define and it seems that it has been left to each school’s interpretation. Recently, research has suggested the implementation of integrated support teams (ISTs) to increase the resources available to teams, athletes and coaches in their pursuit of high-performance and achieving success. ISTs include expertise from professionals in sport sciences, sport medicine, and management (McDougall, Nesti, & Richardson, 2015; Sporer & Windt, 2018; Van Slingerland et al., 2019). One of the sport sciences that has been gaining a lot of momentum in recent years is sport psychology, not only for its benefits in improving sport performance, but also in helping athletes develop life skills that are learned in the sport setting and can be transferable to other aspects of life (Banwell & Kerr, 2016b; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Lewis, 2014).

In Canada, the Canadian Sport Psychology Association (CSPA) recognizes applied sport psychology professionals for having the necessary competencies to deliver counselling services (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.). Mental performance consultants (MPCs) are in charge of providing services to athletes and coaches, whether it is individual and/or team counselling. MPCs teach athletes about a variety of mental skills that can help them cope with different stressors in their lives. Being a student-athlete is a unique experience, and one that comes with a lot of extra responsibilities that non-student-athletes don't have to worry about. Student-athletes face new challenges when entering university such as academic, social and leisure, health and injury, and challenges to succeed which may affect their mental health (Parham, 1993). Some MPCs (but not all) are able to deal with issues such as mental health. And with the prevalence of mental health issues in student-athletes in recent years (Ryan, Gayles, & Bell, 2018), this can be a resource within teams to make sure appropriate measures are taken proactively if athletes need help. For that and much more, MPCs can be a valuable asset in any team's arsenal of resources, especially when considering a high-performance program, such as most Canadian university athletic programs.

The aim of the present study was to investigate coaches' perceptions of the importance of sport psychology services and MPCs in Canadian university athletics. Although sport researchers have considered the role MPCs play in optimizing performance, no research has explored this topic in Canadian university athletics from a coaching perspective. Moreover, a qualitative approach was utilized as there has been a growing awareness of the benefits of qualitative research and the unique inquiry it contributes to the sport and performance literature (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018).

## **Literature Review**

**High-performance.** High-performance can be defined as a program that is "...a sport system that supports athletes that have stepped onto the Podium Pathway (or equivalent). It includes the resources and support personnel in place to support them that culminates in performance at the Olympic / Paralympic Games and/or single sport Senior World Championships" (Government of Canada, 2019). While Canadian university

athletics are not equivalent to a Podium Pathway, they are however striving for athletic success at the national level, and most are considered high-performance programs, with the possibility of sending athletes to world championships, qualifying for Olympic teams, and representing their country at Universiades. If these types of programs believe it is important to provide athletes with resources and support personnel, why not mimic the same type of high-performance model to try to be as successful in the Canadian university sport setting? Own the Podium and the seven Canadian Sport Centres/Institutes across the country are organizations providing resources to athletes and coaches to elevate performance (Own the Podium, n.d.), and provide the best opportunities to maximize athletic success.

**Integrated support teams.** ISTs are multidisciplinary in nature including professionals from sport sciences (e.g., sport psychology, exercise physiology, biomechanics), sport medicine (e.g., sport physician, physiotherapist) and sport performance (e.g., strength and conditioning [S&C], sport administrators) (Canadian Sport Institute Ontario, n.d.; Government of Canada, 2019). The goal of an IST is to work closely with coaches and athletes to provide top-level support in all aspects of sport in their pursuit of athletic success (Canadian Sport Institute Ontario, n.d.; Dijkstra, Pollock, Chakraverty, & Alonso, 2014; Own the Podium, n.d.). Organizations like Own the Podium and the Canadian Sport Centres/Institutes use ISTs to provide the best training environment for athletes and coaches. There are also many national level organizations that include ISTs in their national programs such as Swimming Canada, Athletics Canada, and Gymnastics Canada which clearly are high-performance programs. Instead of having one individual be knowledgeable in all areas of sport (science, medicine and performance), ISTs focus on having several professionals; all experts in only their own field of study. They are all autonomous in the way they deliver their content. However, they are still dependent on the rest of the IST's input and collaboration when it comes to decisions being made about the athlete/team. If not properly managed, an IST will be dysfunctional and likely fail. Good management within the IST means positive, clear, and constant communication between all parties to ensure the athlete/team receive the best holistic care (Dijkstra et al., 2014; Sporer & Windt, 2018).

ISTs as the name suggests, are integrative in nature, but its definition is dependent on the team itself. It is not only about bringing different sport disciplines together. It should be about ensuring that all members of the IST work in a collaborative and cohesive unit (Sporer & Windt, 2018). While they may not be recognized as ISTs, there are other different settings outside of sport in which similar models are applied such as health (Lemieux-Charles & McGuire, 2006; Titzer, Swenty, & Hoehn, 2012) and education (Furney, Aiken, Hasazi, & Clark/Keefe, 2005; Hunt, Soto, Maier, Müller, & Goetz, 2002).

**Sport psychology.** For many years, the focus has been on enhancing athletes' potentials through physical training, making athletes faster and stronger. Recently however, sport psychology has gained more attention in the world of sport. As athletes reach professional status, the physical differences between them get closer together. Applied sport psychology "... is a specific task aimed at increasing the performance and wellbeing of athletes or anyone involved in the sports context." (Dosil, 2006; p.4). What sets good athletes apart from great ones is their mental strength and ability to cope with the pressures and demands of their sport, not only from a physical standpoint, but a psychological one as well (Gee, 2010). Despite the growth in recognition by the sport community of the importance of sport psychology and its relatedness to high-performance and success, often it is not implemented appropriately. Many (including athletes, coaches, and parents) believe sport psychology to be a one-time fix for athletes who struggle with issues such as slumps, the yips, and pre-performance anxiety. However, mental training is just like physical training, in the sense that one must dedicate extensive hours of purposeful practice in order to master new skills (Dosil, 2006).

Sport psychology training (PST) includes the constant and purposeful practice of mental skills where the goal is enhancing performance (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). These skills include goal setting, self-regulation of arousal, confidence, attentional focusing, etc. In recent years, studies have shown that the inclusion of varied PST strategies like self-talk (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Galanis, & Theodorakis, 2011) and imagery (Weinberg, 2008) have contributed to athletes' quality of training and success, including the enhancement of psychological characteristics such as high self-confidence, focus,

sport intelligence, ability to regulate stress levels, and mental toughness/resiliency (Dosit, Cremades, & Rivera, 2014). The mastery of these skills will lead athletes to be “mentally tough” (not meaning that those without it are mentally weak and/or mentally ill). Mental toughness has been defined in many ways, but it is commonly associated with the ability to focus under pressure, be resilient, remaining cool and collected while facing adversity; but one thing all definitions have in common is the attributed value of mental toughness when it comes to athletic success (Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002; Weinberg & Gould, 2011) Athletes and coaches alike are aware of the importance of PST and the positive impact it can have. Nevertheless, a study by Gould, Medbery, Damarjian, and Lauer (1999) of junior tennis coaches found both coaches and athletes list *lack of time* as the number one barrier for not including PST in their training programs.

In Canada, it is unclear how many universities include PST as part of their athletic programs. However, some Canadian universities have full-time professionals who run a PST program within their athletic departments. This gives some insight into the advancement of Canadian university athletics into high-performance programs. Since PST focuses on building the mental skills required for athletes to develop mental toughness and resilience to achieve athletic success, the addition of PST into high-performance programs can be clearly justified. Mentally tough athletes have “a high sense of self-belief and an unshakeable faith that they control their own destiny, [and] these individuals can remain relatively unaffected by competition and adversity” (Clough et al., 2002; p. 38). Mental toughness is a characteristic sought out in athletes that many believe is the key to success, but few are willing to put in the work to achieve. But how are athletes supposed to acquire the skills to become mentally tough? To use S&C as an example, one can search the internet, or ask around for exercises to do in the weight room. But the quality of such self-made programs cannot be compared to the knowledge and expertise of a S&C coach who has had education, training, and background in the field. If your goal is to improve your physical skills, you should look for a certified S&C coach. Likewise, if you are looking to improve on your mental skills, you will benefit from the expertise of a professional.

**Mental performance consultants.** In Canada, specialists in the field of applied sport psychology are recognized by the Canadian Sport Psychology Association (CSPA) as professionals with a Master or PhD degrees in sport psychology or a related field, that are qualified to provide athletes and coaches with sport psychology services to help them succeed in sport (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.). MPCs can work with individual athletes, coaches, and teams. However, what coaches and athletes look for in an MPC can differ depending on goals, time, and other priorities. In a study conducted by Zakrajsek, Steinfeldt, Bodey, Martin, and Zizzi (2013), NCAA Division 1 coaches commented on what they look for in sport psychology consultants. As the researchers noted, some of the illustrative core ideas that arose from the interviews were: an added advantage in skill development and performance, to assist with personal issues/problems, and a trustworthy person who builds rapport with athletes and coaches. Furthermore, Lubker, Visek, and Geer (2008) asked athletes about their thoughts on qualities that affect the effectiveness of sport psychology consultants. Some of the highest-ranked factors were trustworthy and approachable, knowledge of mental skills to improve sport performance, and knows the demands of the sport they are working with.

All these characteristics are what coaches and athletes value when looking to work with an MPC. Nevertheless, one aspect that tends to be misunderstood is the fact that MPCs are not meant to fix problems in one session. Their best work is done by building trust and rapport amongst athletes and coaches and using those relationships to provide a better service for those individuals/teams (Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2014). For most, athletes and coaches alike, the absence of someone like an MPC to provide assistance with sport psychology skills is not detrimental. However, the addition of an MPC can be extremely beneficial not only for individuals, but also for teams. Sport psychology skills, just the same as physical skills like shooting a free-throw, kicking a field goal and catching a ball while running, take time and practice to learn and master (Dosil, 2006). Just like S&C coaches help athletes with the physical aspect of training and sports, MPCs help athletes train the mental side. Sport psychology is more than just creating goals, increasing motivation, and being able to perform under pressure. MPCs can also help athletes manage emotions, equipping them with coping skills to help them deal with stressors in their lives that can occur within or outside of the sport context, but



that will inevitably affect their athletic performance, and eventually their own self outside of their athletic identity (Iso-Ahola, 1995).

Student-athletes' identification of their athletic role is stronger in their first years in university, compared to their last years, as they begin to realize that professional sport is no longer a career option (Lally & Kerr, 2005). Without proper coping skills, student-athletes may struggle dealing with the conflict of role identity including identity crisis and loss of identity, especially when retiring from sport altogether (Lally, 2007). MPCs can provide sport psychology skills that are transferrable from a sport context to real-life settings. One way in which it can be proactively dealt with is by having strong communication and relationships between coaches and players and promoting a supportive team culture. As a coach, their job is not only to develop athletes and deliver championships; many believe that personal development is an important role in the student-athletes' career during university (Banwell & Kerr, 2016b).

**Mental health.** Wylleman, Rosier, and De Knop (2015) used the definition of "mental health" from *Mental Health: A report of the surgeon general* (1999) and applied it within a sport context to express that mental health is "a state of successful performance or mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity" (p. 4). According to Sullivan, Blacker, Murphy, and Cairney (2019), close to 80% of Canadian student-athletes are prone to mental illness. Canadian student-athletes spend on average up to 20 hours per week in training and competition, on top of their schoolwork and social lives (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Not all student-athletes are fortunate enough to receive athletic financial awards (AFAs) to help offset some of the costs of university, and those who do have a limit on how much they can receive and what it can be used for (USports, n.d.). Student-athletes may need a part-time job to help pay for tuition, books, housing and living expenses that are not covered by their AFAs. With respect to their athletic responsibilities, these include practices (any time between the early morning until later at night), S&C/fitness, travel to and from practice and games, and injury rehabilitation. It is important to note that each sport is busiest during their respective seasons, but even

during the offseason, athletes are still expected to participate and perform at a high level, perhaps with a reduced athletic load.

