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**Coping rarely takes place in a social vacuum:**

**Exploring antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships**

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## Abstract

*Objectives:* Despite widespread acceptance that coping is an interpersonal phenomenon, sport psychology research has focused largely on athletes' and coaches' ways of coping individually. The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore coping from an interpersonal perspective (i.e., dyadic coping) in coach-athlete relationships.

*Methodology and methods:* Antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping were discussed with five coach-athlete dyads. We conducted individual interviews with athletes and coaches and then one interview with each coach-athlete dyad. Interviews were analyzed using dyadic analysis and composite vignettes were created to present the data. Methodological rigor was enhanced by focusing on credibility, resonance, rich rigor, significant contribution, and meaningful coherence.

*Results:* Five themes were identified. These represented the essence of dyadic coping (theme: the essence of dyadic coping), antecedents of dyadic coping (themes: lock and key fit, friendship and trust, communication of the stressor), and outcomes of dyadic coping (theme: protection and support). The first theme captures coaches' and athletes' understanding of dyadic coping. The antecedent themes represent the factors that were necessary for dyadic coping to occur. Protection and support relates to the positive nurturing environment that was discussed as an outcome of dyadic coping.

*Conclusion:* The results extend published research by exploring antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping in sport. The findings highlight that dyadic coping was prevalent in coach-athlete relationships when various antecedents (lock and key fit, friendship and trust, communication of the stressor) existed. Protection and support were pertinent outcomes of dyadic coping that contributed to personal and relationship growth.

*Keywords:* communal coping, intimate relationships, relational coping, social support.

Coping rarely takes place in a social vacuum:

Exploring antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships

In the sport psychology literature, psychological stress is an overarching term that encompasses stressors, appraisals, coping, and outcomes (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006). Coping can be defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). This definition stems from the transactional perspective of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which is a seminal theory that has been used to guide research on coping in sport (see, for a review, Nicholls & Polman, 2007). The findings of the research in this area collectively highlight some of the individual coping strategies that are used by athletes (e.g., planning, venting emotions, mental disengagement; Hoar, Kowalski, Gaudreau, & Crocker, 2006) and coaches (e.g., planning, self-talk, centering; Olusoga, Butt, Maynard, & Hays, 2010). They also provide preliminary understanding of how coaches and athletes learn to cope with stressors (Tamminen & Holt, 2012). The majority of coping research that has been framed by transactional based theories of stress (e.g., Weston, Thelwell, Bond, & Hutchings, 2009) overlooks the dynamic nature of coping that rarely takes place in a social vacuum (Bodenmann, 1995, 2005). Indeed, researchers have focused on either athletes or coaches and minimal attention has been paid to the notion of coping as an interpersonal process (Crocker, Tamminen, & Gaudreau, 2015; Nicholls & Perry, 2016; Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014). This is contrary to literature in other disciplines, which supports the view that coping should be considered as a dynamic interplay between two or more people (Bodenmann, 1995; Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998).

In relationship and health psychology contexts, coping research has often been framed by dyadic conceptualizations (Bodenmann, 1995, 2005). According to these

conceptualizations, dyadic coping is defined as the combined effort of both partners when they experience a shared stressor (cf. Bodenmann, 1995, 2005). This definition highlights the shared social context of coping that should be considered in addition to individual coping efforts that are detailed in transactional stress theory (Bodenmann, 2005). One widely used model of dyadic coping is the systemic transactional model (STM; Bodenmann, 1995), which extends transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) by focusing on the dynamic interplay between two people. The STM maintains an appraisal based view of stress and suggests that one partner's appraisal of a stressor is communicated to the other partner who responds with positive and or negative forms of dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 1997, 2005). Despite the potential relevance of this model to coach-athlete relationships and specific calls for research on interpersonal coping in contexts other than romantic relationships (Bodenmann, 1997), such an approach is yet to be qualitatively explored in sport. This is surprising given the potential for dyadic coping to enhance relationship functioning and stability (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006; Papp & Witt, 2010) and the importance of these factors in coach-athlete relationships (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002).

The coach-athlete relationship has been conceptualized as a mutual and causal interdependence between the coach's and the athlete's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). Such relationships have been the focus of scientific research for over 15 years (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) and, collectively, the findings suggest that dyads are interdependent (Jowett, 2007) and that individual differences (e.g., gender; Lorimer & Jowett, 2010), social-cultural factors (e.g., sport environment; Felton & Jowett, 2013), and relationship factors (e.g., leadership; Jowett & Chaundy, 2004) are important for maintaining quality in the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). Researchers (e.g., Jowett & Nezelek, 2011) have also highlighted that coaches are an important source of support for athletes when they experience stressful situations. With this

and the notion that interdependence is an important aspect of coach-athlete relationships in mind, the STM may provide a useful framework for research that focusses on coaches' and athletes' coping.

Despite dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships being underexplored, researchers have acknowledged the role of social parties when athletes seek support to cope with stressful situations (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2014). In addition, it is thought that athletes may appraise stressors as less threatening when in the presence of a coach (Nicholls et al., 2016) and that a coach can supplement and extend an athlete's coping resources (Bianco, 2001). Research that has explored social support in sport has considered the coach as a general other who can provide unidirectional support to athletes (e.g., Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Thus, the concept of social support is conceptually similar but distinct from dyadic coping, which is a broader term under which social support is nested (Lim, Shon, Paek, & Daly, 2014). In contrast to social support per se, dyadic coping involves both partners using coping strategies to support each other in a bidirectional manner (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006) and acknowledging the cooperative process of coping (Lyons et al., 1998). This approach to coping represents a novel avenue for sport research that has potentially powerful implications for research and applied practice. This is because research that explores interpersonal coping will allow us to better understand and develop shared coping experiences between coaches and athletes, which may contribute to more successful performance outcomes.

