

Psychological Safety in High-Performance Sport

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this action-oriented research was to evaluate the current state of psychological safety within Rugby Canada's Women's 7s team and provide actionable recommendations to create change. The inquiry question was: How might Rugby Canada foster a more psychologically safe sport environment? A survey and a focus group were the methods used to delve into the inquiry question, which adhered to the Royal Roads University *Research Ethics Policy*. The findings revealed the presence of a hierarchical environment, maltreatment, grooming, fear of failure, and the athletes' need for a safer environment. Further, the results supported the recommendations in service of Rugby Canada's need to prioritize the psychological safety of their athletes through the implementation of new member onboarding, clear selection guidelines, support for the coach-athlete partnership, and providing athletes with a safe platform to share feedback.

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Executive Summary

I had the pleasure of working with Rugby Canada (RC) on the importance of psychological safety in high-performance sport. RC is a National Sport Organization (NSO) that overlooks the rugby programs in Canada. The purpose of the inquiry was to provide RC with actionable recommendations to ensure their athletes have a psychologically safe environment in pursuit of successful outcomes. The inquiry engaged current and retired RC Women's 7s athletes. The women's team was chosen for the inquiry due to complaints of bullying and harassment filed against the head coach. RC committed to undertaking a broader review of its programs, and the action-oriented research methodology was the perfect opportunity to identify actionable recommendations based on the athletes' needs and the organization's best interests.

The main inquiry question that guided the research was: How might Rugby Canada foster a more psychologically safe sport environment? The following sub-inquiry questions also supported the investigation:

1. How have athletes experienced psychological safety or lack thereof in their sport?
2. What are the barriers that get in the way of psychological safety?
3. What roles have coaches and relationships with coaches played in those experiences?
4. How do Rugby Canada athletes describe relationships between psychological safety and high performance?
5. What do Rugby Canada athletes envision as an ideal environment to be the best athlete they can be?

The literature indicated the prevalence of psychological abuse and its normalization in high-performance sport. Many athletes have reported the experience of being belittled, threatened, shouted at, and ignored throughout their careers (Stirling and Kerr, 2014, 2008;

Gervis and Dunn, 2004). Psychological abuse is most prevalent in the coach-athlete relationship as coaches have the power and expertise over the athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Athletes normalize the coaches' behaviours with the belief that enduring maltreatment is necessary to be successful (Stirling & Kerr, 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Yet, the experience of psychological abuse has negative implications on an athlete's psychological well-being. The psychological impacts involve athletes feeling depressed, nervous, anxious, unhappy, fearful, and hurt (Kerr et al., 2020; Gervis & Dunn, 2004). The literature points to the need to deconstruct how the normalization of psychological abuse is used to drive performance.

I argue that psychological safety needs to be prioritized in high-performance sports to ensure optimal performance and experience. Psychologically safe climates enable individuals to be more engaged in learning and free from anxiety to create positive change and improve performance (Carmeli et al., 2009). The literature directed my inquiry into understanding the factors that detract from and contribute to a psychologically safe sports environment and in what ways psychological safety principles can support high-performance cultures and outcomes.

Action-oriented research (AR) was the methodology that structured the inquiry. AR is the process of identifying the need, direction, and strategy for change in partnership with an organization. A survey and focus group were the methods utilized to investigate the inquiry question. The first method used in the inquiry was a survey that included quantitative metrics of a series of Likert scale questions and close-ended multiple-choice, and qualitative open-ended questions. The survey findings guided the semi-structured focus group questions and discussion. The athletes shared challenges from their experiences and provided actionable recommendations that would support them in feeling psychologically safe in their environment.

The findings demonstrated the presence of a hierarchy, grooming, the fear of failure, and the athletes' desire for a psychologically safe space. Based on these findings, the following conclusions were drawn: the athletes were subjects to psychological maltreatment, there is a hierarchical and power-over culture influencing the organization, the athletes want a high-performance environment where they are safe to be themselves and learn from mistakes, and the athletes desire for the organization and coaches to take a humanistic approach to performance. The recommendations put forward to RC are based on the organization's gaps and identified as necessary to support athletes feeling psychologically safe: new member onboarding, clear selection guidelines, support in forming a healthy coach-athlete partnership, and providing athletes with a safe platform to share feedback and complete a yearly audit of the environment.

The findings, conclusions and recommendations were presented to the decision-makers to engage in a collective dialogue about the outcomes and evaluate the best strategy to move forward. The need for resources and funding was stated as necessary in taking the steps towards change. RC's funding is largely dependent on performance and medal count, which requires RC to produce results in order to fund the various teams within the organization. The focus on results can hinder the organization's prioritization of athletes' psychological safety. Therefore, RC needs to expand their criteria of what they consider successful beyond medal count to include athletes' mental and physical health. The organizational implications include developing an action plan, obtaining resources to support the change process, the continuous re-evaluation of performance, and the accountability and commitment to the change.

Chapter 1: Focus and Framing

Many sports organizations have overlooked the importance of psychological safety in high-performance sport environments. The increase of athletes sharing their experiences of maltreatment in sport alludes to this conclusion. In 2020, Rowing Canada athletes filed complaints against their head coach under the organization's *Prevention of Abuse, Harassment, and Bullying Policy*, which found the coach guilty (Rowing Canada, 2020). On top of this, recently, 37 current and retired National Women's Rugby 7s athletes filed complaints against their Head Coach under the organization's *Harassment and Bullying Policy* (Rugby Canada, 2021a). These two cases of high-performance athletes coming forward with maltreatment complaints are just a few examples of athletes fighting for a safe sport environment. There appears to be a lack of knowledge and understanding of the impact those in power-over positions have on athletes' well-being and the team culture.

Gillespie (2020) identified the importance of psychological safety as it is the number one driver of team performance and satisfaction. Kahn (1990) defined psychological safety "as feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (p. 708). In addition, Gillespie (2020) stated that "Psychological safety is rooted in emotional intelligence and is defined as an environment where it's safe to discuss ideas, experiment, take risks, give feedback, and learn from mistakes" (para. 1). These definitions imply that psychologically safe environments foster a space where individuals can provide and ask for feedback, take risks, make mistakes, and be authentic without the fear of negative repercussions. Even though psychological safety is a new concept within sports research, there is an indication of the importance of a psychologically safe sporting environment for team success, cohesion, and overall team satisfaction (Fransen et al., 2020). A psychologically safe

environment might be considered essential for athletes to have a voice in their careers and also be successful. Athletes experience a large amount of pressure to perform and win medals, which needs to be done in a manner that considers their physical and mental well-being. Athletes learn what is acceptable or not in their environment based on the leaders' reactions and behaviours (Edmondson, 2011). The impact and the influence of those in power-over positions needs to be better understood to orchestrate a psychologically safe environment. This inquiry will be the process of gathering insight into the athletes' experiences of psychological safety in sport, what factors detract from and contribute to a psychologically safe sport environment, and what factors can foster team and organizational change.

I had the privilege of partnering with Rugby Canada (RC) to inquire about psychological safety in high-performance sport. RC is a national sport organization responsible for the oversight of rugby in Canada. I had the pleasure of representing RC on the world stage for four years. My motivation to pursue a capstone on psychological safety is driven by my experiences of feeling unsafe within a high-performance environment and hearing many others voice the same concerns. The purpose of my capstone was to understand the factors that detract and contribute to a psychologically safe sport environment, delving deeper into the coach-athlete relationship. In addition, the inquiry explored how psychological safety principles can support RC in forming a psychologically safe sport environment for its athletes.

The principal inquiry question navigating my research is: How might Rugby Canada foster a more psychologically safe sport environment? My inquiry sub-questions are constructed to inquire into high-performance sports organizations' current and desired future state. Stroh (2015) described one's current and desired state as the "creative tension" of the change process. My sub-questions to identify the present and the desired future state are:

Current State

1. How have athletes experienced psychological safety or lack thereof in their sport?
2. What are the barriers that get in the way of psychological safety?
3. What roles have coaches and relationships with coaches played in those experiences?

Future State

4. How do Rugby Canada athletes describe relationships between psychological safety and high performance?
5. What do Rugby Canada athletes envision as an ideal environment to be the best athlete they can be?

Significance of the Inquiry

In 2021, RC suspended a coach and underwent an investigation due to multiple complaints from current and retired Women's 7s athletes under RC's *Harassment and Bullying Policy*. Thirty-seven athletes brought forward concerns about their treatment within their environment which prompted the organization to protect their athletes and announce an interim technical leadership plan as they continued to prepare for the Tokyo Olympic Games (Rugby Canada, 2021a). An independent third-party investigation underwent and concluded that the 37 complaints were deemed to not fall under the organization's policy's definition of harassment or bullying, yet it was not viable for the head coach to resume his duties (Rugby Canada, 2021c). The conclusions from the investigation were upsetting for the athletes and RC committed to creating change as they recognized "there is an ongoing shift regarding what is considered to be appropriate behaviour in sport, and it is important that Rugby Canada keeps current with these changes" (Rugby Canada, 2021d, para. 1). They acknowledged that their policy was outdated and initiated the change process by firstly updating their Safe Sport Policy Manual (Rugby

Canada, 2021d). Also, they committed to undertake a broader review of its high-performance programs to understand the improvements that need to be implemented to create and sustain a world-class performance strategy and culture across all national senior teams. They want to ensure that history does not repeat itself. “Rugby Canada will commission an inclusive and transparent review of performance rugby programs following the Olympic Games as part of our commitment to better understand the complexities of the training and competition environment” (Rugby Canada, 2021e, para. 5). Furthermore, RC committed to engaging with this action-oriented inquiry to help uncover what changes are necessary for athletes to engage in their programs safely. The athletes’ voices need to be heard to understand their experiences within their environment and empower them to influence and be a part of positive change. RC is paving the way for other sports organizations to prioritize their athletes and explore what it truly means to care for their overall well-being.

The benefits to RC from an action-oriented inquiry are that it collaboratively works with the organizational leaders and stakeholders to bring forward recommendations and actionable knowledge. With the increase of athletes sharing their experiences with maltreatment in sport, it is time to take action and explore what athletes need to feel safe and supported in their environments. The inquiry strived to understand what athletes need from their coaches, support staff, and organization to feel psychologically safe. The athletes’ voices were at the forefront of the research process, allowing them to share what psychological safety principles enable them to be their authentic selves, have a voice, take risks, and be successful. The benefit of the inquiry to the organization included providing the steps needed to be taken to care for the athletes and support them in their performance, to improve governance, to enhance leadership, and to provide guidance for organizational change by those directly impacted. I care deeply about the program

and believe that incorporating a psychologically safe environment can sustain athletes' well-being and success on and off the field.

Organizational Context and System Analysis

RC's mission is "to deliver life-long, inclusive rugby experiences that cultivate participation and inspire excellence from community to club to country" (Rugby Canada, 2021b). To cultivate participation and inspire excellence, the organization must adhere to a standard that upholds its values of "integrity, passion, solidarity, discipline, and respect" (Rugby Canada, 2021b). One of RC's strategic pillars for 2021-2023 is to protect participant welfare by "Providing a safe environment and an enjoyable, inclusive experience for all involved in rugby" (Rugby Canada, 2021b). The inquiry is dedicated to understanding what elements and factors of psychological safety will enhance athletes' positive rugby experiences and ensure long-term engagement. RC is responsible for the overview of rugby programs throughout Canada, including creating safe spaces for athletes to "try, play and win" (Rugby Canada, 2021b). As soon as athletes feel unsafe or have a bad experience, player welfare is compromised. The women's 7s head coach was removed from his position due to maltreatment complaints from athletes. This case requires an understanding of RC's system as a whole and which system components or subsystems contributed to athletes' experience of maltreatment. Understanding the athletes' experience as part of the RC high-performance environment will provide insight into what actions are needed to create an environment that is better aligned with RC's strategic pillars.

Rugby Canada wants to do an overview of their systems to identify gaps and target aspects of their system where growth is required. Applying systems thinking is a way to "understand the nature of change, and what it is that we should be looking for" (Burns, 2015, p.

2). A system is an interconnected set of relationships; everything is related, and change can impact other parts of the system (Burns, 2015). RC is a complex system with many interconnected relationships. A systems thinking approach is required to understand RC's complexity, the external factors influencing the system, and the multiple connected relationships. Appendix A illustrates my assumptions regarding some of the potential systemic factors that could be impeding athletes' psychological safety. Mapping out the systemic pressure and relationships showcases some potential challenges that could be affecting athletes' psychological safety by identifying three topics: power imbalances, hierarchy, and a performance-focused environment.

Financial resources are dependent on results dictating the future of Rugby in Canada which can lead to increased pressure on the organization to secure podium finishes. As a National Sport Organization (NSO), Rugby Canada relies on funding from the Government of Canada and monetary donations. The pressure trickles down, affecting coaches and athletes. Coaches must drive medal-focused results to keep their jobs, and athletes must perform to maintain their position on the team. How coaches generate these results needs to be further understood across multiple teams within the organization.

Narrowing the scope of the inquiry is essential. Changing the parameters in which RC is allocated financial resources is out of scope for the inquiry, although I acknowledge that funding structures influence RC's system. Instead, the inquiry will focus internally on controllable factors, with consideration of the impacts that the funding structure may exert on the system. Narrowing the scope of the inquiry to understand the culture within the training environment and its correlation to athletes' performance and well-being could help comprehend how building psychological safety can influence athletes' engagement. RC cannot control the funding

requirements; they can control how they manage and communicate the consequent responsibilities and expectations of both coaches and athletes.

Overview of the Thesis

In Chapter 1, I have outlined the significance of the inquiry, the organizational context and system analysis. I have showcased the challenges RC experiences and the need for change towards a more psychologically safe environment. The next chapter will be an overview of the relevant literature in support of the inquiry, specifically how psychological safety first arose, the experiences of psychological abuse in sport, the coach-athlete relationship and why psychological safety is necessary for high-performance sporting environments. Chapter 3 includes the inquiry approach and methodology, an overview of the participants, the process that was undertaken to gather and analyze the data, and the ethical obligations of the inquiry. Next, chapter 4 is a review of the study findings, conclusion, and the scope and limitations of the inquiry. Lastly, chapter 5 synthesizes all the work that has been completed with a set of recommendations and a plan for moving forward based on discussions with RC.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There has been continued research on the importance of a psychologically safe environment for organizational change and success. Psychological safety is a critical factor in high-performance sports engagement and in promoting successful outcomes for all stakeholders (Gosai et al., 2021; McLaren & Spink, 2021). High-performance sports influence athletes far beyond the physical, impacting mental, social, and emotional aspects of the athlete's life and experiences (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2020). The practices of coaches and organizations can have significant implications on an athlete's well-being (Gosai et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2020; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). There is limited research on the importance of creating a psychologically safe environment in high-performance sport. However, a large amount of research alludes to athletes' need for a safe space and a need to reorient the current systems in which psychological abuse has manifested.

The usage of the terms emotional abuse and psychological abuse are used interchangeably, which Mountjoy et al. (2016) defined as “a pattern of deliberate, prolonged, repeated non-contact behaviours within a power differentiated relationship” (p. 3). Psychological and emotional abuse involves harming a person's emotions, cognition, values, and beliefs about self and the world (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Athletes have the right to a safe space to learn and grow, yet there continue to be many cases of psychological abuse that impose negative consequences on their mental well-being, performance, and engagement in sport.

In pursuit of understanding how high-performance sport can foster a psychologically safe environment, there must be an understanding of the coach-athlete relationship, the athletes' experiences of psychological abuse, and the importance of psychological safety in sport. Barker-Ruchti et al. (2014) have indicated that sports participation can teach athletes critical social,

cognitive, organizational, and emotional skills that are transferable outside of sport. Yet, they allude to the characteristics of high-performance sport that have been detrimental to an athlete's social development and well-being, including the high-performance sport culture, the coach-athlete relationships, and coach practices (p. 162). The coach-athlete relationship is essential to explore as athletes spend a significant amount of time interacting with their coaches. It is crucial to understand the behaviours that support athletes and alternatively behaviours that may negatively impact athletes. Most importantly, there is a need to explore the power-over dynamic within the coach-athlete relationship. Additionally, athletes' experiences of psychological abuse must be examined to better understand which potentially destructive behaviours have been normalized in a high-performance environment, and subsequently should be addressed. Lastly, the importance of psychological safety will be further investigated within a sports context. There is a need to understand why psychological safety is necessary for high-performance sport cultures to provide appropriate recommendations for the existing gaps. A clear understanding of the current state of psychological safety in high-performance sport and how the coach-athlete relationship is experienced is instrumental in creating an environment where psychological safety is present. First, it is essential to understand the history of psychological safety.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety has gained much interest in organizational and team environments. The attraction to psychological safety grew from the need to understand how people work together to achieve an outcome (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Edmondson and Lei (2014) expressed that the growth of psychological safety is "because of the enhanced importance of learning and innovation in today's organizations" (p. 24). The term psychological safety is associated with a climate where individuals feel safe to take interpersonal risks, be their authentic selves, and

express themselves freely without fear of repercussions (Kahn, 1990; Edmondson, 1999). In the 1960s, the concept of psychological safety was first explored to understand what it would take to orchestrate organizational change. Schein and Bennis (1965) identified the importance of psychological safety for individuals to feel secure in being receptive to learning and changing their behaviour in response to organizational challenges. Schein (1993) argued that psychological safety is essential for individuals to be motivated to learn and orchestrate change without losing a sense of identity. He defined psychological safety as a learner's ability to develop a new habit and learn without a sense of anxiety. As described above, the concept of psychological safety in the 1960s was geared towards understanding how individuals learn in their environment to motivate organizational change. However, it was not until the 1990s that researchers explored psychological safety and its importance in the effects of the social and environmental factors that influence how individuals interact, communicate, and collaborate.

Kahn's (1990) and Edmondson's (1999) research were influential in understanding the behavioural influences of a psychologically safe environment. Kahn's (1990) study explored individuals' experiences within their work and context to discover what engaged and disengaged individuals in their work. His work was centered on understanding psychological safety's motivational and attitudinal outcomes, which found psychological safety to be a significant influence. Kahn (1990) defined psychological safety as the ability to be one's authentic self without fear of any consequences.

Alternatively, Edmondson (1999) described psychological safety as the willingness to take interpersonal risks. The eagerness to take interpersonal risks to engage, connect, change, and learn, is associated with a lack of anxiety that one will be embarrassed, ridiculed or shamed (Edmondson and Lei, 2014; Wanless, 2016). Individuals' beliefs on how others will respond will

also affect one's willingness to take interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999). When a climate is psychologically safe, the team feels confident that they will not be embarrassed, rejected, or punished for speaking up (Edmondson, 1999). She concluded that individuals who feel psychologically safe are more willing to ask for help, admit to mistakes, and seek information from others. Edmondson (1999) also classified psychological safety as a cognitive state for learning and change. She stated that a psychologically safe environment enables a willingness to share ideas and take action to collective work. Thus, it is clear that a key factor to successful learning, organizational change, employee engagement and satisfaction is the presence of a psychologically safe climate where individuals feel safe to take interpersonal risks.

Psychological Abuse in High-performance sport

The behaviours and techniques coaches use to drive performance are outdated and must be re-evaluated by organizations and coaches. Psychological abuse is defined as repeated non-contact harmful behaviours, including belittling, humiliating, shouting, scapegoating, rejecting, isolating, threatening, and being ignored or denied attention and support (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a; Gervis & Dunn, 2004). The normalization of these behaviours is enabled by the belief that toughness is a characteristic of high-performance sport and that winning is the priority even if it is at the expense of the athletes' well-being (Jacobs et al., 2017; Stirling, 2013). Kerr et al.'s (2019) research in partnership with AthletesCAN revealed that "59% of current athletes and 62% of retired athletes reported at least one form of psychologically harmful behaviour" (p. 11). The experience of psychological abuse is most prevalent in the coach-athlete relationship as coaches act in a critical relationship role – a relationship that has a significant influence over an athletes' sense of safety and trust (Kerr et al., 2019; Kirby et al., 2000 as cited by Stirling & Kerr, 2013). The percentage of athletes who have experienced psychological harm points to the need to

deconstruct these normalized “win at all costs” behaviours and build appropriate behaviours that support an athlete’s overall well-being. In this section, the use of psychological abuse in high-performance sport will be explored, and the impact it may have on an athlete’s overall well-being.