The above is a common description of a high-performance student-athlete competing in university from a time commitment standpoint. However, from a sport psychology perspective, each individual is unique in the way they deal with certain stressors, but the fact remains there are still certain aspects of their busy lifestyle that may cause psychological distress. Those that are related to sport can be gender, starting status, scholarship status, and sport type (Sullivan et al., 2019). Other life stressors could include relational problems, stress and anxiety, aggression, disordered eating, and burnout, which are issues that can be prevented (Gomez, Bradley, & Conway, 2018). Most student-athletes have a strong attachment to their identity as an athlete; it is part of who they are. But when that identity is jeopardized by stress and anxiety that cannot be managed, it can have a devastating effect on an athlete's life. Sullivan and colleagues (2019) explored the prevalence of developing mental illness within a sample population of 284 Canadian university athletes; only 19.8% were found to be above the optimal threshold. The majority of coaches and training staff are not equipped with the skills to actually deal with mental health (Moulton, Molstad, & Turner, 1997).

**MPCs, mental health, and ISTs.** A study conducted by Van Slingerland, Durand-Bush, and Rathwell (2018) concluded that high psychological well-being does not automatically imply high levels of mental health functioning or the total absence of mental illness. Gucciardi, Hanton, and Fleming (2017) also found that mental toughness can be a positive indicator of mental health, however it is not the opposite of mental illness. Many student-athletes struggle with some sort of mental health issue throughout their athletic career. But when it comes to asking for help, research suggests that athletes don't actually talk to their coaches, or even teammates, about mental health issues out of fear that they will be perceived as weak or mentally ill, or not able to perform at a high level (López & Levy, 2013). When it comes to seeking help, there is a stigma within sports about seeking sport psychology services (Martin, 2005). Interestingly, being diagnosed with a mental illness has been found to have less of a stigma than it is to ask for help (Kushner & Sher, 1989; Vogel, Wester, & Larson, 2007). In research by Kaier,

Cromer, Johnson, Strunk, and Davis (2015), NCAA Division I athletes reported higher perceived public stigma than personal stigma, as well as higher levels of stigma compared to non-athletes when it comes to mental health and treatment. Increasing mental health literacy and improving access to care may help athletes in dealing with mental health problems and reduce stigma (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Kaier et al., 2015). All of these issues can be addressed by an MPC. And while not all MPCs are certified to deal with mental illness, they can be used as a referral system for those who need help from mental health professionals. But more importantly, if integrated within the team, they can be proactive in preventing athletes from requiring immediate and urgent help.

When MPCs are fully integrated, they can provide insight to the rest of the IST about how athletes are doing from a mental standpoint. An MPC's role within a team is to be a counsellor; to listen, teach, and provide feedback on how to use mental skills in competition. Building trust and rapport between the MPC and the athletes is one of the most important qualities of a good MPC (Lubker et al., 2008; Sharp et al., 2014). Having an MPC as part of a team's IST will make sport psychology resources more available for those athletes who are seeking help from a mental health and a mental performance standpoint. The advantage lies in the fact that an MPC, working as part of an IST, is constantly involved and fully invested in the team. Relationships are built throughout the season, and throughout the multiple years that student-athletes spend competing for their team. These relationships and trust are what could make a difference for student-athletes between seeking help outside of their varsity program from a stranger, rather than talking to someone who understands their environment, and what they go through on a daily and yearly basis (Henriksen et al., 2019; López & Levy, 2013; Watson, 2005). According to research (Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2018), poor mental health can affect performance not only in competition settings but also in training and recovery treatments.

**High-performance, personal development, MPCs and ISTs.** Coaches are responsible for building athletes. The higher level the program becomes, the more specific coaches' roles become. For example, a U8 soccer team is likely to be coached by a parent who may or may not have much experience in soccer and/or coaching. A U16

travel basketball team will most likely have a coach who is certified in coaching basketball and will have help from assistant coaches with similar certifications. A Junior hockey team playing in the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) will have professional coaches, athletic trainers, and physiotherapists on staff. And a professional football team will have the best of all: coaches, trainers, physicians, dieticians, MPCs, S&C coaches, and more. The U8 soccer coach will ultimately have to deal with all the latter responsibilities (e.g., head coach, manager, team doctor, inspirational/motivational speaker), while the professional head coaches focus on their specific roles: techniques and tactics of the sport. One could assume that university athletics (in Canada) would fall somewhere between the Junior hockey team in the OHL and the professional football team. At this level of competition, coaches do not have the time or the knowledge to cover all aspects of sport. They typically need the assistance of professionals who specialize in specific sport topics to provide a well-rounded program. Universities who claim to have high-performance programs but do not have MPCs on staff, should consider the positive implications of doing so, such as helping athletes improve their motor skills through mental training (Carson & Collins, 2016), leadership programs (Voight, 2012), injury-rehabilitation assistance (Ievleva & Orlick, 1991), and more.

**MPC-Coach relationship and buy-in.** The most important element about having an MPC (or any other outside resource) integrated with a team is building strong relationships in order to create buy-in (Fortin-Guichard, Boudreault, Gagnon, & Trottier, 2018). Without it, the resources that an MPC can provide will be wasted. The best way to ensure the success of an integrated model with an MPC is to start at the top, with the coaches' buy-in (Zakrajsek et al., 2013). When an MPC is part of an IST and is recognized and validated by the rest of the IST, the MPC is given the necessary importance and value that they need for the team to be successful as a whole. Leading by example, athletes will recognize the value and importance of the MPC's role, eventually eliminating the idea that sport psychology is only done when last-minute adjustments are needed, and instead, it becomes part of the day-to-day program (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). If coaches believe MPCs to be essential in their program's success, then it is of utmost importance that those coaches voice their opinions about it and allow their athletes to feel comfortable in a setting where an MPC is already part of their athletic

career. At the same time, MPCs must acknowledge that barrier and be sensitive to individual athletes' perceptions and approach to sport psychology. However, by having an MPC be part of a sports team, it may allow the team to unconsciously welcome the idea of working with an MPC starting with a group model (Wrisberg, Simpson, Loberg, Withycombe, & Reed, 2004). This may ease athletes into feeling more comfortable approaching the MPC for individual counselling, whether it is for performance enhancement, personal development, or mental health reasons.

### **Study Rationale**

Being a student-athlete during university is a unique experience. To perform at a high level includes much more than just one's own skills in their given sport. Holistic development is an important quality to be able to perform and thrive in a high-level performance environment (Brown, Arnold, Reid, & Roberts, 2018) and should be provided to all student-athletes in every program across Canada. Yet, athletic programs across the country did not have the budgets to support such demands up until 2016. Banwell and Kerr (2016a) discuss how various Canadian Universities (e.g., Queen's University, University of Toronto, University of British Columbia, etc.) underwent restructuring of their athletic programs with the purpose of winning more CIS (now USports) championships. One of the most common changes was the reduction of their programs with more than half of their teams being cut from full varsity status and funding. The shift to provide better support for student-athletes was more noticeable in reallocating resources towards full-time coaching staff, access to facilities, sports medicine and S&C, amongst others. However, it is inconclusive (based on how many have at least one MPC posted on their teams' websites) how many Canadian universities value sport psychology enough to have a full-time MPC to assist their varsity teams. One way in which Canadian universities can begin to set the standard for excellence and high-performance is by formalizing an IST model as part of their athletic program and making sure an MPC is part of that IST. This will provide athletes with a high-level sport experience as well as give them opportunities for personal development. MPCs provide a level of support for student-athletes that is necessary at the university level, while most athletes are away from home (Crutcher, 2015).

The purpose of this research was to provide insight into the importance of sport psychology services and MPCs in Canadian university athletics both as an opportunity and as a need, as seen by coaches.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Thirty-eight varsity coaches from eight Canadian universities were contacted via email to participate in this research study. USports is the national governing body of university sport in Canada (USports, n.d.). Therefore, only coaches from USports organized sports were eligible to be contacted. Inclusion criteria consisted of head coaches who could speak and understand English, give consent to participate, and coached a varsity sport at a Canadian university. Of those who reached out with interest to participate, all were interviewed. Seven participants (5 males; age  $m=47$ ,  $SD=7.7$ ) took part in a one-time Zoom interview between the months of April and August of the year 2020. Participants were from five different universities, with at least one coach from each of the four sport conferences across Canada (Atlantic University Sport [AUS], Réseau du Sport Étudiant du Québec [RSEQ], Ontario University Athletics [OUA], and Canada West). Participants were from four different sports (both men's and women's teams) and sports included soccer, basketball, volleyball, and rugby. All participants were currently in their offseason as the COVID-19 pandemic was responsible for ending all sport competitions during this time period.

### **Procedure**

This study was approached from a pragmatic theoretical perspective. Applied sport psychology can help athletes with various issues such as increasing performance, learning new mental skills, and counselling mental health. However, there is no one right answer to athletes' struggles and questions about seeking help from mental performance consultants (MPCs). MPCs can provide many different tools such as imagery, self-talk, emotion regulation, and mindfulness to approach athletes' concerns. MPCs must also learn to adapt and draw on from previous experiences. They can apply different

perspectives from multiple situations and learn from them. This fits with the pragmatic philosophy that knowledge is based on experience (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

The researcher applied for ethical approval to conduct this study and was granted it in March 2020 (Appendix A). A recruiting email was sent to varsity coaches from all four athletic conferences (AUS, RSEQ, OUA, and Canada West). The email included information about the study, its purpose, requirements, and level of participation. A copy of the email script and letter of information can be found on Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively. Those interested in participating were asked to reply to the researcher to set an appointment for a one-time virtual interview. This was a semi-structured, 30 – 45-minute, one-on-one interview via Zoom. Participants were given a document package via email prior to their interview with information about integrated support teams (ISTs), MPCs, and an example model of an IST. A copy of the description of an integrated support team and accompanying model can be seen in Appendix D and Appendix E, respectively. The description and model were only meant to be an example of a simplified version of how an IST could operate. This was not meant as a theoretical model.

At the beginning of the interview, coaches were reminded that the interview would be audio- and video-recorded for research purposes, and that they could opt out of the interview or from answering any questions at any point during the interview process. Coaches were then asked for consent to participate in the interview, and their agreement to have it audio- and video-recorded. They were also asked for similar consent to have direct quotes from their interview used in the publication of this research study. Following consent, coaches were asked demographic questions including age, gender they identify with, and sport coached. At this point, the recording was stopped and started again in order to have their demographic information saved separately from their responses to the interview guide in order to maintain confidentiality and have any identifiable information removed that could directly link them to their responses. The remainder of the interview consisted of semi-structured questions following an interview guide with the liberty to elaborate on each question and given answers to get the most complete information possible (Fylan, 2017). Questions that were not part of the

interview guide included how COVID and the quarantine had affected their team and programming. A copy of the confidentiality statement and demographic questions, and interview guide can be found in Appendix F and Appendix G, respectively. Notes were also taken to record important points and to keep track of unstructured questions and recurring themes that came up during the interview process. At the end of the interview, participants were reminded that their information would be kept confidential, and only the members of the research team would have access to their information. Coaches also were thanked for their participation. Data collection began in April 2020 and was supposed to continue until a minimum of five participants from each group (those with MPCs as part of their sport program and those without) were interviewed. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. After five months of unsuccessful recruiting, the researcher decided to end the data collection process. A small initial evaluation of the data concluded that participants' answers had reached saturation.

