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Katherine N. Alexander
*Utah State University*

Kat V. Adams
*Utah State University*

Travis E. Dorsch
*Utah State University*

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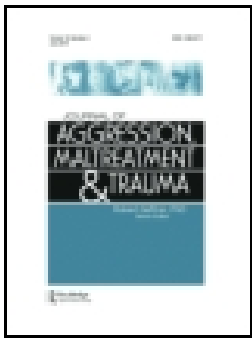
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# Exploring the Impact of Coaches' Emotional Abuse on Intercollegiate Student-Athletes' Experiences

Katherine N. Alexander, Kat V. Adams, and Travis E. Dorsch

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA

**ABSTRACT**

Despite widespread anecdotal accounts of coaches' emotional abuse in intercollegiate sports, empirical literature is lacking. To address this gap, the present exploratory study was designed to explore how former intercollegiate student-athletes interpreted experiences of emotionally abusive coaching. Former female NCAA and NJCAA student-athletes ($N = 14$; $M_{age} = 25.3$ years) took part in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Data were interpreted using a constructivist grounded theory approach. The final product of the research was a three-stage grounded theory explaining how former student-athletes interpret their experiences of emotional abuse over time organized into sections on antecedents to abuse, experiences and actions within the abusive program, and after the abuse. Implications for this work include the idea that individual student-athletes may have different experiences and recollections of coaches' emotionally abusive behavior and that intercollegiate student-athletes are able to discern between "hard, but fair" coaching practices and emotionally abusive coaching practices.

Reports on abusive practices and athlete maltreatment across all levels of sport have highlighted how sport participation is not always an inherently positive experience, and empirical research suggests that emotional abuse is the most frequently experienced form of athlete maltreatment (Kerr et al., 2020). Stirling and Kerr (2008) describe emotional abuse within the coach-athlete critical relationship as both deliberate and non-contact. Emotional abuse contains behaviors in three broader categories: (a) physical non-contact behaviors (e.g., displays of anger and aggression or throwing objects without contacting the athlete); (b) verbal behaviors (e.g., ostracizing, humiliating, name-calling, or demeaning players); and (c) denial of attention and support (e.g., intentionally ignoring players for an extended period of time). Though specific behaviors may vary, what is essential are the relationship between coach and athlete, the behavioral engagement of the coach, and the potential harm experienced by the athlete. Contemporary research has sought to gain a better understanding of former elite athletes' experiences and outcomes of

emotionally abusive behaviors, with the immediate and lasting effects of emotional abuse having been detailed across the popular and scientific literatures (Abrams & Bartlett, 2019; Battaglia et al., 2017; Gervis, 2013; Gervis et al., 2016; Jacobs et al., 2017; Kavanagh et al., 2017; Kerr et al., 2020; Smith & Pegoraro, 2020).

Outcomes associated with former elite athletes' experiences of emotionally abusive behaviors include feelings of embarrassment and shame and decreased self-esteem; clinical manifestations of anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive behaviors (e.g., eating disorders, trichotillomania), and PTSD symptomology; and the cessation of sport participation (Battaglia et al., 2017; Gervis, 2013; Gervis et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2020). Coping strategies and support systems utilized by athletes who experience emotionally abusive coaching behaviors have also been explored, and specific behaviors, including support-seeking and dropping out of sport, have been identified as short- and long-term coping strategies (Kavanagh et al., 2017).

Despite recent advancements in empirical understanding, a gap remains in the field's knowledge of the nature of abuse within American sport (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021), particularly within the context of intercollegiate athletics. In the United States, intercollegiate athletics are overseen by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA), and are considered to be the highest level of amateur sport. Across these governing bodies, intercollegiate student-athletes face similar developmental tasks associated with adulthood while simultaneously learning to adapt to new athletic and academic demands (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). In addition, intercollegiate athletics is rife with student-athlete exploitation and maltreatment due to the potential for organizational rule-breaking, aspects of financial and academic control, and a general lack of oversight by school officials (Hawkins, 2010; Nite & Nauright, 2020).

Due to the general lack of knowledge surrounding abuse in intercollegiate sport (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021) and the potential for adverse outcomes associated with student-athlete experiences of abuse, the present exploratory study was designed to examine how retired student-athletes interpreted emotionally abusive coaching behaviors to influence their intercollegiate sport careers. In addition, we sought to highlight the sources and patterns of support and coping among student-athletes who experience emotionally abusive behaviors. When considering experiences of emotional abuse in sport, it is valuable to employ a systems lens because it affords scholars the opportunity to consider the interdependence of persons (e.g., athletes, parents, coaches, and peers) and contexts (e.g., organizations, communities, and societies), both holistically and reciprocally (see, Dorsch et al., 2022). Such an approach has the potential to foster great insights into how the persons and contexts that surround the coach and athlete may influence athletes' experiences and

perceptions of abuse. A systems perspective has been used to examine instances of sexual abuse in Olympic sport organizations (Kerr et al., 2019) and NCAA institutions (Nite & Nauright, 2020) but has not been applied specifically to the empirical examination of emotional abuse in intercollegiate sport. Doing so in the present study enhanced our understanding of how student-athletes related to and reflected on the roles of various individuals, organizations, and institutions in initiating and perpetuating emotional abuse.

