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9   **Female Athletes' Perceptions of Teammate Conflict in Sport:**

10   **Implications for Sport Psychology Consultants**

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18   psychology-consultants

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21								**Abstract**

22	The purpose of this study was to examine female varsity athletes' perceptions of

23	teammate conflict. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 female varsity

24	athletes (*M* age = 21.17 years) from four sport teams. Analysis revealed that conflict was

25	a prevalent feature of playing on their teams. Conflict relating to performance and

26	relationships were identified. Strategies athletes thought may help create conditions for

27	managing conflict were to (a) engage in team building early in the season, (b) address

28	conflict early, (c) engage mediators in the resolution of conflict, and (d) hold structured

29	(rather than unstructured) team meetings. It also seemed that athletes required personal

30	conflict resolution skills. These findings are compared to previous research and offered as

31	implications for professional practice.

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34   **Female Athletes' Perceptions of Teammate Conflict in Sport:**

35   **Implications for Sport Psychology Consultants**

36   Sport psychology researchers and practitioners have devoted a great deal of

37   attention to understanding ways in which to optimize team functioning and performance.

38   Numerous approaches to team building have been reported, including (but not limited to)

39   promoting communication (Crace & Hardy, 1997; Yukelson, 1997), personal disclosure

40   interventions (Dunn & Holt, 2004; Pain & Harwood, 2009), and team goal setting

41   (Senecal, Loughhead, & Bloom, 2008). Interventions designed to enhance task and social

42   cohesion have also been presented (Spink, 2011). In addition to promoting team building,

43   sport psychology consultants (SPCs) may also be required to improve team functioning

44   by helping to resolve *conflict* between teammates (Hardy & Crace, 1997).

45   Conflict between teammates can undermine team cohesion and performance

46   (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). For example, Holt and Sparkes (2001) found numerous

47   sources of conflict between teammates on a collegiate (male) soccer team, including

48   disputes about playing roles, accusations of selfishness, and poor communication, all of

49   which appeared to be negatively associated with cohesion and performance. Conflict has

50   also been identified as a feature of friendships (Weiss, Smith, & Theeboom, 1996; Weiss

51   & Smith, 1999) and peer motivational climate (Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005; Vazou,

52   Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2005) in youth sport. Similarly, Holt, Black, Tamminen, and Fox

53   (2008) found that conflict was a prevailing feature of involvement on (female) adolescent

54   soccer teams. Results from this season-long qualitative study with two teams showed that

55   some players decided to resolve their differences for the good of the team. Others formed

56   small groups of friends on the team to deal with conflict, while some tended to 'ignore'

57   or move away from conflict. Combined, the findings from these studies indicate that

58   conflict is a relevant issue that influences peer/teammate interactions in various sport

59   settings.

60   Given the potential negative consequences of conflict for team cohesion and

61   performance (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Holt & Sparkes, 2001), Weinberg and Gould

62   (2011) suggested that SPCs working with teams should "resolve conflict immediately"

63   (p. 199). In fact, one of the primary reasons we conducted this study arose from the lead

64   author's experiences of working with university sport teams in the past. He had

65   encountered some conflict and suspected other conflict occurred without specifically

66   being brought to his attention. Unfortunately, the types of teammate conflict that occur

67   and the ways in which conflict can be resolved have not been extensively documented in

68   the sport psychology literature. With little previous research to guide his actions, the lead

69   author decided to conduct the current study to learn more about conflict in university-

70   level sport in order to help guide future work. Hence, the current study addressed these

71   issues described above with a view to providing some applied implications for SPCs.

72   Conflict involves disputes or disagreements between two or more people (Rubin

73   Bukowski, & Parker, 2006) and is "a process in which one party perceives that its

74   interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party" (Wall & Callister,

75   1995, p. 517). Hence, the basic source of conflict lies in one party's needs being opposed

76   by another party's needs and one party being deprived or frustrated by the other party

77   (Pruitt, 2006). Although there are competing definitions and nomenclature, there are

78   generally two types of conflict. One is achievement/content/performance conflict

79   ('performance conflict') that refers to issues relating to the execution of a particular task.

80   The other type is relational ('relationship conflict') and refers to emotional or

81   interpersonal issues (LaVoi, 2007; Rahim, 2002). Both types of conflict have been shown

82   to have negative associations with team performance if not addressed (Dreu & Weingart,

83   2003). However, moderate levels of performance conflict (e.g., when individuals disagree

84   about how to solve an issue) may ultimately have a positive influence on performance if

85   it stimulates discussion and problem-solving among team members (Jehn, Northcraft, &

86   Neale, 1999). For example, players may disagree about the extent to which teammates

87   were adhering to a fitness training program (i.e., a performance task). The disagreement

88   may arise due to the timing of the fitness sessions (e.g., early morning). If this

89   disagreement stimulated discussion and problem-solving between teammates it could

90   lead to improvements in the training schedule and ultimately increase adherence to the

91   fitness program. In this case a performance conflict could have positive consequences for

92   the team.

93   Organizational psychology research has shown that relationship conflict generally

94   appears to be more destructive than performance conflict (see Schulz-Hardt, Jochims, &

95   Frey, 2002). Relationship conflict often produces tension and antagonism that distract

96   team members from performing the task. Emotional resources are used for managing and

97   reducing interpersonal friction rather than working to resolve the problem (Teakleab,

98   Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009). When relationship conflict occurs people often resist

99   alternatives, solutions, and options to resolve the conflict (Gilley, Lane Morris, Waite,

100   Coates, & Veliquette, 2010). Furthermore, *unresolved* conflict has a destructive and

101   negative impact on team performance (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2002). Conflict resolution

102   competencies are therefore absolutely critical to the effectiveness of teams (Gilley et al.,

103   2010). Some of these concepts from organizational psychology were used to inform the

104   latter phases of the analysis conducted in the current study.