### **Data Analysis**

Before data analysis was concluded, the researcher declared his personal biases to a second researcher and principal investigator. The researcher recognized that his own experiences as an ex-varsity player and previous work in sport psychology may have affected the way coaches' responses were interpreted. There were different ways in which the researcher attempted to mitigate his biases. First, the interview guide was shared with the principal investigator of the study to corroborate neutrality and questions to be open ended and not leading in nature. Second, a different researcher acted as a second coder, who categorized the interviews separately. And third, the principal investigator and the second researcher helped review the final manuscript to identify potential biases and tendencies that the main researcher may have added during the writing process.

After data collection was finished and all interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded to a coding software. There were 80 pages of typed data uploaded. NVivo was used to code interviews and group similar answers from all coaches. Two independent researchers coded the results. First, one coder read through and coded the interview



transcripts. Originally, codes were deductively created from the interview questions. Later, more codes were created inductively from the interview answers. Once finished, the code book was sent to the second coder with the original interview transcripts, uncoded. The second coder then categorized the interviews into codes and provided feedback on the code book and possible codes that could be merged and dissolved. After the second coder was finished, both documents were merged into one to compare codes. A diagram of codes was created in order to facilitate the grouping of common themes. Four higher-order themes were created, with several subcategories below each. A copy of the diagram can be seen in Figure 1.

**Methodological rigour.** A six-step pragmatic approach based on thematic analysis was used to establish trustworthiness (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017), which includes Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria (credibility, confirmability, dependability, transferability). Credibility looks at how the interpretation of the results by the researcher fits with the answers provided by the participants. In this study, credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and peer debriefing. Confirmability has to do with researcher's interpretations of the findings coming directly from the participants' responses, and a critical friend and reflexive journaling were used to identify how the researcher's biases may have affected the interpretation of results. An audit trail must be explained in detail so that the reader can examine the research process to determine dependability. Qualitative research is typically said to be transferrable rather than generalizable. Transferability is left to the reader's interpretation through thick descriptions by the researcher providing detailed contextual information about the research question. The four criteria and their subsequent methods for achieving overall trustworthiness are interwoven within each phase of the data analysis, and included are descriptions of how each was operationalized in this study.

***Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data.*** This was achieved through the researcher's prolonged engagement with the design, development, procedure, data collection, data analysis, and writing process of this study. During the interview process, detailed notes were taken to highlight possible arising themes. Records of all data field notes and transcripts were kept by the researcher.

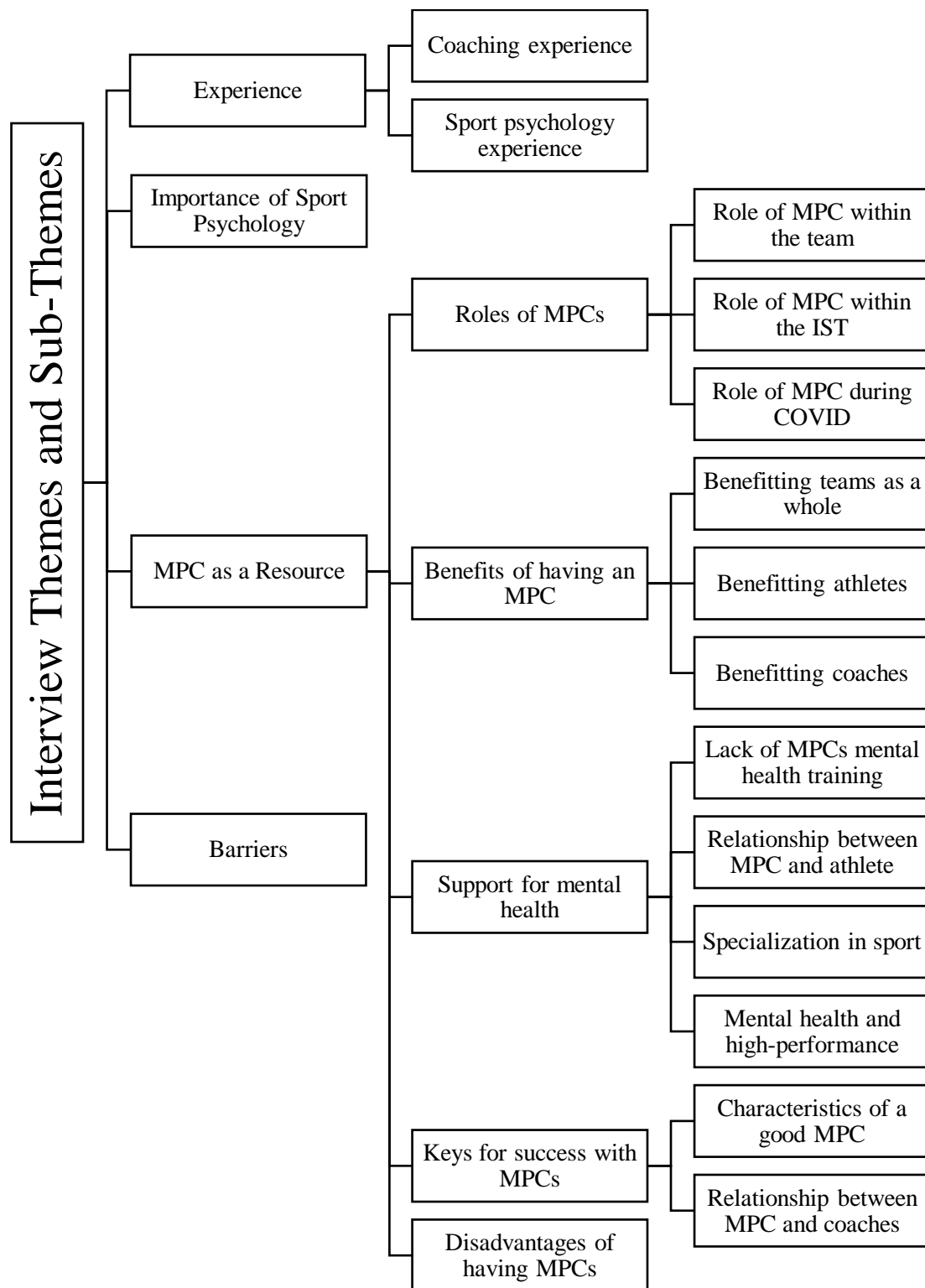


Figure 1: Diagram of Theme Categorization

**Phase 2: Generating initial codes.** Two independent coders were in charge of analyzing the raw data. After going through the transcribed interviews once, new codes were deductively created. A detailed code book was generated as part of an audit trail.

**Phase 3: Searching for themes.** Diagramming of theme connections made it easier for the researcher to group common codes and categorize them into high-order and lower-order themes. Refer to Figure 1 for a diagram of themes.

**Phase 4: Reviewing themes.** Themes and subthemes were vetted by both coders. A coding comparison query was run in NVivo to test for referential adequacy.

**Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.** Through peer debriefing, consensus was reached on the final themes and subcategories.

**Phase 6: Producing the report.** Reasons for conducting research analysis through a pragmatic perspective were discussed. An audit trail was also established from detailed explanation of the elaboration and execution of the research and data analysis, including changes that had to be made throughout the course of this study, as well as notes taken during the interview process. The thick descriptions that were included may allow for the transferability of findings to other sport realms such as high-level club, amateur, semi-pro, and professional sport settings.

## Results

Due to confidentiality, coaches were given pseudonyms when using direct quotes from their interviews to avoid any identifiable information that could be traced back to them. Coaches are identified as Coach 1-7.

The analysis of the interviews revealed four different higher-order themes: *experience*, *importance of sport psychology* (within the program), *MPCs as a resource* (within ISTs), and *barriers* (athletic programs may encounter when looking to hire an MPC). Each theme contained further lower-order themes, as described previously in Figure 1.

## **Experience**

This theme was divided into coaching experience and sport psychology experience, as shown in Figure 1.

**Coaching experience.** Coaches interviewed had a total of over 160 years of combined coaching experience. Their most notable experiences included coaching provincial teams, youth national teams, senior national teams, Canada Games, and FISU (Federation Internationale du Sport Universitaire) Games.

**Sport psychology experience.** Coaches' sport psychology experience varied more compared to their coaching experience. All coaches indicated their sport psychology experience to come from reading books, taking courses as part of their ongoing NCCP (National Coaching Certification Program) professional development, and own personal work with MPCs earlier in their careers as athletes. Some mentioned having taken courses in university either as part of their degree (Human Kinetics/Physical Education) or out of interest. And one coach shared having a Master's degree in Sport Psychology (although it is important to mention they were not the MPC for their own team).

## **Importance of Sport Psychology**

All coaches interviewed expressed the importance of having sport psychology be integrated as part of their program. Coaches placed high value on certain qualities provided by sport psychology such as leadership, development, and high-performance. With regards to leadership, Coach 7 said, "there are always 4 or 5 players that will want to work with the MPC more" referring to players who are interested in continuing to learn and develop their mental skills. They also added, "And then I would say the last thing that [the MPC] would do in the season, would be a captains and leadership talk."

Coach 1 talked about sport psychology as being "a foundational skill" when it comes to mental training and development of mental skills. Coach 5 also placed a large emphasis on developing mental skills with their athletes:

I look at your mental skills and your mental performance as the exact same way, it's a foundational thing. Before we can do advanced work with an athlete in the mental performance realm, we actually have to assess and figure out what their foundational skills are, mental composure, maturity about their own training, self-awareness, their skills of reflection, and the list goes on. So, in other words, what's their skills set, what's their experience, what's their knowledge base. And, currently we have been approaching it that, we actually have sort of a career path of development with mental performance just like we have with any other skill.

Tying development with high-performance, Coach 2 explained how sport psychology can help develop their athletes, not only from an athletic standpoint, but also from a personal one.

[In] my opinion, players now a days at the university level deal with a lot more anxiety, possibly depression, stress to get into programs. I think there's a lot more demands put on the student-athletes. ...but I do think that it's very much front and centre and it's an important part to it. ...I think there's the wellness piece, but also the performance side. And the performance side, in my sport, the athletes that have a stronger, call it mental toughness, ...those are players that I want in my program rather than someone that's really technical that doesn't have the mental skill set or coping skills to deal with some of the challenges that might be put forth.

### **MPC as a Resource**

The coaches discussed the MPC as a resource within their ISTs. This theme was comprised of five sub-themes: roles of MPCs, benefits of having an MPC, support for mental health, keys for success with MPCs, and downsides to having MPCs. These are shown in Figure 1.

**Roles of MPCs.** The role of an MPC can only be defined within its own IST, and each team will adapt the position according to their needs. Coaches mentioned different roles that their MPCs take on. MPCs have a role within the team in terms of how they are utilized and for what purposes. However, they also have a role within the global IST in order to provide the best overall care to the whole team. Some coaches also provided information about how their MPCs' roles were adapted during this year (2020) with regards to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

***Role of MPC within the team.*** Overall, coaches identified two major roles for MPCs: *counselling services* and *high-performance*, where they were not necessarily mutually exclusive, as was the case for Coach 3:

He provides mental performance support. He offers a lot of direction to a group and generation in particular who struggles with a lot. They manage a lot. And he is a sounding board for them. And to enhance their performance. Ultimately, his help helps them perform better. So, we perform better as a team and get the results we're hoping for. He provides a safe environment for young people to voice concerns, to show vulnerability, and to strengthen areas that need improvement. He's been lights out for us.

Specifically, during the year, MPCs may have different roles depending on the demands of the sport during a particular stage of the competition calendar (pre-season, in-season both regular and post-season, and off-season). Coaches described using their MPCs during the pre-season as a time to test athletes on mental skills and obtain baseline scores.

What we do is, prior to every season, our MPCs will send surveys to individual players to get an idea of each player, their personalities, their challenges, their struggles, their weaknesses and all that. When preseason hits, individuals meet the MPC for about half an hour to go over the answers and set up a first link. From there, in preseason we'll probably have 2 or 3 group talks that will be decided between the MPC [and the coaching staff] and what that person feels the team needs, as well as what the staff feels the team needs, and kind of make sure we're on the same page. (Coach 7)

Coaches mentioned utilizing their MPCs more during in-season, but with a specific purpose; to fine tune skills that had already been worked on, and provide one-on-one services to help athletes with more "in the moment" pressures/issues.