Although some sport psychology researchers have highlighted the need for studies that approach coping from an interpersonal standpoint (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014), little empirical research of this nature exists in sport. The sustained academic interest in athletes' and coaches' individual ways of coping appears nonsensical when considering the mutual and causal interdependence of coach-athlete relationships. This study responds to calls for research on dyadic coping in sport (Didymus, 2017) by working towards an understanding of

how coping occurs as an interpersonal process. In doing so, we move beyond the exploration of coping as a process that occurs in a social vacuum and toward a more complete understanding of how athletes and coaches work together to cope with stressors. The first logical step in developing such understanding is to explore the essence of dyadic coping, and the factors that lead to (i.e., antecedents) and occur as a result (i.e., outcomes) of dyadic coping. This was, therefore, aim of the current project.

## **Methodology and Methods**

### **Methodology**

Using an interpretive paradigm, this study was informed by our relativist ontology and constructionist epistemological perspectives (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). We were, therefore, actively involved in the construction of the findings presented in this manuscript. The exploration of coaches' and athletes' experiences provides an opportunity to explore how individuals in close working relationships form meaning and understanding through their social worlds. The findings are a construction of the interaction between the researchers and the coach-athlete dyads (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and, therefore, capture *one* interpretation of antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping. Readers are encouraged to interpret the findings in ways that are meaningful to them and to explore alternative interpretations to those that are presented here.

### **Interviewees**

Six coaches ( $M_{\text{age}} = 41.88$ ,  $SD = 14.45$ ) and six athletes ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22.06$ ,  $SD = 2.97$ ) volunteered to take part in this study. These individuals made up six independent dyads: three male coach and athlete dyads, two male coach and female athlete dyads, and one female coach and male athlete dyad. Multiple cases were used to facilitate breadth of understanding relating to antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping (see Schwandt, 1997). Criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to recruit dyads from individual sports (track and field,  $n =$

3; squash,  $n = 1$ ; triathlon,  $n = 1$ ; swimming,  $n = 1$ ). Individual sports were targeted due to the relevance of this context to the focus of our study. To expand briefly, Rhind, Jowett, and Yang (2012) suggested that athletes who compete in individual sports perceived their coach-athlete relationships to be closer and more committed than athletes who compete in team sports. Closeness and commitment to a relationship has been shown in other non-sport contexts (e.g., marital relationships) to be important for dyadic coping (e.g., Bodenmann et al., 2006) and, thus, focusing on individual sports allowed us to target individuals who could co-construct knowledge that was relevant to the aim of this study. Despite the fact that the coach-athlete dyads in this study worked in individual sports, four of the coaches reported that they worked with numerous athletes (i.e., they were not solely employed to work with the athlete that was interviewed for this study). Based on previous coping literature (Olusoga, Butt, Maynard, & Hays, 2010), the inclusion criteria for this study were (a) the coach was working with an athlete who was competing at University level or above at the time of the study, (b) the coach held a minimum of a level three coaching qualification from his or her appropriate governing body, (c) the coach and the athlete had been working together for at least one season at the time of the study, and (d) the coach and the athlete were working together on a weekly basis.

### **Interview Guide**

Three semi-structured independent but related interview guides were developed to facilitate both individual (athlete, coach) and dyadic (athlete and coach) interviews (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013). In line with our constructionist perspective, semi-structured interview guides were used to ensure that information relevant to antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping was captured while allowing an element of freedom for co-construction of information that was important to the interviewees (see Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Previous dyadic coping literature (e.g., Bodenmann, 1995) provided a loose



framework for the two individual interview guides. The third interview guide, which was used to facilitate the dyadic interviews, was developed from the key themes that were identified during the analysis of all of the individual interview transcripts. A combination of open questions and probes were included in each of the three guides. For example, the athlete interview guide contained open questions such as “what factors are required for shared coping between you and your coach?” and probes that encouraged elaboration (e.g., “what do you mean by that?”). Similarly, the interview guide that was aimed at the coaches included open questions such as “how does dyadic coping influence your relationship with [athlete]?” and probes (e.g., “can you think of anything else?”). At the start of each individual interview the interviewer used open questions to ask each interviewee about his or her understanding of coping (e.g., “what does the term coping mean to you?”). Following each individual’s response the interviewer shared the definitions that we adopted prior to data collection and discussed discrepancies in understanding. The aim of these discussions was to ensure that the interviews stimulated conversations that were relevant to the research aim. The dyadic interview guide focused on dyadic interactions relating to coping experiences and, therefore, contained open-ended questions (e.g., “how do you both cope when you experience a demand?”) and a variety of probes (e.g., “tell me more about that”).

### **Pilot Study**

Before beginning the individual interviews, feedback was gathered on the focus, content, and clarity of the individual interview guides during two pilot interviews: one with a female athlete and one with her male coach. Although not always necessary when researching from a constructionist perspective, pilot interviews were conducted during this study to ensure that the interview guides could assist the co-construction of knowledge (Kezar, 2000) that was relevant to the research aim. The data gathered from the pilot interviews highlighted that some of the probes required modification to encourage more detailed discussion with the

interviewees. For example, “how has this changed over time?” was changed to “tell me more about how this has developed over time?” The guide for the dyadic interviews was piloted using the initial pilot dyad after the individual interviews with the main sample had been conducted. The aim of this part of the pilot study was to ensure that the questions included in the dyadic interview guide were appropriate for eliciting information that addressed the aim of the study. Minor refinements were made to three of the interview questions (e.g., “what is the distinction between your stressors?” was changed to “what are the similarities and differences in the demands that you experience?”).