105   The notions of performance and relationship conflict have some similarities with

106   the ways in which cohesion has been studied in sport teams. Cohesion can be

107   conceptualized in terms of perceptions of group integration and individual attractions to

108   the group based on task and social aspects of group involvement (Carron, Colman,

109   Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002). Performance conflict may be a feature that relates to (i.e.,

110   undermines) task cohesion. Relationship conflict appears to be a feature of social

111   cohesion, in that measures of individual attraction to the group, reaction to conflict, and

112   tolerance of differences have been used assess social cohesion (Carron et al., 2002).

113   Thus, sport psychology research in the area of cohesion, while not directly addressing

114   teammate conflict, further suggests that conflict is an important and relevant issue to

115   examine.

116   In summary, it has been recommended that SPCs deal with teammate conflict

117   (Weinberg & Gould, 2011) and shown that conflict occurs on collegiate and youth sport

118   teams (Holt & Sparkes, 2001; Holt et al., 2008), but little is known about the prevalence

119   of conflict, type of conflict, and ways to manage conflict in sport teams. An initial step to

120   redress these gaps in the sport psychology literature is to examine athletes' perceptions of

121   conflict. We studied team sport (rather than individual sport) because on teams there is a

122   high reliance on teammates for performance success, including issues such as

123   communication and coordination. Female athletes were sampled because conflict may be

124   a particularly salient feature of participation on female sport teams (Carron et al., 2002;

125   Holt et al., 2008). University (i.e., varsity) athletes were selected in part because the idea

126   for this study came from the authors' experiences of working in varsity sport, plus the

127   fact we wanted to recruit from multiple teams of similar levels of performance for the

128   purposes of comparison (and we had access to the teams in question). Therefore, the

129   purpose of this exploratory study was to examine female varsity athletes' perceptions of

130   teammate conflict. The following research questions were addressed: (1) What are some

131   of the features of teammate conflict in varsity sports? (2) What strategies may be useful

132   in attempting to manage teammate conflict?

133   **METHOD**

134   **Participants and Recruitment**

135   Following Institutional Research Ethics Board approval the lead researcher

136   obtained approval from the Athletics Department at a large Canadian university to

137   approach coaches of female teams to ask for permission to contact their athletes. Coaches

138   were e-mailed and they provided permission to approach their athletes and identified

139   individuals who met the sampling criteria (see below). Athletes were contacted via e-mail

140   and asked to participate in the study. In this e-mail it was explained that participation was

141   voluntary and not a condition of their involvement on their teams. Furthermore, it was

142   emphasized that their coaches would not be made aware of who agreed to participate in

143   the study, and issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and use of data were explained.

144   Interested participants replied to the e-mail and an interview was scheduled.

145   A purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2002) was used, which means specific

146   sampling criteria were established *a priori* in order to recruit participants who could

147   provide the most insightful responses to the research questions. The first criterion was to

148   recruit female athletes. Second, athletes from the sports of ice hockey, volleyball, field

149   hockey, and basketball were recruited because these teams were among the most

150   successful in the country. We recruited successful teams because (we assumed) they may

151   have been able to deal with conflicts in the past and thus obtaining the views of the

152   athletes from these teams may have been useful in providing some implications for

153   practice. The success of the teams was reflected by the fact that in the previous five years

154   they had won a combined total of six Canada West (i.e., regional/zonal) conference titles

155   and 12 Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) national championship medals (5 gold, 4

156   silver, 3 bronze).

157   The third sampling criterion was to recruit players with two, three, or four years of

158   playing experience. This criterion was applied because these more senior athletes were

159   likely to have experienced numerous types of conflict at different stages of their

160   university career and may also have been involved in trying to resolve such conflict (cf.

161   Weinberg & Gould, 2011). We did not recruit athletes with only one year of experience

162   because in the CIS system players have five years of eligibility (and college transfers and

163   graduate students are also permitted to compete). As such, it is rare that first year players

164   are extensively involved in a team – most (with some exceptions of course) tend to be

165   'red shirts' (i.e., members of the squad but not the competitive team) and those who

166   actually make the 'first team' usually see limited playing time. Hence, athletes with more

167   seniority were sampled because they would have more experiences to draw on (having

168   been on the team for several years) and therefore be able to provide insightful responses

169   that could be used to answer the research questions (cf. Patton, 2002).

170   In total, 19 female athletes (M age 21.17 years, SD = .92) participated in this study.

171   They were from the sports of ice hockey ($n = 7$), volleyball ($n = 6$), field hockey ($n = 4$),

172   and basketball ($n = 2$). They had completed two ($n = 6$), three ($n = 6$), and four ($n = 7$)

173   years of playing on the team. All athletes provided written informed consent.

174   **Data Collection**

175   Each athlete participated in one semi-structured individual interview, which lasted

176   approximately 50-60 minutes. Interviews were completed in a private office on the

177   university campus by one experienced and one less experienced interviewer. The lead

178   author did not conduct any interviews because he was a professor at the university in

179   question and had a close relationship with the coaches, which may have negatively

180   influenced how forthcoming the athletes would be during their interviews. The

181   experienced interviewer had worked with one of the teams as a sport psychology

182   consultant but she did not conduct interviews with members of the team with which she

183   worked – hence the need for the second interviewer (who completed six interviews).

184   These two interviewers worked together, under the supervision of the lead researcher

185   (who did not work directly with any of the teams in this study), to ensure a rigorous

186   approach to interviewer training and interview guide development.