Then, from there, the MPC stays connected by showing up to practices maybe twice a week over the course of the fall. And probably identify 3, 4, 5 players depending on the year on who may need a little bit more support, and then maybe 2 or 3 that want to have the extra work because they believe in it that much more. And that goes on for the entire season. (Coach 7)

Most coaches saw the need for MPCs to be at practices and games to build rapport amongst the athletes and help create a culture of buy-in. Coach 2 said "[the MPC]

would pop into some of our training. Early on it was a lot of introductions for her to build the relationships with the players. And then every Friday we had a meeting with her for about an hour.” Coach 6 shared how much they valued having their MPC readily available:

[The MPC] was with us throughout all our training camps. She was with us throughout our competition, and she would just be in the stands in the competition. And if I needed something, she’d be there. ... We had a fantastic player. ... we knew she had issues with confidence. So, our MPC had been working with her, and everything seemed ok, and in the warmup leading into the semi-final, she had an absolute melt down. ... she’s a starter. We don’t really have a replacement. I went over to [the MPC] who was in the stands.... And because we had built a relationship, it wasn’t weird. ... And [the MPC] got her going again, no problem. She joined what was left of the warmup and had a good game. Without her, I don’t know if we would have got her going. There’s an example, she’s there, she stays in the background, and when we need her she’s there. We had a fantastic working relationship.

Coaches also pointed out how MPCs were a valuable resource during the off-season, specifically using this time to introduce new mental skills and leadership training. Coach 6 talked about the off-season as the perfect time for this:

...in the offseason, and we don’t really have an offseason, so in our winter season, that there’s a bulk of the work that needs to be done to get us ready again for the preseason. We’re not on the road as much in the winter season. We’re not on the road every weekend which eats so much time. We would have more time to dedicate to an MPC in that winter season.

Coach 3 stated:

...there are one-off meetings. ...I do know the girls reach out during the season and offseason. And now this is the first time that [the MPC] has helped in the offseason, formally. ...he also does a lot of work with our, we call them our off-field leaders. They are doing a lot of work with him in terms of our culture. So, we run a book club, we call it. He helps this one group in particular and he’s been part of that process as well.

***Role of MPC within the IST.*** The coaches indicated that integrating the role of the MPC increases buy-in from the athletes and benefits the culture of the team. The MPC provides expertise in sport psychology, where coaches and other members of the

IST lack the knowledge. “I think the role of the MPC really, in my current scenario, same role as any of the others in that she’s the subject expert when it comes to mental performance.” (Coach 5). Coaches believed that fully integrating an MPC requires the collaboration of all parties that make up the IST to be in synchrony. “In many ways, I always equated, and I think we always should, align what an MPC does with athletic therapy, and with the strength and conditioning.” (Coach 1). Coach 7 explained how no one is above the rest, and all work in conjunction towards one goal: the overall success of the team and the athletes.

Everybody that is in that table has experiences from different backgrounds, from different realities. We all chime in, and we come to a consensus “ok, this is a good time to push, or this is a good time to give a day off” for example. If we’re giving a talk and the MPC has to give a talk on a specific topic, sometimes we’ll include some of the staff members that are at that table to present with them, because it makes sense within the context, or sometimes it’s an alone thing. It’s kind of difficult to narrow down the role of that person. But whenever anything is discussed at that table, it’s give your 2 cents just so we can build a better idea into what should be done with the players, with the team, with an individual.

***Role of MPC during COVID.*** This year (2020), teams encountered unexpected changes to their seasons. Therefore, training methods had to change rapidly and one of the safest and better ways to continue with it was through online sessions. There are not many sport activities that can be done remotely, without equipment or training facilities, or without the physical presence of players and coaches. However, sport psychology is one that can be easily facilitated to a group through a virtual approach. Along with changes in training schedules, MPCs’ roles had to change to accommodate the new regulations set forth by the government due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. During this time, coaches realized the great opportunity they had to utilize their MPC resources when nothing else was available.

This year might be a little bit unique, but I’ve kind of enjoyed it where this period is very much our mental and physical prep, and basketball takes very much a back seat. So, we’re actually fairly heavy on the mental performance side now. And that might be a little bit more just based on what’s going on. (Coach 4)

Coach 7 stated:



COVID has been a very different situation. We've actually added more hours to the MPC because technically during the summer, that person isn't working with the group. But we've said that this is the time to do it, because now more than ever we need to work on structure and mental skills on how to train properly without having a coach or teammates keeping people accountable.

**Benefits of having an MPC.** Coaches were asked about what they thought were the benefits of having an MPC. Overall, coaches had positive opinions regarding MPCs' roles and how they can benefit teams, athletes, and coaches.

*Benefitting teams as a whole.* Collectively, coaches expressed that a team as a whole can benefit from having an MPC, as they can help the team with team dynamics and leadership. Working on the connection between teammates and coaches is an important piece of sports, said Coach 4: "I would say that there's also some element of team building and working on connections between coach and staff and players, between players and players, between coaching staff and coaching staff."

Coaches agreed that captains are not the only leaders on the team, and sometimes identifying them early can be advantageous. Coach 5 talked about taking advantage of their MPC to groom their next generation of leaders from the moment athletes join the team:

...our MPC is part of that leadership component. She helps facilitate a particular component. ...Leadership development has just become a bit of a buzz word in the sport world these days. But for years we've been doing it. You identify some of your younger athletes that you hope one day would be a captain. So, you start working with them. We just happen to now have more structure.

*Benefitting athletes.* Three major topics were revealed when coaches talked about how MPCs could benefit their athletes: development, support and performance. Coach 3 believed that coaching is much more than just instructing technique and tactics to athletes. It's about also helping young men and women grow as individuals:

It just provides an area of growth for your athletes. And ultimately that's why we coach. We want to develop young people. And so, having an MPC helps develop another element of those athletes, to give them the skills that they need in life.

When it comes to support, sometimes athletes need someone else other than a coach to rely on, whether it's an MPC directly supporting the players or acting as a referral system within the field. Coach 4 stated:

I think for them, she can either be a liaison to someone else that can give them better support if they're going through some mental health issues. I think she can be a sounding board for them if they just need to call and get something off their shoulders, because I think she's really good about being confidential with stuff that needs to be done. And obviously checking with them if there's things she feels that I need to know, and just asking permission if it's ok, they share. So, I know that they trust her.

Helping athletes develop their mental skills and be a support system for them from a mental perspective will ultimately help them perform better in the field of play said Coach 7.

***Benefitting coaches.*** Coaches believed that MPCs can be a valuable resource for them. With respect to improving their abilities and increasing their knowledge, Coach 1 stated, "I actually look at our MPC as a means of professional development as well." Coach 5 agreed that MPCs can assist the team staff:

Maybe the only one I haven't mentioned is we also view her as a mental performance coach and support for coaches, for the staff. It's not just for our athletes. How does our staff work, how does our staff operate? Maybe we have personal skills that we want to develop and work on.

Just like athletes, coaches have daily stressors that may affect them. The coaches felt having an MPC can alleviate some of that stress. Coach 3 said:

I had a really [*explicit*] game one time, and I was just not myself. And I chatted to [the MPC] the next day about it. Just how I didn't like where I was in my head space. You tend to figure it out yourself. He's very good like that. He kind of guides you to the answer, he doesn't tell you what the answer is. So, he's really good for the staff as well.

**Support for mental health.** All coaches agreed that student-athletes are in a unique position where they have an increased number of responsibilities compared to the average student non-athlete.

...what student-athletes are going through and what, I don't want to use the word regular, but what the rest of the population are going through, are different things. And fully admitting there are some students between their job, taking a full load, there's some that are working hard. On average, in general, no. Do they also have the same constraints, the same pressure? No." (Coach 1)

These added pressures and responsibilities can add and lead to poor mental health.

Coaches were asked about their opinions on if an MPC could be helpful when dealing with issues of mental health. Four major sub-themes came to light when talking about the differences between an MPC and a school counsellor: lack of MPCs mental health training, relationship between MPC and athlete, specialization in sport, and mental health and high-performance.

***Lack of MPCs' mental health training.*** Mental health counsellors require specific training that not all MPCs have. MPCs are primarily focused on mental training and performance; however, some MPCs take it upon themselves to further their education and complement their training by getting certified as mental health counsellors. Coaches commented on some MPCs lack of mental health training.

I'm not sure that an MPC, and it depends on the level of schooling they've had because maybe they are clinical psychologists, but I think most MPCs probably aren't equipped to deal with in-depth mental health issues. And probably for the protection of themselves, they shouldn't be trying if they're not capable of it. And I'm talking about the most severe [cases], where you have athletes maybe on suicide watch, extremely depressed. So, I think then they have to be referred to the appropriate people. (Coach 6)

For some coaches, it depended on the role they ask of their MPC to play within the team.

I think they [MPCs] are more performance based, like how to get performance. They can do the whole counsellor piece, but they really are in my eyes more trained on the sport side, I think. So ultimately it is about performance. ...I think the mental health side of things is that counsellor piece. (Coach 3)

Regardless of whether the MPC is trained in mental health counselling or not, Coach 4 said for their players "[the MPC] can be a liaison to someone else that can give them better support if they're going through some mental health issues. ...I would say secondary role is to be a liaison between our athletes and mental health support."

***Relationship between MPC and athlete.*** Coaches observed that having an MPC that is trusted and respected is a must when it comes to building strong relationships between the MPC and the athletes. Those strong relationships help athletes feel comfortable to approach the MPC when something is bothering them or feel they need help. Coach 1 explained:

...your student counsellor is dealing with a broad spectrum of 10, 000 students. Your MPC is specializing with 160 student-athletes. ...they are going to have a better relationship. ...They are already working with the athletes one-on-one, so there's a pre-existing relationship there, or a pre-established relationship there. So, there's a comfort zone in terms of reaching out. Whereas if, and I don't care what university you're at, there's going to be fantastic counsellors there, but most of the time, you go see a counsellor, that's the first time you're meeting that person in your life. And so, there isn't that same connection; there isn't that same level of trust. (Coach 1)

Two coaches believed that sometimes it is better to have someone removed to deal with issues about mental health out of fear that the MPC would communicate it to the coach and therefore the athletes would be seen differently, and possibly affect their status on the team.

As soon as an athlete gets to the point where they need counselling or support, or medication, or anything along the lines of mental health, I think that's a moment where it has to be someone maybe a little bit separate from my IST. ...I wouldn't say a mental health professional would necessarily fit on an IST. That might be a little bit separate. (Coach 4)

And Coach 6 stated:

I think one of the difficulties maybe for student-athletes, and I talked about I'd like the MPC to be quite involved in terms of at least knowing our team culture, our team members. Maybe, if that happened, the student-athlete wouldn't feel comfortable going to the MPC if they thought at all that the message would come back to me. So maybe in those instances, they would feel more comfortable going and talking to somebody that's not intimately associated with us.

However, Coach 7 argued that MPCs can be a valuable resource in dealing with mental health issues by building that trust and establishing clear boundaries about confidentiality

between athletes and MPCs, and are better suited to deal with mental health than coaches are.

I think a lot of the times when coaches ask the questions, or when coaches will have those discussions, the players will answer but always with kind of in the back of their mind “this will change how to the coach views me. The coach may think I’m weak because I’m struggling with my confidence”. Because they’re supposed to say they’re strong and well. Whereas MPCs are more confidential and there’s a different kind of trust from the start and they can say that they’re struggling with their confidence.