## Method

The present exploratory study elevates the voices of student-athletes by centering their experiences of emotional abuse in the intercollegiate athletic setting. Our interpretations of their experiences were guided by respect for the stories they shared and informed by a pragmatist perspective. This was an appropriate approach, in that athletes have been shown to vary in their interpretations of what constitutes emotionally abusive coaching practices (Rutland et al., 2022). The study utilized constructivist grounded theory because of its emphasis on the complexities of worlds, views, and actions (Charmaz, 2000, 2014). This approach afforded a unique opportunity to better understand how a small cohort of former female student-athletes interpreted their experiences of abusive coaching practices, a relatively normative experience within elite sport (Kerr et al., 2020).

## Researcher positionality

The interpretative aspects of the present study are important to acknowledge, as all three members of the research team have experienced emotionally abusive environments in high-level sport. This shaped the way data were collected and interpreted. As such, it is important to be fully transparent about our individual and overlapping positionalities. The first author relinquished an NCAA Division I soccer scholarship within weeks of starting their freshman year due to an emotionally abusive coach who exacerbated divisions and conflict. The second author witnessed the emotional abuse of athletes as an assistant coach in a competitive club gymnastics environment that included NCAA-bound athletes. As a two-sport Division I college student-athlete, the third author witnessed a number of teammates and competitors walk away from opportunities to compete in intercollegiate athletics because of abusive relationships with coaches. These experiences, along with the authors' many positive experiences in sport, provided an experiential platform from which they could relate to experiences described by participants as well as some of the socioecological (i.e., individual, interpersonal, and institutional) factors that influence the performance and perpetuation of emotional abuse by coaches.

Table 1.. Participant characteristics.

| Participant Number | Sport | Total Years on an Abusive Intercollegiate Team | Total Years in Intercollegiate Sport |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Lacrosse | 1 | 1 |
| 2 | Softball | 3 | 3 |
| 3 | Volleyball | 4 | 4 |
| 4 | Lacrosse | 3 | 4 |
| 5 | Volleyball | 4 | 4 |
| 6 | Soccer | 3 | 3 |
| 7 | Basketball | 3 | 5 |
| 8 | Soccer | 1 | 1 |
| 9 | Soccer | 4 | 4 |
| 10 | Cross country/ track | 2 | 4 |
| 11 | Basketball | 2 | 5 |
| 12 | Cross country/ track | 4 | 5 |
| 13 | Volleyball | 4 | 4 |
| 14 | Soccer | 4 | 4 |

## Participants

Participants included 14 former female intercollegiate student-athletes, ranging in age from 21 to 35 years of age. All were former intercollegiate student-athletes and had experienced abuse for at least one full year of participation. Thirteen participants were enrolled in NCAA institutions at the time of the abuse, and one was enrolled at an NJCAA institution. Of the former NCAA student-athletes, 10 were participating at the Division I level, two were participating at the Division II level, and one was participating at the Division III level. Ten of the former student-athletes were being supported by full or partial athletic scholarships and a range of sports were represented across participants. Student-athlete characteristics are detailed in Table 1.

## Procedure

After obtaining institutional review board approval, purposeful sampling was used to recruit an initial sample of former intercollegiate student-athletes. Snowball sampling techniques were subsequently used to expand the participant pool. Participants were recruited via targeted social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and by contacting various institutional stakeholders (e.g., coaches and administrators) across the United States. Participants were also recruited by leveraging public information from media articles that aimed to expose abusive coaching practices. After being contacted by the first author, former student-athletes who expressed a willingness to participate completed a short online screening survey to ensure they believed that they had experienced some form of emotional abuse during their intercollegiate athletic career. Student-athletes who were currently involved in investigations or legal actions surrounding their experiences of abuse were excluded from the study.

Informed consent was obtained online. Participants were then briefed on the purpose of the study and were given an opportunity to ask questions prior to the interview. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted online via Zoom with each former student-athlete. In each interview, the first author elevated participants' experiences of emotional abuse in intercollegiate sport by allowing them opportunities to share their own definitions and interpretations of emotionally abusive behavior and by utilizing follow-up probes to allow participants to elaborate on their responses without inferring meaning (Hill et al., 2005). Interviews included discussions of relevant relationships, team dynamics, coping behaviors, and sources and patterns of support. Interviews ranged from 75 to 137 minutes ($M$ = 105.6, $SD$ =18.9). Special care was taken to reduce risks for psychological harm due to the sensitive nature of the focus of these studies, with participants being informed of emotional risks prior to participation. Researchers followed up with participants one week after the completion of their interview with additional psychological resources. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and cross-checked for accuracy by two members of the research team. Transcribed data totaled 472 pages of single-spaced written text.