The Athletes’ Experiences of Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse within the sports context refers to a pattern of non-physical behaviours directed at an athlete by a person acting within a critical relationship role that results in emotional harm (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, p. 91). As described above, psychological abuse is experienced through belittling, humiliating, shouting, scapegoating, rejecting, isolating, threatening, and being ignored or denied attention and support. Stirling and Kerr’s (2008b) research explained that in sport, emotionally abusive behaviours occur in three ways: physical behaviours, verbal behaviours, and the denial of attention and support (p. 175). The physical behaviours are defined as acts of aggression that involve hitting and throwing objects; verbal behaviours involve yelling, shouting, belittling, name-calling, degrading comments, and humiliation; and lastly, the denial of attention and support is identified as being ignored or being expelled or excluded from practice (Stirling & Kerr, 2008b). These categories can support making sense of the various forms of psychological abuse athletes can experience throughout their careers.

Research alludes to a large group of athletes experiencing acts of physical and verbal behaviours and the denial of attention and support throughout their careers. Gervis and Dunn’s (2004) study on the emotional abuse of elite athletes concluded that all participants at some point in their career were belittled and shouted at; additionally, a lot of participants shared they endured being humiliated and threatened. Stirling and Kerr (2014) highlighted that all

participants in their study experienced degrading comments, personal criticisms, threats, acts of humiliation and belittlement, and ignoring (p. 123). Furthermore, Stirling and Kerr's (2008a) semi-structured interviews with elite female swimmers found athletes feeling distressed due to coaches' behaviours: yelling, criticism, throwing objects, and the silent treatment. Additionally, Willson et al.'s (2021) study with Canadian National Team athletes reported experiencing psychologically harmful behaviours such as being shouted at, gossiped about, being put down, told lies about, being embarrassed or humiliated, being ignored, and criticized (p. 10). These cases illustrate the presence and issue regarding athletes enduring psychological maltreatment within their environments. As a result, athletes' psychological safety is being jeopardized in pursuit of excellence, and coaches need to be held accountable for these behaviours.

It is prevalent that athletes experience emotional abuse within the coach-athlete relationship as they progress in their careers (Stirling & Kerr, 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). As athletes advance to a higher level in their career and participate in a competitive stream, the likelihood of the experience of psychological abuse rises (Stirling & Kerr, 2014; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a; Willson et al., 2021). Athletes are subject to psychological abuse when they are not performing to the coaches' expectations (Stirling & Kerr, 2014; Stirling, 2008b; Willson et al., 2021), when it is used by coaches as a technique to make athletes more tough and resilient to the pressure of high-performance sport (Stirling & Kerr, 2013), and as a means to maintain control over the athlete (Stirling & Kerr, 2008b). Athletes are taught that these coaching practices are necessary to endure to be successful and that these behaviours are well-intended to support the athletes' performance (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Therefore, these behaviours are normalized, continuing the cycles of maltreatment in high-performance sport.

The Impact of Abusive Psychological Behaviours

These maladaptive coaching behaviours do not come without consequences to the athletes. Athletes are often left to struggle in silence with the effects of these psychologically abusive coaching practices (Kavanagh et al., 2017). The athletes' experience of psychological abuse within the coach-athlete relationship negatively impacts their psychological well-being, training, and performance (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). More specifically, the psychological impacts involve athletes feeling depressed, nervous, anxious, unhappy, fearful, and hurt (Kerr et al., 2020; Gervis & Dunn, 2004).

It is important to note that an athlete's success could influence how they experience their coach's abusive practices. There is an element of an athletes' self-perception of their performance that is intertwined with the response to a coach's emotionally abusive behaviours (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). Stirling and Kerr's (2008a) research revealed that coaches' emotionally abusive practices were disregarded by athletes when they perceived their performance positively. Therefore, athletes who were successful when performing were more likely to believe there was benefit from a coach's maladaptive practices, thus may not recognize the coach's behaviour as inappropriate. Alternatively, when performance declines, the athlete begins to internalize the coach's abusive behaviours and may have negative responses to them (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). Athletes start to struggle with the thought of displeasing their coach, which negatively impacts their ability to perform without fear, distraction, and anxiety (Kerr et al., 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Athletes expressed reduced motivation, reduced enjoyment, impaired focus, and struggled to develop new skills due to the coaches yelling and belittling (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). On the other hand, some athletes reported an increased motivation to train to become better and obtain their coach's respect (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Overall, the experience of psychologically abusive

coaching practices negatively impacts an athlete's mental health, performance, and involvement in sport.

The Normalization of Psychological Abuse

The normalization of psychologically abusive behaviours to drive performance has posed a challenge. It is influenced by the belief that these behaviours are part of the coaching method that illicit winning results (Kerr et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need to understand psychological abuse and why these tactics have become so prevalent in high-performance sport. Research has indicated that psychological abuse is mainly used to attain performance (Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Stirling & Kerr, 2008b; Robert et al., 2020). Roberts et al.'s (2020) systematic review of non-accidental violence towards athletes alluded to coaches' use of emotional abuse to also be used to deter failure, maintain control, test resilience and commitment, develop toughness, and increase internal competition. Additionally, Stirling's (2013) research found two distinct origins for a coach's use of psychologically abusive behaviours: expressive and instrumental origins.

Expressive origins of emotional abuse refer to a coach's emotionally abusive behaviours that are an end in itself (i.e., yelling demeaning comments at an athlete out of anger or frustration). Instrumental origins of emotional abuse refer to emotionally abusive behaviours that are used to achieve a desired end (i.e., coach's motivation to curb an athlete's behaviour for athletic or personal development). (p. 634).

The use of psychologically abusive practices to drive performance has been deemed acceptable to attain performance.

The "winning at all costs" approach to high-performance sports normalizes psychologically abusive practices even when it is at the expense of the athlete (Gervis & Dunn,

2004). Furthermore, the coach is viewed as the expert, who is providing them with the power and freedom to do what is needed to be successful (Jacobs et al., 2017). Consequently, the coach's abusive behaviour is not questioned, especially when the athlete is successful (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). A coach's expertise and success provides them with an upper hand in dictating how an athlete needs to behave and the criteria they must meet in order to be successful (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). In turn, athletes accept these behaviours as part of high-performance sport and endure the abuse to maintain their position on the team and be successful in achieving their own personal goals (Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). Athletes' normalization of this abusive behaviour is guided by the belief that these coaching practices will result in a successful performance outcome (Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Stirling & Kerr, 2014; Gervis & Dunn, 2004). They believe that these coaching practices are part of the process and their coach is acting in their best interest, no matter how these practices make them feel (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) stated that athletes normalized psychologically abusive coach techniques when competing, but these same behaviours were acknowledged as abusive and harmful once removed. The athletes and observers are silenced from speaking up against these behaviours due to the belief that they are necessary to endure to obtain results (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). The normalization of psychologically abusive practices to drive performance is detrimental to an athlete's well-being and success. For a safe sporting environment to be realized, these coaching practices need to be deconstructed, and a healthy coach-athlete relationship can be formed. The complexity of the coach-athlete relationship will be further explored and illustrate the importance of the coach's role in an athlete's career.

As addressed above, the research on psychological abuse in high-performance sport is prevalent within the coach-athlete relationship. The coach acts in a critical relationship role with

power over the athlete. The techniques they use to drive performance can significantly affect an athlete's well-being and performance. The challenge is the normalization of these coaching practices as necessary to be successful. There is acceptance of psychological abuse being used to drive performance, build athletes' resilience and toughness, and maintain control. Unfortunately, many athletes have endured these coaching practices and are left to struggle with the repercussions. The coach is considered the expert and is in a position of power, leaving athletes in a vulnerable position when experiencing psychological abuse. Research has indicated the normalization of these coaching practices, hence making it essential to highlight the impacts on an athlete's mental well-being, performance, and engagement in sport. These normalized coaching techniques need to be deconstructed to keep athletes engaged in safe sport.

The Coach-Athlete Relationship

The coach-athlete relationship is integral in determining an athlete's success and is a reciprocal process where the coach and athlete influence one another (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2003). It is defined as a unique interpersonal relationship in which athletes' and coaches' feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are interconnected (Jowett, 2005). Thus, "how one feels, thinks and behaves affects and is affected by how the other feels, thinks and behaves" (Jowett, 2017, p. 155). It is essential to build an appropriate and healthy coach-athlete relationship since the quality of the relationship is a determinant of athletes' satisfaction, motivation, successful performances, personal growth and development, and psychological well-being (Antonini Philippe et al., 2011; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Davis et al., 2019; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Also, the coach-athlete relationship is interconnected because neither the coach nor the athlete can accomplish what is needed alone (Jowett, 2017). An effective coach-athlete relationship is holistic in that there is an emphasis on positive growth and development for both coaches and

athletes (Jowett, 2005, p. 412). Unfortunately, the coach-athlete relationship has not been known as an equal partnership. Coaches are considered the experts and the leaders, whereas the athletes are learners and followers (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2016). How coaches use their authority can have enormous implications on an athlete's motivation, performance, and overall well-being – pointing to the need to understand the power imbalances in the coach-athlete relationship and how to form an equal partnership.

Coaches' behaviours and actions come with great responsibility. Coaches have an ethical obligation to act respectfully and do right by their athletes. As noted above, a power imbalance exists within the coach-athlete relationship, with the coach having power over their athletes, which is a contributing risk factor for abusive relationships (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). The coach has the upper hand with their knowledge, experience and access to resources and rewards, determining the trajectory of an athlete's career (Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). They exert authority over athletes as they are the ones who determine the training regime and control valued outcomes such as selections, starting lineups and playtime – placing coaches on a pedestal (Dhurup and Mathaba, 2015). Coaches are credible leaders who have the power to regulate athletes' behaviours, attitudes, and drive for success (Dhurup and Mathaba, 2015). More specifically, Mageau and Vallerand (2003) stated that coaches' orientation towards coaching, the context they operate in, and their perception of athletes' behaviours and motivations influence their coaching behaviours and the authority they impose over their athletes (p. 885). They stated that coaches who are athlete-centred versus coach-centred value and respect their athletes' autonomy. Alternatively, a coach-centred approach targets athletes to behave and think by offering extrinsic rewards that can negatively impact an athlete's mental well-being – this being

where the power-over becomes troublesome. The coach-athlete-centred relationship is ideal since it is an inclusive and empowering model (Jowett, 2017).

When a coach exploits their title, they use their power as a means to control and discipline athletes to make them conform to their standards (Kelly & Waddington, 2006). As Mountjoy et al. (2016) stated: “the cultural context of harassment and abuse is rooted in the discrimination based on power differentials across a range of social and personal factors” (p. 1). Potrac (2004) has outlined six bases of social power that a coach possesses: legitimate, coercive, reward, referent, expert and informational power.

Legitimate power is based on the perception that someone has the right to prescribe behaviour due to election or appointment to a position of responsibility. Coercive power is the perceived ability to punish those who do not conform to one’s ideas or demands. Reward power is based on the ability to give positive consequences and remove negative ones. Referent power is the desire of others to please the person who possesses power. Expert power is based on having distinctive knowledge, expertness, ability or skills, and finally informational power is based on controlling the information needed by others in order to reach an important goal. (Wandzilak, 1985, as cited in Dhurup & Mathaba, 2015, p. 295).

It seems that coaches can exploit unacceptable behaviours due to athletes’ desires to be successful and their efforts to manipulate athletes that there is only one way to achieve their desired goals. This process is considered grooming, where the athletes trust the coach who offers them the opportunity to be successful (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). Meanwhile, the coach is abusing their power by withholding rewards and resources (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). The athletes are groomed to believe they must endure the abuse to succeed (Brackenridge & Fasting,

2005). Hence, coaches' behaviours are normalized and believed to be a part of high-performance sport despite having negative repercussions on athletes. In conclusion, there is no doubt that the coach-athlete relationship is instrumental in an athlete's level of success. How a coach exerts their authority can determine an athlete's motivation and success and may negatively affect their well-being. There is a need to understand how a balanced coach-athlete relationship can be formed.

Forming a Healthy Coach-Athlete Relationship

As indicated above, the coach-athlete relationship is an unequal partnership, since the coach is the expert and leader, and the athlete is the follower. What is important to note is that neither one can be successful without the other. The coach has power over the athlete with their knowledge, experience, and access to resources and rewards. The quality of the coach-athlete relationship is paramount to an athlete's career since the athlete spends a lot of time with their coaches improving their skills and preparing for competitions (Dhurup & Mathaba, 2015; Yukhymenko et al., 2015). Coaches are responsible for creating the environment that influences physical and developmental growth and maintains the well-being of their athletes (Felton & Jowett, 2013). The quality of the coach-athlete relationship is positively correlated with fulfilling athletes' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Felton & Jowett, 2013). The coach's role is one of authority, yet there is a choice as to how a coach uses their power. Therefore, it is pivotal to form a healthy coach-athlete relationship endeavouring to keep athletes engaged in sport and for coaches to lead in a way that supports relational growth.

Coaches' expert knowledge paired with positive interpersonal qualities supports the development of a healthy coach-athlete relationship (Antonini Philippe et al., 2011). The coach-athlete relationship needs to encompass mutual trust, respect, appreciation, and commitment

(Davis et al., 2019). Felton and Jowett (2013) stated that if athletes can positively relate, communicate, and interact with their coaches, their basic psychological needs will be met (p. 132). Antonini Philippe et al. (2011) declared that the coach-athlete relationship is strengthened by a collaborative process involving athletes in decisions and discussions regarding their performance. Coaches engaging athletes to contribute in the training sessions and towards what they are doing allows them to feel a sense of autonomy and increase motivation to train and perform (Antonini Philippe et al., 2011; Felton & Jowett, 2013). This provides athletes with a sense of autonomy to take the initiative and do independent work (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Autonomy-supportive coaching offers athletes a choice and avoids controlling coaching behaviours. Also, it provides “a rationale for requested tasks, rules and limits, acknowledge athletes’ feelings and perspective, provide opportunities for initiative taking and transmit non-controlling competence feedback” (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003, p. 892). Autonomy-supportive coaching behaviours positively influenced athletes’ satisfaction throughout their careers (Felton & Jowett, 2013; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

In addition to the need for collaboration and autonomy-supportive coaching, Davis et al. (2019) indicated that communication skills are paramount to maintaining the coach-athlete relationship. This involves support, motivation, and conflict management strategies. Adding to the importance of communication is Jowett (2005) who stated that “communication promotes the development of shared knowledge and understanding about various issues (e.g. goals, beliefs, opinions, values) and forms the basis for initiating, maintaining, and terminating the coach-athlete relationship” (p. 425). It supports the 3 Cs that are essential in maintaining a coach-athlete relationship: closeness of the relationship, commitment to maintaining their partnership and the complementarity which reflects the motivation of interpersonal behaviours (Jowett,

2005). Forming a coach-athlete relationship requires getting to know one another and coaches to take the time to understand the athletes' intentions and feelings (Jowett, 2005). Overall, coaching behaviours that foster collaboration, open communication, and autonomy support forming a healthy coach-athlete relationship and aid in athlete satisfaction.

The coach-athlete relationship is paramount to an athlete's basic psychological needs – relatedness, communication, autonomy, and interaction. As accentuated above, it is crucial to forming an appropriate and healthy coach-athlete relationship for athletes' satisfaction, motivation, successful performances, personal growth and development, and psychological well-being. It should be obvious that when a coach abuses the power of their role, it will also hinder the coach-athlete relationship. A coach-athlete-centred relationship can support the forming of a healthy partnership. It can be done through a collaborative mindset, communication, and autonomy-supportive coaching, which provides athletes with the ability to make decisions and take the initiative. Although it may not be possible to form an equal coach-athlete relationship due to the authoritative position of a coach, building a healthy partnership should always be a priority. In doing so, it will encourage psychological safety where it is safe to be oneself, learn from mistakes, have a voice, challenge the status quo, and contribute.

The Importance of Psychological Safety within High-Performance Sport

Psychological safety has been proven to be essential for organizational success and innovation. It is the feeling that one is included, safe to learn, contribute, and challenge the status quo in pursuit of organizational success (Clark, 2020). High-performance athletes are consistently pushing their physical and mental boundaries to succeed (Dohlsten et al., 2020). They are also operating under an immense amount of pressure to win medals. Yet, in some instances there is a lack of consideration for an athletes' psychological safety in the process – the

cost is to the athletes' well-being. Psychological safety can support in forming a more sustainable high-performance environment that considers an athlete's need far beyond the physical and performance. Therefore, it is essential for high-performance sport organizations to prioritize the psychological safety of their athletes to mitigate the occurrences of abuse and support the athletes in feeling included, safe to learn, safe to contribute, and safe to challenge the status quo.

Safe to be

Psychological safety is crucial to fostering inclusion which is the first step towards forming a safe team. Inclusion Safety involves being invited into society with the sole qualification of possessing flesh and blood (Clark, 2020, p. 7). There is established respect for the individual's humanity and acceptance into your personal society (Clark, 2020). A safe, welcoming, and inclusive sports system involves feeling a sense of belonging and value that all voices are heard, there is consent and choice, and there are no inequitable barriers (Paralympic, 2019). It means that athletes can engage in meaningful ways that support them in reaching their full potential (Paralympic, 2019). In high-performance sport, inclusion safety can be established by fostering a climate of trust within the team and between coaches and the organization through mutually respectful interactions that are inclusive to all members (Vella et al., 2022). This allows athletes to be themselves in and out of their environment. Athletes must be encouraged to bring their whole selves to the environment in pursuit of success. Establishing inclusion safety is the foundational block towards learning, contributing, and challenging the status quo.

Psychological Safety for Learning

Psychological safety is a prerequisite for continued learning and growth. Clark (2020) defined learners' safety as the feeling that one is safe to ask questions, give and receive feedback,

experiment, and make mistakes without fear of being neglected or rejected. The definition of learning emphasizes this process of making sense of information and experiences (Rynne et al., 2006), and relying on interactions to determine what behaviours are acceptable (Carmeli et al., 2009). A psychologically safe environment enables individuals to be more engaged in learning and free from anxiety to create positive change and improve performance (Carmeli et al., 2009).

In high-performance sports environments, athletes consistently receive feedback on their performance and make errors within their training environments and competitions. They are continually learning and improving their tactical and technical skills to be successful – making learner safety essential to the pursuit of high-performance sport. It is important to note that learning in sport is not limited to athletic skill but also an athlete's sense of self (Penney & McMahon, 2016). Athletes' sense of self is being formed through interactions with the environmental context and the individuals or team members involved (Penney & McMahon, 2016). Additionally, they are trying to navigate their individual physical, social, and cultural contexts, which have monumental implications on learning (Ellmer & Rynne, 2021). Athletes' experiences through the learning process can influence their ability to learn from mistakes and take future risks. Fear of being embarrassed, feeling ashamed, or losing their identity discourages individuals from engaging and learning (Wanless, 2016). High-performance sport can foster positive learning outcomes and less desirable outcomes are primarily determined by an athlete's perception of learner safety within the environment

Growth and learning are often relational, where it relies on the interaction between people to determine areas for improvement and how to move towards a successful outcome (Carmeli et al., 2009). In an athlete's environment, their interactions are mainly with teammates and coaches. Therefore, interpersonal engagement has a significant influence on learning. Edmondson and Lei

(2014) articulated that learning occurs in interpersonal interactions between individuals.