## **Procedure**

Following institutional ethical approval, one member of each dyad (the coach) was contacted via email. This correspondence informed each coach of the purpose and procedures of the study, invited them to participate in an interview, and asked them to extend the participation opportunity to athletes with whom they worked. The first athlete who expressed an interest in the study was asked by the coach if they could be contacted directly by the first named author. During each correspondence, potential interviewees were informed that they did not have to participate in the study, that they could withdraw at any point in time and without reason, that they would remain anonymous during reproduction of the results, and that the interviews would be recorded using a digital voice recorder (Olympus VN-733PC).

The data collection process involved two distinct phases. Phase one consisted of individual interviews with the coaches and athletes and phase two involved one dyadic interview with each coach-athlete dyad. The decision to conduct two phases of data collection was made to capture individual athletes’ and coaches’ thoughts about antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping (individual interviews) in addition to knowledge that athletes and coaches co-constructed during their dyadic interview. Thus, the data collection procedure allowed coach-athlete interactions that are important when studying coping as an

interpersonal phenomenon to be considered. At the start of phase one, each coach and athlete completed, signed, and returned to the interviewer a written informed consent form. At this stage, each interviewee was informed that the content of their individual interview would not be disclosed by the interviewer to the other member of their dyad. Individual interviews were then organized and conducted ( $M_{\text{length}} = 65.25$  minutes,  $SD = 11.16$ ) to offer each interviewee an opportunity to talk about their experiences of the antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping. At the start of every interview, each of the interviewees identified the sport that they were involved with, the number of years that they had been involved with that sport, the length of their relationship with the other member of the dyad who had volunteered to be interviewed, and the average number of hours that he or she spent working with the other member of the dyad each week. Following the individual interviews, one of the coaches requested to withdraw from the study and, therefore, the audio file representing his interview and that of the associated athlete was permanently deleted and removed from the sample. Thus, the final sample consisted of five coaches ( $M_{\text{age}} = 37.65$ ,  $SD = 10.07$ ) and five athletes ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21.85$ ,  $SD = 2.92$ ).

At the start of the second phase of data collection, which took place approximately three months after phase one, each interviewee was contacted via email and invited to take part in a dyadic interview ( $M_{\text{length}} = 67.40$  minutes,  $SD = 9.42$ ). The period of time between the two phases of data collection provided each interviewee with an opportunity to reflect on his or her experiences of dyadic coping (Polkinghorne, 2005). Each dyad that was interested in taking part in phase two was invited to an interview on a mutually convenient date. At the start of each dyadic interview, the interviewees were reminded of the purpose of the study and were asked to provide written informed consent. Once each dyadic interview had been conducted and transcribed verbatim, each individual was sent a copy of their individual and dyadic interview transcript and was asked to comment on how accurately the document

represented their experiences of dyadic coping. Each of the interviewees provided written or verbal feedback on the transcripts and reported that the content was a true reflection of his or her experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using a form of dyadic analysis (see Eisikovits & Koren, 2010), which involved two different but related interpretive analysis phases. First, prior to the dyadic interviews, the 12 individual interview transcripts from the first main phase of data collection (i.e., excluding those that were developed during the pilot study) were inductively analyzed using six stages of thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns within the data that could be used to guide the dyadic interviews. Second, thematic analysis procedures were applied to the dyadic interview transcripts using abductive logic. This phase of the analysis involved the use of themes from the individual interviews to guide the analysis (deductive) while remaining open to the construction of new themes (inductive). The aim of this method was to deepen and broaden the analysis using a dyadic perspective (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010) and to ensure that the interactions between coaches and athletes were inherent in the analyses. Both phases of data analysis involved iterative processes that allowed themes to be co-constructed by the interviewees and the first named author. This recursive approach was applied within and between the two phases of analysis and, therefore, the themes that were constructed during phase one were reviewed and amended following the second phase of analysis.

### **Data Representation**

Following the thematic analyses, ten composite vignettes were developed to represent the data (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). The aim of this method of data representation was to allow us as researchers and the readers an opportunity to explore meanings in the data (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The themes that were constructed convey one interpretation of the

data (MacDonald & Walker, 1977) as co-constructed by us (the researchers and the interviewees) at the time of data collection and analyses. In presenting these findings we do not suggest that the themes represent the only antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping but, rather, those that we deemed pertinent at the time of data collection and analysis. By presenting the data as composite vignettes, we have embraced elements of narrative enquiry by adopting the position of story analysts and story tellers. This approach has been advocated by various researchers (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2009) who suggest that the dichotomy of these terms is not straight forward and that researchers may shift from one standpoint to the other when presenting data.

Two composite vignettes were developed for each of the themes using the voices of the coaches and the athletes (Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier, & Pheasant, 2011; Schinke, Blodgett, McGannon, & Ge, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Composite vignettes represent a variety of experiences that are amalgamated into a single all-encompassing narrative (Blodgett et al., 2011; Spalding & Phillips, 2007). This type of vignette allowed the coaches' and athletes' voices to be used to present a single theme within the results (Grbich, 2007). Thus, each vignette represents the voices of five individuals and presents the depth and richness of our data as composite accounts. It is worth noting at this juncture that although the vignettes are presented separately for athletes and coaches, the data for each vignette comes from both individual and dyadic interviews and, therefore, interactions between coaches and athletes are inherent in each vignette. A multi-stage iterative process was used to craft the vignettes and construct rich accounts (Blodgett et al., 2011; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) of interviewees' thoughts about antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping. The first stage of this process was to extract data from the transcripts that was relevant to each theme. Second, the extracted data were merged together to form a vignette that represented one of the constructed themes and the athletes' or coaches' collective voices. We then reviewed and

