

STUDENT-ATHLETE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

**Canadian Varsity Student-Athletes' Perceived Institutional Mental Health Support:
Are Universities Extending the Care Needed for Flourishing in an Endemic World?**

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Abstract

Canadian university student-athletes regularly face a combination of academic-related stressors (e.g., assignments due, tuition to pay) and sport-related stressors (e.g., travel to competitions, injury, fatigue). In fact, evidence suggests that university student-athletes are at an increased risk for mental health concerns. To further understand student-athletes' particular experiences, the present master's thesis research investigated student-athletes' perspectives on institutional mental health support and whether they believe the support provided is enabling them to flourish in an endemic world. Grounded in Keyes' two-continua model of mental health and Basic Psychological Needs Theory, this study explored how institutional environments and need satisfaction influence student-athletes' well-being. A multi-method qualitative approach combining timelines and semi-structured interviews was used with eight varsity student-athletes from multiple sports. Narrative analysis was used to create storylines within and across student-athletes' experiences. From these storylines, three composite creative nonfictions (CNFs) were built. The first CNF was written using a first-person narrative exploring a student-athlete's internal thoughts and feelings on mental health supports at their institution, as well as the barriers they faced accessing these supports. The second and third CNFs were written as an all-knowing narrator (i.e., third-person omniscient) detailing two student-athletes' divergent experiences of flourishing and languishing. Based on the results, recommendations are offered to help universities adapt and develop initiatives aimed at better supporting student-athletes' mental health.

Preface

I, Lauren Nicole Shearer, am the principal investigator for the presented master's thesis. I was responsible for conceptualizing the research design, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and writing the thesis in a monograph format. Dr. Martin Camiré supported all aspects of the conceptualization, analysis, and writing. Finally, prior to recruitment and data collection, ethical approval was received from the University of Ottawa's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (file number: H-04-23-9051).

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CHAPTER I: Literature Review

Introduction

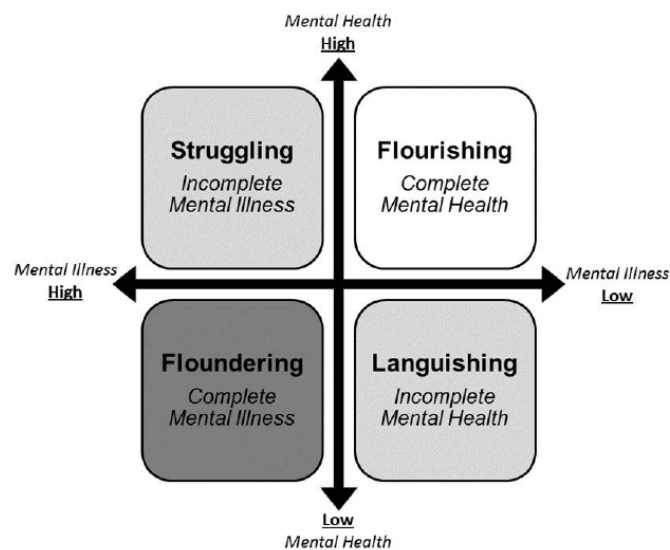
The World Health Organization defined *mental health* as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community” (para. 1). *Mental illness* is characterized by a wide range of symptoms altering a person’s behaviour, thought processes, and mood (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009; World Health Organization, 2022). These conditions, such as anxiety disorders, mood disorders (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder), schizophrenia, and eating disorders are distressing, and significantly impair an individual’s ability to function in daily life (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009)

Mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness and has been explored on a two-continua model by Keyes (2002), depicting mental health and mental illness on a biaxial continuum such that mental health and mental illness can be experienced concurrently (see Figure 1). For example, Keyes’ (2002) model depicts that an individual with mental illness can still experience well-being. Further, Keyes (2003) described individuals who score high on the mental health continuum and low on the mental illness continuum as flourishing, whereas individuals who score low on the mental health continuum are described as languishing. *Flourishing*, as conceptualized by Keyes, refers to an optimal state of mental health and an individual experiencing high levels of well-being and positive functioning (2007). Flourishing individuals tend to have high levels of positive affect, satisfaction with life, positive social functioning, and a sense of meaning and purpose (Keyes, 2007). Opposite to flourishing, *languishing* is characterized by negative affect, limited daily functioning, a lack of interest in

life, low motivation, and a diminished sense of purpose (Keyes, 2002). People who are languishing exhibit more chronic physical conditions than their flourishing counterparts, miss more days of work, and are at a greater risk of developing mental illness (Keyes, 2007). Keyes' mental health continua model leans heavily on markers of well-being, identifying 13 dimensions that reflect mental health. Keyes labels positive emotions (i.e., emotional well-being), positive psychological functioning (i.e., psychological well-being) and positive social functioning (i.e., social well-being), but how is well-being defined?