### Data analysis

Data were analyzed using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), and data collection and analysis occurred iteratively. Transcribed data were reviewed at least two times to allow researchers to familiarize themselves with participants' general experiences prior to analysis. The first and second authors then read each transcript and highlighted sections that were related to experiences of emotional abuse in intercollegiate sports. Data were coded comparatively using open, axial, and selective coding techniques until theoretical saturation was reached. The first and second authors engaged in memoing and reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis in an attempt to reflect on potential biases and limit these influences (Crabtree & Miller, 2022). The authors also met frequently during the open and axial coding process to discuss these biases, along with the coding of themes and their interrelationships. The third author served as a critical friend (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011), challenging the assumptions being made in the analysis, biases that may have shaped the first and second authors' interpretation of data, and the grounded theory that was ultimately derived from the analytic process. These recommendations were informed not only by the data, but by the third author's own experiences as an NCAA student-athlete.

### Results

The result of our analytic process was a heuristic model representing student-athletes' experiences of emotionally abusive coaching behaviors. Although

participants had varied experiences prior to the emotional abuse, they described similar stages of recognition and coping across their athletic careers. All participants identified the head coach (HC) as primarily having abusive and negative tendencies. Within the model, stages are organized into sections based on antecedents to the abuse, experiences and actions within the abusive program while on the abusive team, and after the abuse (see, Figure 1). See, Table 2 for relevant themes and participant quotes regarding antecedents to the abuse and experiences and actions within the abusive program.

### *Antecedents to the abuse*

Experiences prior to the abuse included preceding sport experiences and an organized recruiting process for college. Participants identified a variety of youth sport experiences preceding their intercollegiate sport participation, with some specializing early in a single sport and others participating in multiple sports throughout high school. Although five participants reported experiences of emotional abuse in youth sport, all student-athletes generally reflected on their prior sport experiences as overwhelmingly positive.

All participants described an organized, labor-intensive recruitment process and reflected on these experiences positively. Recruitment involved contacting college and university coaches via e-mails and phone calls, inviting coaches to watch film and games, and visiting potential schools of interest to meet with coaches and current team members. Participants generally reported that this period was a time of celebration, with many reflecting on their optimism and commitment to intercollegiate sport participation at this stage.

Following successful recruitment, student-athletes started their intercollegiate careers with realistic expectations and demonstrated awareness of the challenges involved in intercollegiate sport participation. As described by Participant 8 (basketball) "I mean, I understood that, like, yes, you're there to go to school, get your degree . . . but you 'bout to be around your team and your coaches, almost 24/7, it's crazy." These daily pressures of being a student-athlete were juxtaposed by the reality of being a female athlete and a general lack of opportunities for professional sport participation after college: "as a woman and softball [player], you don't go to play in the major leagues . . . I knew that this wasn't going to be something that I'm going to take for the rest of my life" (Participant 2, softball).

Despite a realistic understanding of the pressures and opportunities associated with participation in intercollegiate sport, student-athletes still faced an adjustment period due to new experiences and heightened expectations, as detailed extensively by Participant 3 (volleyball):

> I just remember feeling like very scared as a freshman. We did have to run this fit test every year. And it's actually really, really hard. And I remember not passing like the first

**1. Antecedents to abuse**
Positive recruitment experiences
Athlete commits to participating in the program

**2. Experiences and actions within the abusive program**

**Learning the program**
- Program expectations
- Implicit and explicit rules
- Team and staff dynamics
- Coach communication style

*Action: Identifying a trusted support system*

**Identifying abusive HC behavior**
- Generally negative and harmful
- Aggressive
- Inconsistent expectations
- Punitive actions and retaliation against players
- Disparate treatment across players