187   The less experienced interviewer's training was extensive. Prior to the start of the

188   study he worked with the lead author for 6 weeks to develop a background understanding

189   of qualitative research and interviewing. This involved a weekly meeting, readings about

190   interviewing techniques, and discussion of these readings. Two mock interviews were

191   then completed. First, the less experienced interviewer interviewed the experienced

192   interviewer (using the preliminary version of the interview guide). Then the experienced

193   interviewer interviewed the less experienced interviewer. Audio files from both

194   interviews were reviewed and discussed to help refine the interviewer's skills,

195   particularly in terms of when to probe for further information to obtain concrete accounts

196   of specific events that had occurred. A debriefing protocol was also put in place. The two

197   interviewers debriefed after every interview to discuss what went well and if any areas

198   could be improved (particularly in terms of using probes to elicit concrete accounts). The

199   second interviewer also had a weekly one-on-one meeting with the lead author to discuss

200   the study. All three members of the research team also met on a weekly basis to further

201   review and discuss the data collection (and later, analysis). This protocol prepared the

202   less experienced interviewer and ensured a level of consistency between the manner in

203   which the interviews conducted by both interviewers. That is, while the interviews were

204   not standardized (because they were semi-structured), both interviewers were 'on the

205   same page' in terms of emerging issues they should probe and in the general manner the

206   interviews should be carried out.

207   Given that lack of previous research into conflict on competitive adult teams, the

208   initial version of the interview guide was created based on questions used in previous

209   qualitative studies of teammate conflict in youth sport psychology (i.e., Holt et al., 2008;

210   Weiss et al., 2006) and suggestions for future team conflict research in organizational

211   psychology (Deutsch, 2006). It was refined following the training protocol and mock

212   interviews described above. The interview guide was refined following the training

213   protocol and mock/pilot interviews. In particular, the three pilot interviews with female

214   tennis players (conducted by the less experienced interviewer) helped establish the

215   appropriateness of the interview guide. Data from these interviews were not included in

216   the study but were useful for helping to clarify some of the key issues to examine and

217   ways in which to phrase certain questions. We evaluated the appropriateness of the

218   structure of the interview and some of the specific questions asked. In addition to minor

219   wording/phrasing issues, two main improvements were made to the guide. First, a longer

220   introductory section was added. Second, the need to provide 'our' definition of teammate

221   conflict was identified as an issue to make clearer in the interview guide.

222   Prior to each interview the participants were reminded of the purpose of the study,

223   that there were no right or wrong answers, that we were interested in their own

224   experiences and opinions, their participation was voluntary, and their responses would

225   remain confidential. The interview guide was divided into four sections: ice-breakers,

226   transition questions, main questions, and concluding questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

227   After asking the participants to provide demographic information, the ice-breaker

228   questions were designed to give us a basic understanding of the individual and their

229   team's dynamics and to help the participant feel at ease in the interview situation. These

230   questions were posed in a very conversational manner and included asking participants to

231   describe the team dynamics, atmosphere, and their general role on the team. Transition

232   questions focused on types of conflict. First, participants were asked, "How would you

233   define conflict?" Then participants were given our broad definition of conflict (i.e.,

234   disputes or disagreements between two or more teammates: cf. Rubin et al., 2006; Wall

235   & Callister, 1995) to ensure interviewer and interviewee were talking about conflict

236   between teammates (rather than, for example, with coaches). Participants were then asked

237   to describe conflict they had experienced consistent with our definition. The interviewers

238   did not direct the interviewees to make any distinction between performance and

239   relationship conflict – these concepts were applied during the latter stages of data

240   analysis. The main questions focused on conflict management/attempts at resolution (e.g.,

241   How were you involved in managing any of the conflict? How did you feel about the

242   conflict? What were the consequences? If the conflict was resolved, how did resolution

243   take place? What do you think is the most effective means of conflict resolution on your

244   team? What types of things could you do to help prevent conflict?). For concluding

245   questions participants were asked to further reflect and recap on the main types and

246   sources of conflict, means of resolution, recommendations for managing conflict, and if

247   they had anything else to add. Throughout the interviews participants were asked to

248   provide concrete examples and discuss specific events that had occurred during their

249   tenure on the team. The guide is available from the lead author. Participants received a

250    $25 gift certificate for a grocery store as a token of appreciation for their involvement

251   upon completion of the interview.

252   **Data Analysis**

253   Audio files were transcribed verbatim, which produced 667 pages of typed data.

254   Analysis followed the steps of content analysis (as outlined by Maykut & Morehouse,

255   1994) and was led/coordinated by the first author in conjunction with the two other

256   members of the research team (i.e., the two interviewers). All transcripts were coded to

257   ensure confidentiality (and pseudonyms were assigned). Individual meaning units were

258   first identified using 'line-by-line' inductive analysis rather than imposing a framework

259   on the data. That is, salient units of meaning were identified. The term line-by-line

260   analysis is a little misleading because although researchers review every line of a

261   transcript, meaning units identified may be represented by a phrase, sentence, or

262   paragraph. Similar meaning units were coded together as themes. 'Rules of inclusion' (or

263   'essence phases') were written for each theme. These are propositional statements that

264   describe the meaning of the provisional theme and the meaning units (i.e., data) housed in

265   that theme. Similar themes were grouped together as categories, which were again

266   assigned rules of inclusion to convey the meaning of the themes they represented. This

267   process led to the provisional long list of themes being reduced to broader categories. For

268   example, themes identified in relation to the roles of captains/senior players, SPCs, and

269   coaches mediating conflict were grouped into the category of 'mediation.' Throughout

270   the analytic process each meaning unit, each theme, and each category was assessed

271   using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to ensure that the

272   meaning units in each theme and the themes in each category were distinct and

273   appropriately categorized. That is, meaning units, themes, and categories were constantly

274   compared with each other and a table describing the connections between the

275   themes/categories was created (Table 1). Emerging findings were discussed via weekly

276   meetings among all three members of the research team.