sensitively revised the drafted vignettes to ensure that each one adequately represented the relevant theme. The composite vignettes were then shared with the interviewees who were asked to reflect on and report how well the vignettes represented their experiences, the meaning that had been constructed, the contextualization of their experiences, and our interpretations of the data (Smith, Papathomas, Martin Ginis, & Latimer-Cheung, 2013). Nine of the ten interviewees contacted us with their reflections and three specifically reported that the vignettes resonated with them. One of the interviewees provided additional data relating to friendship and trust, which he thought should be added to one of the vignettes. This request was actioned, the updated vignette was sent to each of the interviewees, and the interviewees confirmed that it more accurately represented their experiences.

### **Methodological Rigor**

A time- and place-contingent list of criteria was applied to assess the quality of this research (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). With this in mind, the reader is encouraged to judge the research using the following criteria: (a) credibility, (b) resonance, (c) rich rigor, (d) significant contribution, and (e) meaningful coherence (see Tracy, 2010). Credibility was sought by verifying the findings with each of the interviewees at multiple stages throughout the project and by crafting real, rather than fictional, vignettes using the words and phrases of the interviewees (Smith, 2013). We suggest that a degree of resonance was achieved because three of the interviewees expressed a strong emotional connection when they were asked to comment on how well the vignettes represented their experiences. Rich rigor was developed by allocating sufficient time to interview the athletes and coaches and by conducting both individual and dyadic interviews. This maximized the possibility of constructing comprehensive representations of the interviewees' experiences that were relevant to the research aim. Additionally, the period of time (three months) between phases one and two of the data collection provided us with an opportunity to transcribe, analyze, and reflect on the

individual interviews prior to conducting the dyadic interviews. According to Polkinghorne (2005), this period of time will have enhanced the quality of the information constructed during the dyadic interviews. With reference to significant contribution, we suggest that methodological (e.g., dyadic interviewing and dyadic analysis) and conceptual (e.g., dyadic coping within the coach-athlete relationship) contributions have been made that extend the sport coping literature and aim to stimulate future research (Tracy, 2010). This article also makes a contribution to the literature by highlighting the usefulness of using composite vignettes as a way to present research findings (see also Blodgett et al., 2011; Schinke, Blodgett, McGannon, Ge, Oghene, et al., 2016). The chosen methods (i.e., dyadic interviewing and analysis) are methodologically and meaningfully coherent because they are suited to studying dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships. Meaningful coherence was further enhanced by achieving the stated aim and by establishing meaningful connections between previous literature, the aim of this study, the methods used, and the co-constructed findings (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

### Results

The processual nature of dyadic coping means that the vignettes presented in this section inform the reader of the antecedents and outcomes of managing demands together, rather than dictating a fixed sequence of events. We provide ten vignettes that capture our interpretations of the interviewees' experiences of dyadic coping and highlight the antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping. Five key themes are presented: the essence of dyadic coping, lock and key fit, friendship and trust, communication of the stressor, and protection and support. To enhance methodological rigor, each of these themes was constructed and defined via our regular discussions between each of us as research team members. Although we have tried to be transparent in how these vignettes and themes were constructed, we are conscious that our personal experiences and backgrounds may have

shaped how the findings and the vignettes have been constructed and reported (Randall & Phoenix, 2009).

### **The Essence of Dyadic Coping**

This theme represents our understanding of dyadic coping within the coach-athlete relationship. The theme addresses how coaches and athletes defined dyadic coping and to what extent this type of coping supplemented and extended an individual's coping resources. The theme was defined as "the sharing of demands experienced by an individual as a means to supplement and develop coping strategies for both members of the dyad."

### **Coach perspective.**

"Dyadic coping is basically the fact we get to share demands placed on us. At times we may go to an expert but we don't actually pass stress to them, it's still us coping together. Sport matters to the athlete because they are the athlete and it's all about them. I think it can get very overwhelming so when they have a problem and can't manage it they share it. When you're coaching someone their problems are your problems, that's a given. I take their problems on board and I get angry because I feel bad for them. I know I can't take the problems away but I can help them come up with strategies to manage them. We believe one way of coping is to find ways of keeping moving in the right direction by sharing the burden and trying to get over it. I think every athlete that I work with impacts on my coping in some way or another but I don't think they would be aware how much they do. These experiences of helping other people cope with their demands has helped me because the way they cope rubs off on me. I now know how to deal with stuff in my life and have forged some coping strategies that I can use outside of coaching. Year on year we are never going to get rid of the demands but we can get better at coping with them. The hard times just cement things further down the line. We build trust when we cope together so the next



375           time we're put in a stressful position we can shoulder the burden together."

376   **Athlete perspective.**

377           "In terms of dyadic coping, I think we cope with things together, because coach  
378           understands my emotions, we share our problems, and we help each other out because  
379           you have to work together to get through it. Sometimes I feel I can handle stuff  
380           myself, so there are problems that can take a couple of days for me to tell my coach.  
381           But then other times I'll say something is annoying me and I need to sort it out  
382           straight away. When I share the things that are stressing me out, coach puts things into  
383           perspective. In my head it amounts to a lot of things but my coach just sees it as  
384           another competition so maybe things aren't as bad as I thought. My coach doesn't  
385           burden me with their problems but when they tell me I do my best to help them deal  
386           with the rubbish they have to deal with. These problems and our experiences of  
387           managing them has brought us closer together and developed our friendship.  
388           Nowadays I don't get as stressed and a large part of that is coach teaching me how to  
389           cope. Over time we've just realised how each other deals with things. I've taught  
390           coach about stress but coach has taught me so much more."