*Action: Report abuse to administration/staff*

**Feeling effects**
- Distress
- Decreased motivation
- Mental health impairments

*Action: Develop maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies*

**3. After the abuse**
Exit the abusive program via transfer or retirement
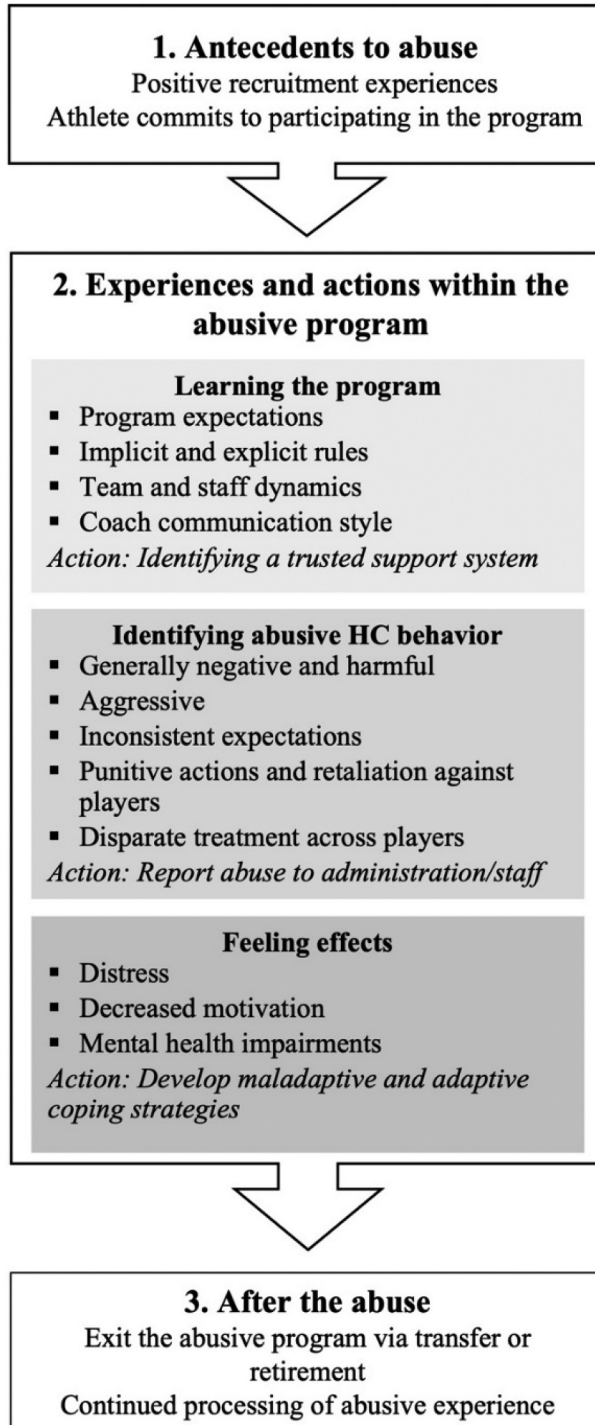Continued processing of abusive experience

**Figure 1.** Intercollegiate athletes' recollected experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices.

**Table 2.** Reported participant experiences and themes.

| Antecedents to Abuse | |
| --- | --- |
| Positive youth experiences | Prior to college my experience in soccer was great. I had really great relationships with my teammates. And I had the great opportunity to be coached by some really awesome people … There were coaches that were hard on me, but not to the extent where I didn't enjoy what I was doing anymore. Very supportive, wanted me to get to the next level . . . . made me look really forward to what I was doing, in college. (Participant 4, soccer) |
| Positive beliefs about commitment toward school | "I was really excited. I was super-proud. I mean, it was a huge deal. All my friends knew. I was in the newspaper at home. So, I was just really excited." (Participant 9, soccer) |
| Expectation that college sport will be difficult | "It's just, it's like a different world to think because you're a freshman, you don't know what college athletics [is]. I was the first one in my family to play a college sport … You know, I kind of went in thinking like, college sports are gonna be hard, it is what it is." (Participant 3, volleyball) |

| Experiences and Actions Within the Abusive Program | |
| --- | --- |
| Learning who to trust | "Especially as freshmen, we were scared who was going to find out what we said. Like, at one point, if you said something to your trainer, our trainer wasn't the one that told somebody but, one of the trainers in the training room was roommates with our assistant coach, and told her something that somebody said, and we were really careful. (Participant 4, lacrosse) |
| Noticing expectations and rules | "She made [people] call her ma'am. If we were being yelled at and we didn't say, ma'am, she'd say, 'Who, who are you speaking to?!' We'd have to say, Ma'am … I'm like, well, that's not consistent. You don't require that all other times except when you're yelling at us, we have to call you, ma'am." (Participant 11, basketball) |
| Identifying abusive and inconsistent HC behaviors | "Our last practice as seniors in our home court, he gets mad, like in the last 10 minutes of practice. And he's like, 'everyone leave, get out of the gym.' And it was like our last practice as seniors, we didn't even say bye. Things like that or just like, you never know what you were gonna get. What you were going to get at any given point." (Participant 13, volleyball) |
| Noticing favoritism and differential treatment across teammates | "They would have more playing time. Coach would spend more time going through film with them. They would get to choose drills that we did. She would just talk to them mostly, mess around with them. When she'd come in the practice, like hug on them and just communicate with them." (Participant 11, basketball) |
| Reporting abuse | "We would report it to our athletic director. But our athletic director did not care … So, we would report, we would tell [another college coach at the university] and try to tell other coaches, tried to talk to the trainers about it. So, I couldn't really do much." (Participant 2, softball) |
| Apathy due to abusive situation | "I was a high performer. I had luckily, at least matched my performance the first year, but I could have been better. I had broke down crying several times … So coping was harder and harder, it got more difficult. In the beginning, you have so much energy and motivation and patience. It didn't matter what [the coach] said, I could laugh it off, but the world just started turning upside down … My energy and my thoughts were like, I don't care anymore." (Participant 10, track/cross country) |

time 'cause you have to keep running until you pass it. And I was just like, oh my gosh, this is day one. I failed the fit test. Like, it's just so scary and overwhelming.