***Specialization in sport.*** One thing the majority of coaches agreed on is that MPCs have a slight advantage when it comes to counselling. Their understanding of the athletic demands placed on student-athletes is what sets them apart from school counsellors who may not share the same perspective about the types of stressors student-athletes go through on a day-to-day.

I don’t necessarily think that the people that I’m talking about [counsellors] don’t have the ability to help them, I just don’t think they have the context to help. I think varsity athletes are under a different set of pressures... Essentially, they’re doing 2 or 3 full time jobs at once. And just the amount of pressure that’s on them, and this ability of the athletes now has changed completely. If you don’t have that context, I don’t necessarily think you can build that rapport in a timely fashion to really help them when they’re in moments of crisis.” (Coach 4)

Coach 5 explained the difference between school counsellors and MPCs is:

The exact same way a family doctor would differ from a sport med doctor. I think they have the same base knowledge and expertise, but they’ve chosen to have an enhanced knowledge base when it comes to sport and athletics. When working with those individuals I think their awareness of the demands of sport, of the needs of that athlete, greatly enhances their ability to counsel, to recommend, to advise.

***Mental health and high-performance.*** Some coaches made the specific distinction that MPCs can only be focused on one of the two, mental health or high-performance. For the most part, all coaches agreed that MPCs’ primary focus should be high-performance, and that mental health should be separate as it will become too much to handle. For example, Coach 4 stated:

I think you can invest in mental health or you can invest in mental performance. And when you start to cross the line too much, I think it's just asking too much from an individual person. And two different roles with individual athletes, or two different roles within a team, I think the message gets lost. I think there has to be clear delineation between the 2. And neither is less important or more important, I just think they're different.

Coaches suggested that just because MPCs' main role is high-performance does not mean they are not resourceful. They are able to provide quick counselling to assess an athlete's state of mind. And if they determine an athlete requires more help, they are able to refer athletes to a mental health professional that would be better suited to deal with more important issues.

Our MPC is not one to be a counsellor for any of our athletes. That person's role is really for performing on the field or help perform on the field. However, if this person realizes "ok, wait a second. There's an eating disorder happening with one of your players", they will refer to an actual mental health professional on campus. ...the MPC will have a connection to the players, and we'll be able to identify much sooner, and we'll guide the players in the right direction. It's a very clear idea to the players and to the MPC that that person's role is really for performance or doing better in their sport. (Coach 7)

Coaches understood that, at the end of the day, athletes whose mental health is in poor standing will not be able to perform at their fullest potential. Coach 7 shared: "...I strongly feel that adjusting or correcting or better guiding on the mental side will lead to higher performance.". Coach 2 believed mental health and performing at a high level are intertwined, and they are both correlated to each other; if one suffers the other is likely to follow.

I think they can relate it back to the sport. That's the big thing here for us, with this MPC. It's that you can relate it back to performance. Because ultimately that's what we talk about here, the high-performance. And when you talk about high-performance, the mental side is one pillar to the overall holistic environment of an athlete. So, if [the MPC] can relate it back to helping that player refocus and get back and maybe develop some coping skills to get back to a better performance on the field or on the ice, I think that's beneficial. (Coach 2)

**Keys for success with MPCs.** All seven coaches discussed what makes their MPC and their IST successful. More specifically, they felt individual characteristics of a good MPC and the relationship between coaches and MPCs contributed to this success.

*Characteristics of a successful MPC.* The characteristics of an MPC will influence the level of buy-in from the team towards the sport psychology section of the program, and as most coaches pointed out, without buy-in an MPC is a wasted resource. Coach 4 commented on fully integrating their MPC into everything they do, to the point where the MPC is not seen as an outsider anymore, but as "...part of the tribe". One prevalent characteristic about integration is *continuity*. Coaches reported having worked with Master's and PhD students, and even MPCs who only worked with the team for a few sessions. The coaches felt that in such cases there was not a real connection or continuity to what was being taught, and therefore the athletes lost interest quickly.

You would hope that that MPC is experienced enough that they can go about their business without saying "what do we need to do this week?" because if that's the case then it just becomes another task for the leader of the program to manage and I think there's enough on a head coach's plate to deal with some of those things. (Coach 2)

Another characteristic discussed was the MPC's level of involvement. The coaches believed there must be full involvement and integration from the MPC in order to completely understand the team dynamics and how they fit within the team and the IST.

The MPC has to understand where they fit. And has to understand the team culture, and the only way you can understand the team culture is if you're actually there. And not there every day, that's not what I'm suggesting, but at least get a good sense. (Coach 6)

Coach 7 further explained:

If an MPC would only show up for the hours that they're supposed to show up, and not hang out for just hanging out, I don't think it'd feel very natural or like they necessarily want to be part of this group. And I think the wanting to be part of the group and the group success is a huge thing, both for the staff, confidence in this person, and for the connection with the players as well.

As with any team, a compatible personality was considered important by the coaches. Having the right person with the right attitude made a big difference.

You have a number of different dynamics there. And you have to find that person that resonates with all those teams and I'll tell you right now. Not everybody can do the job that [the MPC] is doing. We're very fortunate. She's special.... But the big piece is that personal connection. (Coach 1)

***Relationship between MPC and coaches.*** The coaches believed that a major component of MPC success was the relationship between the MPCs and themselves. The majority of the coaches expressed their thoughts about having honest, open, and personal relationships with their MPCs.

Honest. It has to be honest. ...I think you have to have a really strong relationship with your MPC, or it doesn't work. ...I love that we're going golfing, that we're friends. But it strengthens our connection, and the girls all get to hear it. Because you have to model the behaviours to know that I'm with my support staff going golfing and hanging out, having a pint. The girls understand and see that. And there's a lot of value in that. So, there's better buy-in. There's just a level of trust there that you can't have otherwise. (Coach 3)

Coach 4 commented:

Open, fully integrated obviously. ...I think the more our players see that we're using her services, that we completely buy in, I think it's incredibly important for coaches to show up to MPC sessions. The moment you're not there, the players don't see it as important. I think you have to be fully supportive of what they do. But on the flipside too, her showing up to practices, regardless if she understands...The fact that she shows up to practices, the players see that she's an important part, that she's fully integrated in what we do. So, I think you need to be open, she needs access to players and coaches, and we need access to her. She's part of our staff like anyone else is. ...I think the big thing is to be open and connected.

And Coach 5 further stated:

The ideal relationship I would like to see her and meet with her every single day just like I do any other assistant coach. Would love to see them drop in and be involved in every single training session to some degree. That doesn't mean hanging out in a corner and sitting out on a chair every second of every minute, but I would like them to be as visible, as integrated, and as much a part of the



fabric of all versions of training, and all environments as any other assistant coach. (Coach 5)

**Disadvantages of having MPCs.** Coaches were asked about any disadvantages of having an MPC. They responded with possible negative qualities of some MPCs such as being inefficient, poor organizational skills, lack of continuity, and lack of trust. For example, Coach 2 said:

I think at times obviously when you bring someone to your coaching staff and you're working with a team that's on an annual training plan, the message should be consistent or delivered in chunks throughout that annual plan. And sometimes if it's not it's kind of ineffective.

There was also one feature that is not directly associated with an MPC's performance but was a common answer by most coaches; the usage of financial resources, especially when the MPC is not provided and funded by the athletic program. Coach 5 shared:

The disadvantage is once it becomes fully integrated, it is one of the easiest ones to lose as well because of funding. I worry if it's gone, because I don't think any other assistant coach or head coach is skilled enough to carry it on.

## **Barriers**

Barriers refer to what might prevent coaches and athletic departments from hiring MPCs. Lack of finances to fund MPCs was the most common answer by coaches when asked about barriers. When coaches are given a certain budget for the year, it places restraints on how to manage that budget. Priorities may be different depending on the immediate needs of their athletes, and as was the case for Coach 6, unfortunately there were not enough resources to go around.

We can't afford it. That is the issue. If I have to decide on spending \$150 now for a nutritionist to come in and talk, or I can take someone extra on our road trip, pay for the ferry or whatever. That's a balancing act. And we have no money.

Sometimes, due to the restraints from low budgets, prioritizing becomes an issue, and it can be handled in different ways. Coach 4 suggested that sometimes it can be in a negative way:

...I know the more coaches that don't buy-in to proper IST models, they'll use that money towards basically another assistant coach but disguising it on paper as a "video analyst". Coaches are masters of, I don't want to say manipulators, but definitely understand how to bend a buck or two to funnel resources into what they feel is most important.

However, as Coach 6 put it, lack of resources is just an excuse. It's more about a lack of prioritization on both the coaches (when the budget comes directly from the team's budget) and on the athletic departments (when the budget comes from the overall varsity program). "I don't think athletic departments can afford them, or at least they don't prioritize the MPCs. Because if it was a priority, they would put money towards it."

All that being said, Coach 3 put things in perspective for other coaches and athletic departments who may be on the fence about prioritizing MPCs: "I don't see a drawback, budget maybe, that you have to pay for them. But you have to invest in your athletes. That's a huge piece for us."

Only one coach out of the seven answered "no" when asked if they had an MPC as part of their IST. This coach said they hire Master's and PhD students for workshops but because they are not paid full-time, they are not able to work with the team on a regular basis. The coach went on to say that some of the difficulties that their team struggles with trying to implement sport psychology into their program is the lack of continuity, buy-in from the players, and simply not having an expert in the field leading those occasional sessions. There is no one to help train athletes in mental skills and performance, and no one to support those athletes and coaches. When asked about final remarks, the coach said:

I would like to reiterate that I don't understand how university athletic departments can talk about high-performance and we don't have a sport psychologist on staff. It doesn't make sense to me. We can prepare them physically and have them ready to play tactically, but mentally they have to be able to perform. And I think you need a professional person to do that. Of course, I understand dollars and cents. But it just seems to me that a sport psychologist should be a core member of that high-performance model. And if that means you have to cut somewhere else, maybe you're taking a person out of sports information, I don't know. But it seems to me that it isn't given enough credit. And it doesn't seem to be a priority for athletic directors. How do you run a high-performance program if you don't have one? ...it absolutely should be a core

building block of a high-performance program. So, we're not high-performance, I think. We don't have one.

After each interview was over, coaches were asked if there was anything further they wanted to share, or anything they felt was important to mention that they might have forgotten. Some important comments were:

I think following an athletic therapy model... is the one that makes the most sense when developing a mental skills program or mental performance program. I think you have to figure out ways how to best deal with continuity because I think that's a huge piece when it comes to mental performance. ...I do think the coach has to be involved in the IST and not above the IST. So, I think in some ways, in selling coaches is how they fit in. Coaches are very self-centred people, and I feel like I probably fit there to some extent as well. We like to know where we fit, and how it can either service our program but also how we sort of fit within the program as well. (Coach 4)

Coach 6 stated:

When you talk about high-performance, you're talking about doing a good job for maybe not so many. So, now you have to make decisions, is your athletic program going to be large, can you afford all these things, and the high-performance things that go along with it? Or not? I think that's part of the barriers too. The philosophy of the athletic departments and the culture. (Coach 6)

And finally, as Coach 3 put it: "I don't know how you do this without an MPC at this point. I couldn't imagine not having one."

## **Discussion**

The aim of the present research was to investigate coaches' perceptions of the importance of sport psychology services and MPCs in Canadian university athletics. It was hypothesised that coaches would report that MPCs should be a fundamental part of their IST from a high-performance, personal development, and mental health standpoint. The findings supported this hypothesis.

Banwell and Kerr (2016a) suggested that Canadian universities are undergoing a restructuring of their sport programs. They are adjusting budgets and reducing the number of varsity programs they offer in order to provide more and better resources for

select teams. Results of this study indicated that some Canadian universities have already restructured their programs to upgrade the types of resources available to student-athletes, including the provision of mental skills training. All but one of the participants in the current study indicated having an MPC currently working with their team, which suggests there is progress in recognizing that sport psychology is a high priority in advancing the Canadian university sport model.