Learning behaviours can be affected by an individual's concerns about the consequences and reactions of taking interpersonal risks, and for learning to be possible, psychological safety must be present (Edmonson, 1999). Athletes spend a significant amount of time and energy training and competing, and those experiences can have significant consequences within and beyond sport (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2016). When learners' safety is present, individuals are willing to be vulnerable and take risks to enhance their learning (Clark, 2020). Alternatively, when learner safety is not present, individuals will refrain from expressing themselves and asking questions (Clark, 2020). Clark (2020) stated that there are "three patterns of fear-inducing emotional danger that remove learner safety and create a state of risk: (1) neglect, (2) manipulation, and (3) coercion" (p. 42-43). Psychological abuse can be experienced through the learning process by coaches using humiliation and belittlement to drive performance. This has negative impacts on athletes' psychological well-being and performance. Hence, the coach-athlete relationship must alleviate any concerns about one's reaction during the learning process and establish a psychologically safe space to learn.

Contributor and Challenger Safety

Clark (2020) identified contributor and challenger safety as crucial in establishing psychological safety. He defined contributor safety as the ability to contribute what you know and what you have learned, and challenge safety as the capability to challenge the status quo without fear. Challenging the status quo is where innovation begins (Clark, 2020). Embracing the vulnerability of challenging the status quo might lead to creative solutions that ultimately improves the state or potential of an individual or team (Clark, 2020). Therefore, both contributor and challenger safety relate to the importance of a psychologically safe environment

for athletes to have autonomy and a sense of ownership of their journey to success. McLaren and Spink (2021) found that athletes are more willing to contribute their ideas and actions towards a shared goal when psychological safety is present. Their results identified that increased cooperative communication was associated with increased task cohesion based on the athletes' perception of the team environment. Alternatively, Spink et al. (2013) revealed that athletes who have the freedom to express themselves in a group and have clear role clarity feel that they can speak freely. In addition, their research indicated an increase in the athletes' willingness to work hard. McLaren and Spink (2021) and Spink et al.'s (2013) research aligns with Edmondson's (1999) research which outlined that feeling safe within a group increases the willingness to contribute. It also aligns with Kahn's (1990) research which found that psychological safety increased commitment and involvement, and Clark's (2020) research that identified contributor and challenger safety to be necessary for innovation to be ignited. It is instrumental for leaders to protect the team's right to speak up, provide the team with opportunities for discourse and ask the team to contribute and challenge specific ideas (Clark, 2020).

Enhancing Psychological Safety in High-Performance Sport

The team leader significantly influences an athlete's ability to learn, feel included, contribute, and challenge within the environment. Coaches have power over their athletes and are responsible for facilitating an environment that promotes feelings of psychological safety. Edmondson (2011) explained how team members are aware of the behaviours and reactions of their leaders which are likely to influence which behaviours are deemed appropriate and safe. The leaders set an example of how to behave (Edmondson, 2011) which influences how athletes experience value, connection, confidence, and comfort in their environment (Gosai et al., 2021). Therefore, the coach has a significant role in influencing psychological safety and is responsible

for inviting athletes to be themselves, learn, contribute, and challenge ideas. An established relationship develops the ability to speak up without concern of interpersonal consequences (Carmeli et al., 2009). Perhaps most importantly, when team members are less focused on self-protection, there is early prevention of problems and accomplishing shared goals (Edmondson, 2011). Thus, coaches need to acknowledge their role in providing athletes with a voice and encourage the sharing of their thoughts and opinions. Coaches can establish psychological safety for their athletes by being accessible and communicative, having positive relationships, establishing appropriate team culture, acting as a positive role model, refraining from adopting negative behaviours such as punishments, and identifying and promoting emotional healing for their athletes (Vella et al., 2022, p.11). Psychological safety has been shown to improve performance and athlete satisfaction, making it essential for coaches to showcase appropriate leadership and establish a psychologically safe environment.

When psychological safety is present, members feel a sense of security to be themselves and safe to learn, contribute, and challenge without fear of repercussions from leadership. Those in a power position obtain authority detrimental to the athletes' sense of safety within their environment. A coach's reactions and behaviour illustrate what an athlete must do to be successful without considering the implications and influence on an athlete's psychological well-being and performance. Athletes are consistently pushing their boundaries in pursuit of success. The prioritization of psychological safety can support an athlete's success through appropriate learning processes, welcoming contributions, and an overall sense of belonging. Psychological safety is integral in establishing a sustainable sports environment where athletes can strive for successful outcomes, but never at the expense of their well-being. As sport leaders, we must

remember that athletes are human beings first, where their overall health and well-being is our number one priority.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Methodology

The research for this project was conducted using action research (AR). AR is the continuous cycle of planning, implementing, and evaluating. It is about doing meaningful research with an organization rather than on an organization focusing on forming an egalitarian partnership. Greenwood and Levin (2007) stated that action research focuses on shared decision-making and collaboration. Partners engage in systemic inquiry and investigation to design a solution to reach the desired goal (Stringer, 2014). It is a collaborative, sustainable way of creating actionable knowledge that empowers organizations to understand their challenges and form solutions to the challenges they are facing. AR engages stakeholders experiencing challenges to take meaningful action to the organization. It has been shown to generate more significant results and give a sense of ownership to the organization (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Bradbury et al., 2019). As Bradbury et al. (2019) stated “action research may be considered a particularly powerful approach to knowledge creation in these times because its processes and practices help stakeholders to learn while addressing the challenges they care about” (p. 7). The Action Research Engagement (ARE) Model (see Appendix B) will be utilized throughout the inquiry. The ARE Model focuses on the planning stages of action research and clarifying the “need, direction and strategies for change, resulting in the development of an organization change action plan” (Rowe et al., 2013, p. 19).

AR is an ideal methodology to explore the complex challenge that RC is experiencing. It would be prudent for RC to explore and understand their organizational challenges collaboratively to learn as an organization. Senge et al. (2015) identified the importance of leaders seeing the more extensive system to understand the complex problems occurring and

develop solutions that benefit the whole system rather than implementing temporary solutions. RC are organizational stakeholders and must understand the nuances of the systems, processes, and mechanisms for change. They then need to contribute to the insights and solutions as they are also researchers. The action for change must be meaningful and relevant to them. An AR methodology will enable critical reflection and generate conversations to co-create the future of RC's organization.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection used a mixed-methods approach, using qualitative and quantitative metrics. Research acknowledges that quantitative and qualitative research approaches can complement one another. Amaratunga et al. (2002) suggested that mixed methods can compensate for the weaknesses in single methods by counterbalancing the strength by combining multiple observers, theoretical perspectives, and methodologies (p. 23). A qualitative approach attempts to understand the what, how, and why through words and observations (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015), whereas a quantitative approach represents concepts through trust in numbers (Amaratunga et al., 2002). The first method utilized in the research is the survey, which included quantitative metrics of a series of Likert scale questions and close-ended multiple-choice, and qualitative open-ended questions. The survey gathered a large amount of data to formulate a comparative analysis to identify occurring themes. The findings from the survey steered the focus group questions to dig further into the main themes identified. A mixed-method approach strengthened the data analysis and validity of the findings.

Survey

The research process began with a survey sent out to all current and retired RC women 7s high-performance athletes, with a total of 29 responses. The survey questions were constructed to uncover the current experiences of athletes perceived psychological safety and the future state

needed for RC to foster a more psychologically safe sport environment. The survey questions were designed to gather the athletes' experience within Timothy Clark's 4 stages of psychological safety: Inclusion Safety, Learner Safety, Contributor Safety, and Challenger Safety. The 4 stages of psychological safety capture all necessary components for psychological safety to be present: a sense of belonging and the ability to learn and grow, to contribute and make a difference and to make things better (Clark, 2020). It was essential to start the data collection process with a survey to comprehend the athletes' experiences within the team and organization and their overall sense of psychological safety throughout their careers. Starting the data collection process with a survey supported gathering a large amount of data on various participants' viewpoints (Glasow, 2005). Further, the online platforms made a survey an attractive method as it quickly reached a wide range of participants with low costs allowing for diverse responses (Evans & Mathur, 2005). The wide range of survey data provided a preliminary understanding of the current state of the athletes' sense of feeling psychologically safe and their vision of the future of RC. As a result, we can start to bridge the gap between RC's organizational priorities and the athletes' priorities (Stroh, 2015). Another advantage of surveys is that they reduce research biases since participants will be answering the same questions, making the data analysis straightforward. The findings from the surveys guided the subsequent method, the focus group.

Although there are many positives to surveys, the potential challenges must be considered. Surveys rely on a significant response rate to reduce biases in data analysis. Also, the method assumes that everyone has access to the internet and has experience with technology. This can lead to a lack of representation and limit reachability, especially when considering a global audience (Evans & Mathur, 2005). In addition, it is important to have well-phrased

questions to ensure meaningful and accurate responses. Poorly constructed questions can lead to participants misinterpreting the question, producing inconsistent data (Evans & Mathur, 2005). Surveys were an attractive method for this capstone to reach a variety of athletes and obtain diverse perspectives.

Focus Group

Once the survey responses were analyzed, the focus group was conducted with 7 athletes. Gathering and analyzing the survey data before proceeding with the focus group helped form questions that cannot be effectively addressed without open-ended and probing questions (Adams, 2015). The focus group questions were semi-structured to support the participants' ability to shape the direction of the conversation. Semi-structured interview questions are flexible in their nature through the use of open-ended questions that enable dialogue between the interviewer and participant (Kallio et al., 2016).

A focus group can generate information on the collective view of the athletes and understand the meaning of their views (Gill et al., 2008). A small group method was ideal for the inquiry to empower the participants to shape the direction of the dialogue. The data generated from the focus group supported an increased understanding of the athletes' experiences and beliefs on what changes might be implemented to support their psychological safety. The strength of conducting a focus group is that it allows participants to develop ideas collectively (Smithson, 2007), and reflect on their individual and collective experience.

The focus group followed a 1-2-4-All liberating structure. Liberating Structures are known to "include, engage, and unleash everyone in contributing ideas and shaping their future" (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014, p. 29). The 1-2-4-All structure can generate ideas and solutions from a large group of participants (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014). The method

begins with silent self-reflection on a proposed question, progresses to generating ideas in pairs, then sharing and developing ideas in foursomes, and ends up altogether to share the critical concepts that emerge (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014). With the limited number of participants, the focus group followed the liberating structure, but rather than a 1-2-4-All, it followed a 1-2-All. The liberating structure was ideal for the inquiry as it naturally builds toward consensus and welcomes diverse perspectives, which is relevant, given the team nature of this sport experience.

There are various components that make a focus group successful: how the group interacts, the pre-existing relationships, and how it is moderated. Gill et al. (2008) stated that pre-existing groups make recruiting and sharing experiences easier due to comfort and familiarity. The familiarity of the athletes with one another supported the data collection and made it easy for them to have deep discussions and challenge each other's views. Another component of success for a focus group is the moderator. The moderator is responsible for guiding the conversation to ensure that essential topics are covered, and everyone's voices are heard (Smithson, 2007; Gill et al., 2008). The moderator must respond respectfully and be aware that their reactions and behaviours could influence the group (Smithson, 2007). My relationship with the athletes and familiarity with the challenges occurring was an asset to the discussion, as well as having a neutral 3rd party (inquiry member) with no connection to the group support in co-moderating the discussion. To mitigate personal bias as much as possible, the inquiry member was responsible for probing questions, while my role was to facilitate the direction of the group. Overall, this focus group generated deep insight into the needs of an organization from a player perspective and allowing the athletes' voices to guide the recommendations put forward to RC.

Project Participants

The participants for the inquiry were the RC Women's Rugby 7s high-performance athletes. There are various women's programs within Rugby Canada; the 15s team, 7s team, and developmental teams. I sent out the survey to all current and past players (65 players) of the Women's 7s team and welcomed 10-12 athletes to participate voluntarily in a focus group. Only the women's 7s athletes were involved in the inquiry, excluding the women's 15s team, the developmental programs, and men's programs, which allowed this inquiry to focus on current challenges occurring within the women's 7s program. This inquiry is unique in that it focuses on a female athlete's perspective within a high-performance environment that has traditionally been led from a male leadership lens.

Another partner in the research methods was the inquiry team member. The inquiry team member piloted the inquiry methods and helped with the data analysis process to mitigate bias. Specifically, the inquiry team members completed the survey and moderated the focus group. The feedback was instrumental in ensuring the questions were clear and would answer the research inquiry. See appendix C for the inquiry team consent form (the consent form is from the MAL capstone site).

Study Conduct

Upon approval from Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board, an electronic email invitation (see appendix D) about the research was sent to prospective participants, including an attached information letter (see appendix E). This email included the survey link encompassing the survey preamble and survey questions (see appendix F). The documents are from the MAL capstone site and modified to the specific context of this capstone thesis. The survey was sent to current and retired athletes in hopes of receiving 45 survey responses. The survey gathered initial

data to guide the semi-structured focus group interview questions and dig further into themes discovered. The participants were sent a summary of key themes found from the survey to keep them engaged and provide visibility of the research process (see appendix G).

Once the survey data analysis was complete, a recruitment email for the focus group (see appendix H) with an attached information letter (see appendix E) was distributed to ensure participants were aware of the focus group process. Upon confirming 7 athletes willing to partake in the focus group, an informed consent letter was sent to those participants (see appendix I). These documents are from the MAL capstone site and have been modified to the specific context of this capstone thesis. The participants were selected on a first-come-first-serve basis. The survey findings guided the formulation of the focus group questions (see appendix J for the focus group questions). After the focus group, interviewees were provided with the findings and were given the opportunity to clarify any possible results (see appendix K). I personally sent out all this information and conducted the focus group as there were no power-over concerns.

Data Analysis and Validity

The data was analyzed using qualitative methods of analysis which included multiple steps. Before beginning the analysis, I familiarized myself with the data and looked through my research journal to be aware of my reflections on the process. Once I familiarized myself to the data, I condensed the large amounts of data into relevant text through codes (Saldana & Omasta, 2017). The codes were used to analyze and categorize participants' statements to employ a consistent approach to the data analysis. Clark's (2020) 4 stages of psychological safety were used as the codes to capture the participants' need to belong, be safe to learn, contribute and challenge, which are directly related to the research questions. The codes allowed me to focus on

specific characteristics and intriguing topics that formed themes across the data set (Nowell et al., 2017). After coding the text, I noticed patterns by identifying themes. The process involved sorting coded data into themes and reviewing to identify patterns (Nowell et al., 2017). At this stage, I began to understand the meaning of the data collected. To ensure validity, I reviewed all the coded data and themes multiple times to ensure they formed a coherent pattern. I continued to refine and group the data until it was succinctly summarized in the text. Lastly, I determined the aspects of that data that each theme captured and why they were essential. The findings and key themes were shared with participants to provide them with an opportunity to offer any other reflections of their experience. It was necessary to ensure no biases were present in the data analysis and it was representative of their stories. The quantitative data from the survey Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions were used to support the qualitative data by confirming any associations and comprehensive patterns when identifying themes.

Ethical Implications

My capstone adhered to the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. The ethics behind the research are essential to the care, protection, and well-being of participants. The Tri-Council Policy “aims to strike an appropriate balance between recognition of the potential benefits of research, and protection of participants from research-related harms, including injustices and breaches of Respect for Persons” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018, p. 9). The Tri-Council Policy states that research involving humans must follow the three core principles of Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). This

section will showcase how the inquiry will prioritize the ethical conduct of research involving humans.

Respect for Persons. The Respect for Persons recognizes the importance of respecting participants' autonomy to make decisions and act based on their choices (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018, p. 6). My capstone ensured the Respect for Persons was fulfilled by seeking ongoing consent and providing visibility to the research process through a detailed outline of the research and open communication. Participants received an email invitation outlining the research process, providing sufficient information in which they were free to choose whether to engage or not. Additionally, I sent out consent letters that outlined the benefits and potential risks to the participants, allowing them to make an informed decision. Participants were made aware that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the research and of the ethical conduct of the research. I also informed participants that I would permanently delete the data collection once the data analysis was complete.

Concern for Welfare. The core principle, Concern for Welfare, prioritizes the quality of the participants' experience of life "such as their physical, mental and spiritual health, as well as their physical, economic and social circumstances" (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018, p. 7). As a researcher, I was responsible for ensuring I was not exposing participants to any unnecessary risk. I provided detailed descriptions of the research process to allow potential participants to assess the potential risk and benefit of engaging. I was responsible for being transparent with participants to ensure they understood the research's purpose and felt safe that the information shared would remain confidential. I provided a safe environment where participants felt in control and a sense of ownership in the process.

Justice. The last core element, Justice, refers to the obligation of treating all participants equally with respect and concern and making sure there is equity in the distribution of benefits and burdens (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). The recruitment process is an essential component of fair and equal research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). Participation in the study was determined by the inclusion and exclusion criteria. All participants within the inclusion criteria received an invitation letter by email to participate in the research. Participants each had an opportunity to engage in the study through the survey and/or the focus group. There was an equal opportunity to participate in the research if desired.

My top priority was to be respectful, responsible, and honest (IDEA, 2015) to adhere to the ethical principles of Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice. I was aware of the sensitivity of the subject of psychological safety in high-performance sport. The information that athletes shared could have caused an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability, making the ethic of care a focus. Bishop (2014) defined the ethic of care as the focus “on supportive and nurturing relationships among self and others. Care is emotional and takes a human approach” (p. 69). It was essential for me to remember that athletes could be sharing stories and information that could put them in a compromising position on the team. I needed to protect their identities. Through collaboration, I could best understand how to represent participants to ensure minimal risk. This means sharing data in aggregated forms or using composite narratives to bring together different elements from various participants (Saldana & Omasta, 2014, p.194). I reassured participants that confidentiality and their safety were my top priority by fostering a collaborative process that eliminates any power dynamics as the known researcher.

Outputs and Knowledge Mobilization

I have opted to pursue a thesis for my MAL capstone to contribute to academic literature and to support organizational change. Aside from the academic write-up, my capstone's output was the presentation of actionable change recommendations to RC. The inquiry gathered the perspective and understanding directly from the athletes to make a case for the need for psychological safety in high-performance sports environments. This endeavour was a bottom-up approach that sought to provide athletes a space to share their experience and ideas for a better future. This research builds a case that psychological safety in sport needs to be further investigated. The ongoing challenge of athletes experiencing maltreatment suggests that there is need for change, and I am hopeful that this thesis will support future research initiatives and showcase the importance of athlete well-being beyond performance. Employing psychological safety principles can reinforce the significance of caring for the athlete's well-being while also supporting successful performance outcomes. The recommendations brought forward to RC were directly related to the inquiry findings, the athletes' stated needs, and their desired future. The collaborative process with my organization partners has resulted in mobilization strategies for the next steps with the recommendations to support action.

Contribution and Application

Participants. The athletes were able to share their personal stories and reflections in a safe and meaningful space. Their experiences were at the forefront of the research process, empowering them to provide recommendations and participate in the change. A bottom-up approach allowed athletes to communicate their wants and needs to feel safe within their environments.

Sponsor. The research benefited a high-performance National Sport Organization, Rugby Canada, to learn about the impact of the high-performance environment on the athlete experience, and what conditions are required to encourage psychological safety within their environment. The overarching goal of this research is to prioritize athlete well-being when making decisions and informing policy, to keep athletes engaged in their sport.

Society. My research is a small yet important contribution to a topic that needs more investigation in high-performance sports organizations. I am hopeful that the research findings will inspire other high-performance sports environments to explore how their system impacts athletes' psychological safety.

Researcher. As a retired professional athlete, I benefit from knowing that I have made a positive contribution to the sports community and developed skills in leading a high-performance sports organization through a change process. I have become well-versed in action-oriented research and take this learning back to my organization. Also, I benefit from fulfilling a requirement as part of obtaining my Master of Arts in Leadership.