Figure 1

Two-Continua Model of Mental Health (Keyes, 2002)



The definition of well-being has been scrutinized by Dodge and colleagues (2012) who explored descriptions or dimensions of the term rather than isolating the exact meaning of well-being. A broad concept encompassing physical, psychological, and social dimensions of one's life, well-being is situated as the balance point between challenges individuals face and the resources they possess to address such challenges (see Figure 2). Well-being involves having

positive emotions, a sense of purpose, good relationships, and a sense of accomplishment. It is a dynamic and multifaceted state contributing to overall life satisfaction (Dodge et al., 2012).

Figure 2

Conceptualization of Wellbeing (Dodge et al., 2012)



University student-athletes face many challenges associated with their dual role that can influence their well-being. On top of typical student-related stressors (e.g., academic challenges, financial issues), student-athletes also face sport-related stressors (e.g., pressure to win, travel to competitions, injury, fatigue; Humphrey et al., 2000; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005) that can prompt or exacerbate mental health concerns (Neal et al., 2013). In fact, evidence suggests that university student-athletes are at an increased risk for mental health concerns due to additional stressors (Neal et al., 2013) and experience lower levels of well-being compared to their non-student-athlete counterparts (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated instances of mental health concerns, as self-reported levels of anxiety and depression increased due to the pandemic (Dozois, 2021). Moving forward, research is needed to understand how university student-athletes are dealing (or not) with their student- and sport-related stressors as they continue to face *lingering* challenges brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the two guiding research questions of this master's thesis project are: What are varsity student-athletes' perspectives on institutional mental health support provided by universities? and Is the support provided enabling varsity student-athletes to flourish in an endemic world?

Literature Review

Below, I provide an overview of the current literature on mental health, outlining research with general and student populations documenting the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Next, U SPORTS, the Canadian university athletics governing body, is introduced and U SPORTS' response to the COVID-19 pandemic is examined. Finally, the student-athlete psychological well-being, help-seeking, and mental health literatures are explored, positioning the need for further research in this area for Canadian student-athletes.

Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, Canadians were hit with a global pandemic, COVID-19. In an instant, millions of Canadians were facing unemployment while others transitioned to remote work as schools and businesses closed their doors and social distancing became a crucial part of daily life (The Canadian Press, 2021). As for athletes, all sports were stopped abruptly including the suspension of professional sports like the NBA and NHL, the postponement of the 2020 MLB season and the cancellation of the entire 2020 CFL season. Amateur athletes faced similar restrictions, as the Tokyo 2020 Olympics were postponed until 2021 and both Canadian (i.e., U SPORTS) and American (i.e., NCAA) university sport bodies cancelled all remaining sporting events for the season.

Over five waves of COVID-19, various orders were enacted by the Canadian government including lockdowns, mandatory quarantines for travellers, stay-at-home orders, mandatory use of face masks, social distancing measures and even a curfew with hours residents could not leave their homes (only in Quebec) all to reduce the spread of COVID-19. These drastic changes impacted the lives of Canadians, requiring them to constantly adapt to ever changing public health guidelines and restrictions that followed each wave of COVID-19. In December 2020, the

COVID-19 vaccine became available to Canadians. Today, 81% of Canadians have received at least one dose of an approved COVID-19 vaccine (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024).

With the social, economic, and physical health impacts of COVID-19, Canadians' mental health was also affected. A nationally representative survey of 1,803 Canadians by Dozois (2021) indicated participants' self-reported levels of anxiety and depression had dramatically increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, four times as many Canadian participants reported high or extremely high anxiety levels, while the percentage of participants reporting low levels of anxiety was two times higher before the pandemic. Self-reported levels of depression also increased two-fold in the Canadians surveyed (Dozois, 2021).