277   Writing represents the final stages of qualitative analysis (Richardson, 1994). A

278   written narrative was initially drafted, reviewed, and re-drafted several times. To advance

279   beyond the initial exploratory aspects of the study attempts were then made to link the

280   findings (more deductively) to relevant previous research in sport and organizational

281   psychology in terms of the categorizing the types of conflict (i.e., performance and

282   relationship). Categories presented refer to the prevalence of conflict, types of conflict

283   (performance and relationship) and creating conditions for conflict resolution. A final

284   issue, that athletes lacked conflict resolution skills, was also identified. This emerged as a

285   consequence of interrogating the findings for missing links in the data in terms of what

286 athletes said and 'did not say' regarding how they personally dealt with conflict (cf.

287 Thorne, 2008).

Methodological Rigor and Validity

289 We focused on the use of self-correcting verification strategies during the process

290 of the research itself (see Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) in addition to

291 'post-hoc' verification. Specifically, given the novel aspects of the research and the lack

292 of previous research in this area, extensive attention was given to the creation and

293 refinement of the interview guides and preparation of the interviewers. Techniques

294 deployed involved interviewer training, pilot testing the interview guide, and regular

295 debriefing during the course of the study in order to self-correct any problems. The

296 analysis was reviewed and assessed by all members of the research team (Maykut &

297 Morehouse, 1994).

298 In addition to these measures taken during the course of the study, all participants

299 were e-mailed a one-page summary of the results and asked to comment if it was an

300 accurate reflection of your experiences and/or if there was anything they thought was

301 incorrect. Fourteen athletes responded and they were overwhelmingly positive in their

302 support for the manner in which the results had been presented. The made comments

303 such as "I find it to be consistent with my experiences and an accurate representation of

304 my responses." "Ya that sounds perfect and reflects our discussion quite accurately.

305 Everything that you have printed I have had an experience with." "I agree with the

306 different types of conflict, as well as that there are different means to mediate different

307 issues that may arise as such. Conflicting relationships between players, especially with

308   the significant amounts of time spent together through my experience are the most

309   difficult to deal with." Hence, member-checking supported the analysis.

310   Finally, the results were also presented at a meeting of professors, coaches, and

311   coaching/sport psychology undergraduate and graduate students for further scrutiny. The

312   purpose of this presentation was not to revisit the analysis, but rather to help ensure that

313   findings were logical, coherent, compelling, and that the applied implications were

314   relevant and made practical sense (cf. Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The findings

315   appeared to be compelling to the audience, and coaches in particular, because several

316   requested follow-up meetings and sought ways to incorporate conflict management

317   strategies into their coaching practice.

318   **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

319   **Prevalence of Conflict**

320   Writing in sport psychology, LaVoi (2007) claimed that, "conflict is an inevitable

321   part of life and relationships" (p. 34). Although this claim has not been empirically

322   documented in the sport psychology literature, we found evidence that conflict was a

323   regular occurrence and a normal feature of being involved on all the teams. Participants

324   made comments such as "There's always people that don't get along, but then I think

325   that's with every team" (P3), "I guess it just sucks but it's [conflict] always gonna

326   happen" (P13), "You're never gonna be able to prevent having any conflict" (P14), and "I

327   don't think you'll ever have a season without conflict" (P1).

328   Several participants also thought conflict was particularly salient among female

329   teams. P14 suggested that, "during girls' sports it's like there's always gonna be conflict

330   because people's emotions get involved" and similarly P18 said "…especially girls I

331   think. Girls are way worse than boys…. Girls specifically do crave it [conflict]. There are

332   girls on my team that will go looking for trouble sometimes." These findings reflect

333   studies that have shown conflict is a more prevalent feature of females' friendships in

334   sport than males (Weiss et al., 1996) and a regular part of involvement on female

335   (adolescent) teams (Holt et al., 2008). Furthermore, based on a review of team cohesion

336   research in sport, Carron et al. (2002) suggested, "from a performance perspective, it

337   would seem especially important for coaches and applied sport psychologists to strive to

338   maintain high cohesiveness and prevent team conflict in female teams" (p. 183). The

339   current findings support this perspective.

340   **Performance Conflict**

341   Ten athletes reported issues that were coded in the theme of performance conflict.

342   Performance conflict was coded as issues that centered around *practice and competition*

343   *concerns* (i.e., related to the task) and *playing time* (see Table 1). For example, P12

344   explained that:

345   Everyone on the team's really competitive so it's usually more like performance

346   conflicts that start to come out. [That] would be more of what happens on our

347   team. Like within practices, if people are getting frustrated with people during the

348   practice time, that's usually when they'll start bitching about that… I guess yeah

349   talking about the performance, people's performance.

350   Additionally, some performance conflict arose from concerns about playing time. For

351   example, P16 said:

352   There was some [conflict] where people, there were just like less skilled players

353   and more skilled players that were, in regards to ice time and stuff like that.

354   People would get frustrated and just, they'd fumble the puck or cause turnovers.

355   Our analysis suggested that performance conflicts were not necessarily extremely

356   dysfunctional. In fact, performance conflict could be functional. The following quote

357   from P13 captured this perspective. She said:

358   A lot of the [performance] conflict isn't necessarily a bad thing… I think a lot of

359   that conflict ends up coming from the will to win… I don't think that's necessarily

360   a bad conflict or a bad thing to come up…. I think for me that's a good thing

361   because otherwise I'd be on a complacent team and that's not where I want to be…

362   These findings tend to support the idea that conflict relating to performance can have

363   beneficial performance effects under certain circumstances (Jehn et al., 1999).

364   **Relationship Conflict**

365   Fourteen athletes reported issues that were coded as relationship conflicts.

366   Relationship conflict referred to *interpersonal disputes/disagreements* between two or

367   more teammates that did not directly relate to a performance issue on the court/field/ice

368   as well as *conflicting personalities* (see Table 1). We categorized what the athletes

369   referred to as disputes/disagreements and conflicting personalities conflict under the

370   umbrella category of 'relationship conflict,' which captured the fact that the issues raised

371   all reflected interpersonal relationship issues. Athletes reported that relationship conflict

372   was more dysfunctional than performance conflict. P5 said:

373   I think performance based conflicts are more, in terms of, they're the easiest thing

374   to resolve. Um, *personal conflicts are very hard to resolve* [emphasis added]…

375   [Performance conflicts are] just you as an athlete, it's not you as a person. When

376   you're dealing with people as a person… their flaws are being exposed and

377   people don't like their flaws being exposed. It's very uncomfortable and it's very

378   hard to do it in a way that you're not criticizing them as a person.