The coaches' sport psychology experiences varied considerably. They indicated their sport psychology experiences came from reading books, taking courses as part of their ongoing NCCP (National Coaching Certification Program) professional development, and their own personal work with MPCs earlier in their careers as athletes. Some mentioned having taken courses in university either as part of their degree (Human Kinetics/Physical Education) or out of personal interest. These findings support previous research suggesting coaches gain knowledge through various sources (Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Rodgers, Reade, & Hall, 2007; Werthner & Trudel, 2006). Côté (2006) argued that there are three main settings in which coaches learn the skills to be effective: coach education programs, learning experiences as an athlete, and learning experiences as a coach.

Having a coach with the dual role of also being the MPC of their own team enables that coach to incorporate PST into their team's training more easily (Buceta, 1993). However, the disadvantages with the coach-MPC dual role are a) time restrictions, which may interfere with the quality of each separate role; and b) interpersonal conflicts between the coach-MPC and athletes, which may be diminished with a separate sport psychology professional (Huang & Hung, 2008). Moreover, ethical principles and confidentiality are one of the primary responsibilities for MPCs and may be blurred when a person is acting in a dual-role position (Ellickson & Brown, 1990).

Roles of MPCs varied across different teams mostly dependent on what the coach placed priority on, either high-performance or mental health. However, all coaches agreed that having an MPC on staff was beneficial as they are multifaceted in the way they approach their role; they provide resources for individual athletes (e.g., one-on-one

counselling), for coaches (e.g., professional development), and for the team as a whole. (e.g., fostering group cohesion).

As Vealey (2007) explains, there are different types of mental skills that MPCs can help athletes and coaches work on including foundational, performance, personal development, and team skills. Moreover, developing these skills is necessary for success. This was supported by the current findings as the coaches identified the individual benefits that MPCs provide their athletes such as leadership skills, personal development, skills development, counselling support, and overall high-performance. Some research also suggests that MPCs should not only focus on the outcome of performance but support the development of the athlete as a person (Dosil et al., 2014; Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Iso-Ahola, 1995). Banwell and Kerr (2016b) argued that MPCs can play an important role in enhancing athlete's personal development. Gee (2010) also expressed the importance of MPCs providing sport psychology tools to athletes to help them deal with psychological factors that may negatively interfere with their success.

Coaches, just like athletes, have certain expectations and responsibilities. And while it may go unnoticed, they often perform under pressure. In that case, MPCs are also able to help coaches deal with the demands of their sport (Giges, Petitpas, & Vernacchia, 2004). During competition, sometimes it is the coaches who end up talking to the MPC more than the athletes do (Sharp et al., 2014). In the current study, coaches discussed how MPCs had benefitted the coaching staff from professional development and support standpoints. They reported using their MPCs as another coach on staff; someone to bounce ideas off and to help them better understand what their athletes go through on a day-to-day basis. This helped coaches better plan practices and coordinate with other members of the IST to provide the best care for their athletes.

Coaches pointed out that only when sport psychology is fully integrated into the program can one really appreciate the full benefits it can offer. Research also suggests that sport psychology must be integrated within sports by MPCs working alongside other professionals that provide resources for a team (e.g., physical, tactical, technical; Sporer & Windt, 2018; Vealey, 2007). As was stated by the coaches during the interview

process, the MPC's particular role within an IST is to be the subject expert when it comes to sport psychology and mental performance. Every member in the IST is required to collaborate and contribute to benefit the success of the team and its players. Those coaches who have integrated MPCs into their sport have noticed the benefits that come with prioritizing sport psychology; from improving group cohesion and promoting leadership within the group, to increasing high-performance, support and development for athletes and coaches.

When discussing mental health, coaches pointed out that MPCs specialization in sport and their existing relationships with the athletes gave MPCs an advantage in assisting athletes with mental health issues. Research shows that MPCs are able to provide athletes with coping skills and mental health interventions to deal with negative psychological factors (Schinke et al., 2018). A study by Van Slingerland, Durand-Bush, and Rathwell (2018) reported high levels of mental health functioning in Canadian student-athletes. However, they emphasized that their results are not necessarily indicative of the absence of mental health issues. Consultants' sport background can be an essential attribute in fitting in with athletes. Understanding what athletes go through better prepares them to deal with mental health issues in sport (Zakrajsek et al., 2013). López and Levy (2013) found student-athletes prefer counsellors who have knowledge and personal experience in sports. This is because athletes feel these counsellors will better understand their needs.

One important point made by the coaches in this study is that not all MPCs are qualified to deal with mental health issues unless they have taken further education specific to counselling mental health. Nevertheless, they recognized that having an MPC working with their team provided a level of awareness of athletes who may be dealing with mental health issues and if needed, could be referred to a mental health professional by the MPC. It has recently been proposed that specialized professionals be specifically assigned to deal with athletes' mental health issues as their primary and only focus (Henriksen et al., 2019).

The literature also shows stigma and lack of mental health literacy as important barriers preventing athletes from seeking help with mental health issues (Gulliver et al., 2012; Kaier et al., 2015). By talking about mental health and reducing common stereotypes within the team, student-athletes may feel more comfortable talking about it and reaching out when they need help (López & Levy, 2013). While coaches in the current study did not specifically talk about barriers for their athletes seeking help when struggling with mental health issues, assumptions can be made about the type of relationship MPCs have with the team, and the importance coaches place on mental health. By promoting a safe space within the program, coaches were able to foster a positive culture that enables athletes to feel comfortable to ask for help. And having someone else on staff (e.g., MPC) shows their student-athletes that they care enough about mental health to have someone who can listen to them, and if necessary, refer them to a professional for better care. It is important for universities to recognize the value of incorporating professionals like MPCs to increase mental health literacy and manage the mental health support system for student-athletes (Henriksen et al., 2019; Van Slingerland et al., 2019). Even though mental toughness has been explored as a positive indicator of mental health, it does not mean that mental toughness and mental illness are mutually exclusive (Gucciardi et al., 2017).

Coaches believed that mental health and high-performance strongly overlap; athletes with poor mental health will most likely perform poorly. They also indicated that MPCs are able to provide mental skills to increase student-athletes' mental toughness, which will help them be more resilient to stressors and maintain a higher level of performance. Research has shown that there are factors other than physical ability and limitations that can affect the mental state of athletes and consequently their overall performance (Iso-Ahola, 1995). That is why student-athletes must develop the appropriate mental coping skills along with the necessary social support that MPCs can provide. Athletes' mental health can have an impact on competition performances, training/preparation, and recovery (Schinke et al., 2018).

All coaches agreed that no matter their focus (high-performance or mental health), MPCs must build an honest, trusting and open relationship with their athletes. Only then

will athletes be comfortable to talk to them about anything; whether they are looking to improve performance or talk about issues that are more personal to them. A study by Lubker, Visek, Geer, and Watson (2008) looked at the effectiveness of MPCs from athletes' and consultants' perspectives. Both groups rated positive interpersonal skills as the most important factor, which consisted of four components: friendly, approachable, trustworthy, and can maintain confidentiality. Interpersonal skills of MPCs play an essential role when it comes to building strong relationships, which are important for success (Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018; Lubker et al., 2008; Zakrajsek et al., 2013). The findings of the present study support previous research. According to the coaches, the ability of MPCs to build trusting relationships with athletes and coaches is what allows them to be successful. Coaches highlighted qualities such as being personable, trustworthy, and understanding of the team culture as being characteristic of successful MPCs.

Additionally, continuity in the delivery of sport psychology programming was identified in the present study as another key for success. According to participants, it provides an organized structure for learning compared to sporadic and ineffective sessions that lead to unproductive results. This continuity also allows athletes and coaches to buy-in and expand their careers. PST requires extensive hours of practice and dedication (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). The ideal time to work on new mental skills is in the off-season and continue that work through the pre-, regular, and post-season rather than trying to fix a last-minute problem right before a game. Coaches in the present study recognized that in order to increase buy-in, they should set an example by attending sport psychology sessions, as well as incorporating terms and techniques used by MPCs in all aspects of training and competition. Sharp and colleagues (2014) argue that coach involvement in sport psychology programming is essential for the effectiveness of the program. In addition, the relationship between athletes and MPCs should be more of a partnership; it should be collaborative and engaging in order for athletes to feel involved (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015).



As with the addition of any type of resource, there are certain barriers that have been acknowledged with hiring MPCs. A barrier that has been previously identified in the literature is the lack of time for athletes and coaches to utilize MPCs' services. In a study by Gould, Medbery, Damarjian, and Lauer (1999) on junior tennis coaches, it was found that coaches and athletes list "lack of time" as the number one barrier for not including PST as part of their training. Contrary to the literature, coaches in this study understood the importance of fully integrating sport psychology and MPCs into their programs to be able to maximize the benefits associated with doing so. Lack of time was not identified in any of the coaches' interviews as a barrier or disadvantage, as all coaches completely appreciated the time commitment sport psychology requires and prioritized the implementation of it within their programs.

As was mentioned previously, the relationship between MPCs, coaches, and athletes is of paramount importance. With that in mind, not finding the right person for the job was identified as a barrier within this study. Coaches all had positive reviews about their own MPCs and expressed that professionalism, character, and a compatible personality were keys for success. But they were clear in pointing out that an MPC without those qualities could do more harm than good. Sporer and Windt (2018) explained that in order to enhance performance management within an integrated team, hiring the right people can make a difference. This is further supported by findings of two studies that looked at what MPCs perceived to be important for consulting effectiveness (Sharp & Hodge, 2011; Sharp et al., 2014). These studies identified building connections and relationships with athletes and coaches will promote a successful and positive environment.

The coaches in the present study also highlighted monetary constraints as a barrier. As they explained, financial restrictions may be encountered by athletic directors/departments who may not see the need to spend financial resources on MPCs. Other restrictions may be reflected within an individual team's annual budget where the decisions on how to spend that money lie with the head coach. In this instance, it may mean prioritizing travel expenses over hiring an MPC full-time. Past literature has examined barriers for athletic directors/departments hiring MPCs. The most common

barrier tends to be finances/budget (Kornspan & Duve, 2006; Voight & Callaghan, 2001). The literature seems to be incongruous in relation to importance of sport psychology versus priority. A study by Wrisberg, Withycombe, Simpson, Loberg, and Reed (2012) found that athletic directors in NCAA Division I schools expressed positive attitudes towards sport psychology but were still unwilling to hire an MPC full-time. Another study reported that NCAA Division I athletic directors saw a need to hire MPCs, but this need was not at the same level of priority as athletic trainers or S&C coaches (Wilson, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sailor, 2009). It must be emphasized that athletic directors do not have the same frame of reference as coaches do. They don't have direct contact with MPCs in order to fully understand the benefits. Coaches that use sport psychology resources and find them beneficial should advocate for more implementation of such services. If coaches make their athletic directors aware of the need for MPCs, then athletic directors may be more inclined to prioritize such services as part of their overall athletic program (Kornspan & Duve, 2006). Despite the financial burden that may fall on the institutions/sport programs for hiring MPCs, Fortin-Guichard and colleagues (2018) suggest that coaches and administrators' public image may benefit in light of providing such services to their student-athletes.