Chapter 4: Inquiry Project Finding and Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings, conclusions, and scope and limitations of the inquiry are discussed. This chapter begins with the study findings, which will report the survey and focus group data and illustrate key themes. Next, the study's conclusions are summarized based on the inquiry question and sub-questions, explaining the outcomes for the organization. Lastly, the scope and limitations of the inquiry are described.

The inquiry was constructed in pursuit of answering the main inquiry question: How might Rugby Canada foster a more psychologically safe sport environment? The following sub-questions also guided the inquiry:

1. How have athletes experienced psychological safety or lack thereof in their sport?
2. What are the barriers that get in the way of psychological safety?
3. What roles have coaches and relationships with coaches played in those experiences?
4. How do Rugby Canada athletes describe relationships between psychological safety and high performance?
5. What do Rugby Canada athletes envision as an ideal environment to be the best athlete they can be?

Study Findings

The inquiry methods provided current and retired Rugby Canada Women's 7s athletes with a voice to share their experiences and provide recommendations. Twenty-nine athletes completed the survey, while seven athletes participated in the focus group. The survey gathered data of the athletes' experiences within the program, which supported constructing the focus group questions to gather further insight into the prevalent themes. Timothy Clark's 4 stages of psychological safety were used to code the data to ensure all aspects of psychological safety

were covered – inclusion safety, learner safety, contributor safety, and challenger safety. The data gathered from these two methods suggested that the athletes lacked a sense of psychological safety within their environment. The following are the key themes that presented a challenge and opportunity for change associated with them:

Finding 1: There is a hierarchical environment

Finding 2: The grooming of the athletes

Finding 3: The fear of failure

Finding 4: Athletes want a safer environment

Finding 1: There is a hierarchical environment

The athletes expressed a differential in treatment based on their position on the team, performance, and whether they were considered a “favourite.” The data revealed that the athletes who were not considered a top or “favourite” had different experiences within the coach-athlete relationship. These athletes lacked a sense of belonging, were denied attention and support, and did not feel like they could voice their thoughts or opinions. The coaching staff influences the hierarchy in the team, and the athletes are controlled and affected accordingly.

The hierarchical organization of the team impacted the athletes’ ability to be themselves and feel a sense of belonging. Athletes expressed that they were denied the opportunity to be coached, train with all teammates, and be treated equally on a personal level if they were not a top or favourite player. Based on an athlete’s position on the team, there was an overall sense of denial of attention and support, creating unequal opportunities that impacted the athlete’s feeling of inclusion. The unequal treatment based on athletes’ positioning on the team left them feeling like they did not belong and were reluctant to be their authentic selves.

Additionally, the power of the hierarchical environment within the team determined who was allowed to have a voice and share their ideas. The athletes in a leadership role and favoured by the coaches were more welcome to contribute and challenge the status quo. Otherwise, athletes stated that they were to stay within their lane; otherwise, they were shut down and belittled. “No eye contact, being ignored or consistent negative words or tones around most things I say or do. Change of tone and body language when the coach doesn't like the player asking the question. Automatic defensiveness” (Athlete 2). Athletes who attempted to contribute and challenged the status quo shared that they feared their opinions would impact their position on the team and would be abandoned and punished by coaches. The risk was not worth it unless an athlete was a top or a favourite player. The hierarchical team environment dictated who could contribute and challenge the status quo. As stated by one athlete:

The sense of hierarchy and chicks within the team. The feeling that because I was not part of that hierarchy, I was simply a follower that had to part-take with what the ‘leadership’ group decided. Challenging decisions lead to being singled out and potentially "punished" for not "believing in the team’s decisions (22).

Overall, the athletes shared that they did not feel heard and that the coaches and organization did not value their feedback.

Table 1

The Athletes’ Experience of the Hierarchical Environment

<i>The impacts of the Hierarchical Organization</i>	<i>Examples from athletes</i>

<p>The lack of belonging</p>	<p>2: Saying hello and treating everyone equally was rare, especially when staff seemed stressed.</p> <p>5: Differential treatment based on status within the team.</p> <p>16: Always ups and downs, depends on how the team and coaches feel about you. It's like walking on eggshells.</p> <p>22: Hierarchy within the team, if you're not part of the "top group" you are not important mentality.</p> <p>24: Favouritism and lack of acceptance. If you were not a favourite and did not play the political game you were either not playing or not getting selected. There was no standards/ accountability just subjective opinions.</p> <p>27: Teammates excluding and cliques. Every player out for themselves. Teammates not supporting improvements and growth in each other.</p>
<p>The denial of attention and support</p>	<p>2: Coaches would only coach a select few. Never getting reps with the "top/favourite players."</p> <p>8: Someone ignoring you when you perform poorly or yelling at you.</p> <p>24: staff only focusing on "core" members, leadership group being cliquey and more concerned with hierarchy status than the overall well-being of the team.</p>
<p>Not having a voice and feeling heard</p>	<p>2: In meetings, staff would snap or ridicule questions if they didn't come from captain or a few favourites.</p> <p>7: Negative feedback or defensiveness if I was to voice an opinion.</p> <p>13: Your position on the team, if you were a leader or fav of one of the coaching staff you were more likely to have your voice heard.</p> <p>16: Only a few voices from the favourites on the team are trusted and heard.</p> <p>22: The creation of a hierarchy within the environment, some voices were held higher than others and only those voices could make decisions.</p>

Finding 2: The grooming of the athletes

As stated above, the athletes expressed a lack of recognition if they were not top or favourite athletes. They were denied attention and support, did not have a voice, and did not feel a sense of belonging. The coaches groomed these athletes to behave obediently to ensure they

were not belittled, humiliated, or lose their spot on the team. Even the top and favourite athletes were required to follow guidelines to ensure they did not compromise their position on the team. As athlete 3 shared, “seeing other athletes being ridiculed or completely ignored made me question if and when it was going to happen to me.” The inconsistency of how athletes were treated and the fear of being treated differently has negatively impacted their ability to be themselves and have a voice.

If an athlete was not in this top group or a favourite, they were not welcomed to bring forward new ideas. The fear of abandonment and neglect overweighed the risk of speaking up. Athletes mentioned that they observed people challenging the status quo which led them to “be cut playing time, cut opportunities, punished with conditioning vs rugby, reprimanded in front of the whole team, bullied, pushed aside, alienated, ridiculed and/or completely cut from the program” (2). Athletes were groomed by staff to believe that they could not speak up or challenge the status quo from personal experiences or seeing others punished. When not welcome, the repercussions of questioning a coach overpowered the athletes’ ability to have a voice and put forward their best efforts – leaving athletes with no voice in fear of abandonment and neglect.

There are consequences of this grooming on the team environment. Athlete 27 articulated the effects of the fear within the team dynamic by stating that “Every player out for themselves. Teammates not supporting improvements and growth in each other.” The athletes were groomed to believe that they are only worthy of attention if they are top players or a favourite, and to attain this position on the team; they must fit within the “box.” Otherwise, they sit back and hope that their opportunity will arise to feel a part of the team. Consequently, a “Toxic team culture, players talking behind each other's backs” (Athlete 1). The toxic team culture was propagated by

the actions of the staff, which silenced the athletes and required their obedience to remain a member of the team. Consequently, the athletes were pinned against one another which created an unhealthy, individualistic environment.

Table 2

The Athletes' Experiences of Grooming

<i>Grooming</i>	<i>Examples from athletes</i>
Stay within your "Box"	<p>3: You are only safe to contribute when your opinion aligns with the coaches and leadership group, other than that, stay in your box.</p> <p>5: Punishment for contributing outside of your "designated" skill set.</p> <p>10: Being chastised for trying something new.</p> <p>20: No talking same language. No talking to each other. Players that listen and do what the coach want no matter what.</p>
No disagreeing	<p>7: Negative feedback or defensiveness if I was to voice an opinion.</p> <p>10: Being punished for doing so. Being told I was not grateful and could be replaced if I disagreed with anything.</p> <p>11: You be reprimanded for challenging the status quo and will be cut for not following or going against the coach or the way the team is run.</p> <p>13: Fear of your position on the team being compromised, ideas not being welcomed.</p> <p>15: If we challenged the status quo there was always consequences no matter who you were on the team. We trained in an environment where we were silenced and change wasn't acceptable.</p> <p>16: Shunned by other players and or staff for disagreeing, thinking outside the box was not encouraged.</p>
Learn from experiences what is right/wrong	<p>2: Being snapped at or ridiculed for a question. Feeling attacked or getting benched for trying something in practice.</p> <p>6: Feeling like I'll get punished for asking questions, not feeling like failure is celebrated but instead avoided.</p> <p>10: Being chastised for trying something new.</p> <p>15: Being punished for trying to new skills or critiqued and called out in front of the whole team, despite being a leader and much respected by teammates.</p> <p>20: Personal attacks, being on the spot when asking question.</p>

Finding 3: The athletes fear failure

The data revealed that athletes feared making mistakes and taking risks which impacted their ability to learn and grow. The athletes shared that making mistakes and trying new things would lead to punishing behaviours such as getting yelled at, being humiliated in front of the team, being benched, being neglected, and not being selected. As athlete 22 shared they, “Fear of making mistakes that could affect selection. Feeling degraded or singled out for making mistakes often lead to feeling an athlete should know how to improve rather than informing them and helping them learn.” Thus, rather than athletes being encouraged to learn from their mistakes and take risks to become better, coaches taught them that mistakes were unacceptable and that there would be repercussions. As a result, the athletes did not have the opportunity to learn from failure to enhance learning and growth. Instead, they struggled with the fear of failure.

The athletes’ experiences with their coaching staff taught them that making mistakes or taking risks had consequences, including, being ignored, judged, and left to figure out their learning process on their own. Athlete 7 stated that she feared making mistakes or taking risks because there was “a feeling like someone/or people will give up on you if you do fail at something.” This accentuates the fear of neglect and abandonment when making mistakes and taking risks. Athletes could not risk someone giving up on them or ignoring them in pursuit of excellence therefore they would avoid making mistakes and taking risks at all costs. Overall, the findings presented a lack of safety to try new things and make mistakes. When trying new things and making mistakes, one would be met with consequences – humiliation and abandonment.

Table 3***The Athletes’ Fear of Failure***

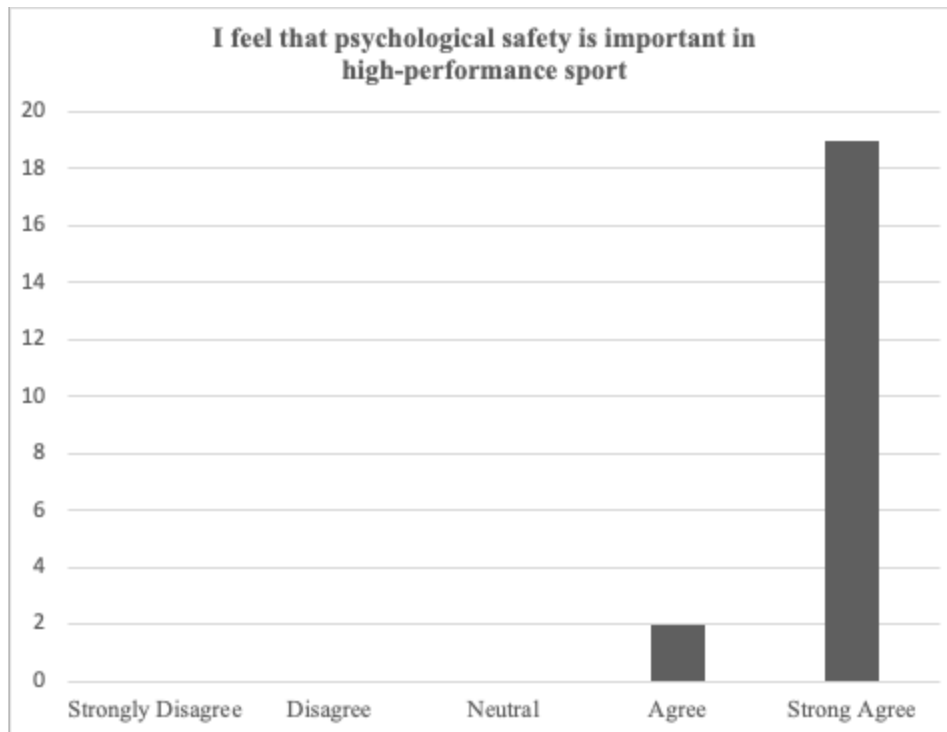
<i>The fear of failure</i>	<i>Examples from athletes</i>
Humiliation	<p>1: Being exposed for my mistakes.</p> <p>8: Getting yelled at when mistakes happen.</p> <p>15: Being punished for trying to new skills, or critiqued and called out in front of the whole team, despite being a leader and much respected by teammates.</p>
Lack of safety to try new things and make mistakes	<p>5: Punishment for making mistakes.</p> <p>6: Not feeling like failure is celebrated but instead avoided.</p> <p>7: Harsh repercussions of failing.</p> <p>16: Have been benched or made fun of in the past for making mistakes as learning.</p> <p>22: Fear of making mistakes that could affect selection. Feeling degraded or singled out for making mistakes often lead to feeling an athlete should know how to improve rather than informing them and helping them learn.</p> <p>24: Mistakes meant non selection unless you were a part of the “core” group. Learned from top down, coaches to leadership group.</p>
Fear of abandonment	<p>8: Someone ignoring you when you perform poorly or yelling at you.</p> <p>11: That I am not allowed or don’t feel comfortable asking questions. That I am not allowed to make a mistake and if I do then it’s something that is scrutinized. Furthermore, other more established players can make many mistakes or play not well and it is fine. This makes the environment very uncomfortable and left me with high anxiety when making mistakes.</p> <p>13: Coaches creating an environment of fear, judgement (not sport based, but biases).</p>

Finding 4: Athletes want a safe environment

The athletes stated that they believe that psychological safety is essential in high-performance sport.

Figure 1

The Importance of a Psychologically Safe Environment



Note: This figure demonstrates the athletes' rating on the importance of psychological safety in sport based on a Likert-scale question in the survey.

The athletes disclosed that they believe a sense of psychological safety is necessary to optimize performance, be their authentic selves, prioritize their well-being, stay engaged, and build healthy relationships. They also shared that they feel psychologically safe when; they are safe to be themselves, feel a sense of belonging, have equal opportunities to compete and be coached, have a voice and feel heard, feedback is welcomed, failure/mistakes are encouraged, and their organization protects them to challenge the status quo. These sub-themes will be further explained within Clark's (2020) 4 stages of psychological safety.

The athletes stated that they felt a sense of inclusion safety when they were valued as human beings and team members regardless of their standing on the team. They desire to be respected and recognized for their individuality where they can show up as their authentic selves.

“Being seen for who I am, what makes me unique, that I have something to offer” (Athlete 1).

They also would like to have equal opportunities within the training environment to compete, be coached and be supported throughout their time in the program. Most importantly, they want to feel welcomed, have a voice and be heard, rather than feeling like they are “just a number or a player passing through” (Athlete 11). The athletes want to be treated equally, with respect and acknowledgement of their place on the team.

The athletes envision learner safety within their environment by being cared for and supported throughout their learning journey. They want to know that they can fail, make mistakes, and try new things without fear of consequences and neglect; “Encouraged in a positive way. Reinforce the idea that failure is okay. Acknowledged that not being perfect is still ok” (Athlete 6). Clark (2020) emphasizes that failure needs to be the expectation of moving forward to achieve learners’ safety. The athletes stated that they want mistakes to be an encouraged component of the performance environment. Another important theme was the need for coaches to readily provide feedback and converse with the athletes about their performance so that they might have an opportunity to learn and grow. “The support, guidance and ability to ask questions creates a safe to learn environment. The freedom to try things and analyze them without judgement” (Athlete 22). To make this possible, coaches should strive to be approachable and open to learning about what each athlete needs. Honest and open communication about an athlete’s performance can support in achieving learner safety.

The athletes stated that to feel a sense of contributor safety, and despite their position on the team, there would be encouragement and engagement, all voices would be included, and there would be a safe space to share their experience in the environment. They feel safe contributing when asked for their ideas and feedback and are encouraged to ask questions and

speak up. “Being encouraged to share and speak my mind. Asking for feedback, acknowledgement from the other that there is always room for growth” (Athlete 6). Athletes feel safe to voice their opinions and engage in dialogue when feedback is approached respectfully and with an open mindset. “All feedback taken with an open mind. Acknowledged. Digging into the feedback to find the root and where the gaps are” (Athlete 21). The athletes want to be respected and feel that their voices are valued. It is not only the contribution on the field that matters but how they are treated and welcomed off the field. In all, athletes want to be involved in discussions and the decision-making processes about both personal and team development.

In order for challenger safety to be present, athletes disclosed their desire to be able to challenge the status quo without consequences. They want to participate in an open dialogue where they can share and receive feedback. “You will be supported or at least not reprimanded for challenging the status quo” (Athlete 11). The athletes want to know that their contributions are valued, where offering feedback results in change when necessary. This would demonstrate that the organization is open-minded and actively listening to the athlete experience. “Open minded individuals and staff creating spaces where our voices can be heard, and to know action will be in place soon after” (Athlete 13). Challenging the status quo requires vulnerability and courage. For the athletes to feel safe in doing so, they want to know there is a reciprocal respect between all stakeholders that will uphold a psychologically safe environment.

Conclusion

The findings highlighted a gap between the athletes’ current and desired environment. The hierarchical nature of the team manifests a challenge of athletes not having equal opportunities to be coached, have a voice, and feel a sense of belonging. Additionally, athletes have adopted a strategy of obedience to their superiors to avoid being humiliated and neglected.

Coaching staff have groomed them to stay within their “box”, and in doing so athletes believe that they must stay quiet. In addition to the belief that one must be obedient and silent to avoid negative consequences, athletes began to fear the ramifications of taking risks or making mistakes, therefore learning and growth became very challenging in the performance environment. It continues to be clear that the athletes have encountered a range of experiences that have impacted their ability to feel psychologically safe within their environment, where they have lacked a sense of inclusion safety, learner safety, contributor safety, and challenger safety.

Study Conclusion

The study led to four conclusions. These conclusions are based on the study findings related to the main inquiry question and sub-inquiry questions, and are supported by the current literature highlighted in Chapter 2.

Conclusion 1: Maltreatment impacted athletes’ sense of psychological safety

Conclusion 2: There is a hierarchical and power-over culture that requires balancing

Conclusion 3: The athletes want an environment that is safe to be oneself, learn from mistakes, and take risks as these are essential elements to achieving optimal performance

Conclusion 4: The athletes want the organization and coaches to take a humanistic approach

Conclusion 1: Maltreatment impacted athletes’ sense of psychological safety

Conclusion 1 answers the sub-inquiry questions: How have athletes experienced psychological safety or lack thereof in their sport? What are the barriers that get in the way of psychological safety? It is supported by finding 1, there is a hierarchical environment; finding 2, the grooming of athletes; and finding 3, the fear of failure.

All athletes have the right to a safe environment, and unfortunately, the presence of maltreatment has negatively impacted RC athletes' feelings of psychological safety. The athletes encountered psychological maltreatment as a means of punishment, control, and obedience. The findings suggested that the athletes who were not considered a top or a "favourite" were more likely to experience psychological maltreatment. The athletes experienced maltreatment in the forms of verbal psychological abuse and the denial of attention and support. As described in Chapter 2, verbal psychological abuse involves yelling, shouting, belittling, name-calling, degrading comments and humiliation; and the denial of attention and support is identified as being ignored or being expelled or excluded from practice (Stirling & Kerr, 2008b). Athletes experienced maltreatment when they made mistakes, performed poorly, spoke up, took risks, and asked questions – resulting in athletes being fearful. The findings of maltreatment within RC women's 7s team align with the current literature, where these forms of psychological abuse are present in a high-performance sports environment, and the risk rises as athletes progress up the performance ladder. Many athletes at the elite level experience being belittled, shouted at, humiliated, threatened, and ignored throughout their careers; and their perception of these behaviour being psychological abusive can be dependent on their level and success (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). The findings outline athletes' maltreatment experience as a debilitating factor in athletes' performance and overall well-being.