379   Similarly, P17 reported that:

380   Um, I'd say less destructive would be the things [that happen] on the court [i.e.,

381   performance conflict], when things happen, arguments happen, like in the heat of

382   the moment, because obviously everyone knows it's in the heat of the moment of

383   the game, and those are the things that are usually pretty easy to like get over after

384   and just talk about them. And *I guess more destructive would be I guess more*

385   *personal things* [emphasis added]. Like if someone was annoyed with like

386   someone just in general or something they were doing I guess outside of

387   volleyball, and they just didn't really get along. I guess that could be brought like

388   onto the court and kind of affect team play.

389   Our findings and previous research in organizational psychology (Schulz-Hardt et al.,

390   2002; Teakleab et al., 2009) therefore suggest that relationship conflict may be

391   particularly destructive and dysfunctional.

392   **Creating Conditions for Conflict Resolution**

393   There was not a 'one size fits all' type solution for dealing with conflict. As P5

394   remarked, "I don't think there's really any sort of map in conflict resolution because it's

395   individual based." This view that there is neither a single model of conflict management

396   nor a singular way to approach conflict in particular settings is entirely consistent with

397   the organizational psychology literature (Deutsch, 2006). Retaining this caveat in mind,

398   the subsequent sections are presented as different ways in which athletes thought conflict

399   was and could be addressed in their teams.

400   **Team building early in season**. Fourteen athletes identified that engaging in

401   team building early in the season, while not preventing conflict, could build trust and

402   open channels of communication to help them more effectively resolve conflict that may

403   arise. For example, P8 said that a helpful activity her coach ran during the pre-season was

404   when they had:

405   A huge session of our training camp dedicated to goal setting and to

406   expectations… We have goals to help us achieve them and then we have methods

407   to help us achieve our goals. I believe that a lot of what we do in there, especially

408   in the expectations of our players really sets the bar for you know, I am

409   responsible for myself, I am responsible for my play and I am responsible for

410   bringing the team up with me. And so I think that all those things together

411   especially the last one, sort of connects you to the team… Just having everybody

412   on the exact same page I believe is where it really starts.

413   Similarly, when asked what she would do to address conflict on her team, P11

414   said:

415   I would probably just kind of set up maybe some team values or team norms, um

416   what is expected of the player and what's expected of the coaches, so that, that

417   those things are known, so it's easier for people to know what they have to do…

418   Keeping communication open 'cause I feel like sometimes if there's not good

419   communication, then that can really make it hard to solve conflict… I think just

420   communicating and team bonding or team kind of exercises help.

421   Sport psychology research has shown that team building exercises can be valuable

422   in helping to establish social norms around the expected behaviors and interactions

423   among teammates (Munroe, Estabrooks, Dennis, & Carron, 1999). Furthermore,

424   establishing group communication processes early in the season may enhance the

425   effectiveness of SPCs' work during latter phases of a season (Holt & Dunn, 2006; Pain &

426   Harwood, 2009; Windsor, Barker, & McCarthy, 2011). Our study builds upon these

427   findings by suggesting that engaging in team building practices early in the season may

428   have consequences in addition to team building outcomes because they create open lines

429   of communication that may help in creating conditions for dealing with conflict during

430   the season.

431   **Address conflict early**. Having engaged in early season team building, 10

432   athletes also emphasized that as the season progressed it was important to *'nip it*

433   *[conflict] in the bud.'* P4 said "I think people need to address it early rather than later, so

434   it doesn't build up inside of them." P10 referred to a conflict she had been involved with

435   and said it was better to:

436   Like nip it in the bud almost, like the conflict [last year]. Like if I hadn't said

437   something it could have gotten worse, but like since I did say something quite

438   quickly it was like oh 'OK like I'll change' and then that was like kind of the end

439   of it. [But] if I hadn't have said anything or if it just kind of had happened again

440   then it would have been a bigger issue I think.

441   Similarly, athletes identified that not dealing with conflict early in the season

442   could *escalate* problems later in the season. P13 said "within volleyball it depends on

443   what point of the season it is… if it's in February, like you stop it before it happens

444   because that's playoffs and you can't have that." And P8 provided further insight when

445   she explained that:

446   The problems just come out in times, like my first year it's the National Semi-

447   finals, that's when those issues come out. That's when people see their

448   opportunity to play in the National Championship and when stuff starts getting

449   hard and those traits that people have come out.

450   The idea that conflict may change over the course of the season has previously

451   been reported in a study of team dynamics over a season (Holt & Sparkes, 2001). The

452   current findings emphasize that conflict should be addressed early (cf. Weinberg &

453   Gould, 2011) because otherwise it may cause problems during the intensive pressurized

454   environment of CIS conference and national championship playoffs in which up to three

455   games may be played over the course of three or four days.

456   **Mediation.** Thirteen athletes referred to the importance of mediation, which

457   involved the engagement of a third party in teammate conflict situations (*captains/senior*

458   *players, SPCs, or coach – as a last resort*). In most cases, more senior players (i.e., the

459   athletes we interviewed) were expected to take either formal (captain, assistant captain)

460   or informal leadership roles.

461   The general perspective was that athletes first seek out the assistance of *senior*

462   *players and captains* to mediate conflict. The athletes we interviewed acknowledged this

463   process. P18 said:

464   I really think that having a captain, like mediator in the middle is one of the best

465   ways… being a captain doesn't necessarily mean you have to dictate how it gets

466   resolved but you just kinda referee to make sure that it's resolved.