This year (2020) the coaches reported that MPCs were instrumental in the implementation of virtual and distanced programming for their teams during the COVID-19 global pandemic. MPCs were able to provide sport psychology services through online platforms when athletes were not allowed to be physically present at training sessions. Schinke and colleagues (2020) surveyed 1602 professional soccer players between March and April 2020 of which 22% reported symptoms of depression. The isolation and confinement guidelines set forth by governments around the world during this global pandemic left athletes uneasy and vulnerable. However, not much research has been published to date on how MPCs have been able to provide help for athletes during these uncertain times. The current research suggests that some coaches implemented sport psychology resources as part of their programming for reasons such as mental health support, mental skills training, and group cohesion, all through distanced and virtual mediums.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

This study has a number of strengths worth emphasizing. This was the first study to look at MPCs' involvement and the importance of sport psychology within Canadian university athletic programs directly from coaches' perspectives. The use of a qualitative approach enabled the researchers to gather more comprehensive and relevant information regarding coaches' perspectives on the topic. In addition, the combined level of experience of the coaches in this study makes their opinions highly valuable and trustworthy.

There were also some limitations identified in this study. The data collection process was affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Over 30 coaches across Canada were contacted throughout a five-month span, with only seven agreeing to participate. This led to a small and homogeneous sample. Originally, the intent of this study was to recruit many different coaches from a variety of sports from all four USports conferences across Canada to get a good sense of coaches' opinions across different disciplines (e.g., team and individual sports, different sports, different backgrounds and experiences) and regions. Another limitation of the present study was the lack of coaches without an MPC. Only one coach recruited answered "no" to having an MPC as part of their team. Therefore, it was not possible to compare answers amongst participants in that situation.

## **Future Directions**

Future research should focus on the number of successful teams who have an MPC on staff versus those who don't. Defining success (winning versus development and group cohesion) would be ideal in order to quantify results in a more objective manner. More research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of sport psychology resources within Canadian university athletics. A restructuring of university sport programs is apparent since Banwell and Kerr's (2016a) work, but there is still a long way to go for Canadian university athletics to provide an all-around high-performance program to student-athletes. Some coaches mentioned the addition of an MPC as part of their team is considered an important asset in the development of female athletes, therefore qualifying for external funding. Research should focus on organizations that may provide

opportunities for funding MPCs in university athletics with the motive of helping young student-athletes develop personal and leadership skills that can complement not only their athletic careers, but also their personal lives.

### **Implications**

This study was meant to provide insight as to what coaches believe are the benefits of integrating sport psychology services into their sport program. Hiring MPCs is an untapped opportunity to enhance performance, aid with mental health, promote connectedness amongst teammates and coaching staff, and adds another element to athletes' overall athletic and personal development. The implications of this study include the increased awareness in Canadian university athletics for MPCs to be recognized as full-time staff. Canadian universities must recognize how invaluable a resource an MPC can be. It is an opportunity for varsity programs across the country to truly become high-performance, along with supporting student-athletes with personal development and prepare them for life after sport/university; the benefits far outweigh the expenses. As the present study showed, MPCs can be a valuable asset when it comes to high-performance, support and development not only for athletes, but coaches too. With organizations searching for ways to help young people with improving mental health, this study provided insight as to where funding may be allocated. External funding may also help alleviate some of the financial burdens athletic departments encounter when looking to hire new resources. This research also hoped to enlighten athletic directors and coaches from all sports, levels, and backgrounds about the benefits of requesting the services of MPCs for their teams. As coaches in this study noted, it is important to invest in your athletes.

### **Conclusion**

By interviewing coaches, this study was able to gather information on the value that MPCs can add to Canadian university athletics from a stakeholder's perspective. Athletes typically search for sport psychology counselling services for individual reasons. There is no reason for them to seek the help of MPCs to help the team as a whole. In this study, the involvement of MPCs within teams and the value they can add, as well as

resources they can provide to an entire team and to individual athletes on that team was investigated. Overall, it was found that MPCs are being hired and used in Canadian university athletic programs with the purpose of enhancing performance and providing mental health resources. Coaches believe it is necessary to prioritize and fully integrate sport psychology as part of their program in order to maximize its benefits. It is important for them to show support and commitment with the MPCs and for the MPCs to build strong, honest, and open relationships with athletes and coaches. These relationships will lead to productive work which can have many benefits such as aiding athletes with personal development, skill development, and leadership skills. MPCs can also be an added resource for coaches when it comes to professional development and staff support. The inclusion of MPCs within ISTs will complement the holistic approach provided to student-athletes in order to improve the high-performance model in Canadian universities.

This research allowed for a better understanding of how MPCs are utilized and what types of responsibilities are placed on/expected from them. Despite having only seven participants contribute to this study, it is important to reiterate that they had a combined coaching experience of over 160 years with multiple high-level coaching appointments, and at some point in their careers, they had all worked with an MPC. Their knowledge and experience complement and reinforce the results of this study.

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<https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.27.3.258>

## Appendix A: UWO Ethics Approval Form



**Date:** 7 April 2020

**To:** [REDACTED]

**Project ID:** 115379

**Study Title:** How Sport Psychology Can Benefit Varsity Athletics in Canadian Universities

**Short Title:** Sport Psychology as part of IST in University Athletics

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** 01/May/2020

**Date Approval Issued:** 07/Apr/2020 16:28

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 07/Apr/2021

Dear [REDACTED]

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Description of IST and MPC Model	Other Data Collection Instruments	07/Feb/2020	1
Email Script - Version 002	Recruitment Materials	03/Mar/2020	002
Interview Guide - Version 002	Interview Guide	03/Mar/2020	002
IST Model	Other Data Collection Instruments	07/Feb/2020	1
LOI and Consent - IST and MPCs - Version 003	Verbal Consent/Assent	25/Mar/2020	003
Verbal Consent and Identifiable Information Questions - Version 002	Verbal Consent/Assent	25/Mar/2020	002
Verbal Script - Version 003	Oral Script	25/Mar/2020	003

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED] Research Ethics Officer on behalf of [REDACTED] NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Appendix B: Recruiting Email Script



## Email Script

Hello, my name [REDACTED] and I am a Master Student in the Department of Kinesiology. I am currently studying the importance of Mental Performance Consultants and Integrated Support Teams as part of Varsity programs across Canadian Universities. I am recruiting participants who meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) can speak and understand English, (b) give consent to participate, and (c) are a Head Coach of a Varsity sport at a Canadian university.

This research will hopefully lead to understanding the value of Mental Performance Consultants (MPCs), the application of Sport Psychology, and implementation of Integrated Support Teams (ISTs) as part of Varsity programs across universities in Canada.

If you volunteer as a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview conducted by the student investigator via Zoom, a web conferencing application. Interviews will be audio recorded. Questions will ask about your knowledge of Sport Psychology, whether or not your university has an IST model in place, and your opinion on the value of having an MPC be part of your team.

The session should take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time.

If you are interested in participating, please contact the student investigator at [REDACTED]

Thank you.

## Appendix C: Letter of Information

**LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT****Understanding the Implementation of Mental Performance Consultants as Part of Integrated Support Teams for Varsity Programs in Canadian Universities****Principal Investigator**

[REDACTED]

**Co-Investigators**

[REDACTED]

**Invitation to Participate:**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] (The University of Western Ontario). You are being invited to help expand our research and understanding on Applied Sport Psychology in Canadian universities' Varsity programs. You are eligible to participate if you (a) can speak and understand English, (b) give consent to participate, and (c) are a Head Coach of a Varsity sport at a Canadian university. If you do not meet these criteria, you will be ineligible to participate at this time.

**This consent form should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, feel free to ask the student investigator (Federico Cisneros). Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.**

**Why is this study being done?**

The purpose of this study is to understand the value of Mental Performance Consultants (MPCs), the application of Sport Psychology in Canadian university athletics, and implementation of Integrated Support Teams (ISTs) as part of Varsity programs across universities in Canada. To do so, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the student investigator ([REDACTED]) that will ask questions regarding your knowledge about Sport Psychology, your experience with it, as well as your opinion on the need to have an MPC as an available resource and the value of ISTs.

**How long will you be in this study?**

The study will only involve one session of a one-on-one interview via Zoom, that will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

**What are the study procedures?**

Coaches who wish to participate will receive an email with information regarding ISTs and MPCs before participating in a one-on-one, semi-structured interview that will ask questions pertaining to their knowledge of Sport Psychology, whether or not your university has an IST model in place, and your opinion on the value on having an MPC be part of your team.

**What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**

Participation in this study will involve the disclosure of personal opinions. If you were to feel uncomfortable asking any questions, you may choose not to answer. There are no foreseen risks to participating in this study.

**What are the benefits of participating?**

You may be helping to contribute to the understanding of factors such as how MPCs can be a helpful resource not only from an athletic stance, but from a mental health point of view. If you are interested, you can ask for the study results once they are available.

**Can participants choose to leave the study?**

At any time, participants can terminate the interview by letting the student investigator know they wish to withdraw from the study. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study.

**How will participants information be kept confidential?**

If you decide to participate in the study, the information that you share will remain confidential. Interviews will be audio recorded. Personal answers and comments made will only be used to examine the research questions of this study. Only the principal researcher (Dr. Craig Hall) and the student investigator (Federico Cisneros) will have access to your answers recorded on the interview and these will be kept on a password protected USB device in a locked file cabinet in the Exercise Psychology Laboratory. Personal identifiable information such as name, age, gender, email address, sport being coached, and university, will be stored securely in a master list by researchers for a minimum of 7 years after project completion per Western University's Faculty Collective Agreement. Aggregated data stemming from this research may be presented at academic conferences and/or published in academic journals. Your name, gender, age, and your contact information will be collected but will not appear in any publications stemming from this research. Informed consent will be required in order for the researchers to be able to use direct quotes from the interview for the publication of this research. However, any personal information appearing in any publication will be changed by a given pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

After the 7-year period, all electronic data will be permanently deleted. At no time will individual responses be reported. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario's

Non-Medical REB may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

**Are participants compensated to be in the study?**

There will be no compensation for participants who complete the study.

**What are the rights of the participants?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate and if you choose to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. You may choose to withdraw from the study by refraining from answering the questions. If you choose to withdraw after completion of the study, your answers will not be used as part of the results of this study.

**Contact:**

[REDACTED], PhD, Principal Investigator at The University of Western Ontario,

[REDACTED], MA Candidate at The University of Western Ontario

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics:

Phone number: [REDACTED]

Toll free long distance: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

At the time of the interview, you will be asked for consent to participate in this study.

## Appendix D: Description of an Example Integrated Support Team Model

### **Integrated Support Team and Mental Performance Consultant Model**

The Integrated Support Team (IST) model is a holistic approach to providing health management for teams, coaches, and athletes. It can be composed of a physician, physiotherapist, athletic trainer, dietician, strength and conditioning coach, video analyst, biomechanist, and a Mental Performance Consultant (MPC).

All of the mentioned above work in consultation and in partnership with one another, to ensure the best health management possible for all teams, athletes, and coaches.