As instances of mental illness increased in Canada due to the COVID-19 pandemic, access to mental health services became even more vital. With the lack of access to adequate mental health resources for Canadians prior to the pandemic (i.e., nearly half of Canadians in need of mental health support had their needs only partially met or completely unmet in 2018; Statistics Canada, 2019), an "echo pandemic" of depression and anxiety has and continues to lead many Canadians unable to seek the care they desperately need (Favaro et al., 2020).

Canadians trying to access mental health care face many barriers such as long wait periods, lack of available professionals, language and cultural difficulties, and cost of care (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2018).

Today, Canadians are still facing increased mental health challenges and difficulty accessing and utilizing mental health care. In 2023, 18.3% of Canadians 15 years of age and older met the diagnostic criteria for a mood, anxiety, or substance use disorder; however, only around half of those sought professional help. Moreover, according to Statistics Canada (2023), 36.6% of Canadians with mood, anxiety, or substance use disorders reported their mental health

care needs were not fully met. Although counselling services are the most common form of care for Canadians with mental disorders, it is also most common that needs for counselling go unmet compared to needs for medication and information, exemplifying the lack of available counselling or psychotherapy services for Canadians in need (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Cross-sectional comparisons can also be drawn for the general Canadian population, with the prevalence of general anxiety disorder (GAD) doubling in ten years and major depressive disorder (MDD) and bipolar disorders also increasing from 2012 to 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2023). Girls/women between 15-24 years of age exhibited the greatest 10-year increases with levels of GAD tripling and MDD doubling (Statistics Canada, 2023). Further, postsecondary student-specific data showed significant increases between 2013, 2016, and 2019 for mental illness, above-average stress, psychological distress, and help-seeking (Linden et al., 2021). Women students reported a higher prevalence than men in all areas (Linden et al., 2021).

Postsecondary students comprise an already vulnerable population for mental health concerns given that the majority of students fall in the age range when the initial onset of mental disorders is most common. In a Canadian edition of its survey, the American College Health Association (2022) conducted a National College Health Assessment Report in Canada in Spring 2022 and indicated that over 33% of Canadian university students ($n=11,322$) experienced severe psychological distress over the past 12 months, also reporting that 16.8% of students were languishing. Over 83% of Canadian students reported experiencing moderate to high levels of overall stress, with 32% receiving psychological or mental health care in the last year.

Recent public opinion research commissioned by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) and the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) surveying 2000 Canadian postsecondary students reported institutional mental health services were accessed by

half of all students yet, on-campus services did not meet one-third of students' needs. Many barriers exist for students attempting to access on-campus support, with only 28% of students aware of how to access services, long wait times, and poor perceived quality of services (CASA, 2022). This same report further explored the impact of COVID-19 on the postsecondary population. Findings from 2022 report the pandemic negatively impacted the mental health and feelings of stress for 75% of students, equivalent to 2021 levels (CASA, 2022).

Jaworska et al. (2016) reported that most Canadian post-secondary institutions engage in outreach and mental health promotion, with many institutions emphasizing outreach initiatives to targeted groups including LGBTQ+, Indigenous, international, and first-year students. Although there was a 74% agreement that students are informed about mental health services, less than half of respondents believed outreach and services were effective, nor a good use of campus resources (Jaworska et al., 2016). The majority (84%) believed that the expansion of such services would be beneficial (Jaworska et al., 2016).

Canadians' mental health suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 34.3% of Canadians reporting mental health difficulties and nearly 9% of that sample reported their mental health difficulties were severe (Statistics Canada, 2022). Faced with social, economic, physical and mental health impacts, COVID-19 created novel challenges that Canadians were forced to respond to, adapting their daily lives for indefinite amounts of time. Students were frustrated by the transition to online learning, over half of students perceived online learning negatively and almost three-quarters said the pandemic negatively impacted their studies (King et al., 2023). The pandemic also had a detrimental effect (ranging from 58.4% to 82.8% of students reporting a negative impact) on students' ability to exercise, engage in academic activities (e.g., internships), participate in leisure activities, and connect with friends (King et al., 2023).