391   **Lock and Key Fit**

392           This theme relates to the individual nature of each coach-athlete relationship, which  
393           the interviewees perceived to be an antecedent to dyadic coping. The theme represents the  
394           ways in which the fit between the coach and the athlete develops mutual support and  
395           contributes to relationship growth. The lock and key fit appeared to extend an individual's  
396           coping resources and facilitate shared approaches to coping. This theme was defined as  
397           "flexible approaches used to foster a lock and key fit, shared understanding, a nurturing  
398           environment for athlete growth, and dyadic coping."

399   **Coach perspective.**

“Each athlete has their own locks and as a coach you’ve got to find that particular key to unpick their lock. You recognize that you are coaching individuals so everything works in a totally different kind of way; whatever solutions I find for one are going to be different for the others. So, I’ve got to develop a relationship with each of these guys fairly bloody quickly to figure out which are the right keys. Some athletes like to deal with things on their own but others use me as a leaning post. For example, one athlete, if I was standoff-ish with them, they wouldn’t say anything to me and I wouldn’t understand anything about them. I feel that with some athletes that they will tell you a problem and if you don’t come back with a magic fix then you’ve let them down. You don’t always get the right key every time and I’d be naïve to think I always will. I’ve had athletes who have been members of the group and you’re probably more like a fitness instructor, you know, they turn up, do their training, so it varies. However, when you find that key and have a really good relationship, it’s still professional, it’s a job, and at any point they could fire me as their coach or I could say I’m not coaching them. But the athletes grow with you, so it becomes a closer bond developed through experience, to start with I wouldn’t have felt comfortable talking to them about my life, but I think recently I have. It’s made me become a different kind of coach, I know that I have to have a lot of different attributes to connect with different people. I like to think that to coach Jimmy how to play football, you need to know about football, you need to know how to coach, and you need to know about Jimmy...you’ve got to work on each of those elements to be able to coach.”

**Athlete perspective.**

“Dyadic coping probably does exist in lots of different areas but it depends on the people doesn’t it, and your relationships with people and different situations. My

coach and I are both so similar. At the beginning of the athlete-coach relationship I felt comfortable with my coach because we felt the same things, we thought the same things, and they just made me feel comfortable that way. I think the coach should make more of an effort because it's your sports career it effects, so you've got to be patient as a coach, and as athletes we have to commit to the cause. For example, my coach has to initiate the conversation with new athletes, as some of them need someone to come to them, and talk to them. My coach is a nice person and we get on well, so I am willing to turn up for them. I guess it initially takes some adapting to different people and their personalities."

#### **Friendship and Trust**

This theme captures the main ingredients that coaches and athletes deemed important precursors to dyadic coping. The theme focuses on the coach-athlete relationship as a shared endeavor and, more specifically, on the friendship and trust that was reported by each of the dyads in this study. The findings suggest that failure to develop trust within the coach-athlete relationship will limit how much coaches and athletes share their stressors within their dyad. Friendship and trust was defined as "the mutual connection and integrity of the relationship, which forms the building blocks of a shared coping experience between two individuals in a close personal relationship."

#### **Coach perspective.**

"Our relationship has developed around friendship, because if there was no trust in what we were trying to say or do, that openness, the way we share stress then our sport relationship would be nothing. I know that this is a two-way thing, we keep going and we keep ourselves on track. The two of us are growing a shared experience; we get to know each other. I take a big interest in their life, I want to know what they want to achieve, what their ambitions are, how will they get there. I think the key

450 driver is actually trust and I think that is a trust developed through experience; you  
451 know, on both sides. The stronger the friendship, the stronger the trust. If things go  
452 wrong we will both be devastated afterwards and it will be equal. I accept  
453 responsibility, it's weird because I coach somebody to perform and they have to take  
454 ownership of that performance but we achieve that performance by mutual and shared  
455 endeavor. We are in it together; it matters to them because it's them and it's all about  
456 them but equally it matters to me. It's like me facilitating a shared approach to dealing  
457 with stuff; the better we get, the bigger we will fall. It's just friendship you know,  
458 even though they're younger than me. I think it's a fundamental connection that is  
459 coaching, as opposed to running a program or teaching someone. Overall, it's a lovely  
460 relationship that we've got, but the key, the kernel, the nut of it all is that we trust  
461 each other."

462 **Athlete perspective.**

463 "I think a good coach shouldn't be just your coach, they should be more like your  
464 friend, in a professional manner, but so you can talk to them about an issue and they  
465 can talk to you like their friend. My coach took an interest just before they started  
466 coaching me, which was positive. At first, I did everything coach said and to a certain  
467 extent, I still do, but as I'm getting older my coach can trust me enough to talk  
468 through things a bit more. It can depend on how much I'm willing to give, so I think if  
469 they give everything but I'm not giving the same back, I don't think it's entirely their  
470 fault. We've got to work through everything together. You've got to be honest  
471 otherwise there is no point having a coach, it's a two way kind of thing, they learn to  
472 grow with you. I see my coach as a good friend; somebody who I trust and has my  
473 interests at heart. At difficult times, our friendship has meant that I continued and  
474 persevered with the sport. For me, sport is better because I'm close to my coach. It

475 takes time to build up any relationship doesn't it, so yeah, in the time you spend  
476 together you get to know each other better. I'm lucky to have them as my coach, I  
477 trust them."