Some participants also had intercollegiate athletic experiences prior to being involved on the identified abusive team, with two student-athletes being transfers and four describing head coach changes that led to eventual abuse.

Furthermore, one transfer experienced emotionally abusive environments twice due to transferring, and one participant experienced three emotionally abusive head coaches due to coaching changes at the university. These prior intercollegiate sport experiences helped shape participant expectations for continued sport involvement. Participant 8 (basketball) described a head coach with whom she had a positive relationship during her first year and explained that her coach only wanted what was best for her:

> I loved it . . . he [the coach] always expected the best out of you. And what I've learned is when coaches are repeatedly on you, in a, in a way that's for improvement, then that's how they know, that's how you can know as a player that they really care.

Both transfers had positive experiences with their head coaches prior to interacting with abusive head coaches, and they both utilized these prior coach-athlete relationships as references when considering and understanding subsequent coaches' behaviors.

### Experiences and actions within the abusive program

After participants entered the abusive environment, they described processes of learning about the program and noticing the abusive situation. In addition, student-athletes described an ongoing need to cope due to distress from this environment.

### Learning the program

Upon entry into the program, participants described a period of learning about program expectations. Student-athletes often described a desire to better understand their coaches' styles and mannerisms and wanted to develop a strong relationship with them. As noted by Participant 13 (volleyball), "[Initially, I] really bought in to [the head coach's] ideas. I tried my best to like advocate for him amongst the team. I tried to do that at the beginning, I respected him." Student-athletes also reported trying to better understand teammate-teammate relationships, coach-teammate relationships, and coach-coach relationships. Specifically, they wanted to better understand who they could trust.

Participants identified a trustworthy support system and were careful about the information they shared with teammates, coaches, and other members of their institutional support staff outside of this identified support system to protect themselves from potential punishments. Furthermore, participants described both formal and informal rules and expectations, with student-athletes being most concerned about learning informal expectations applying to conduct in specific situations. Student-athletes also began to identify small inconsistencies between the implicit and explicit rules communicated by the head coach.

Student-athletes described wanting to know about general coach tendencies as it relates to coach-player communication and performance-based feedback about skills and playing time decisions. Student-athletes observed coaching choices and behaviors in practices and game situations and aimed to look for behavioral patterns across the coaching staff. Furthermore, student-athletes often identified specific coaching behaviors in terms of how these behaviors impacted individual and team performances and outcomes. As observed by Participant 3 (volleyball): "Our head coach would just sit there on the bench during games. And just tell us we're not doing good. Wouldn't really coach us. So, it was more that she made the assistant coaches and the grad assistants do all the coaching."

### Identifying abusive head coaching (HC) behaviors

After learning about program expectations, forming trusting relationships, and noticing patterns in coaching behaviors, student-athletes began to make more specific value judgments about whether specific coaching behaviors were more helpful or harmful to themselves and the team. Although some participants did not classify the behaviors as abusive at the time, all participants eventually identified that the head coach's behaviors were harmful and negative. One participant reflected on not realizing that the coach's behaviors were abusive: "So even in college, I didn't know that that was abusive, but I still knew that you just shouldn't treat somebody like that" (Participant 12, track/cross country). Other student-athletes identified the coach's current behaviors as inconsistent with the coach's previous behaviors during the recruitment process, especially highlighting how the recruitment process is not indicative of the realities of participation in intercollegiate athletics:

> [The head coach was] kind of like a role model figure. She, being a female, and one of the only females in the industry, someone to look up to. So, I think that before recruiting, it was like, she's amazing. I can't wait, like she's such an inspiration, type of thing. And then it switched when I got on campus." (Participant 5, volleyball)

A number of student-athletes also began excusing the coach's abnormal behavior before identifying it was harmful:

> She's introducing [a drill] to us for the first time and she's calling us dumb and stupid, and brainless for not figuring it out. And so, I kind of looked over at the seniors. And they're kind of like, I don't get it either. So, I'm just like, okay, I'll give her another chance. This is the first practice. Maybe she was just uptight. No, like, she's not uptight, she's bipolar. (Participant 11, basketball)

Student-athletes soon began noticing specific coaching behaviors that were clearly harmful to players and were able to identify aggressive and inconsistent coach behaviors. These coaching behaviors led to instability in the coach-athlete relationship due to a general lack of reliability and support. In addition,

participants reported that the head coach was coercive, punitive, and often exhibited retaliatory behaviors when student-athletes were perceived to be disobedient to their demands. One participant described how her head coach regularly used punishments and exhibited aggressive behaviors when student-athletes did not comply with the coach's demands:

> Definitely, physical [punishment]. Yeah, a lot of like running, whatever she could think of at the spot, so exercises, and they were extreme. They were definitely extreme . . . She threw temper tantrums a lot. [When] anything wasn't going her way or perfect. She laid out on us. (Participant 1, lacrosse)

Participants also explained that certain groups of student-athletes received disparate treatment and that the head coach often demonstrated favoritism toward specific players through allocation of playing time, additional privileges, reduced punishments, and more communication. In addition, all student-athletes attempted to report instances of abuse to administration and support staff but found it ineffective as reports were not taken seriously. Only seven student-athletes were aware of institutional investigations of the reported abuse, yet these participants explained that the administration failed to acknowledge that the coach was abusive, and the coach was not reprimanded for their abusive actions, even when student-athletes took legal action against the university:

> We ended up getting a lawyer. And we talked to past players, past coaches. And we ended up getting this document of literally proof of how she was abusing all of us, even the coaches heard something, parents heard something, so clearly, we're not crazy. And the university still was like nope, she didn't do anything wrong. (Participant 3, volleyball)

Participants explained that they felt apathetic due to this situation and that they felt that it was difficult to continue their intercollegiate sport involvement.

### Feeling effects and an ongoing need to cope

All participants reported experiencing distress and mental health impairments due to the abuse, resulting in maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies (see, Table 3). Maladaptive forms of coping included developing apathy toward the situation, self-isolating from teammates and the team environment, avoiding interactions with the coach, ignoring instances of abuse through self-blame and dissociation, and developing a sense of paranoia or distrust toward others. These coping strategies were often associated with burnout in sport and led to increased feelings of loneliness and distress. Adaptive coping strategies included using humor to describe the abuse, utilizing value-based coping strategies and reflections (i.e., utilizing religion, spirituality, or other values to cope), and finding a trusted and safe support system to discuss their experiences. Some student-athletes also formed bonds with people outside

**Table 3.** Coping strategies of intercollegiate athletes.

| Maladaptive coping strategies | |
|---|---|
| Apathy toward the situation | "I just felt that no one really wanted to be there. I could just see it on people's faces. No one was excited." (Participant 11, basketball) |
| Self-isolating | "I wasn't seeing a therapist at the time. I didn't have any friends outside of my team. And so, I really just felt alone and isolated." (Participant 12, track/cross country) |
| Avoiding interactions with the coach | "I didn't even want to go near her. [The coaches] had their offices in the same building where they had the trainer. If I would walk in to go see the trainer, and I would hear her voice I would turn away." (Participant 2, softball) |
| Ignoring instances of abuse through self-blame and dissociation | "We're so young, we always think it's us . . . And what could I have done differently, or better?" (Participant 7, basketball) |
| Developing a sense of paranoia or distrust toward others | " . . . it made me think, did our sports psychiatrist go to our coach? Is [coach] trying to get them to tell him everything that we're saying?" (Participant 8, soccer) |
| **Adaptive coping strategies** | |
| Humor | "I'd say more of like, something that I thought was like funny. I'd be like, oh my gosh, she called me this today, and I don't even know how to react, and I'd be laughing on the phone." (Participant 4, lacrosse) |
| Value-based coping | "The grace of God really got me through this. Because I used to struggle with depression, but for some reason, I was all right." (Participant 7, basketball) |
| Finding a safe and trusted support system | "I was heavily involved in the church. So, I talked with some other members of the church about everything. I [also] had a professor who was a sport psychology professor, who I spoke at length with about everything that was going on, and he kind of helped me to make the decision about walking away from the sport." (Participant 6, soccer) |

the immediate athlete support staff, including professors, members of the local community, and other students. Although these strategies often mitigated some of the student-athletes' negative feelings, all participants still reported experiencing mental health impairments due to continued exposure to abuse.

### *After the abuse*

All participants explained that the only way that they stopped the abuse was through retiring or transferring away from the abusive head coach. After retiring or transferring, participants described a continued need to engage in coping strategies to promote recovery from this traumatic experience. All participants described a period of introspection, reflection, and story-making to better understand their own experiences of abuse, highlighting how talking about these experiences helped them to heal: "I say trauma [referring to her experiences] because it really was, for me personally. When you posted this opportunity to talk about it, it's definitely one of the steps in my healing process" (Participant 1, lacrosse).

Within this process, student-athletes aimed to make sense of their experiences by recollecting their experiences and re-categorizing the coach's harmful behaviors as abusive:

So, when I look back at my time in college, one of the big things for me, that I still try to wrap my head around is the fact that I was abused for a really good amount of the time that I was in college. If I wasn't abused, I was witnessing abuse. (Participant 12, track/cross country)

Participants also identified both positive and negative outcomes associated with their overall college or university experiences (see, Table 4). Positive outcomes included developing a more caring coaching and life philosophy, the formation of lifelong friendships, and a desire to serve as an advocate for other student-athletes. Negative outcomes included the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and PTSD-like symptoms, chronic mental health impairments, a need for more long-term counseling, relationship impairments, and burnout from sport. Although the severity of abuse varied across individuals, all participants explained that these traumatic experiences had long-lasting implications on their personal lives.