As previously described, maltreatment was used as a means of control and demanding obedience from the athletes; specifically, it was used to require athletes to stay within their "box" and discouraged athletes from taking risks, making mistakes, and sharing feedback – this can be referred to as grooming. The Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS) defines grooming as inappropriate behaviours that seem normal and gradually

engage in boundary violations (Canadian Safe Sport Program, 2021). The athlete trusts the coach who provides an opportunity to be successful; meanwhile, the coach may be abusing their title by withholding rewards and resources (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). The RC athletes believed these coaching behaviours were necessary to endure to succeed and not compromise their position on the team, hence normalizing the psychological maltreatment experienced and eventually investigated. The literature does not address the emotional grooming process that occurs and normalizes these behaviours. There needs to be further research into the emotional grooming of athletes to understand the use of maltreatment as a means of control.

Overall, the coaches' tactics of power and control negatively impacted athletes' ability to feel psychologically safe within their environment. The maltreatment posed a barrier to the athletes' sense of belonging, learning from failure, and having a voice. The hierarchical organizational structure and power differentials influenced their inability to share concerns, which will be addressed in Conclusion 2.

Conclusion 2: There is a hierarchical and power-over culture that requires strategies to balance

The hierarchical structure within the team and power-over culture was a significant influence on the athletes' feeling of psychological safety. Conclusion 2 answers the sub-inquiry question: What are the barriers that get in the way of psychological safety? What roles have coaches and relationships with coaches played in those experiences? It is also supported by finding 1, the presence of a hierarchical team structure; and finding 2, the grooming of athletes.

It is suggested that RC's hierarchical organizational structure enabled a toxic performance environment that diminished psychological safety for the athletes within the system (see appendix L for RC's Organization Structure). Mountjoy et al. (2016) stated that the risk of

psychological abuse is rooted in the power differentials. In the case of the women's 7s team, the head coach was responsible for two roles. They were both the head coach and the high-performance director, with no other individuals overseeing either role. This suggested that there was a significant power over dynamic between the coach and athletes, with little external accountability to ensure the health and well-being of the stakeholders. This inquiry finding made it clear that this system was operating in a silo.

The centralization of power allowed leaders to shape the environment with little resistance or accountability. The structure within the team became a significant barrier to the athlete's ability to feel a sense of psychological safety, which the literature indicates is essential for successful high-performance environments. The hierarchy of the team was based on the coaches' identified "favourites" and top performing athletes. Athletes expressed that being a top or "favourite" influenced how they were treated by the coaching staff. Position on the team was influential on the level of attention and support received and the level of influence an athlete could have on the rest of the team. The data also suggested that the hierarchy was an indicator of value and inclusion, where top athletes would be rewarded with more opportunities. As shared by athlete 22 "Hierarchy within the team, if you're not part of the 'top group' you are not important mentality." It was favourable for the athletes to be considered a top or "favourite" in order to reach their desired goals. The hierarchical structure was normalized, as the risk of disrupting the system was of great detriment to the athletes and their longevity in the program. Again, this highlights the coaches' abuse of power and how the organizational structure neglected the athlete experience. Ultimately the hierarchical structure within the team left athletes' questioning their position and how to navigate their own success within the system. These factors all influenced their performance, satisfaction, and psychological well-being.

In this situation, the coach determined the athletes' future on the team, their playing time and selection. Edmonson (2011) revealed how team members are hyper-aware of the leader's behaviours, influencing members' perception of appropriate behaviour. This relates to the findings where RC women's 7s athletes were taught how to behave based on a fear of not being selected or losing their spot on the team. The coach's use of power-over modeled the necessary behaviour for the athlete to be successful in the established performance culture – follow as I say and do.

The athletes' motivation to be successful and the coaches' power over the relationship normalized the psychologically abusive practices experienced in this environment. Athletes expect that they can rely on their coaches as they can provide the opportunity to achieve their goals and provide rewards (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). As identified in the literature review, the normalization of maltreatment is guided by the belief that these coaching methods are necessary to obtain success. Specifically, these practices are believed to deter failure, maintain control, test resilience and commitment, develop toughness, and increase internal competition (Roberts et al., 2020). Although this type of environment may have a negative impact on the well-being of the athlete, they believe that these coaching practices will lead to successful outcomes and that the coach is acting within their best interest (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). A fear of loss of their athletic careers is a strong deterrent in athletes' reporting coaches' abusive practices (Stirling & Kerr, 2009), thus normalizing these coaching practices.

As addressed in Chapter 2, the coach-athlete relationship impacts an athlete's satisfaction, motivation, successful performances, personal growth and development, and psychological well-being. When a coach abuses their position of power and a hierarchy is established, this dynamic can become a barrier to forming a healthy coach-athlete relationship,

which has been established as essential within a sports environment and instrumental in developing a psychologically safe environment. Coaches play a significant role helping athletes feel valued, connected, confident and comfortable (Gosai et al., 2021). As highlighted in the findings, when the coach-athlete relationship lacks an egalitarian partnership, it can create a divide between coaches and athletes. This divide became more significant when athletes pushed against the system, which resulted in consequences for the athletes. It is important to note that a healthy coach-athlete relationship can only be realized through a collaborative partnership that is based on relational components such as mutual trust, respect, liking, support, openness, cooperation, and responsiveness (Jowett et al., 2012). The findings suggested that in this case that the abuse of power and the established hierarchy impeded the formation of an appropriate coach-athlete relationship.

In conclusion, the hierarchical organization and power-over characteristics of this dynamic need to be balanced in pursuit of psychological safety. Roberts et al. (2020) found that those who possess power can abuse it with fewer consequences and less resistance, making psychological abuse more likely to occur (p. 23). The first prominent challenge that enabled the adverse effects of a power imbalance was the coach's position as both the high-performance director and head coach of the women's program. Therefore, there was centralized power and an absence of accountability which according to Thoroughgood and Padilla (2013) can lead to disastrous outcomes. The athletes were susceptible followers "who by the nature of their personalities and associations with key leaders and institutions, either submit to or actively join in the leader's toxic mission" (Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013, p. 145). In the case of the RC athletes, they were conformers to the environment, where fear and insecurity led them to obey and remain silent with the hope they would reach their athletic goals (Thoroughgood & Padilla,

2013). Athletes were taught how to behave through the coaches' use of belittling, humiliating, or losing their spot on the team. The centralized power of the coach enabled practices that diminished the athletes' sense of worth on the team and impeded the formation of a healthy coach-athlete dynamic. To summarize this conclusion, centralized power was destructive and toxic in the environment.

Conclusion 3: The athletes want an environment that is safe to be oneself, learn from mistakes, and take risks as they are essential elements to achieving optimal performance

Conclusion 3 answers the sub-inquiry question: How do Rugby Canada athletes describe relationships between psychological safety and high performance? Conclusion 3 is supported by finding 4, the athletes want a safe environment. The athletes described the relationship between psychological safety and high-performance sport as an essential component to their performance; a foundation upon which they can confidently take risks, ask questions, try new things, and develop as a player. Psychological safety is identified as necessary for the RC athletes to be successful in their athletic pursuit. High performance sport demands athletes to perform under pressure and win medals, where they consistently push their physical and mental boundaries. Given the demands of high-performance sport, creating a psychologically safe environment can support athletes in performing at their highest potential. Athletes can perform their best when they can be authentic, learn, contribute, and challenge the status quo.

Athletes consistently learn, receive feedback, and require support in high-performance sports environments. How an athlete experiences failures in their environment can have a significant impact on their ability to learn and grow. When an athlete develops a fear of being embarrassed or ashamed, it will discourage them from engaging in the learning process (Wanless, 2016). Rugby is an unpredictable and dynamic sport. Failure and making mistakes are

a part of the game, and how they are approached by the team can influence how an athlete will engage in learning in the future. In a leadership role, the coach has a responsibility to ensure their reactions and behaviours demonstrate that athletes can be themselves, make mistakes, and take risks. Edmondson (2011) stated that a leaders' response to situations significantly impacts their team members, therefore it can be argued that developing a healthy coach-athlete relationship should be a priority in high performance environments as means to cultivate psychological safety.

A team leader is an important influence on how a team experiences psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). In the analysis of the data the athletes pointed out that if the organization's goal is to win medals, there should be appropriate resources to support the coach-athlete relationship in being a dynamic that enables mutual respect, relatedness, openness, autonomy, and competence. Psychological safety can be established within the coach-athlete relationship by valuing feedback from all stakeholders. Coaches need to remain approachable, available, and actively seek the athletes' input to reduce relational barriers (Edmonson, 2011). The formation of a healthy coach-athlete relationship can also help set clear expectations for the athletes, where it supports athletes in role clarity and speaking freely (Spink et al., 2013). It empowers all stakeholders with a clear path to success, thus reducing the likelihood of coach-athlete dissatisfaction over time. In a healthy dynamic, the hierarchy of athletes will naturally emerge, where athletes are clear on their role and contribution to the team.

Conclusion 4: The athletes want the organization and coaches to take a humanistic approach

The athletes envision a humanistic approach in coaching as an ideal environment for optimal athlete development. This conclusion answers the sub-inquiry question: What do Rugby Canada athletes envision as an ideal environment to be the best athlete they can be? Athletes

want an environment that welcomes all parts of themselves. Athletes embrace the pressure of performance to be successful. To feel safe in the performance environment, they want to be treated as people first. They envision a humanistic approach for the organization and coaches to “get to know the human first” (Athlete 4), establishing mutual respect and trust within the relationship. It is a more holistic approach to high-performance sport, considering the athletes’ technical abilities, but also their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs.

A humanistic approach focuses on promoting athletes’ personal growth and development (Falcão et al., 2017). It prioritizes athlete-centred coaching, emphasizing the athletes’ need to make decisions and be autonomous to enhance self-awareness, growth, and development (Cassidy, 2010; Falcão et al., 2017). The literature identified the importance of athletes having autonomy throughout their careers to empower them with choices and avoid controlling coaching techniques, supporting the psychological safety of the athletes. Humanistic coaching arose from the concern of coaching methods that lacked personal empathy, coach-centred decision making, and one-way teaching where the coach was over-powering the partnership (Falcão et al., 2017, p. 280). A coach-athlete partnership promotes a learning process and collaborative mindset to form clear guidelines for success that are agreed upon and allow for individualized coaching. A partnership that welcomes approachability, honesty and adaptability provides athletes with an equitable opportunity for selection and promotes their safety through transparent and clear expectations.

The humanistic aspect of high-performance sport points to building relationships between organizational members. The athletes mentioned that they want to feel more connected to the organization and develop stronger relationships with the Board of Directors, other RC athletes and members, coaches, and the CEO in pursuit of a holistic community. Connection is an

essential component of athlete satisfaction, psychological safety, development, and performance. Specifically, the relationship with the coach is the most influential as the athlete spends the majority of their time with them. Humanistic coaching is achieved by forming relationships with the athlete to understand their individual needs. Coaches are responsible for the development of athletes and therefore should prioritize understanding individual athletes' needs to best support their learning, development, and performance (Gearity, 2012; Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014).

Athletes quickly learn how coaches need to be approached, yet there is generally no reciprocity and therefore no partnership can be established. Athlete 6 shared the need for coaches to be adaptable to coaching, knowing their players and how they need to be supported. Edmondson (2011) stated that, in order to understand what people truly need, leaders need to be available and approachable, invite input and feedback, and model openness and fallibility. Thus, supporting the formation of a psychologically safe environment, which we have established is the foundation for athlete performance and satisfaction. This sets an example of how to behave and models how power can be used for the benefit of all stakeholders – the power to, with and within. When the organizational goals and purpose are to obtain medals and win, it overshadows the individual needs of each athlete and has the potential to enable destructive coaching techniques. The belief that abusive coaching techniques lead to results and a “win at all costs” paradigm, is outdated. A humanistic approach highlights the meaning of sport and abolishes the need for toughness and winning to be a necessary component of high-performance sport (Jacobs et al., 2017; Stirling, 2013). Athletes deserve to be treated as equal partners in a relationship, where they feel a sense of belonging and know their role on the team. It must be acknowledged that it takes effort to establish a healthy coach-athlete-organization relationship, but we must remember that

establishing investments in healthy dynamics can support performance far more than outdated tactics.

Scope and Limitations of the Inquiry

The scope of the inquiry was limited to the Rugby Canada Women's 7s team, current and retired athlete members. There was interest in studying this group of athletes as many of them were impacted by the recent investigation of allegations against the head coach, where the allegations were directly related to the topic of psychological safety. These allegations were indicative of a sport system that had let the athletes down in establishing a safe environment. In pursuit of creating a psychologically safe environment, there was a need to understand the athletes' experiences in the current system. Sixty-five athletes were engaged to gather data about the current and desired future state of psychological safety within their environment. The purpose of the inquiry was to understand what athletes need to feel safe and then provide them with an opportunity to provide recommendations to the organization for positive change. Although the inquiry was limited to the women's 7s team, these findings will support the organization in prioritizing a safe environment for their stakeholders. It should be noted that there are various forms of maltreatment that athletes can experience in high-performance sport, but the scope for this inquiry was limited to psychological abuse. Overall, the scope of the inquiry was limited to support the immediate needs of the organization.

Within the scope of the inquiry, there were some challenges. The psychological and emotional trauma and fatigue from the recent investigation may have deterred some athletes from engaging in the inquiry. The inquiry required athletes to consider how their experiences impacted their psychological safety. The need for athletes to rekindle their emotional trauma led to a less than anticipated engagement rate. Of the 65 engaged athletes, 29 responded to the

survey, and 7 participated in the focus group. The 29 responses to the survey were a reasonable amount given the circumstances and current state of the team. There were many incomplete submissions with a large number of open-ended questions skipped. This could have been due to the depth of reflection that the survey questions required and the quantity of open-ended questions which were time-consuming. In hindsight, I should have limited the open-ended questions to encourage a higher participation rate. The number of open-ended questions that were skipped may have skewed the data. With regards to the focus group, I hoped to engage 10-12 athletes and had 7 athletes participate. The participants were passionate about the topic and shared their recommendations for organizational action. Overall, given the circumstance of the emotional engagement required for the inquiry, the data gathered was insightful to the inquiry questions and provided actionable recommendations to bring forward to the organization towards positive change.

Chapter 5: Inquiry Implications

In Chapter 5, the recommendations resulting from the inquiry will be outlined with an action plan based on the study findings and conclusions outlined in Chapter 4. I will describe the next steps necessary in the change process guided by the findings and discuss the organization implications for Rugby Canada. Lastly, I will close the chapter with implications for future inquiry within the organization.

The study recommendations are based on the findings, conclusions, and the relevant literature which guided the main inquiry: How might Rugby Canada foster a more psychologically safe sport environment? With the addition of five sub-inquiry questions:

1. How have athletes experienced psychological safety or lack thereof in their sport?
2. What are the barriers that get in the way of psychological safety?
3. What roles have coaches and relationships with coaches played in those experiences?
4. How do Rugby Canada athletes describe relationships between psychological safety and high performance?
5. What do Rugby Canada athletes envision as an ideal environment to be the best athlete they can be?

Study Recommendations

The following recommendations were put forward regarding the organization's needs:

1. New member onboarding
2. Clear selection guidelines
3. Support the formation a healthy coach-athlete partnership
4. Provide athletes with a safe platform to share feedback and complete a yearly audit

Recommendation 1: New Member Onboarding

To support establishing a psychologically safe environment at RC, there is a need to implement a new member onboarding process. This action was identified in the survey and focus group findings. The findings illuminated the athletes' struggle to feel a sense of belonging, feel safe to be themselves and feel supported within the organization. These feelings were associated with the athletes' lack of understanding of the organization's cultural values, goals, and priorities, and the knowing how to access available support and resources. This suggests a disconnect between the organizational culture and the resources provided to the athletes. To address this gap, being welcomed into the organization as a newcomer through an onboarding process will support the goals of psychological safety and inclusion.

The transition to elite sport can be daunting; an athlete undergoes a drastic life change. Integrating a new member into the organization impacts the formation of relationships and influences how they will perform and fit within the group (Gazmin, 2021). The term onboarding refers to the process of introducing new members to their role – introducing them to the organization's goals, values, policies, expectations, and processes (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). It is also the “process of socialization for new members into an established group or organization” (Gazmin, 2021, p. ii). Properly socializing new members into their environment reduces uncertainty and anxiety, positively impacts their satisfaction, provides role clarity, and strengthens relationships and confidence (Gazmin, 2021). Therefore, there is a strong case that an onboarding process for the organization will showcase its support and value for the athlete.

The athletes shared that new athletes were integrated into the program passively without an introduction to the organization's cultural values, goals, resources, and members. As a result, the athletes often felt intimidated and unwelcomed. Establishing an onboarding process must prioritize making newcomers feel safe in their new environment. Bauer (2010) identified four

essential building blocks to the onboarding process: compliance (policy-related), job clarification, culture, and connection. These four building blocks can support athletes' integration and socialization into a new environment.

The organization must provide access to policies and procedures to ensure transparency for new members. Policies outlining consent are necessary to ensure the information shared between staff about an athlete is appropriate and consensual (Personal communication, January 20th, 2022). It can support athletes in feeling comfortable being vulnerable and safe within their environment, knowing there is established confidentiality. Also, RC must clearly communicate what resources are available if they require support. The data collected in the focus group suggested that if the number of medals measures organizational success, RC must provide the tools and resources to meet these expectations.

“Are we really going to equate success to the number of medals in 2021. And I think that if the inherent goal of these organizations is success equals number of medals and if that's what it's going to be and that's what's going to continue to be, then the athletes need the appropriate resources” (Athlete 5).

On top of the need for resources, athletes shared the need to understand the cultural vision, goals, and values and be provided with clear role expectations.

“Making sure that the culture is communicated throughout the organization. What do we want to do this year and how do we make it accountable like nobody's accountable for any” (Athlete 4).

“What's everybody's goal as a player coach, CEO, board member like just kind of understanding a little bit more of what's going on” (Athlete 6).

Lastly, there is a need for connection, which involves establishing interpersonal relations necessary for performance, satisfaction, and inclusion. New athletes at Rugby Canada need to be integrated within their respective teams and the larger organization. To enhance the feeling of connectedness, there would be benefits in introducing key organization members as part of the onboarding process. “The organization needs to do better on communicating and connecting with their athletes” (Athlete 11). Organizational success is not possible without all parts of the systems – the players, coaches, administration, and leadership team. Taking the time to connect supports forming a community and culture that demonstrates care and trust for one another.

Overall, implementing an onboarding process can support the performance and satisfaction of new athletes joining RC. An onboarding process can address the gap in the athletes’ lack of cultural understanding, connection to the larger organization, and knowledge of available tools and resources. Athletes would be provided with the necessary resources and policies, role responsibilities, culture, and form connections within the organization. An onboarding process sets an athlete up for success and welcomes them into a new environment. It is a simple way to ensure athletes feel psychologically safe and know they will be cared for when integrated into the system.