478 **Communication of the Stressor**

479 When using dyadic coping the coach-athlete dyads sought to establish meaning  
480 through communication. It appears that an individual's role within the relationship may  
481 influence the level of communication within the coach-athlete dyad. Communication of the  
482 stressor was defined as "the verbal and non-verbal communication that coaches and athletes  
483 used to share a stressor and promote dyadic coping, and the ways in which communication  
484 influenced and directed a partner's coping strategies."

485 **Coach perspective.**

486 "If there is a problem we talk, I coping together starts by talking. We both talk readily  
487 and openly about the things that are pissing us off about work and we talk about stuff  
488 associated with both of our jobs and about both of our relationships. We have chats at  
489 like 10, 10.30 at night, just because we're kind of supporting each other. My athletes  
490 are fairly easy to chat to about things; it's a two-way relationship, that's a good way  
491 to describe it. If they appear stressed I will pull them to one side and speak to them,  
492 plant the seed because I know from experience if something's was not quite right in  
493 my life, it affected my game. Sometimes I can't cover anything up, it shows in my  
494 face whatever mood I'm in and other times I hide it completely. Naturally you end up  
495 having conversations about things not related to sport, even if it's girlfriend or  
496 boyfriend problems, you become a confidant. I leave it open for them to come to me.  
497 After a bad performance we just talk about what we could do better from both sides  
498 and help him manage it."

499 **Athlete perspective.**

“It isn’t just a hi, bye relationship. We are in constant communication, you know, all the time. It took a while for me to open up about like niggles and pains that I have during training because I thought coach would think that I was trying to get out of the session. But now we have chats just jogging in the warm up, coach will speak to me and say maybe you need to do this or perhaps you should talk to this person. Before competition, my coach can see I get stressed, they know where things are going wrong for me and I can tell when coach is getting annoyed, probably not as well, but I can tell. My coach can get a bit emotional, you know? Once they get it all out of their system they seem fine and we chat to take their mind off whatever it is that they’re worried about. My coach is very good at, you know, just talking about life really. Coach will tell me openly and honestly, I will rant and rave and they will calm me down, tell me to ignore it, help me cope. When coach puts it into perspective I guess it’s calming and I think ‘why am I worried about that?’ Before competition, we speak about the event, the week leading up to it, the night before, the morning of, straight after it. Sometimes I’m quite a closed book so unless someone does ask me I won’t come out and say I’ve had a bad day. I guess it comes out in my mannerisms, my body language. My coach can just tell by the way that I do things, the way I am. My coach is a good coach, able to recognize certain things. I’m fortunate that they are there to speak me through it.”

### **Protection and Support**

Protection and support was defined as “outcomes of dyadic coping that facilitate a supportive and nurturing environment for personal and relationship growth.” Protection and support were described as two positive outcomes of dyadic coping for the coaches and athletes who took part in this study. The vignettes capture elements of protection and support that were directly offered by the coaches and the indirect provision of protection and support

525 by the athletes.

526 **Coach perspective.**

527 "I have noticed the athletes actually have a big effect on me in terms of their energy. I  
528 think every athlete that I work with impacts on my coping mechanisms some way or  
529 another. So, when I'm doubting myself as a coach after a bad performance and they  
530 aren't, I think it's the best thing I could have to know that they still believe in me. It's  
531 just them and they don't need to do anything differently, just them being who they  
532 are; that's why I coach. It's more of me actively looking after or looking out for them,  
533 rather than the other way around because I try to allow the athlete to only concern  
534 themselves with the physical preparation and let me basically carry the baggage. But  
535 it's a shared load, shared burden, shared task to try and get over it. I think over time  
536 we've realized how each other deals with stress. I try to hide things from them and try  
537 to be happy with how things are going. Some days it's not always the case and some  
538 days we have bad days but I always just try and get them through the day. I won't let  
539 them down and walk away, I'm not going to quit until they quit. I'm pretty sure most  
540 coaches would say that; you recognize certain things in the sports person that you try  
541 and influence, whether it's their behavior or preparation, without them realizing. You  
542 try to empower your athletes to take some responsibility because you might not be  
543 directly helping them to cope but you're giving them the skills to be able to cope and  
544 then kind of exploring with them. We are both understanding, both learning, so I  
545 suppose it's supporting each other and we're exploring all avenues together."

546 **Athlete perspective.**

547 "When you can see that coach is not in the best mood there will be no back chat, no  
548 trying to get out of the session. Sometimes my coach just cuts straight down to  
549 business rather than like you know the whole how are you sort of thing, like banter,

there is none of that anymore, it's more like they're stressed, they need to get this done. I usually just do it for them and I hope that helps. If things are bad, I'd feel bad if I wasn't there to support them. For me, having my coach there to support me and smiling and saying 'don't worry mate', calms me. After a bad performance, coach highlights things and so maybe things aren't as bad as I thought. They tell me I can do it and every time things go well, it proves their point. Coach keeps things in perspective. My coach relaxes me just from the way they speak to me and treat me. They congratulate me when things are going well and keep my mind at rest when things aren't so good. My coach is good to have around and believes in me as much as I believe in myself."