**Table 4.** Reported outcomes of experiencing emotional abuse in intercollegiate athletics.

| Positive Outcomes | |
| --- | --- |
| Developing a more caring coaching and life philosophy | "I know that I won't be like that as a future employer or mother, or spouse." (Participant 14, soccer) |
| The formation of lifelong friendships | "We still are best friends to this day . . . You know, I asked myself, why didn't you just transfer but I met my bestest friends and I couldn't let them go through something like that alone." (Participant 3, volleyball) |
| A desire to serve as an advocate for other athletes | "In the long run, I think I have a lot more empathy toward athletes. Because I do realize that this is how people actually treat their players. And at my high school, they used to talk about our head coach of football, he was a jerk, he used to knock people around and stuff like that. And I was like, man, that sucks. But now having like, I feel the impact of what it could be having a coach that is like that. I'm like, man, I should have went up to Mr. Head Coach and said, You need to stop! (Participant 8, soccer) |
| Negative Outcomes | |
| The development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and PTSD-like symptoms | "I was having PTSD symptoms from sport, and I couldn't figure out why. I found it very triggering to think about it, I was having nightmares, insomnia, dissociative episodes." (Participant 12, track/cross country) |
| Chronic mental health impairments | "I would say, as a result, I had my own mental health. You know, I look back and I definitely experienced anxiety." (Participant 1, lacrosse) |
| A need for more long-term counseling | "It sucks cause I'm still on anxiety medicine, I've tried to go off, and it's miserable going off and then I've cried to my counselor because I felt like a failure for going back on it." (Participant 9, soccer) |
| Relationship impairments | "And I don't really trust a lot of people in power now, like bosses . . . Because, you never know, if they're given authority, they may take it too far." (Participant 11, basketball) |
| Burnout from sport | "After my experience, I have not even done [softball]. I'm like, I don't want to do anything. I mean, it's at the point where I don't even know if I want like my kids to go that hard for sports. Because of my experience." (Participant 2, softball) |

## Discussion

The final product of the exploratory research was a three-stage grounded theory explaining how former student-athletes interpret their experiences of emotional abuse over time. Although participants shared a range of diverse sport experiences prior to entry into intercollegiate athletics and these preceding sport experiences helped shape expectations for college, each reported similar stages of recognition and coping across their careers. The former student-athletes described an initial period of learning about program expectations, which included observing coaching behaviors, learning staff and team dynamics, identifying trustworthy individuals to rely on, identifying implicit and explicit rules, and learning about their head coach's communication styles and patterns. Although participants varied in how they initially categorized their respective head coaches' behaviors, all eventually recognized that the behaviors were negative and harmful during their time as members of the team. This contrasts with previous work that found student-athletes often perceive abusive coaching practices to be well-intentioned and necessary for elite performance (Stirling & Kerr, 2014).

Participants also relied on various adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies while participating in sport and engaged in self-reflection processes during career transitions in an effort to better understand coaches' abuse and as a means to cope with adverse and traumatic athletic and personal experiences. Only two participants reported having utilized counseling services while in college, raising questions about how intercollegiate student-athletes decide if and when to utilize counseling resources provided by their athletic departments or institutions. Previous research suggests that student-athletes utilize coping mechanisms during and after experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices, including using humor, dissociation, and avoidance in the moment, relying on support systems or leaving sport to cope over time, and engaging in meaning making processes in retirement (Kavanagh et al., 2017). The former student-athletes who took part in the present research explained that the only way they were able to end the abuse was to exit the athletic program via retirement or by transferring, mirroring prior research examining the athletes' experience of emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2014).

Participants were especially sensitive to the volatility within the emotional climate of their respective intercollegiate programs. Specifically, student-athletes reported expressing confusion about head coaches' expectations due to inconsistent, aggressive, and unstable coaching behaviors. The former student-athletes also reported that their coaches were often controlling of their behaviors, and they ultimately became fearful of being punished since their head coaches exhibited retaliatory and punitive behaviors when they were perceived to be disobedient to coaches' demands. It became evident from

examining participant experiences that they also perceived differential treatment across teammates and that they felt the need to manage changing expectations on the part of the coach. Ultimately, this capricious and abusive environment created an unwelcoming team climate that was detrimental to their own and their teammates' wellbeing and development.