Recommendation 2: Clear selection guidelines

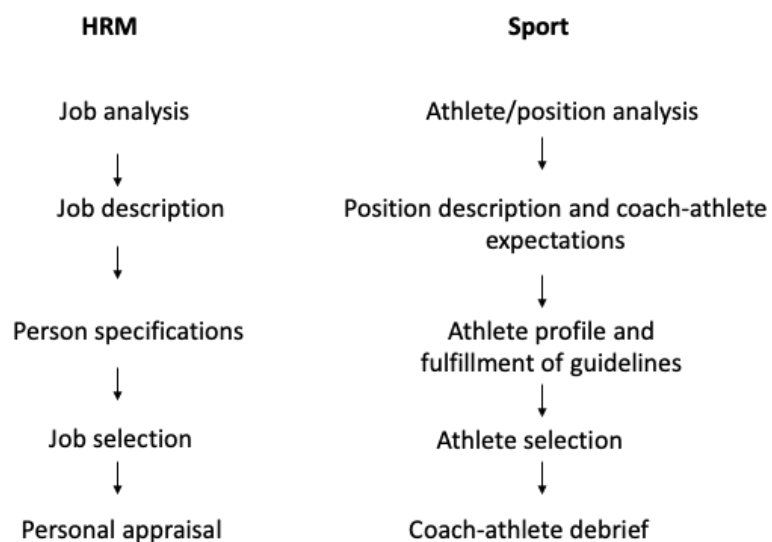
The findings revealed athletes being treated differently based on their status within the team. As a result, athletes felt that coaches did not provide equitable opportunities for selection in major tournaments. Throughout the inquiry, participants shared concerns that some athletes had to adhere to specific standards whereas others did not. It formed a sense of inequality within the team and supported the formation of a dysfunctional hierarchy. The coach’s role is to make

team selections and determine athletes' funding. There should be clear guidelines and selection criteria in place to provide accountability to both coaches and athletes.

Establishing selection criteria can encourage a fair selection process by keeping selectors accountable (Johnston et al., 2021). Although Johnston et al. (2021) acknowledged that a selection process cannot be 100% accurate, it is still necessary to limit the potential selection errors. A selection criterion is a set of standards from which athletes are judged by the coaches (Bradbury & Forsyth, 2012). It involves identifying the best athlete for the job based on the athlete's role and position. Specifying performance criteria and expectations can support athletes in understanding what must be done for selection. Bradbury and Forsyth (2012) correlated the workplace Human Resource Management (HRM) selection process to obtain components that are necessary for the athlete selection process (see figure 2).

Figure 2

HRM selection process translated to a sports context



Note: HRM selection process translated to a sports context. Adapted from “You’re in; you’re out: Selection practices of coaches,” by T. Bradbury and D. Forsyth, 2012, *Business and Management: An International Journal*, 2, p. 9.

There is first a need to identify the abilities and qualities needed from an athlete to fill a particular position. The written position description provides concrete and clear guidelines of the necessary expectations for selection. This position description should include an agreement and expectation formed by both the coach and athlete and their commitments to one another. Next, the athletes’ competencies and attributes, athlete profile, determine their eligibility for selection (Bradbury & Forsyth, 2012). Aiming for fair selection guidelines and a non-bias selection process, selection should also be based on the athletes’ fulfillment of the guidelines as outlined in the coach-athlete agreement. Lastly, an athlete debrief involves the evaluation of the athlete’s performance and suggestions to support development (Bradbury & Forsyth, 2012). The literature does not indicate a list of appropriate selection criteria but rather recommends critical elements to form an equitable process. This includes developing a selection policy detailing how athletes will be assessed, who will decide the selection, and the process of selection (Bradbury & Forsyth, 2012). It also requires the ongoing commitment to re-evaluate the selection process and adapt to the organizational needs, transparently involving the athletes. In establishing a selection policy criterion, it should be noted that each sport will be unique to meet the needs of a specific context.

Athletes have a right to a fair selection process, one that is free of favouritism. The RC athletes expressed concerns about coaches not being held accountable for their selection process:

“Having like a single point of contact whether it’s a coach or whether it’s a single decision maker. A lot a lot can be missed or overlooked” (Athlete 2).

“The power and the responsibility disperse to more people it’s just like it’s a recipe for failure and dictatorship when it's just on one person” (Athlete 3).

Implementing a selection process would address the concerns of the amount of control coaches have in the selection process and ensure it is fair and unbiased. By implementing a selection process, the power is dispersed and supports athletes in having more autonomy-based incitement. Furthermore, the process would be less about attempting to become the coach’s “favourite” and instead focused on meeting the criteria through technical ability and on demand performance.

Developing a selection criterion for RC high-performance programs can support an equitable selection process that keeps coaches accountable to the established standards. To be selected, athletes are evaluated based on their role and position in comparison to the performance standards. This supports athletes to be autonomous since there are clearly communicated expectations to be successful. A selection process disperses a coach's power by holding them accountable for their choices and selecting athletes who fulfill the necessary components. Athletes strive for selection, and clear guidelines give them the knowledge of what is necessary to succeed while keeping coaches accountable for their selection process.

Recommendation 3: Support the formation of a healthy coach-athlete partnership

The literature review indicates that the coach-athlete relationship influences athletes’ satisfaction, motivation, successful performances, personal growth and development, and psychological well-being. Specifically related to psychological safety, the coach-athlete relationship is crucial to an athlete’s sense of belonging, and ability to learn and improve, have a voice, and contribute their ideas. All of which inherently increases the athlete’s willingness to

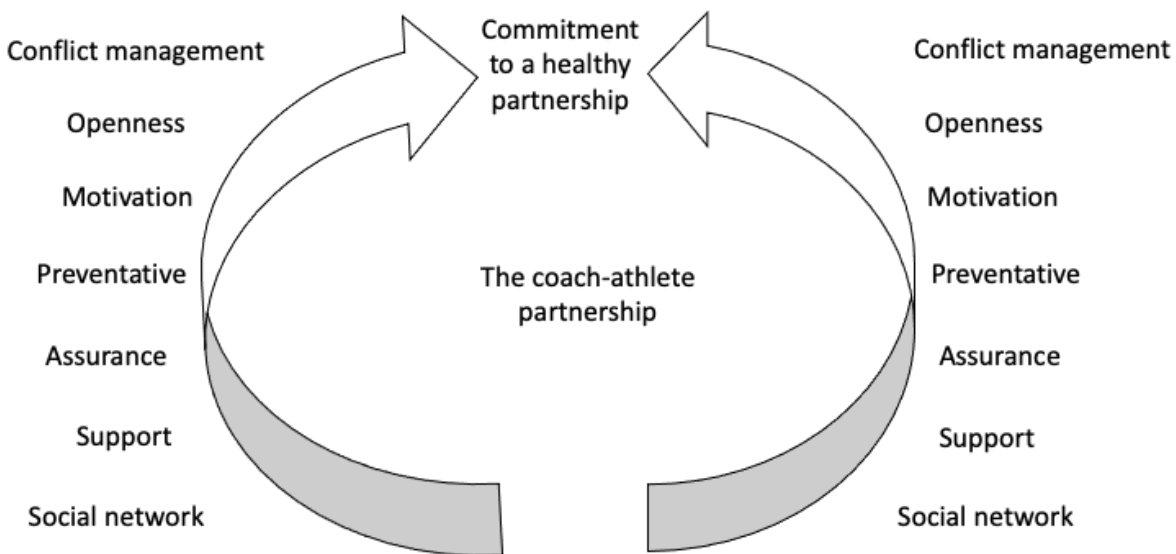
work hard and feel a sense of task cohesion – influencing the team culture. The coach's leadership style significantly impacts the athlete and team outcomes (Walinga et al., 2021), and their reactions and behaviours illustrate the expectations and requirements for an athlete to be successful. Waligna et al.'s (2021) research found that coaches who encompassed non-hierarchical values and beliefs, through non-hierarchical structure and systems, fostered an environment that enabled athletes to all become leaders within their sport careers. This provided athletes with a "total focus they were able to allocate to their performance as a result of the cultural integrity achieved through the alignment of values, principles, processes, structures and actions" (Waligna et al., 2021, p. 97). Forming a coach-athlete partnership is a step towards a non-hierarchical team structure which emphasizes the athlete as a human first and creates a safe space for athletes to learn and fail in pursuit of success. However, this is no easy feat as coaches are not necessarily taught how to sustain appropriate relationships with their athletes. Instead, they are primarily versed in their knowledge of sport's technical and tactical aspects. Based on the study findings, coaches need support in managing their coach-athlete relationship to ensure their techniques are not psychologically harming their athletes – in turn affecting their longevity and performance.

The coach-athlete relationship is successful when there is trust and respect. The athletes shared that they want to be treated as equal partners in the relationship and for coaches to take a humanistic approach in their coaching strategies. The literature has indicated the importance of forming relatedness within the coach-athlete relationship for optimal performance and satisfaction. The challenge will be ensuring these relationships are being developed appropriately and keep both sides accountable for their actions. Rhind and Jowett's (2010) COMPASS model illustrates seven main categories that support and maintain the formation of a healthy coach-

athlete relationship: conflict management, openness, motivation, positivity, advice, support, and social networks (see figure 2).

Figure 3

The COMPASS model



Note: The COMPASS model of relationship maintenance in the coach-athlete relationship.

Adapted from “Relationship Maintenance Strategies in the Coach-Athlete Relationship: The Development of the COMPASS Model,” by Daniel J. A. Rhind & Sophia Jowett, 2010, *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 22:1, p. 118.

Conflict management focuses on the importance of setting expectations between the coach and the athlete and appropriate consequences and discussions of unmet expectations. Openness relates to the need to talk about topics not related to sport and sharing one’s feelings. Motivation is the maintenance of the coach-athlete relationship. It is the ability for the coaches “to show that they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to help the athletes achieve their goals and athletes need to show that they have the abilities to meet the expectations of the coaches” (Rhind and

Jowett, 2010, p.114). Positivity is the need for a coach to adapt their coaching strategies to meet the athlete's preference. It also means that coaches are being fair and dealing with their challenges outside of the sporting context to ensure it does not impact their coaching behaviour. Advice is the importance of discussing issues related to training or competition and constructively providing feedback. Support is the need to show that one is committed to the coach-athlete relationship through assurance, providing support after a poor performance, and personal support. Lastly, social networks are defined as spending time outside of sport together and with the shared network. These components are essential to forming a coach-athlete relationship and can be standards that coaches and athletes agree to when forming the partnership. It requires a degree of commitment to the complexities of the relationship and process. Athlete 6 in the focus group connected the need for these components to be prioritized within their environment:

How does the coaching staff learn how you accept your feedback like it's that honest approach and being like this is how I work best and, like the coaches being adaptable to that of knowing their players and kind of getting to know them in that sense. And also like having that positivity approach on like these are work on rather than being like well this was shit. We also talked about having those more one on one personal meetings with coaching staff and more established players, because you get them every what couple months or just after a tour or after a camp, rather than having those everyday conversations, like the more personal conversations of what do you need from the environment.

The coach-athlete relationship is instrumental to the athletes' psychological safety and prioritizing the formation of these relationships can create a safe environment for athletes to both

experience success and failure. It would benefit the organization to facilitate and enable the coaches and athletes' partnership. This begins with providing coaches with the tools and resources on leadership strategies and an understanding of how their behaviours impact the team.

Athlete 1 in the focus group brings light to this challenge:

The awareness piece around what the high-performance environment demands of the athletes and the staff like that performance has a lot to do with like your funding and what your program looks like and, obviously, if it's a lot of pressure on the athletes, and especially the staff to make sure that we're performing. If there's awareness around that and realizing that staff might feel an extra amount of pressure which they can put on to athletes at times when we don't need that pressure. How can we avoid a potential really negative outbursts from the staff if we don't perform well, how can we be proactive, so we see the signs early enough maybe that staff can go and get support or like have a way to manage and cope, rather than just like internalizing all this pressure, and then it comes out in really toxic ways so that was just something I feel like.

In all, the coach-athlete relationship is an essential partnership in experiencing a psychologically safe environment. Enabling a healthy coach-athlete relationship has positive implications on an athlete's performance and well-being and therefore, should be prioritized to ensure athletes are psychologically safe within their environment.

Recommendation 4: Provide athletes with a safe platform to share feedback and complete a yearly audit

The last recommendation is supported by the athletes' need for a safe space to share their individual and collective concerns and feedback. The athletes shared that they have never felt safe voicing their concerns due to the lack of neutral party evaluations. In the current system, the

feedback channels led directly back to the coach, which resulted in athletes being punished and humiliated. Moving forward, RC should consider that a psychologically safe environment invites feedback, and all concerns are addressed in an appropriate manner. Therefore, RC might consider providing a neutral party for athletes to voice feedback in confidence. In addition, it is recommended to complete a yearly team audit to gather data and feedback of the team's environment and evaluate the athletes' satisfaction. Having someone safe for the athletes to approach with concerns and a yearly cultural audit will support individual and organizational accountability.

The athletes recommended the need for the organization to protect athletes when they choose to challenge the status quo and provide feedback. In addition, they offered tangible recommendations which are instrumental to creating change.

1. Providing safe ways to flag inappropriate behaviours
2. Anonymous feedback channels
3. Confidential exit interviews

The recommendations brought forward from the athletes are instrumental in creating change in the feedback process. The protection of the athletes to challenge the status quo will provide a sense of unity and suggest that they are valued members of the organization. They want a structure that provides them with a safe space to voice concerns and flag inappropriate behaviour. Also, they want to have scheduled opportunities for feedback and ensure their concerns are validated through a timely action plan. Newman et al. (2017) stated that speaking up and providing feedback is imperative to reduce errors and improve psychological safety. Therefore, building a platform for sharing is essential in the pursuit of a safe performance environment for all stakeholders.

Organizational Implications

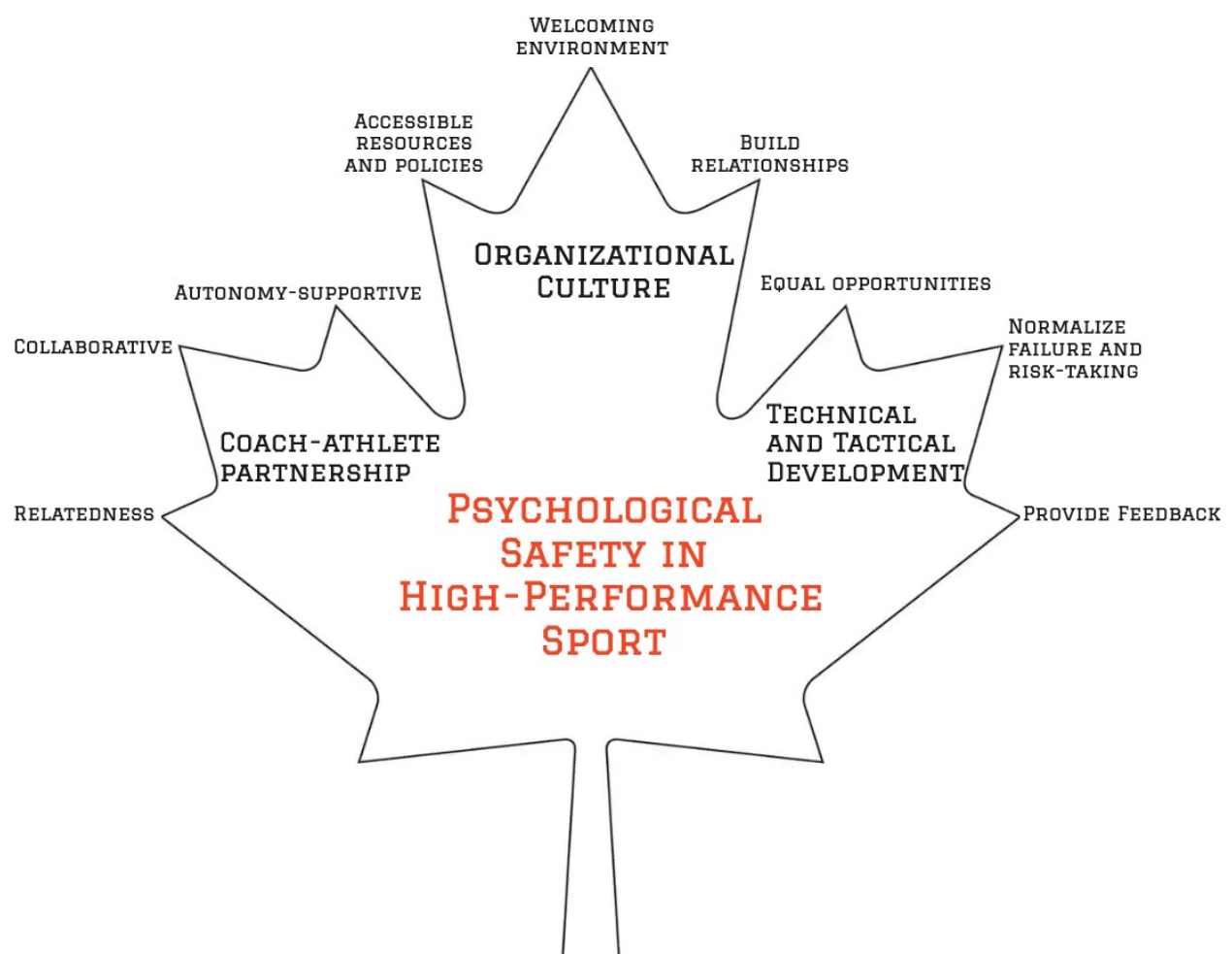
The inquiry began in collaboration with my organizational sponsor to understand the organizational context and challenges at RC. The case of the RC women's 7s team exposed a gap in the system that needed to be explored – which my organizational sponsor agreed to do. The concern was the athletes' lack of safety experienced in their environment, which allowed for maltreatment to occur. The inquiry topic of psychological safety in high-performance sport was fitting for the organizational challenge. Psychological safety encompasses the feeling that one can be their whole selves, feel safe to voice their opinions, thoughts, or ideas without the fear of being judged, embarrassed, rejected or punished. The experience of psychological maltreatment in the environment pointed to the need to understand how the athletes' psychological safety can be prioritized in a high-performance sport environment.

The athletes were key stakeholders in the inquiry process and pivotal in generating new data, understanding, and providing recommendations for change. They were invited to share their experience and to provide recommendations on how the organization can establish a psychological safety environment for their athletes. The bottom-up approach to the inquiry was implemented to gather insight into the needs of those directly affected by the system. The inquiry process became a platform for the athletes to voice their concerns and communicate the changes they identified as priority. It allowed for a thorough understanding of the parts of the system that directly impacted the athletes and their experiences of maltreatment. The athletes' insight was instrumental in forming actionable recommendations which were articulated from the data and presented to RC partners. The collaborative nature of the inquiry allowed for instrumental feedback, support, and ideas that guided the recommendations shared with my organizational sponsor.

I presented the findings, conclusions, and recommendations to the decision-makers, where we engaged in a collective dialogue about the outcomes of the inquiry and to make suggestions about an optimal strategy to move forward. The inquiry findings and conclusions outlined the barriers that impeded athletes' psychological safety. The participants provided suggestions, ideas, and shared their experiences which guided the formation of the actionable recommendations towards psychological safety for all stakeholders. The recommendations were based on the identified athlete needs of a high-performance sports environment in order to feel a sense of a psychologically safe environment (see figure 4).

Figure 4

Psychological Safety in High-Performance Sport



Note: This figure is designed to highlight the important components to forming a psychologically safe sporting environment.

RC is now responsible for taking the steps forward to form an action plan and begin the change process to protect the welfare of their athletes and provide a safe environment for all involved in their programs (Rugby Canada, 2021b). They are the organizational stakeholders who understand the nuances of the systems and have the power to create action-oriented change. RC's commitment to its athletes' well-being indicates their commitment to a psychologically safe environment.

RC further shared the insight of the various structural elements within the system that hindered the athletes' psychological safety. The hierarchical power-over dynamics within the organization structure put a blind spot in the behaviours occurring within the environment. The women's 7s team were the RC stakeholders who experienced the consequences of the system. Learning that it was a problematic conflict of interest for one person to hold the role of both head coach and high-performance director, RC must now re-evaluate their organizational structure and implement practices to ensure accountability for behaviours and actions of all leaders. RC noted that evolution needs to occur within their system and the need to specify clear roles and responsibilities. There is a need to re-evaluate their structure to eliminate the power imbalances. It will require the Board of Directors to provide oversight and an accountability framework and mechanism for sustainable change. This involves being transparent with information, decisions and actions, having performance expectations clearly defined, and continuous feedback loops during review and evaluation (WHO, 2015), such as the yearly audits and providing a platform for athletes to share feedback. RC can determine the change progress by regularly checking in

with those influenced by the system. The hierarchical power-over system can be deconstructed by re-evaluating their organizational structure, implementing an action plan and form of accountability, taking action, and re-evaluate with the athletes' involvement.