### Discussion

This study is the first to explore antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping within coach-athlete relationships. In doing so, we also captured the essence of dyadic coping as reported by the interviewees and interpreted by us, the researchers. Using individual and dyadic interviews with five coach-athlete dyads, we constructed five themes during our analyses of the interview transcripts. Each theme was represented by two composite vignettes, which enabled us to illustrate our interpretations of the interviewees' shared accounts of each theme. The themes suggest that the essence of dyadic coping for athletes and coaches relates to the sharing of demands to supplement individual coping resources, and that a lock and key fit between the coach and the athlete, the development of friendship and trust, and verbal and non-verbal communication of stressors can promote dyadic coping. We also noted that dyadic coping can contribute to protection and support that is important for personal and relationship growth. The vignettes presented support and extend previous research on coping in sport. To illustrate, most coping research in sport psychology has focused on individuals (Smith, 2013) and, in doing so, has overlooked the interpersonal



nature of coping. This is problematic because it is difficult to isolate and analyze an individual's coping when they are operating in a social environment, such as sport. Thus, our focus on dyadic coping extends the body of existing knowledge by providing insight to the factors that may lead to (i.e., antecedents) and occur as a result (i.e., outcomes) of dyadic coping.

The first theme in our results represented the essence of dyadic coping. Our interpretation of the data in this theme is such that coaches and athletes understand dyadic coping to be a process of coping together. This finding is similar to those in other domains where it has been highlighted that individuals need to perceive stressors as 'our problem' for dyadic coping to occur (Bodenmann, 1995; Lyons et al, 1998). The interviewees in our study suggested that a shared approach to coping extended their own coping resources. Indeed, athletes reported that they sought coping-related support from their coach when they had exceeded their own resources or when their available coping resources were insufficient. Thus, it may be that dyadic coping enhances and develops individuals' coping resources, which is consistent with other researchers' suggestions that coaches play a role in developing athletes' coping strategies (Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Our findings extend this knowledge by suggesting that both athletes' *and* coaches' coping resources may be extended by dyadic coping and that shared coping is mutually beneficial for both parties. This also extends previous literature on social support in sport psychology (e.g., Tamminen & Holt, 2012) by suggesting that support may be bidirectional between coaches and athletes. Turning to our second theme, lock and key fit, our findings support and extend previous research by identifying that a coach's role can vary according to contextual factors and athlete requirements (cf. Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). These findings add weight to the suggestion that athletes may perceive the coach as an attachment figure (Davis & Jowett, 2010) who can facilitate an environment that fosters the development of life skills (Vallée & Bloom, 2005).

Moreover, our interpretations of the data suggest that coach-athlete relationships may not involve a mutually supportive partnership from the outset and, in doing so, extend the body of knowledge on coach-athlete relationships (Jowett, 2007; Poczwadowski, Barott, & Perego, 2002). Current conceptualizations of coach-athlete relationships (e.g., Jowett & Cockerill, 2003) highlight that mutual and causal interdependence is a key element of effective and successful relationships. Our findings add to this by suggesting that a lock and key fit is not only essential for relationship sustenance but also for the promotion of dyadic coping. This suggestion is similar to findings in health (Fife et al., 2010) and relationship (Hamama-Raz, Hemmendinger, & Buchbinder, 2010) psychology that have identified relationship roles as an antecedent to dyadic coping.

Our third theme, friendship and trust, suggests that these elements may promote and shape shared coping experiences between athletes and coaches. This supports and extends previous work (e.g., Carpenter & Scott, 1992; Papp & Witt, 2010; Wunderer & Schneewind, 2008) by suggesting that the initiation and development of relationships is fundamental to the ways in which individuals manage demands together. Some researchers (e.g., Jowett and colleagues, 2003, 2005, 2007) have highlighted that closeness and interdependence offered in coach-athlete relationships can facilitate athletes' optimal functioning (Jowett, 2005). The interpretations presented here extend these thoughts by highlighting that friendship and trust, which are similar to closeness and interdependence, promote the sharing of stressors between athletes and coaches and may antecede dyadic coping. Indeed, researchers in other domains (e.g., fostering) have shown that individuals require trust when sharing their experiences and stressors (e.g., Steenbakkens, van der Steen, & Grietens, 2016). In sport, trust has been found to be a building block of close coach-athlete relationships (Poczwadowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002). Our focus on friendship and trust supports this notion by highlighting that both members of the coach-athlete relationship should be concerned for the wellbeing of the

other to facilitate shared experiences and foster dyadic coping. Our findings do, however, contradict those of some published works. For example, the communal coping theory suggests that shared coping experiences can be facilitated if one person in a dyad holds a communal coping orientation (Lyons et al., 1998). Our interpretations of our data, however, suggest that investment from both members of the dyad is essential for dyadic coping to occur. One possible explanation for this divergence is that the extant research on communal and dyadic coping has typically explored the reciprocal nature of personal (e.g., marital) relationships. However, these types of relationships differ from the hierarchical, role-divided nature of coach-athlete partnerships, which appear to require both individuals to value a dyadic approach before friendship and trust can develop and dyadic coping can occur.

Our fourth theme highlighted verbal and non-verbal communication of a stressor as an important antecedent of dyadic coping that allowed athletes and coaches to share stressful experiences and influence the other's coping strategies. This finding is consistent with a body of non-sport literature (e.g., Bodenmann, 1995; Lyons et al., 1998) that indicates that there must be an element of communication for coping to be shared. Indeed, Bodenmann (2005) conceptualized dyadic coping as a phenomenon that encompasses a stress communication process that mobilizes both partners' coping resources. Our interpretations extend this concept to the context of coping in sport, by drawing attention to the importance of communication between athletes and coaches to facilitate shared coping experiences when managing stressors. One explanation for the importance of communication for our sample relates to appraising and coping resources (see Lazarus, 1999). For example, communication between a coach and athlete may shape the individual's appraisal of a stressor and may augment the coping resources that are available by promoting a shared approach to coping (Meuwly et al., 2012). Crocker et al. (2015) suggested that the use of "we-talk" among team members may provide valuable information about the stressors faced and the use of

communal coping. Our results extend this literature by focusing on dyadic, rather than communal, coping in sport and by exploring this concept in coaches and athletes who are operating in individual sports.