467   P13 recognized this when she said: "It's my role as a fifth-year player to get involved and

468   kind of be more involved with it [dealing with conflict]." Similarly, P12 said:

469   But like now [as a senior player] I would, if I saw something like that I would

470   probably like pull that girl aside, or one of those girls and be like, you know, like

471   this isn't going to work, like you should really try to do this. And [I] try to like

472   help them out, and kinda just, kinda befriend them and try to like make them see a

473   different side of things. So it kind of almost forces them to be open [to other

474   perspectives].

475   The idea of engaging other players in conflict management has been reported in a

476   previous study of adolescent females' soccer teams (Holt et al., 2008). Involving captains

477   and senior players as mediators has also been identified in a study of high school team

478   captains. That is, Voelker, Gould, and Crawford (2011) found that captains reported the

479   need to mediate, but stay neutral, in conflict situations on their teams.

480   Two teams worked with a SPC (one of whom was a member of the research team

481   but she did not conduct interviews with any members of the team with which she worked

482   or review their interview transcripts). In these teams athletes reported they would

483   approach *SPCs* to help mediate conflict. For example, P1 explained a situation that had

484   happened to her (and this situation involved one of the SPCs who was a co-author of this

485   study). P1 said:

486   I just went through [name of SPC] and like me, and [SPC], and [name of

487   teammate with whom there was a conflict] sat down…. [It was] way easier than

488   just having me and [teammate], cause I think it would it would turn into

489   something else… The best way and the only way that I would go about it would

490   be with [SPC].

491   Referring to a different SPC (who was not involved with this study) who worked with her

492   team, P3 explained a similar instance:

493   I think it can help having a third party. It's helped in the past when two people on

494   our team don't see eye to eye and then they can meet with our sports psych and

495   then say what they wanna say. It's just easier to kind of have a third party who's

496   not involved and maybe they can say their opinions too, and just kind of help get

497   a happy medium.

498   Athletes were quite prepared to go to the *head coach* with performance conflict.

499   But in terms of relationship conflict it seemed that the head coach would be involved

500   only when other mediation routes had been exhausted. In fact, athletes preferred not to

501   involve their coaches in relationship conflict if possible. As P10 said:

502   You don't want the coach ever to know that there is like stuff going on in the

503   team, like it's not like really their place… So if they get involved then it's

504   definitely escalated to like more than I guess our team could handle.

505   In this way the head coach was the 'last resort' for dealing with relationship conflict.

506   **Structure team meetings**. Thirteen athletes reported that team meetings played a

507   role in conflict resolution. This finding was distinct from engaging mediators because

508   team meetings involved convening the entire team to discuss conflict. We distinguished

509   between *unstructured* and *structured team meetings*. Unstructured team meetings usually

510   involved only the athletes and were a 'free-for-all' in which they discussed their

511   concerns. These unstructured meetings appeared to be an ineffective means of resolving

512   conflict; in fact, they often seemed to escalate the conflict. P1 explained that talking

513   about an issue in a general team setting could be a problem because "[we] don't want to

514   create a bigger issue out of it and have a bigger problem with that person. Don't want

515   people on the team to be like off put like, taking sides or whatever." Similarly, P10

516   referred to an unstructured meeting on her team that resulted in "those three friends

517   hold[ing] grudges against the other person and that just [got] like more blown out of

518   proportion like the more people involved." And P13 reported a time when an

519   unstructured meeting was called,

520   …by this one girl for this conflict. … she didn't like the tone people talked to each

521   other… She still didn't agree by the end of the meeting. There were 15 people

522   who agreed… who think that 'this is OK' and then there's one person who's really

523   bothered by it.

524   Such unstructured team meetings in which players simply gather to discuss an issue may

525   actually lead to participants adopting entrenched positions that can escalate conflict

526   (Pruitt, 2006).

527   On the other hand, several instances of structured team meetings helping to

528   resolve relationship conflict were reported. Often these meetings were mediated by a SPC

529   (on the two teams that had access to a consultant). One SPC (who was not an author of

530   this study) organized 'rap sessions' which were a structured approach to deal with any

531   issues. P3 explained the format of these rap sessions. She said:

532   We all get together and then there'll [be] our sport psych with us. We'll all write

533   down an issue we have, or if we don't have an issue, just write down something

534   nice or something, and then she'll read them out and if you have something to say

535   on that issue then you say it, and then if you don't say it there, then the issue's

536   done. We don't talk about it anymore, once that rap session is over, and I find

537   that's a good way to deal with it 'cause, on our team everyone tends to speak up

538   and say what they need to say, and so then it's dealt with right there.

539   The other SPC (who was an author of this study but did not conduct interviews with the

540   athlete in question), while not following the structure of these 'rap sessions', nor being

541   aware of this approach, also mediated team meetings and created a structure which

542   seemed to be effective. P14 explained:

543   I think our team meetings work pretty well like everyone kind of gets to have

544   their say and then yeah, it was really good to have [name of SPC] there because

545   she kind of mediated the meeting and I think without her there it would have

546   never, nothing would have ever been resolved 'cause everyone was just kind of

547   throwing out their opinions of stuff, and she kind of mediated it to, into a

548   resolution kind of thing so probably yeah, team meeting with someone kind of

549   helping out with the team meeting almost.

550   Although there does not appear to be any applied research specifically examining

551   the ways in which SPCs resolve conflict, studies have shown that SPCs can play an

552   important role in enhancing team unity, communication, and trust through the delivery of

553   team building interventions and exercises (e.g., Harwood & Pain, 2009; Holt & Dunn,

554   2006). Specifically, these studies have shown that SPCs can enhance team functioning

555   and unity by conducting team meetings that are characterized by open and honest

556   communication in a safe and regulated environment ensuring athletes feel comfortable

557   enough to discuss team issues and identify ways to address their concerns. The extent to

558   which team meetings were structured (e.g., 'rap sessions') versus unstructured (i.e., 'free-

559   for-alls') appeared to be the crucial factor by which athletes distinguished the success of

560   conflict resolution.