Canadian university student-athletes were faced with an additional negative impact, the loss of their athletic seasons. The sudden loss of competitions and cessation of training during the COVID-19 pandemic challenged athletes' sense of purpose, motivation, and athletic identity (Parker et al., 2022). Previous research has shown how athletes who exhibit a strong athletic identity typically neglect other identities (i.e., student identity; Adler & Adler, 1991) and push away other interests or hobbies to focus solely on athletics (Kidd et al., 2018). Adopting a singular athletic identity poses acute challenges in an athlete's career, particularly in times of career transition (e.g., athletic retirement), experienced by most university student-athletes upon graduation (Chun et al., 2023). COVID-19 has been considered a "career/transition barrier" by Stambulova and colleagues (2020) due to its interference with athletic development and career advancement. It has been shown that athletes with a high athletic identity have more challenging career transitions and experience increased symptoms of mental disorders following retirement (Roberts et al., 2023). Therefore, COVID-19 may have exasperated mental health concerns in university student-athletes who highly identify with their athlete role. Consequentially, more research on how career/transition barriers like COVID-19 altered Canadian student-athletes' varsity sport experiences, mental health, well-being, and perceived support is warranted.

U SPORTS and the COVID-19 Pandemic

U SPORTS, the Canadian university sport governing body, is composed of four conferences: Canada West (CW), Ontario University Sport (OUA), Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec (RSEQ), and Atlantic University Sport (AUS; U SPORTS Staff, 2016). U SPORTS had 58 member institutions and nearly 15,000 student-athletes during the 2023-2024 season competing in 12 sports (i.e., with tennis joining as a 13th sport in 2024-25). During the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of student-athletes competing in Canadian university sports were

impacted (U SPORTS, 2020a). The 2019-2020 sports season ended abruptly for late winter sports such as hockey and volleyball as U SPORTS national championships were cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020 (Chidley-Hill, 2021). Further, the 2020-2021 season was cancelled for both Fall and Winter sports due to the pandemic (U SPORTS Staff, 2020).

U SPORTS recommended that student-athletes keep training and pursue academics during the cancelled 2021 season, where permitted (U SPORTS, 2021). However, training was difficult or impossible for most. Such disruptions had mental health implications for student-athletes. In response, the U SPORTS Medical Committee released a document on mental health best practices detailing recommendations to manage student-athlete mental health. These recommendations emphasized Canadian athletic departments' roles in supporting student-athlete mental health by reducing stigma, utilizing screening tools to identify at-risk student-athletes, ensuring access to qualified licensed practitioners, and referring student-athletes to said practitioners and appropriate resources. The U SPORTS Medical Committee (2020) offered recommended developing integrated support teams (IST) to provide comprehensive care and seek input from current on-campus student health services in the development of procedures reflective of diverse student-athlete populations.

Although U SPORTS had some mental health resources available to universities in 2020-2021, including screening tools and best practices (see above) listed on its website's *Medical resources* page (U SPORTS, 2020b), these resources are no longer accessible. It is unknown if institutions utilized these resources during the pandemic or endemic seasons nor if student-athletes felt they had adequate access to and support from these resources. Consequently, qualitative research centering on student-athletes' lived experience is warranted to address how U SPORTS student-athletes perceive support and mental health resources provided by their

institution during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Furthermore, this research will help illuminate the current landscape of Canadian student-athletes' well-being, mental health, and flourishing in an endemic world.

Student-Athletes' Psychological Well-being and Mental Health

The dual role of a student-athlete leads to a combination of academic- and sport-related stressors. Student-athletes commit nearly double the amount of hours to extracurricular activities compared to non-athletes, while both groups dedicate about the same amount of time to studying and coursework (Richards & Aries, 1999). Due to their busy schedules, it has been found that lack of time and poor time management influence student-athletes' social wellness (e.g., creating and sustaining interpersonal relationships) and intellectual wellness (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving), affecting their overall well-being (Janse van Rensburg et al., 2011).

Canadian national team athletes with senior carding completed a survey prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (December 2019). When compared to the Canadian adult population, elite athletes reported four times the amount of mental disorder symptoms (41.1% compared to 10%), with nearly seven times the prevalence of depressive symptoms and generalized anxiety (Palay et al., 2019; Poucher et al., 2021). Depressive symptoms had a 31.7% prevalence in elite athletes and only 4.7% prevalence in the Canadian adult population, while anxiety had an 18.8% prevalence in elite athletes but was only reported in 2.6% of the Canadian adult population (Palay et al., 2019; Poucher et al., 2021). The prevalence of mental disorders reported for elite Canadian athletes is alarming and attention must be paid to the mental health support available to athletes. Existing mental health initiatives should be assessed to ensure they are accessible to their target population and meet athletes' needs.