With reference to protection and support, which was the fifth theme that we presented, it is generally accepted that coaches aim to provide a nurturing environment to facilitate athletes' growth (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014). It is the exchange of care between coaches and athletes that is deemed important for coach and athlete growth (Poczwardoski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002). Our inferences extend this work by suggesting that athletes also offer support to the coach and that this support may be indirect and unacknowledged by both parties. In contrast to previous relationship literature (e.g., Lyons et al., 1998), we suggest that coaches and athletes do not necessarily need to use collaborative coping strategies (e.g., joint problem solving) to reduce the negative effect of stressors. Instead, the coach may play a direct role in dyadic coping with a shared stressor and the athlete may play a less direct role. These contrasting interpretations could be explained by the unique nature of coach-athlete relationships, which differs from other types of personal relationships (e.g., husband and wife) that have been explored in the published literature. For example, marital relationships include mutual reciprocity, which is not as prominent in the "authority figure-subordinate" (Stebbing, Taylor, & Spray, 2016, p.292) relationship of coaches and athletes. To expand briefly, the notion of empowerment is unique to coach-athlete relationships (Tawse, Bloom, Sabiston, & Reid, 2012) and there is often less of a focus on mutual support provisions. Thus, there are distinct roles that are present in coach-athlete relationships that may influence how dyadic coping manifests.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A noteworthy strength of this study relates to the coaches and athletes who were interviewed. Specifically, we worked with experienced coaches and athletes who had been

together for at least one season at the time of data collection. This facilitated breadth of understanding relating to dyadic coping (see Schwandt, 1997) and allowed knowledge relating to the essence, antecedents, and outcomes of dyadic coping in effective and successful coach-athlete relationships to be constructed. Another notable strength relates to the use of composite vignettes, which allow the reader to understand the perspectives of the coaches and the athletes through the interviewees' voices (Schinke, Blodgett, McGannon, Ge, Oghene, et al., 2016). Despite these strengths, the findings should be considered in light of potential limitations. For example, self-selection bias may have influenced the sample because interview based research tends to attract individuals who engage in altruistic behaviors, and find the experience innocuous and therapeutic (Peel, Parry, Douglas, & Lawton, 2006). In addition, the research did not explore how dyadic coping was considered alongside individual coping, did not thoroughly explore how dyadic coping may come into play once individual coping resources are exhausted, and did not seek to understand helpful and unhelpful instances of dyadic coping. Researchers would do well to address these shortcomings when exploring dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships. It is also important to consider that our vignettes are influenced by our own experiences and motivations (Randall & Phoenix, 2009) and that the data gathered may have been unintentionally influenced by the lead author. In addition, the focus on coach-athlete dyads who were working together at the time of data collection and reported having a positive relationship overlooked those working in new coach-athlete relationships who may have offered interesting insight to dyadic coping. This is noteworthy because the findings of previous research have suggested that relationship length is a contextual characteristic that influences dyadic coping (Wunderer & Schneewind, 2008).

### **Implications**

Two important implications emerge from the findings. First, our interpretations of the

data show that coach-athlete relationships can offer a supportive environment to manage the demands that individuals experience in competitive situations. Thus, dyadic extensions of transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) are required to better understand and explain the interpersonal coping processes that are at play in coach-athlete relationships (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014). Exploration of the coach-athlete relationship offers novel and complimentary insight to dyadic coping theories that have been identified in research to date. Indeed, while previous researchers have acknowledged dyadic coping processes within personal relationships (e.g., husband and wife; Bodenmann & Cina, 2006), this study is among the first to capture the essence of interpersonal coping in context dependent relationships (e.g., coach-athlete; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Future research should build on our interpretations by using a narrative tradition to explore the specific ways in which coach-athlete dyads use dyadic coping processes to overcome stressful experiences. The second implication relates to the application of these insights to applied practice. For example, the lock and key fit between the coach and the athlete, a focus on friendship and trust, and verbal and non-verbal communication of stressors appear to antecede dyadic coping and foster protection and support of each member of the dyad. These findings may be useful for national governing bodies (NGBs) and practitioners because they bring to the fore the existence of dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships. This is noteworthy because it is acknowledged that this type of coping increases available resources (Traa, De Vries, Bodenmann, & Den Ouden, 2015) for managing the negative outcomes of stressors. The results also highlight some of the adaptive support structures that relate to dyadic coping (e.g., fostering friendship and trust) and can be used by coaches and athletes when managing stressors. Thus, it may be useful for NGBs to incorporate a focus on dyadic coping in coach education programs.

## Conclusion

725           This study has advanced knowledge of coping in sport by highlighting coping as an  
726 interpersonal process, rather than an individual phenomenon. In addition, the results capture  
727 the essence of dyadic coping as shared coping processes and recognize that the lock and key  
728 fit between an athlete and a coach, friendship and trust, communication of the stressor, and  
729 protection and support are important elements of dyadic coping in sport. Future research that  
730 develops knowledge of these elements will facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of  
731 how dyadic coping manifests and how coaches and athletes can work together to take shared  
732 responsibility for coping with stressors. This will be helpful because dyadic coping has  
733 implications for appraisals of stressors (Nicholls & Perry, 2016), relationship satisfaction  
734 (Falconier, Jackson, Hilpert, & Bodenmann, 2015), and psychological well-being  
735 (Gudmundsdottir et al., 1996). Researchers should explore the coach-athlete relationship in  
736 more depth with a specific focus on the support structures that facilitate enhanced sport  
737 performance. This approach would help to identify some of the factors that can enhance  
738 athlete well-being and performance in high-level sport.

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