561   The importance of having someone other than the head coach structure team

562   meetings with the purpose of dealing with conflict was emphasized. For example, P4:

563   The [meeting] with the coaches was more laying down this is what's going to

564   happen because of it. The second one we had a sports psych sort of help um guide

565   it, so that, that was more effective, because it, people were more honest with their

566   opinions.

567   The issue of coach involvement in sport psychology sessions has been disputed in

568   the literature. Ravizza (1990) suggested that coaches should attend SPC-led team

569   meetings to show their support for the sport psychology program. But others (e.g., Dunn

570   & Holt, 2003; Halliwell, 1990) have argued that the presence of the coach could lead to

571   athletes being reluctant to share their opinions and concerns. The latter perspective was

572   reinforced by the current findings.

573   **A 'Missing Link' – Conflict Resolution Skills**

574   An important aspect of qualitative analysis is to look for 'what is not' in the data

575   to help 'fill in the gaps' between participants' experiences and implications for practice

576   (Thorne, 2008). Although all participants discussed numerous ways of approaching

577   conflict, only two reported that they directly tried to resolve *their own conflict*. The

578   remaining 17 participants, when asked how they personally would approach a conflict,

579   reported that they preferred to avoid conflict. In terms of avoiding situations P6 discussed

580   a relationship conflict she had with a teammate and said "you know, you don't have to

581   like everyone on the team, but I just kind of separated myself from her and I took myself

582   out of the picture." Referring to a similar situation, P8 said, "I would say [with this]

583   specific individual, [I] just ignore it. I avoid any opportunity that I'll have to be around

584   that person." Similarly, P10 said she "kind of would rather just not deal with it to be

585   honest. Like I don't want to have that conversation with her umm I….yeah I just really

586   don't want to have that conversation."

587   P9 recognized an irony when she spoke earlier in her interview about the need to

588   deal with conflict, but when asked how she dealt with a relationship conflict she

589   personally experienced she said:

590   I just let it build up and pretend[ed] that nothing's wrong, nothing's wrong, and

591   then if someone says something and I'm in a bad mood, I'm just like just lose it

592   inside and get so angry for some reason but it's just like, obviously it's good that I

593   realize that so that I know from experience that it's not good to build it up…. I

594   can tell people don't let it build up, don't let it build up, but I do it to myself

595   which is [offensive word] but so, so easy to do.

596   From these reports of preferring to avoid conflict that actually involved them we inferred

597   that athletes lacked personal conflict resolution skills. Indeed, as P11 expressed:

598   I know like lots of people don't really know what to say or what to do if they are

599   involved in one, and so maybe just kind of being trained at the beginning to kind

600   of learn how to deal with them [would be useful].

601   Similarly, in their study of leadership among high school captains, Voelker et al. (2011)

602   concluded that coaches and SPCs can "foster more effective peer leadership and team

603   success in high school sport by teaching conflict management and promoting more

604   positive collaboration between multiple captains on a team" (p. 62).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

606   The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine female varsity athletes'

607   perceptions of teammate conflict. Conflict was a prevalent feature of involvement on all

608   the teams and two types of conflict were identified (performance and relationship).

609   According to the athletes' reports, relationship conflict appeared to be more destructive

610   than performance conflict. This is consistent with previous research in the organizational

611   psychology domain (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2002; Teakleab et al., 2009). Although it has

612   been suggested that SPCs must deal with conflict (cf. LaVoi, 2007; Weinberg & Gould,

613   2011), to date the issue of conflict has not been extensively documented. The current

614   findings detailing the prevalence and nature of conflict in female varsity sport therefore

615   offer potentially important and previously unreported contributions to the sport

616   psychology literature.

617   Several strategies, in combination, appeared to create conditions that could help

618   SPCs' attempts to resolve conflict. Team building early in the season, while not

619   preventing conflict, could help establish trust and open channels of communication and a

620   climate of mutual understanding and honest self-evaluation (also see Crace & Hardy,

621   1997; Yukelson, 1997, 2006). The implication is that SPCs (and coaches) can engage in

622   early team building to create conditions for effective 'mid-point' (or in the case of sport,

623   mid-season) conflict management, which is a particularly important time period in team

624   development for overcoming inertia and developing cohesion (Tekleab et al., 2009).

625   The current findings also suggest practical strategies such as addressing conflict

626   early, engaging mediators in the resolution of conflict, and holding structured team

627   meetings may be useful for managing conflict that arises. Given that there may be

628   parallels between the performance conflict with task cohesion and relationship conflict

629   with social cohesion (cf. Carron et al., 2002), strategies designed to promote team

630   cohesion may also be useful for dealing with conflict. In other words, proactively

631   promoting team cohesion may have added benefits of reducing the prevalence and/or

632   impact of conflict. Approaches that can be used during the season for building cohesion

633   and improving team functioning can include activities such as team pledges, movie clips,

634   fake press conferences, and personal disclosures (see Dunn & Holt, 2003; Dunn & Holt,

635   2004; Holt & Dunn, 2006).

636   Another practical implication is that it seems to be important that practitioners

637   understand the different types of conflict that may occur on teams and be able to identify

638   these types of conflict. Performance conflict may be quite obvious and relationship

639   conflicts more difficult to discern, yet should be revolved (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2002).

640   SPCs may face some challenges in identifying conflict – especially relationship conflict

641   that may take place away from the court/field/ice. One way in which SPCs may be able to

642   identify (or at least learn about) conflict is by developing strong, open, and trusting

643   relationships with the athletes. Such relationships may enable athletes to be more

644   forthcoming in sharing conflict concerns with the SPC.