It is notable that access to funding influenced the organizational structure. The access to funding and demand for winning medals to obtain funding influenced the organizational structure and reinforced behaviours impacting the athletes' psychological safety. National Sport Organizations (NSO) depend on external funding which is determined by team performance. Own the Podium (OTP) determines the funding allocated and is an instrumental partner for RC. "OTP is in the business of recommending the list of sports, events, teams and athletes to be targeted and the investment strategies to permit them to contribute to the medal targets endorsed by the OTP Board" (Own the podium, 2022). Success is equated to medals, and the current state requires NSO's to reach a specific standard to receive funds. The primary metric used to evaluate funding recommendations by Own the Podium (OTP) to funding partners (Sport Canada and the Canadian Olympic Committee) is the ability to place in the top 3 at the Olympic Games. The factors that are considered in evaluating medal potential are:

- Historical results at World Series events, Rugby World Cup 7s, Major Games and prior Olympic Games.
- Coaching and Technical Leadership Team
- Daily Training Environment
- Player Depth
- Gold Medal Profile (positional evaluation of each player)
- Winning Style of Play

RC wants to implement change, and there are external expectations on performance that directly impact their economic viability as an organization.

When medals are the central factor in determining access to funding, it hinders the organization's ability to prioritize their athletes. "The whole model of it's the medal count that matters not how you get to the performance because you know performance certainly can matter but it's what should matter equally or more so it's how you get there" (personal communication, January 20th, 2022). "When one is taken care of the other will be better" (personal communication, January 20th, 2022). The organizational partners recognize the need to prioritize athlete well-being. They must find a way to balance both the funding metrics and their athletes' safety and recognize that taking care of athletes' mental and physical health contributes to positive performance outcomes. It is important to note the various factors that can exacerbate or trigger mental health: "grueling year-round training and competition programs, protocols with insufficient recovery leading to overtraining or burnout, unhealthy dietary regimens, dysfunctional sport cultures, excessive travel, early specialization demands, injuries, inadequate funding, and abusive coaching, as well as transitions into and out of sport" (Van Slingerland et al., 2020, p. S1-17). High-performance sport is no easy feat and recognizing the importance of taking care of the athletes' mental health is pivotal in the evolution of sustainable, psychologically safe sport. It is essential for RC's sport culture to encourage help-seeking and provide appropriate resources to eliminate the stigma of mental health in sport and ensure their athletes get the support they need. Currently, athletes who seek psychological help are generally at risk of losing playing time, their starting position or their position on the team (Van Slingerland et al., 2019, p. 175). RC has the capability to change this narrative by including these factors in their performance plans as metrics that are crucial to their organization in pursuit of

achieving OTP funding. They don't have to prioritize medals over everything in order to win medals. The current state of the organization requires resources and funding for change to happen. Although it seems that the funding partners' criteria are out of RC's control, they can lead the way in expanding the criteria and show their commitment to mental and physical health in sport and its influence on performance outcomes. It enables a sustainable sports culture that acknowledges the human first and allows the results to showcase themselves.

Many organizational responsibilities will be necessary for the change process to be successful, including a sustainable action plan that identifies necessary resources to enact meaningful change. The recommendations in this inquiry are a guide to support RC in making these changes. The change process can support a dynamic shift within high-performance sports programs to care for their athletes beyond performance.

To summarize, the implementation of a new member onboarding process allows RC to ensure athletes are aware of resources available and are clear on their role and responsibilities. Athletes would like a clear selection criterion that outlines an objective process for selection to team events where the coaches must be accountable for their decisions to organizational members where there is not a conflict of interest and bias. Athletes suggested that providing support in building and maintaining a healthy coach-athlete relationships would be beneficial in creating a healthy environment. It would require the organization to appoint a qualified member and provide them with the necessary training and resources to support the coach-athlete partnership. Finally, the need for a yearly cultural audit and a safe member for athletes to approach with concerns also requires the organization to appoint a qualified member to ensure the athletes' concerns and feedback are taken seriously. RC is committed to the change necessary

to promote a safe sports environment and may need to address a potential shortfall in funding and resources to actualize the change process.

The next step in pursuit of change encompasses the CEO connecting me with the Board of Directors to share the information generated from the inquiry. The CEO valued the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the inquiry, which could further support the high-performance review that RC underwent. Extending the inquiry findings, conclusions and recommendations to the Board of Directors will provide them with extensive knowledge of the current state of RC from an athlete's perspective. It also supports determining which recommendations need to be prioritized based on the findings from the high-performance review. The leaders within the organization acknowledged the need for change in support of a sustainable sport environment and understand the implications of not taking action – as outlined in this inquiry. Taking steps to improve their organizational structure with a priority of athletes' psychological safety can formulate a sustainable sports culture where performance and well-being are equally valued. The inquiry has expanded the current knowledge and implications of psychological safety in high-performance sport. High-performance sport and psychological safety are rarely discussed as necessary, although research has suggested otherwise. It is evident that NSO's need to look at their programs from a more holistic perspective and create metrics that prioritize the athletes' well-being and performance outcomes equally.

Implications for Future Inquiry

The inquiry was being conducted during a sensitive time for the RC women's 7s team. There was an ongoing investigation into the complaints of bullying and harassment, and when the inquiry began, the case was front and centre of the sports world. As a result, the athletes had to revisit their emotional trauma for the inquiry. For future inquiries, I would wait until the

investigation is complete and the athletes are in the right mindset to engage in the inquiry. Many athletes stated that the inquiry process supported their healing process with the platform for them to have a voice, while others feared revisiting the trauma. An inquiry of this nature asks athletes to be vulnerable, thus minimizing additional trauma is essential. Regardless, the inquiry generated a rich amount of data that led to helpful recommendations to RC. There is an opportunity to expand the inquiry to various RC teams to gather a broader range of data and perspectives. Additionally, RC would benefit from a cultural audit to identify any other teams which might have experienced similar challenges and could benefit from a similar inquiry process.

The inquiry process has identified the need for continued research on the topic of psychological safety in high-performance sports. As illustrated in this inquiry and literature review, psychological safety is necessary for athletes to feel safe to belong, safe to learn in their sport, make mistakes, contribute to their career, and take action towards change. It supports athlete performance and satisfaction, yet there lacks a clear understanding on how to create a psychologically safe environment in a high-performance sport context. The recommendations provided to RC is contextual to the rugby and team sport environment, and it does not necessarily expand to other sports organizations. There is a need to further understand how psychological safety can be prioritized in high-performance sport. Specifically, how can organizations take steps towards change, especially when dependent on performance outcomes to obtain necessary funding. Performance and results should not be generated at the expense of an athlete's well-being. The narrative that harsh tactics and ongoing maltreatment generates performance is outdated and must be reconsidered by all sport organizations. It is time to create

change to make sport sustainable, and this begins with understanding the psychological safety principles that can support athletes' performance and well-being.

Thesis Summary

The inquiry was a collaborative process with the organizational needs at the forefront. It was identified as necessary due to the current state of the organization and the athletes' experiences of maltreatment within the environment which led to an investigation. The inquiry findings, conclusion, recommendations, and organizational implications outline the need for change within RC's system. The findings and conclusion provide RC with a deep overview of the athletes' experiences within their environment and the need for their psychological safety to be prioritized. The recommendations and organizational implications can support RC in enabling a future state that promotes athlete psychological safety, in turn, their performance and satisfaction in the program. The recommendation will support the external high-performance review findings by providing the Board of Directors with a broader overview and understanding of the athletes' experiences and the importance of taking action.

The implementation of the recommendations will require commitment from the CEO and Board of Directors to actualize change. According to the action research engagement (ARE) model, the broader organizational members need to formulate a change action plan and begin the transition to the initiation of the plan (Rowe et al., 2013). It may require multiple cycles of integration and review in order to obtain optimal desired change. Decision-makers were engaged in the dialogue and identified the best strategies and actions to move forward. This includes the need to present the findings, conclusions, and recommendations to the Board of Directors in support of the high-performance evaluation that occurred. Therefore, new stakeholders are engaged to assist in transitioning the recommendations into an action plan. The organization will

have to go through its own engagement process and evaluate the recommendations to best suit its processes and current state.

This inquiry provided RC with concrete recommendations and expanded the knowledge and need for psychological safety in high-performance sport. The focus of high-performance sport has been geared towards medal count, so much so that it has lost the humanistic needs of athletes. Athletes are human first and need to be valued beyond their performance. The cases of maltreatment in sport indicate the need for systemic change. Prioritizing athletes' psychological safety can generate results and provide them with the safety to be themselves, learn, take risks and contribute in pursuit of reaching their optimal performance and results. RC's mission is "to deliver life-long, inclusive rugby experiences that cultivate participation and inspire excellence from community to club to country" (Rugby Canada, 2021b), which is enabled by prioritizing its athletes and balancing the funding requirements to stay afloat. RC is committed to the change necessary to provide the athlete with a psychologically safe environment and have the opportunity to set an example for other sports organizations around the world.

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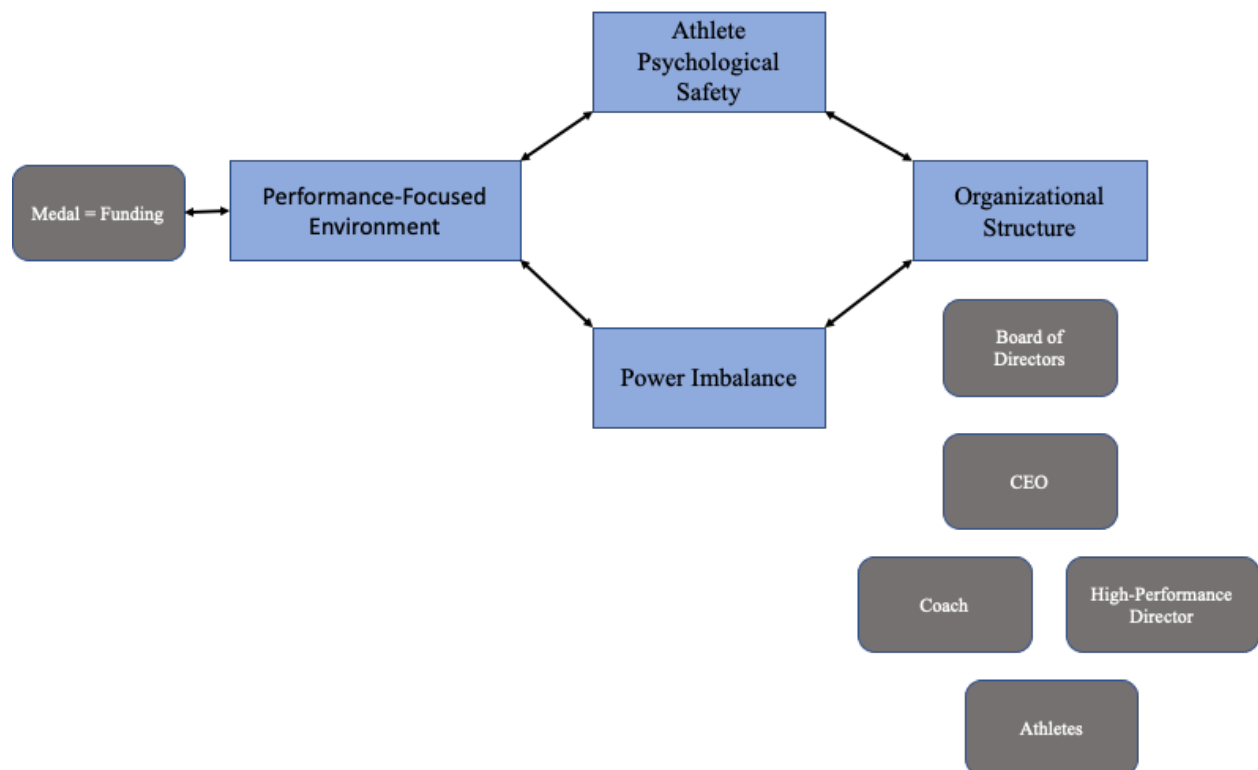
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Appendix A: System's Map

Figure 1

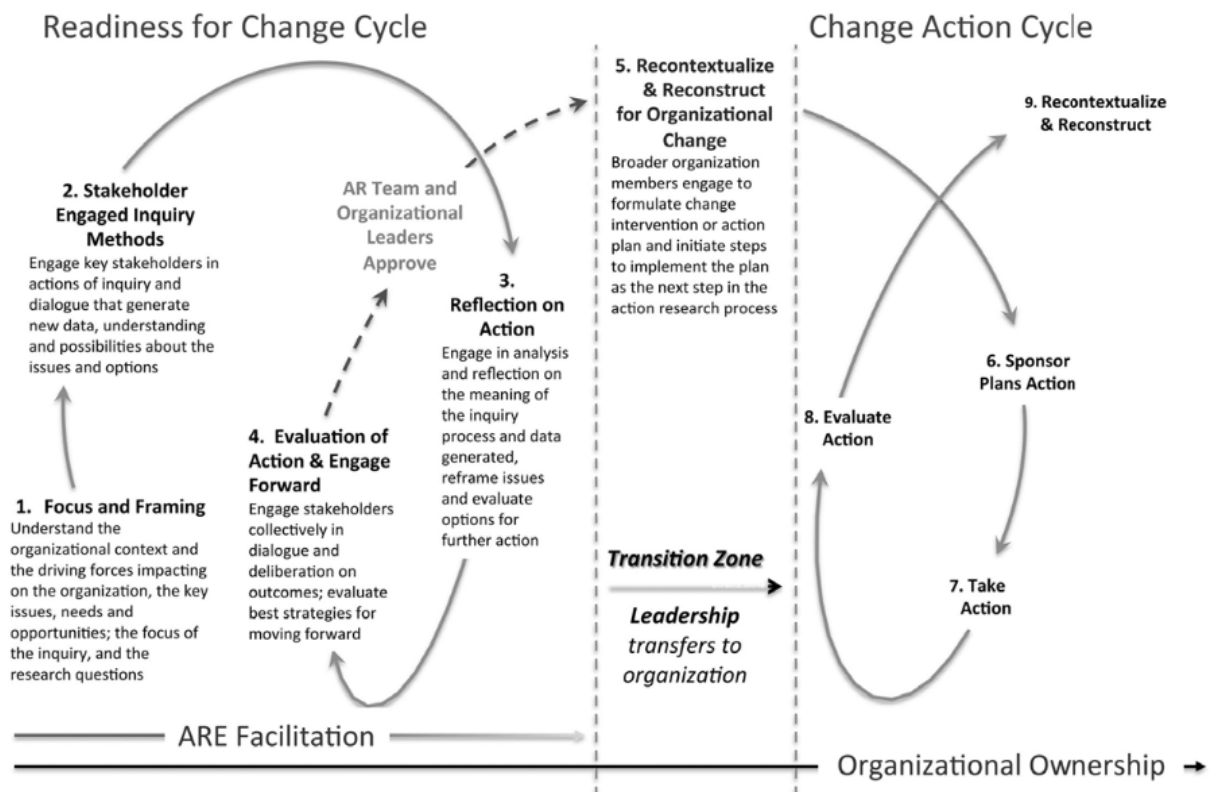
A system's map representing potential factors impacting athlete's psychological safety at Rugby Canada.



Appendix B: Action Research Engagement Model

Figure 2

The action research engagement model. Modified version of the original organizational action research (OAR) model (Rowe, Agger-Gupta, Harris, & Graf, 2011).



Note. AR= Action Research; ARE= Action Research Engagement

Appendix C: Inquiry Team Member Letter of Agreement

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership Degree at Royal Roads University, Natasha Watcham-Roy (the Student) will be conducting an inquiry study at Rugby Canada as to how might high-performance sports organizations optimize psychological safety. You can confirm the student's registration at Royal Roads University by contacting the Program Head, Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, at Niels.Agger-Gupta@royalroads.ca.

Inquiry Team Member Role Description

As a volunteer Inquiry Team Member assisting the Student with this project, your role may include one or more of the following: providing advice on the relevance and wording of questions and letters of invitation, supporting the logistics of the data-gathering methods, including observing, assisting, or facilitating the focus group, taking notes, reviewing analysis of data, and/or reviewing associated knowledge products to assist the Student and the Rugby Canada's change process. In the course of this activity, you may be privy to confidential inquiry data.

Confidentiality of Inquiry Data

In compliance with the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Policy, under which this inquiry project is being conducted, all personal identifiers and any other confidential information generated or accessed by the inquiry team advisor will only be used in the performance of the functions of this project and must not be disclosed to anyone other than persons authorized to receive it, both during the inquiry period and beyond it. Recorded information in all formats is covered by this agreement. Personal identifiers include participant names, contact information, personally identifying turns of phrase or comments, and any other personally identifying information.

Personal information will be collected, recorded, corrected, accessed, altered, used, disclosed, retained, secured and destroyed as directed by the Student, under direction of the Royal Roads Academic Supervisor.

Inquiry Team Members who are uncertain whether any information they may wish to share about the project they are working on is personal or confidential will verify this with Natasha Watcham-Roy, the Student.

Statement of Informed Consent:

I have read and understand this agreement.

Name (Please Print)

Signature

Date

Appendix D: Email Invitation

Hello,

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for my Master's Degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University. This project has been approved by the Organizational Sponsor/Partner, Rugby Canada, and I have been given permission to contact potential participants for this purpose.

The purpose of my research is to discover how Rugby Canada can foster a psychologically safe environment. Psychological safety is defined as an environment where it is safe to discuss ideas, experiment, take risks, give feedback, and learn from mistakes without the fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career. The objective is to hear from you, the athletes, what it would mean for you to feel more psychologically safe in your environment and hear about your experiences that have positively and/or negatively affected your psychological safety. The findings will support the recommendations that will be brought forward to Rugby Canada.

Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because you are a current or past Rugby Canada 7s athlete. I would love your voices to be at the forefront of the research process in the hopes of bringing meaningful findings forward to your organization.

Today, I am reaching out in hopes that you will take part in a 15-20 minute survey. Once the survey is complete and the information shared has been analyzed, I will be sharing with you a summary of the patterns identified from the survey.

I am also looking for 10-12 athletes to participate in a focus group once the survey process is complete. If this is something you would be interested in, please let me know, and I will put your name down as a potential participant. Participants will be selected on a first-come, first-served basis. I will also be sending out an invitation letter when the surveys are completed with more information about the focus group process.

I realize that due to our collegial relationship, you may feel compelled to participate in this research project. Please know that you are not required to participate and, should you choose to participate, your participation would be entirely voluntary. Your choice will not affect our relationship in any way.

The attached document (Information Letter) contains further information about the study conduct and will enable you to make a fully informed decision on whether or not you wish to participate. Please review this information before proceeding.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes.

Insert link to survey here and do not ask for a response.

Sincerely,

Natasha Watcham-Roy

Appendix E: Information Letter**Psychological Safety in High-Performance Sport**

My name is Natasha Watcham-Roy, and this research project is part of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University. You can confirm my registration at Royal Roads University by contacting the Program Head, Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, at Niels.Agger-Gupta@royalroads.ca.

Purpose of the study and sponsoring organization

The purpose of my research is to discover how Rugby Canada can foster a psychologically safe environment. Psychological safety is defined as an environment where it is safe to discuss ideas, experiment, take risks, give feedback, and learn from mistakes without the fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career. The objective is to hear from you, the athletes, what it would mean for you to feel more psychologically safe in your environment and hear about your experiences that have positively and/or negatively affected your psychological safety. The findings will support the recommendations that will be brought forward to Rugby Canada.