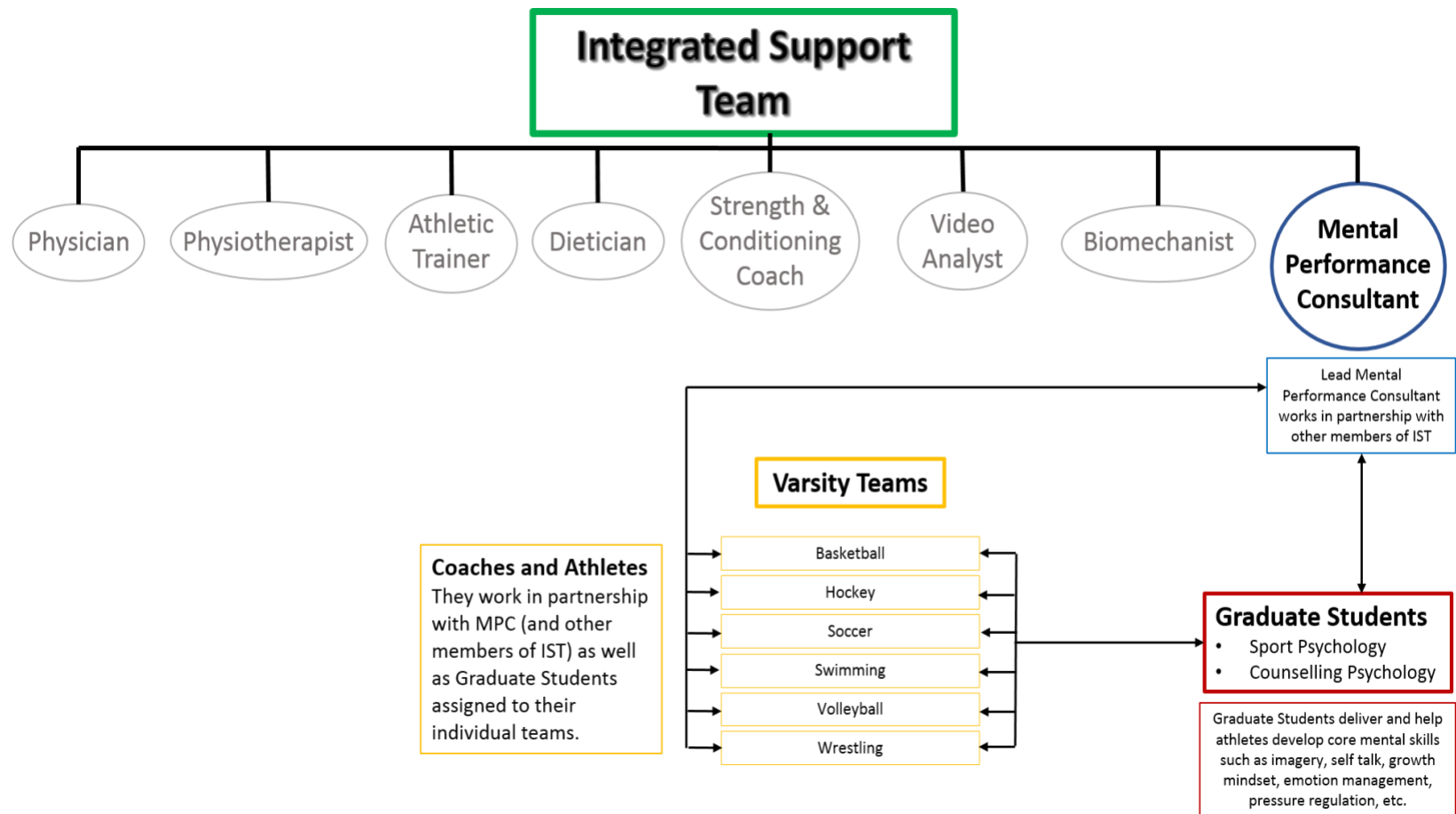
This study focuses on the value of Applied Sport Psychology and MPCs as part of a program's IST.

The Lead MPC, as part of the IST, would be in charge of coordinating, supervising, and supporting Graduate Students (GSs) who are studying Sport Psychology or a related field, assigned to individual teams (e.g., One graduate student assigned to work with the Women's Basketball team; another graduate student to work with the Men's Wrestling team). The Lead MPC is also responsible for roles such as mental health counseling which are beyond the expertise of the GSs.

The purpose of having GSs assigned to individual teams is to give them practical experience in the field of Applied Sport Psychology while giving that team an opportunity to benefit from the resources available throughout the year. GSs would deliver team workshops, meetings and exercises to build team resilience and cohesion as well as help athletes develop core mental skills such as growth mindset, emotion management, imagery, and self-talk. GSs would report back to the Lead MPC to debrief, which serves as a learning opportunity for the GSs to improve on their own skills. Each team (coaches and athletes) would work in partnership with the IST to ensure transparency amongst all parties. Coaches and athletes can self-refer to the Lead MPC (or other Lead) if a situation arises which is outside the scope of the GSs. Coaches and individual athletes would work with the GS assigned to their team to meet their needs during the year as the season goes on. Having a GS assigned to a specific team for the whole academic year will allow them to build the relationship needed between athlete-consultant, which in turn will provide the GS with the best opportunity to help the team.



Appendix E: Diagram of an Example Integrated Support Team Model



## Appendix F: Confidentiality Statement and Demographic Questions Guide

### Introduction and Instructions

Hello, my name is [REDACTED]. I am the student investigator for this research study. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Just to remind you, I am looking at your current views/usage of Sport Psychology, MPCs and ISTs within your program. Before we begin, I would like to ask if you had a chance to go through the LOI/C document that was sent to you?  
Do you have any questions?

### Information about interview questions:

This information provides a brief outline of what the researchers would like to learn about the coaches being interviewed. This includes their perspectives on Sport Psychology and the involvement of Mental Performance Consultants (MPCs) as well as the implementation of Integrated Support Teams (ISTs) as part of their program. Interviews will be one-to-one (interviewer to coach) and will be open-ended (not simply yes or no answers). Due to this, the exact wording of questions may slightly change. I may use additional questions for clarification ("*So, you are saying that...?*") or if I need more information ("*Please tell me more?*") or to better understand why you think or feel the way you do about something ("*Why do you think that is...?*").

### Confidentiality

Before we begin the interview, I would like to take some time to discuss confidentiality and to go over some basic ground rules:

- All your views are welcomed and important
- Any personal identifiers will be removed from your comments to ensure confidentiality
- I will ask you about your current views/usage of Sport Psychology, MPCs and ISTs within your program. Should you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, please feel free to let me know or choose not to answer
- Any information that you share with me will be kept in strict confidence; I will not share the information with anyone outside of the research team
- I may interject should we stray off topic or to clarify any of your responses
- I may also take notes during the interview
- The interview will last about 30-45 minutes

### Consent

- Do you consent to participating in this study?
- Do you consent to having direct quotes from your interview used in the final manuscript of this study? (Any personal identifiers will be replaced by a pseudonym).

### Demographic questions and personal identifiable information:

1. Please state your age, gender, what sport(s) you coach, where and how long you have been coaching.
2. What is your coaching history/background?

## Appendix G: Interview Guide

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Questions to uncover coach's current perceptions on Sport Psychology, Mental Performance Consultants, and coaching:**

*(For purposes of this interview, Sport Psychologist, Mental Performance Consultant, and MPC are interchangeable terms)*

1. Please describe your experiences with Sport Psychology (e.g., skills, MPCs, workshops, etc.)
2. Please discuss how Sport Psychology is relevant as part of your program.
3. Have you read the information sent to you regarding ISTs and integrating MPCs as part of the model?
  - a. Do you have any questions about what you read?
4. Does your university have a “formalized” IST as part of their Varsity program?
  - a. If YES, is an MPC part of that IST?
  - b. If NO, what do you consider to be your IST with the resources that your Athletics department provides for you?

*(If YES to question 4.a. go to “Questions on having an MPC as part of the IST Model”; if NO to questions 4. and 4.a. go to “Questions on not having an MPC as part of the IST Model”)*

#### **Questions on having an MPC as part of the IST Model:**

1. What do you think the role of your MPC is as part of the IST Model?
2. What is the role of the MPC within your team?
3. How would you describe the ideal relationship with your MPC?
4. What are the benefits/disadvantages to having an MPC?
5. From a mental health perspective, how do you think an MPC differs from a typical school counsellor?
6. What do you think of the overall IST Model implemented by your university, and having an MPC as an available resource?

**Questions on not having an MPC as part of the IST Model:**

1. What do you think the role of an MPC should be as part of an IST Model?
2. What do you think the role of an MPC should be as part of a team?
  - a. If you had an MPC assigned to your team, what would you expect their role to be?
3. What would the ideal relationship be between you and an MPC?
4. What do you think the benefits/disadvantages would be to having an MPC?
5. From a mental health perspective, how do you think an MPC differs from a typical school counsellor?
6. What do you think are some barriers to implementing ISTs and MPCs within universities' Varsity programs?
  - a. How could those barriers be overcome?
7. What recommendations would you give your Athletic Director on implementing an IST as part of the Varsity program in your university?

Was there anything else you would like to add that we may have missed in our discussion?

**Conclusion**

I want to thank you for your time and your willingness to share information about yourself and your coaching experiences. I want to assure you again that this information will be treated in the strictest confidence. Thank you for your time.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

**Name:** Federico Cisneros Sánchez

**Post-Secondary Education and Degrees:**

**Master of Arts in Kinesiology – Psychological Basis**  
*University of Western Ontario, London, ON*  
 Anticipated Completion Date: Fall 2020

**Bachelor of Arts – Honors Specialization in Kinesiology**  
*University of Western Ontario, London, ON*  
 2020

**Honours and Awards:**

**The Terry White Award**  
 2019

**OUA Academic All-Canadian**  
 2018, 2019

**Tim Wiggan Rugby Scholarship**  
 2013, 2017

**Duke of Edinburgh – Gold Award**  
*Presented by Prince Edward, Earl of Wessex*  
 2012

**Lt. Governor Medal (Nova Scotia)**  
 2012

**Related Work Experience:**

**Varsity and Recreational Sports Clubs Assistant Coordinator**  
 University of Western Ontario, London, ON  
*September 2019 – present*

**Junior Partner**  
**Mind Gym - Elite Mind Performance** with Dr. Natascha Wesch,  
 London, ON  
*July 2017 – present*

**Teaching Assistant**

University of Western Ontario, London, ON

*September 2018 – April 2020*

**VARSIY SPORT PSYCHOLOGY WORKSHOPS**

**Goal Setting – Western Men’s Rugby Team**

**Goal Setting – Western Fencing Teams**

**Leadership – Western Fencing Teams**

University of Western Ontario

*August 2018 – February 2020*

**A Sport Psychology Perspective on Coaching Ringette**

**Dorchester Dragons Ringette Association**

**London Lynx Ringette Association**

Dorchester, ON; London, ON

*September 2019, October 2019*

**VAMP – VARSITY ATHLETES MENTAL PERFORMANCE**

**VAMP Up Your Self-Talk**

**How to Transition from a Varsity Life to a Normal Life**

University of Western Ontario

*February 2019, March 2019*

**Mental Training for Youth Volleyball Athletes – Self Talk**

**Western Women’s Volleyball Coaching Clinic**

University of Western Ontario, London, ON

*September 2018*

**Community Engaged Learning Project – Sport Psychology Workbook**

Saugeen-Maitland Midget AA Women’s Hockey Team

*October 2016 – November 2016*

**High School Rugby Assistant Coach**

Volunteer

King’s-Edgehill School, Windsor, NS

*May – June 2014; May – June 2015*

**Fowler-Kennedy Sports Medicine Clinic**

Volunteer

University of Western Ontario, London, ON

*January 2015 – April 2015*

- Professional Development:**
- Managing Conflict and Personalities in Sport**  
 By Ashley Duguay (M.H.K., PhD Candidate; Student Mental Performance Consultant)  
 Webinar hosted by Canadian Sport Center Atlantic  
*March 2019*
- The Sport Body: Body Image and Athletes**  
 By Melissa Allen (CSCA Dietician)  
 Webinar hosted by Canadian Sport Center Atlantic  
*January 2019*
- Leader Effectiveness Training**  
 Hosted at University of Western Ontario  
*September 2017*
- Performance Psychology**  
 By Dr. Natascha Wesch  
 University of Western Ontario  
*October 2016*
- People to People: Leadership Summit**  
 Hosted at Stanford University, California, USA  
*July 2010*
- Affiliations:**
- Canadian Sport Psychology Association (Student Membership)**  
 2018 – present
- Varsity athlete for Western Mustangs men’s rugby team**  
 2012 – 2018
- Publications:**
- Submitted for Publication:*
- Deck, S., Cisneros, F., Farhat, J., Morava, A., Nagpal, T., and Prapavessis, H. (2019). Tobacco use among varsity athletes – why do they do it and how do we make it stop: An exploratory mixed methods evaluation. *Journal of Smoking Cessation*