

Summary of findings: Exploring Verbal and Mental Abuse Within the Context of
Coaching Elite Female Volleyball in Manitoba:

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Summary of Findings

The coach-athlete relationship is a major part of the elite sport experience for most athletes. Within this elite sport context coaches and athletes interact on a day-to-day basis, and these interactions often inform the growth and direction of the athlete as a pupil of the coach. Research has shown that abusive coaching practices have been largely normalized within the elite sport context and this is exacerbated in the case of a winning coach (Stirling & Kerr, 2008; Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Overall, the research literature lacks a consistent definition of what constitutes verbally and mentally abusive coaching tactics. The lack of a clear definition has impacted both prevention and intervention of verbal and mental abuse within elite sporting contexts (Brassard & Donovan, 2006; Iwaniec, 2003). After analyzing the available literature, this thesis combined the ideas of many researchers to adopt a definition of coaching verbal and mental abuse as harmful, non-physical, repetitive patterns of coaching behaviour causing undue stress on athletes' emotional well-being (Iwaniec, Larkin, & Higgins, 2006; Glaser, 2002; O'Hagan, 1995).

Using a multi-method qualitative research design this thesis sought to explore: (1) how are verbally and mentally abusive coaching behaviours recognized within the context of elite female volleyball in Manitoba? and (2) what can be done to decrease verbal and mental abuse? As part of a qualitative research design, this study made use of three different qualitative research methods. The methods include: (1) auto-ethnographic accounts of verbal and mental abuse in volleyball, (2) analysis of coaching policies applicable to coaches in Manitoba, and (3) semi-structured interviews with volleyball coaches of elite female volleyball in Manitoba.

Auto-ethnography was used in order to embrace my position in conducting this research and acknowledge my biases within the context of elite female volleyball in Manitoba, as both a former player and a current coach. Additionally, using this method provided concrete examples of where the lines get blurred between motivating, manipulative, or abusive coaching practices. The analysis of coach policy focuses on the policies that Volleyball Canada and Volleyball Manitoba endorse, which specifically address abuse in sport. Through the use of semi-structured interviews with eight coaches who coach elite female volleyball (five male and three female), I was able to gain thick descriptions of what the coaches believe verbal and mental abuse is and how they have been educated on verbal and mental abuse. I gained a lot of insight into the experience of each coach I interviewed, which was achieved by constructing questions that were designed to be open-ended and non-assumptive. These kinds of questions allowed coaches to share about their experiences freely and with as much detail as they felt necessary. In triangulating these three methods, I analyzed the consistencies and inconsistencies between my experiences, elite coaches' perspectives, and coaching policies in Manitoba and across Canada.

The results from the auto-ethnographic reflections are two-fold in that they represent my dual perspective as a former elite female volleyball athlete and a current coach of elite female volleyball within the province of Manitoba. The athlete reflection demonstrated that verbal and mental abuse is a very personal experience and that experiencing verbal and mental abuse can have serious impacts on the career path of an athlete. In completing the coach reflection it was evident that previous sport experiences have an impact on the present sport experience in ways that may be unknown to the

coach without intentional reflexive analysis. Additionally, it is evident that coach education presently lacks emphasis on coaches' development of self-reflection and emotional intelligence. Coach education in this case would do well to promote these important psychological tools to coaches.

Through careful analysis of coaching policies currently adopted by Volleyball Canada and Volleyball Manitoba, this study demonstrated that there is a need for policy improvement and communication, as there are a plethora of issues within these policies documents linked to availability, clarity, consistency and language use. Perhaps the most important finding linked to the policy analysis, was the recognition that the current policies in place at Volleyball Manitoba need to be more accessible to potential readers (i.e., athletes, parents, and coaches). Finally, it was noted that where policies are available there is a need for clarity on the relevancy and applicability of said policies.

The semi-structured interviews generated an immense amount of data that was categorized into seven major themes: (1) coaches' assessment of women's volleyball in Manitoba, (2) the role of the coach, (3) factors influencing the coach-athlete relationship, (4) the impact of the environment on the elite sport experience, (5) the role of abuse in elite sport, (6) coaching education and (7) policy on verbal and mental abuse in Manitoba. Each theme had minor themes that further explored the major theme, providing a thorough and in depth results from this study.

The data generated through the auto-ethnographic reflections, policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews were triangulated to form several key conclusions from this study. The first conclusion is that there is a history of verbal and mental abuse within the community of elite female volleyball in Manitoba. This was made clear through the

athlete reflection, which took place roughly ten years ago, the publication date of certain policies dating back to the year 1999 (roughly seven-teen years ago), and acknowledgment from the participants of the historical context of abuse within elite female volleyball in Manitoba. Secondly, it is clear that verbal and mental abuse continue to be an issue within the context of elite female volleyball in Manitoba. This was noted in the coach reflection through the struggle that I faced as a young coach with understanding what appropriate and inappropriate coach behaviorus are, the current lack of awareness and understanding of policies addressing abuse of female volleyball athletes within Manitoba, and the acknowledgment of several of the participants that Manitoba has not actively engaged in eradicating the abuse that currently exists within this context. Finally, it is important to address the normalized verbally and mentally abusive coaching behaviours within the context of elite female volleyball in Manitoba, as reinforcing the current culture of verbal ad mental abuse and as a reminder of the history of abuse within this province and sport culture.

In response to the research questions posed by this study, the results demonstrated that verbal abuse involves comments including jokes, insults, and verbal remarks that were directed at the athlete's personality or appearance. In addition, participants in the study framed mental abuse as the outcomes of these actions or when comments or actions by coaches cause feelings of emotional distress. Additionally, this research demonstrated the need for better coach education, improved policy awareness, and accountability for coaches as ways to address the current issue of verbal and mental abuse within the province of Manitoba. Future research implications are diverse and include studying athletes' perspectives of abuse, exploring male athlete and coaches' perspectives, looking

at other provinces within Canada, investigating a variety of sports (i.e., team versus individual sports), comparing less experienced coaches' views with more experienced coaches' views and considering the impact of coaching demographics on adopted coach behaviours.

References

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