Prior research has found that closeness in the coach-athlete relationship, authority of the coach, perceived importance of the coach's expertise and success in relation to the student-athlete, and the coach's ability to control access to student-athletes were key factors in the coach-athlete relationship (McHenry et al., 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). The present study adds to this understanding by highlighting how former intercollegiate student-athletes assess key factors in the coach-athlete relationship *in tandem with* coach behavior in order to identify whether or not specific coaching practices are abusive. All participants in the present study believed that their head coach's behaviors were harmful and inappropriate, regardless of the coach's level of expertise, successes, or legitimacy of authority. Additionally, all participants reported that, regardless of the amount of time spent with the head coach, they did not feel supported in the coach-athlete relationship. Given that participants varied in when they began identifying their coach's behaviors as abusive (rather than harmful, dysfunctional, or inappropriate), investigations into emotionally abusive coaching practices should include a large variety of current and former student-athletes in order to holistically assess the coach's abusive behaviors. Furthermore, many of the former student-athletes also described how the inaction of athletic administrators and continued abuse from the coach led to distress and mental health impairments while participating in their sport, and this lack of oversight and protection by administration led to a process of normalization and acceptance of the abuse across the teams. Administrators should reconsider what mechanisms they utilize in examining coaching effectiveness and should adopt appropriate policies and procedures that prevent abuse to ensure the safety and wellbeing of student-athletes. Such mechanisms could include (a) regular mental health screenings and treatment for athletes that are conducted outside of the athletic department, (b) strong written policies outlining what coaching policies and practices are unacceptable, and (c) contract provisions that allow for termination in the case of athlete maltreatment of any kind.

Certainly, a novel finding from this study includes the idea that personal preferences, prior experiences, relationship with the coach, and sporting contexts influenced how former student-athletes identified coaching behaviors as acceptable or abusive. In reflecting on their sport experiences, student-athletes in the present study suggested that certain coaching behaviors are not always indicative of emotional abuse. Participants explained that their own personal preferences toward specific coaching styles and the supportive behaviors offered by the coach in the coach-athlete relationship were important factors

in determining whether or not these coaching practices were acceptable. In addition, the former student-athletes explained that they often expected certain coaching behaviors, including yelling at student-athletes in game and practice settings and occasionally utilizing aggressive coaching strategies, from elite sport coaches to motivate them and help them succeed. Participants explained that these coaching strategies were acceptable because they were consistent and utilized in conjunction with appropriate performance-based feedback and supportive coaching behaviors. Participants, therefore, seemed able to distinguish between "tough but fair" coaching practices and harmful, abusive behaviors that lacked a clear connection with performance improvement. Thus, it appears that understanding the psychosocial climate established by a coach may be especially important in identifying emotionally abusive coaching practices.

The salience of perceived psychosocial climate in helping student-athletes determine whether or not certain coaching behaviors are acceptable highlights why it is important for researchers to consider utilizing a systems approach when examining abusive coaching behaviors. Those working directly with intercollegiate athletes, such as coaches and trainers, should also consider the personal factors and preferences of each elite athlete, should work on establishing an appropriate and supportive relationship with the athlete, should set consistent expectations for coach and athlete behaviors, and should understand what behaviors are deemed appropriate by athletes in a given sporting context in order to more effectively coach elite athletes.

Despite the many contributions made by this study, results should be interpreted in light of a few important (de)limitations. While steps were taken to limit author biases through reflexivity, memoing, and utilizing critical friendship (Crabtree & Miller, 2022; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011), biases were still present in guiding the collection and interpretation of study data. The researchers recognize that they were necessarily biased toward believing the stories shared by student-athletes and did not seek to interrogate the experiences of the coaches, teammates, or institutional representatives. In addition, all participants were former female intercollegiate student-athletes. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that females are most often the victims of emotional abuse in intercollegiate athletics settings, and there is merit in exploring the female experience of emotional abuse and the resultant trauma, future research should also be designed to consider the perspectives of former male student-athletes who have experienced emotionally abusive coaching behavior to allow researchers to (dis)aggregate unique experiences of emotional abuse that may be shaped by gendered power dynamics. Although the present study highlighted former student-athletes' experiences of emotional abuse in intercollegiate settings, future research could be designed in a broader way to consider athletes' experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices in other competitive sport contexts in the United States. Examining abusive

coaching practices within these contexts would also allow broader systems-level examination of the relationship across the athlete, the psychosocial climate, and abusive versus "tough, but fair" coaching behaviors and. In line with Côté and colleagues' developmental model of sport participation (see, Côté et al., 2009; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014), it would also highlight abusive coaching practices across development as well as the potential structural limitations that facilitate abuse in high-performance sport settings.

Additionally, the present research considers the experiences of student-athletes prior to changes in NCAA rules concerning student-athlete compensation and the transfer portal. Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) compensation rules and transfer rules that allow student-athletes to more readily enter the transfer portal without penalty may give NCAA student-athletes more agency to leave programs and more freedom to accept compensation as intercollegiate student-athletes. It will be especially important to consider how NIL may impact the amount of control and power that coaches and institutions have over student-athletes given the prior constraints placed on them for the sake of amateurism. Future research should be designed to consider how these changes impact student-athletes to better understand the long-term implications of these policies on their agency and well-being.

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## Disclosure statement

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