Your participation and how the information will be collected**Survey**

This stage of the research will be gathering data using a survey. It is anticipated that the survey will take 15-20 minutes. The survey is entirely anonymous. Participating in the survey does not mean you need to engage in the focus group. Please note that due to the anonymous nature of this survey, once you have submitted your responses, it will not be possible to identify them in order to extract or withdraw from the data set.

Focus Group

The participation at this next stage of the research is 1.5 hour focus group where you will brainstorm ideas and solutions for the change needed in your environment. The focus group will be held online through zoom and my inquiry team member will support with the break out rooms and managing any technical issues that may arise. The focus group will follow a 1-3-All liberating structure. The method begins with silent self-reflection on a proposed question, progresses to generating ideas in threes, and ends up altogether to share the critical concepts that emerge. The focus group participants will receive a summary of the discussion and be invited to provide any additionally comments.

Once the focus group has been conducted, it may be unfeasible to extract one's individual data in a group setting. If you wish to withdraw from the focus group after it has been conducted, I will do my best to extract your individual contributions. However, it may not be possible due to the difficulty in extracting one individual's comments in a group setting.

Real or Perceived Conflict of Interest

As a retired member of the Rugby Canada Women's 7s Team, I inherently have a perceived conflict of interest in researching psychological safety due to my passion for seeing a change in high-performance sport environments. I have personally experienced and observed the impacts of an unsafe environment, which could also be perceived as a conflict of interest as I could be viewed as not objective. My inquiry team member will be involved in the data collection and analysis process to mitigate the perceived conflict of interest. I am disclosing this information to you to make a fully informed decision on whether you'd like to participate.

Benefits and risks to participation

As a participant, you will have the opportunity to share your experiences, ideas, and thoughts on how Rugby Canada can foster a psychologically safe space. Your voice will be at the forefront of the recommendations brought forward to Rugby Canada, and I believe an athlete's perspective can provide deep insight into how a psychologically safe environment can be formed. Involving you as the participant will provide valuable findings and recommendations to your organization, with confidentiality being my top priority.

The questions asked may bring up past traumatic experiences from your environment, and I want to acknowledge the courage and vulnerability it takes to be involved with this research. _____ will be available to support you throughout the inquiry if you are in need. I can reassure you that everything said will be kept completely confidential, and if at any point you feel like no longer participating, you are free to withdraw with no prejudice. Research reports from the online survey in which there is no personally identifiable information such as the research participant's name, and there is no way to trace the responses back to the research participant, are considered anonymous. If you chose to go forward with the survey, know that the information shared is completely anonymous. Alternatively for the focus group, there will be group discussions and I cannot assure that others will keep the information confidential. I will reiterate the importance of "what happens in the room stays in the room", reinforce the idea of creating a psychologically safe space to encourage open dialogue, and share my commitment of maintaining confidentiality.

The project has received approval from the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board and that any questions can be addressed to ethicalreview@royalroads.ca

Inquiry team member

There will be two inquiry team member that will be assisting me with the research process. The inquiry team member will be piloting the survey, supporting with conducting the focus group, and assisting in the data analysis. _____, the Mental Performance Consultant at Rugby Canada, is the other inquiry team member who will be engaged throughout the research and will be available to support you as needed. The inquiry team member has signed a contract to maintain the confidentiality of the research process.

Confidentiality, security of data, and retention period

I will work to protect your privacy throughout this study. All information I collect will be maintained in confidence. Electronic data (such as transcripts or audio files) will be stored on a password-protected computer on my home computer.

Please note that your valuable ideas and opinions will appear in the report itself. However, no personal information such as your name or personally identifiable information will be used to attribute those comments to you. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential.

Once the data has been collected, I will be sharing it with my inquiry team member to assist with the analysis. Upon completion of my master's degree, the information will be permanently deleted.

Sharing results

In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master of Arts in Leadership, I will also be sharing my research findings with Rugby Canada and all participants.

Please keep a copy of this information letter for your records.

Appendix F: Survey Preamble and Survey

The research includes this survey and is estimated to take 15-20 minutes to complete depending on the level of feedback you provide. The information you provide will be summarized, in an anonymous format, in the body of the final report. The data collected from this survey will guide the next phase of the research. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual. All data received will be kept confidential.

By pressing “begin” on the survey you are indicating that you have read and understand the information letter and give your free and informed consent to participate in this project. Please note that due to the anonymous nature of this survey, once you have submitted your responses, it will not be possible to identify them in order to extract or withdraw from the data set.

Your completion of this survey will constitute your informed consent.

- I confirm that I have read the Information Letter that provides details of the research
(please click to proceed to the online survey)

Q1. Please choose your age category below

16-19
20-29
30-35
36+

Q2. How many years have you been associated with Rugby Canada in an athlete/player capacity?

1-2
3-4
5+

Q3. Are you a current or retired athlete?

Current
Retired

Q4. Inclusion safety satisfies the basic human need to connect and belong. Rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am/was accepted as a member of my team					
I am/was treated with respect					
I feel/felt included by people in my environment					

Q5. What prevents you from feeling a sense of inclusion?

Q6. What allows you to feel a sense of inclusion?

Q7. Learner safety means that you can engage in all aspects of the discovery process (learning) without being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished. You feel safe to give feedback, make mistakes, etc. Rate how strong you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel/felt comfortable asking questions					
I am/was allowed to learn from my mistakes					
The organization supports/supported my efforts to learn					
I can/could ask for help when I need it					

Q8. What prevents you from feeling safe to learn?

Q9. What allows you to feel safe to learn?

Q10. Contributor safety means that you feel free and able to contribute what you know to the team and apply what you have learned. Rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The organization allows/allowed me to do my job					
The organization values/valued my contribution					
I am/was encouraged to contribute as much as I can in my role					
I have/had a voice in decisions					
My ideas and feedback are/were welcomed					

Q11. What prevents you from feeling safe to contribute?

Q12. What allows you to feel safe to contribute?

Q13. Challenger safety means you feel safe to challenge the status quo without fear of jeopardizing your personal standing or reputation. Rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel/felt safe disagreeing with the way my team does things					
I feel/felt safe disagreeing with the way the organization does things					
I have/had the freedom to challenge the status quo					
I can/could take reasonable risks without being punished					
I can/could bring up problems and tough issues					

Q14. What prevents you from feeling safe to challenge the status quo?

Q15. What allows you to feel safe to challenge the status quo?

Q16. I feel that psychological safety is important in high-performance sport

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
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Please elaborate on why you believe it is or is not important

Q17. There is/was a strong sense of psychological safety between teammates

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
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Q18. There is/was a strong sense of psychological safety between players and the organization

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
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Q19. There is/was a strong sense of psychological safety between players and coaches

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	---------	-------	----------------

Q20. Who do you believe is responsible for cultivating a culture of psychological safety?

- Teammate
- Coach
- Captain/leadership team
- High Performance Director
- CEO
- Board
- Coach Association of Canada
- Sport Canada
- Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

Q21. What behaviours/actions, from whom you believe are responsible for creating a psychologically safe environment, have supported you in feeling a sense of inclusion, safe to learn, safe to contribute, and safe to challenge the status quo?

Q22. What behaviours/actions, from whom you believe are responsible for creating a psychologically safe environment, have NOT supported you in feeling a sense of inclusion, safe to learn, safe to contribute, and safe to challenge the status quo?

Q3. Is there anything else you wish to tell me about your psychological safety during your career at Rugby Canada?

Appendix G: Shared Survey Findings

Finding 1: Athletes want to feel psychologically safe within their environment to optimize performance, be their authentic selves, prioritize their well-being, stay engaged, and build healthy relationships.

Finding 2

Athletes feel psychologically safe when:

- They feel safe to be themselves
- They feel a sense of belonging
- They have equal opportunities to compete and be coached
- They have a voice and feel heard
- Feedback is welcomed
- Failure/Mistakes are encouraged
- They are protected by their organization to challenge the status quo

Finding 3

Athletes do not feel psychologically safe when:

- They are not safe to be their authentic selves
- They are treated differently based on their position on the team
- They are singled out and humiliated for their mistakes
- They are denied attention/support based on their position on the team, their performance, and for making mistakes and taking risks
- The environment does not encourage failure
- They fear repercussions from speaking up and asking questions
- Their concerns are not taken seriously

Appendix H: Focus Group Recruitment Letter

Hello,

Thank you for your responses to the survey. The survey responses are currently undergoing analysis, and as promised, I will share a summary with you once completed. Meanwhile, as indicated in my first email, I am reaching out to recruit 10-12 athletes willing to participate in a 1.5 hour online focus group. The purpose of the focus group is to dive deeper into the emergent themes that appeared in the survey and to hear about the changes you would like to see and the ideas you have to bring forward. Participants will be selected on a first come first served basis. Thank you to those who have already volunteered!

The attached document contains further information about the study conduct and will enable you to make a fully informed decision on whether or not you wish to participate. My inquiry team member will be in the focus group providing tech support and moderating the break out rooms. If you need any support after the focus group, _____ will be available. Please review this information before responding.

I realize that due to our collegial relationship, you may feel compelled to participate in this research project. Please know that you are not required to participate and, should you choose to participate, your participation would be entirely voluntary. Your choice will not affect our relationship in any way.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes.

If you would like to participate in my research project, please contact me at:

Name:

Email:

Telephone:

Sincerely,

Natasha Watcham-Roy

Appendix I: Focus Group Informed Consent Letter

By signing this form or returning an email indicating consent, you agree that you are over the age of 19 and have read and understood the information letter for this study and you give your free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Your signature states that you are giving your voluntary and informed consent to participate in this project and have data I contribute used in the final report and any other knowledge outputs (articles, conference presentations, newsletters, etc.). Please note that an electronic signature or returning an email indicating consent is suffice.

As the researcher, I will maintain your confidentiality, but I cannot promise this on behalf of other participants. However, I will request that all participants respect the confidential nature of this study and not share identifying information with others.

I consent to the audio recording of the interview

I consent to the video recording of the interview

I consent to quotations and excerpts expressed by me through the interview be included in this study, provided that my identity is not disclosed

Name: (Please Print): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix J: Focus Group Interview Questions

Q1. How could a coach and team create a welcoming and egalitarian environment?

Q2. How would you like a coach and the organization to approach a poor team performance and/or individual performance? What behaviours would eliminate the fear of failure and making mistakes from a coach, organization, and team?

Q3. In what ways can the board/Allen, managers and coaches encourage and engage athletes to have a voice and feel heard?

Q4. What changes would you like to see within the organization structure which would positively influence your psychological safety?

Appendix K: Shared Focus Group Findings

Table 1

Focus Group Findings shared with participants

Psychological Safety Codes	Themes	Recommendations	Quotes
Inclusion Safety	Player-led Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include all voices ● Build a diverse group ● Dynamic changing group of leadership ● Group chosen by team ● Accountability to team ● Integrate all parts of the system ● Values of the team are upheld ● Leadership Development 	<p>"Because you brought up like players are maybe selected or may not be Is this a group that like should almost be dynamic, you know what I mean like should it be changing should it always be the same people or should there be more than one group type thing I don't know" (6)</p> <p>"You need both you need all aspects of the systems, you need the players, you need to coaches, you need the administration" (2)</p> <p>"The conversations, like the leadership group is great yes and there's a purpose for it but also having the conversation like a lot of those conversations should be had as a team kind of like have them brought down, rather than just having three or four players talk to a coach and have more so, everybody kind of get to say" (6)</p> <p>"We finally moved to like the team voting and there was more of like players that would be there for like the next squad so you can ensure that the culture can kind of be maintained. There was representation, there was really a mix of people that could understand, maybe. You know, like</p>

			<p>not being on on tour not selected versus selected and you can get really a scope of everything that's going on in the environment, and so it was a better representation of the team and the discussions could flow " (4)</p> <p>"It would be a lot to bring a brand new person on to leadership and I don't think that's like necessarily realistic um I do you think that having new people in the program provides a perspective of things that lots of people have just been normalized to. and I think that's actually really valuable" (3)</p>
	New Player Induction	Make people feel welcomed	"Introducing them and introducing them, not in a way that's like this is someone you're competing with and like someone that potentially will push out a selection it's more like this is your teammate and you are a team of 20 or 25 and you guys are all working together so like here's your teammate kind of thing" (1)
	Diversity amongst staff and administration	Inclusive hiring process	"The representation that athletes coming in can see and can be supported by a wide range of staff members so just looking at different intersections of athletes and like what they can see and administration rugby canada specifically or like with our coaching staff or support staff that there's diversity there" (1)
	Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Resources ● Feedback channels 	"Equal kind of like feedback to everyone feedback channels and then available resources" (4)
	Coach-Player relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Supportive Speech ● Professional development 	"And we also talked about having those more one on one personal meetings with coaching staff and more established players, because

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection • Humanistic approach • Transparency and clarity on roles • 1:1 meetings 	you get them every what couple months or just after a tour or after a camp, rather than having those everyday conversations, like the more personal conversations of what do you need from the environment" (6)
	Organizations Purpose		"Are we really going to equate success to number of medals in 2021. And I think that the inherent goal of these organizations is success equals number of metals and if that's what it's going to be and that's what's going to continue to be, then, then the athletes need the appropriate resources" (5)
Learner Safety	Normalize Failure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do different drills to build a relationship with failure • Being able to take accountability • Support through failure • Honest feedback • Talk about it! 	<p>"How can we avoid a potential like really negative outbursts from the staff if we don't perform well how can, how can we be proactive, so we see the signs early enough maybe that staff can go and get support or like have a way to manage and cope, rather than just like internalizing all this pressure, and then it comes out in really toxic ways so that was just something I feel like" (1)</p> <p>"I think normalizing through practices and stuff like that in less stressful situations can help players and coaching staff get to know each other better, of how to improve, but then also to have those uncomfortable conversations Of when things don't go right" (6)</p> <p>"A lot of times you get feedback and you're not told the whole story" (7)</p>
	Welcome questions	Ask questions and be open to questions	"You know it didn't feel safe to like ask questions, often the question

			would be either return to the individual in a bit of an attacking manner stuff like that, so there wasn't like real potential for growth there as like a team is more so, you would just hope that you weren't you know the reason that the team loss like it that you weren't the one getting pointed fingers out that day so it's kind of like to be able to learn from a loss, instead of just like feeling that we shouldn't have lost because mistakes were made, I guess" (4)
	Unity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff support • Togetherness • Equal coach-athlete relationship • Respect each others decisions 	"Like and the welfare of the team and the welfare of each individual on the team comes down to the unity of the of the whole cohort of the team, plus the coaches. we win together we lose together. we're all accountable, but none of us are individually responsible for that right now and there's so many things that happened in the game that there's no freaking way you can pinpoint it to to stepping left instead of stepping right like that that absolutely insanity" (2)
	Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust the athlete • Humanistic approach • Understand the why • Understand how coach is helping you get better • Equal coach-athlete relationship 	<p>"You were told to trust because they had your best interest in mind and they had the team, you know, like the team's performance in mind and you were supposed to kind of like trust blindly that. Everything was meant for like to be the best, but then there wasn't really trust, on the other side that we were there to be the best and we were there to perform, and we were there to grow" (4)</p> <p>"You need to get to know the</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the coach doing to grow? 	<p>human first to be able to like and I feel like some coaches do that really well and then, when the coach does that really well, they can be like thousand should tackle I'm like oh my God that was such a shift tackle" (4)</p> <p>"Able to respect the decisions that they make, even if we don't like them, but then, also for the coach to be able to respect it has to be, it has to be a two way a two-way street is but understanding that we and respecting that we're both fulfilling a certain role, and that is necessary for a team to be functioning" (2)</p>
	Coach-Athlete relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build awareness of the signs that athletes need support • Resources available for staff to handle pressure • How does the athletes accept feedback? • Athletes age group 	<p>"And then we talked about. Like having mandatory staff support like. Or like having the awareness around the signs of when people need to need some extra support " (5)</p> <p>"The awareness piece around what the high-performance environment demands of the athletes and the staff like that performance has a lot to do with like your funding and what your program looks like and, obviously, if it's a lot of pressure on the athletes, and especially the staff to make sure that we're performing. if there's awareness around that and like like realizing that staff might feel an extra amount of pressure which they can put on to athletes at times when we don't need that pressure. like How can we avoid a potential like really negative outbursts from the staff if we don't perform well how</p>

		<p>can, how can we be proactive, so we see the signs early enough maybe that staff can go and get support or like have a way to manage and cope, rather than just like internalizing all this pressure, and then it comes out in really toxic ways so that was just something I feel like." (1)</p> <p>"How does the coaching staff learn how you accept your feedback like it's that honest approach and being like this is how I work best and, like the coaches being adaptable to that of knowing their players and kind of getting to know them in that sense. And also like having that positivity approach on like these are work on rather than being like well this was shit it's like okay yeah we." (6)</p> <p>"Obviously as a team you can't like necessarily curate your feedback for like every single person because it's a group of people, but like on a one on one basis, like what the staff like we all know how they receive feedback, like every single day like, especially in the environment, we were in we were like. kind of trying to judge the day and like alter our behavior to like please other people, and like there was just no reciprocity with that it was kind of like." (3)</p> <p>"Able to respect the decisions that they make, even if we don't like them, but then, also for the coach to be able to respect it has to be, it has to be a two way a two way street is but understanding that we</p>
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			and respecting that we're both fulfilling a certain role, and that is necessary for a team to be functioning. I'm often thinking of servant leadership and it's like showing up with like, what can I bring and what can I give to the situation, instead of what can I get from it" (2)
Contributor / Challenger Safety	Seek feedback	Coaches seek and welcome feedback	"Coaches wanting feedback to grow I think wouldn't make it more meaningful for athletes to like want to give the feedback" (4)
	Timelines for evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance reviews • Coach evaluations • Involve the parents 	"That system is put in place, as well as like a scheduled feedback time and it's not just like once a year, at the end of the season like it's happening all the time" (1)
	Protect the athletes	Channels for feedback that is anonymous (3rd party)	<p>"The system created like provides someone like safe that athletes can go to provide feedback and like whether that is a coach or manager, or like Alan or whatever like" (1)</p> <p>"That involves like player feedback going to someone who is reviewing reviewing the head coach just like having feedback that goes straight to the head coaches this. is not that has proven to be not productive in our case" (Athlete 3)</p>
	Selection Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coach is the teacher of the game • Power is dispersed = not one single ruler 	<p>"Having so having like a single point of contact whether it's a coach or whether it's a single decision maker. A lot a lot can be missed or overlooked" (2)</p> <p>"For the coach to be a coach a selector a person who decides who</p>

			<p>gets salary, who gets bonuses who gets what amounts like for a coach to hold all of that" (4)</p> <p>"The power and the responsibility disperse to more people it's just like it's a recipe for failure and dictatorship when it's just on one person" (3)</p> <p>"Like you can go fast on your own because you don't need to get consensus on decisions, but they. can't necessarily it's not a sustainable or robust it's not" (2)</p>
	Relationship with the board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency • Trust • Organizational Alignment 	<p>"But we don't know, maybe, maybe we can maybe the board can host like month monthly meetings or if there's a new Member, they say Oh, I want to like I want to talk to the team" (5)</p> <p>"And to understand the intention of the board to help understand what they have on their plate to actually hear the conversations that are going to going forward to either drive or not drive certain Program" (2)</p> <p>"And like it rebuilds that trust right because that trust has been gone for a long time, I think, and especially between like the women's programs and rugby canada, been a long history of of trial and error, and you know, like things like festering and stuff like that, so I think that rebuilding that trust and that alignment would be really key" (4)</p> <p>"Making sure that the culture is</p>

			<p>communicated throughout the organization. What do we want to do this year and how do we make it accountable like nobody's accountable for any" (4)</p> <p>"And what everyone's goal is basically like just to kind of build off of that like what's everybody's goal as a player coach ceo board member like just kind of understanding, a little bit more of what's going on, like you said in a whole" (6)</p>
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Appendix L: Rugby Department Executive Structure

Figure 3

Rugby Canada's Executive Structure