645   SPCs may wish to teach athletes (especially senior athletes) conflict management

646   skills because the resolution of conflict is critical to the effectiveness of teams (Gilley et

647   al., 2010). Such skills can include enabling team members to identify the type and source

648   of conflict, recognize desirable conflict, and implement appropriate conflict resolution

649   using cooperative (win–win) negotiation strategies rather than competitive (win–lose)

650   strategies (Deutsch, 2006; Stevens & Campion, 1999). People are more likely to succeed

651   in changing their conflict into a resolvable problem if they use cooperative behavior and

652   have the skills that facilitate effective cooperation (Deutsch, 2006). Hence, SPCs should

653   encourage athletes to engage in the activities listed above rather than investing their

654   emotional resources into dealing with interpersonal friction (Teakleab et al., 2009) and

655   ensure that athletes remain open to multiple problem-solving options (Gilley et al., 2010).

656   Furthermore, it would seem important that SPCs themselves receive training in

657   conflict management and resolution skills. Deutsch (2006) suggested that some skills for

658   effective conflict resolution include the ability to place the disagreements in perspective

659   by identifying common ground and common interests. Practitioners should also ensure

660   parties refrain from making personal attacks and help them seek to understand the other's

661   point of view. Furthermore, parties should limit and control expression of negative

662   feelings and be willing to forgive. Finally, practitioners should encourage parties to be

663   appropriately honest because one can be unnecessarily and inappropriately truthful during

664   conflict resolution.

665   During our presentation of the results to professors, coaches, and students we

666   were asked what a coach who did not have access to a SPC could do in terms of

667   managing conflict. We suggest that coaches could facilitate team building activities early

668   in the season. But, our findings suggested it may be inappropriate for a head coach to

669   mediate conflict (especially for relationship conflict). Perhaps in such cases assistant

670   coaches, if they have a strong relationship with athletes, could act as a mediator or help

671   structure team meetings. Additionally, one coach told us he developed a '24-48' rule to

672   deal with conflict. That is, after a conflict arises his athletes must wait 24 hours before

673   they act (to reflect on the issue and avoid a kneejerk reaction). Then, within the next 24

674   hours the athlete must resolve the conflict. After the passage of a total of 48 hours, the

675   coach then expects the matter to have been resolved and never revisited. The notion that

676   after the discussion of an issue it should be 'put to bed' was also a feature of the way in

677   which 'rap sessions' were structured. Although we did not specifically have data to

678   evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, they are techniques SPCs and coaches may

679   wish to consider.

680   Given the exploratory nature of this study several issues identified provide areas

681   for further investigation. Although athletes reported that relationship conflict was

682   particularly destructive, we were unable to link types of conflict with specific conflict

683   management strategies (although it seemed that many of the athletes' comments referred

684   to relationship conflict issues). Conflict may be a dynamic concept. For example, types of

685   conflict may be more or less prevalent at different stages of the season. It is also possible

686   that athletes' experiences of conflict may change over the duration of their involvement

687   in the team. That is, more senior athletes appeared to be expected to take on mediating

688   roles. Further study is needed to example both how experiences of conflict change over

689   time and how athletes may come to adopt roles in which they mediate conflict.

690   The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Some findings may have

691   been sample-specific because all athletes played on teams affiliated with one university.

692   Every year these teams are expected to be competitive for conference titles and national

693   championships. The players presumably faced high performance demands which may

694   create conflict that is not as prevalent on less competitive teams. Hence, SPCs must

695   consider contextual factors unique to their own team settings when considering these

696   findings (cf. Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Henschen, 1998).

697   In the future it may be important to examine conflict among members of less

698   successful teams (as well as among members of more elite teams) to gain a better

699   understanding of how conflict may vary across context in order to provide more precise

700   implications for sport psychology practice. Although our decision to sample female

701   athletes proved to be reasonable and appropriate, studies examining ways in which male

702   athletes deal with conflict would also make valuable contributions to the literature

703   (especially given that previous research with male collegiate athletes has identified

704   numerous sources of conflict; Holt & Sparkes, 2001).

705   Finally, the information obtained from the athletes allowed us to reach an

706   adequate level of data saturation. The total number of athletes across all the teams was

707   about 60 people. When one considers we sampled more senior athletes, the total number

708   of potential participants is reduced to about 30 people. Hence, we sampled approximately

709   two-thirds of potential participants. We decided that the sample of 19 athletes enabled us

710   to reach an adequate level of data saturation and provide a strong account of conflict

711   experienced on the teams (which was further confirmed via member-checking).

712   In summary, the four strategies identified (i.e., engage in team building early in

713   the season, address conflict early, engage mediators in the resolution of conflict, and hold

714   structured team meetings) provide practical suggestions for SPCs working with teams.

715   We have also explored other implications for professional practice as described above.

716   We hope the findings of this exploratory study may stimulate further research detailing

717   ways to manage conflict. In particular, research examining the effectiveness of the team-

718   based conflict resolution strategies suggested here, as well as other approaches, will add

719   to the literature. It is important to evaluate both aspects of program delivery and

720   characteristics of SPCs in order to produce knowledge that can guide practice (Brawley

721   & Paskevich, 1997). Given the potentially destructive consequences of conflict, such

722   research may have important consequences for team performance and athlete well-being.

723

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843   Table 1

844   Categories and Themes from Content Analysis

Themes	Categories
Types of Conflict	
Practice and Competition Concerns	Performance Conflict
Playing Time	
Interpersonal disputes/disagreements	Relationship Conflict
Conflicting personalities	
Creating Conditions for Conflict Resolution	
Team building	Team Building Early in Season
'Nip it in the bud'	Address Conflict Early
Don't let conflict escalate	
Go to captains/senior players	Mediation
Go to sport psychologist	
Go to coach [last resort]	
Unstructured team meetings	Structure Team Meetings
Structure team meetings	
Resolving own conflict?	Missing Link – Conflict Resolution Skills

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