A total of 66 U SPORTS student-athletes (incoming, current, and former) represented Canada at the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics (U SPORTS, 2024). Parallels can be drawn between elite Canadian athletes and U SPORTS student-athletes as overlap in these populations already exists (U SPORTS Staff, 2021). University student-athletes' day-to-day routine may be more closely aligned with that of elite athletes than the general population, warranting more attention be directed at university student-athlete mental health and how best to support Canadian athletes.

Like U SPORTS in the Canadian context, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) exists in the United States to “provide a world-class athletics and academic experience for student-athletes that fosters lifelong well-being” (para. 1; NCAA, 2024a). The NCAA is the largest regulatory body for student athletics with over 500,000 student-athletes at 1,100 schools (NCAA, 2024b). Similar to USPORTS, the cancellation of the NCAA spring 2020 sports season and the transition of academic coursework to virtual learning led to the NCAA's acknowledgment of the pandemic's mental and physical health impact on their student-athletes (NCAA, 2020). The NCAA (2020) executive summary published data from the “NCAA Student-Athlete COVID-19 Well-being Study,” which was composed of 24,974 survey responses, representing each of the three divisions (Division I, II, and III). The multifaceted report explored living and learning arrangements, mental health concerns, barriers to training, the pandemic's impact on academics, and the desired resources of student-athletes (NCAA, 2020). Notably, NCAA student-athletes reported rates of mental health concerns 1.5 to 2 times higher than historically reported in pre-pandemic studies (NCAA, 2020). Additionally, the prioritization of student-athlete mental health was a key theme when student-athletes were asked in what ways coaches and support staff could support their mental and physical well-being (NCAA, 2020). Although U SPORTS operates in a similar manner to the NCAA, the Canadian student-athlete

experience presents different challenges (e.g. funding/scholarships, admission requirements; Geiger, 2013) when compared to the NCAA, making Canadian research in this area vital.

Student-Athlete Support and Help-Seeking

In a Canadian study, it was reported that nearly half (47.3%) of varsity student-athletes had experienced a time when they wanted to seek mental health services but chose not to (Giovannetti et al., 2019). Giovannetti and colleagues further identified that student-athletes' rationale for not seeking help was primarily not having enough time. Other barriers to help-seeking included a lack of awareness of offered services, feeling like their struggles were not severe enough, fear of embarrassment due to the stigmas surrounding mental health challenges, and overall discomfort discussing mental health (Giovannetti et al., 2019).

The stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness in student-athletes offers an additional challenge for the population (Van Slingerland et al., 2018). When compared to their nonathlete counterparts, student-athletes reported significantly higher levels of stigma; both personal stigma (i.e., your own beliefs) and perceived public stigma (i.e., your beliefs about society's perception; Kaier et al., 2015). Moreland et al. (2018) found that student-athletes are willing to seek mental health services but perceived stigma and the availability of mental health services generated barriers. Moreland et al. (2018) also found that men were less willing to seek mental health services than women. This gender difference could be partially explained by DeLenardo and Terrion (2014) who found that Canadian student-athlete football players consistently perceived mental illness as a reflection of weak character and felt weak if they sought out mental health services. Further, stigma may also cause student-athletes to underreport symptoms of mental illness (Steiner et al., 2010).

Effective mental health support for student-athletes requires more than just services, programs, and qualified professionals; it also depends on the day-to-day practices and interpersonal environments that encourage the use of these supports (Habeeb et al., 2022). Habeeb and colleagues (2022) emphasized the importance of leadership that places the person first, with sport managers modeling behaviors that prioritize athlete health, safety, and well-being over a sole focus on winning. Visible leadership commitment—such as speaking openly about mental health, valuing athlete well-being in performance evaluations, and hiring staff who embody holistic approaches—can help set supportive expectations within athletic environments (Habeeb et al., 2022).

Coaches, in particular, play a critical role in influencing student-athletes' help-seeking behaviors. Research by Bissett and Tamminen (2020) identified several barriers that U SPORTS student-athletes face when considering disclosing psychological distress to their coaches. These barriers include perceived power dynamics, an emphasis on toughness, poor visibility of mental health conversations within team settings, hierarchical pressures (e.g., based on team standing), and negative prior experiences with disclosure (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020). A supportive coach-athlete relationship—characterized by trust, open communication, and validation—was highlighted as crucial in reducing these barriers (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020).

Coaches can support athlete mental health through a range of preventative efforts. Bissett et al. (2020) outline three levels of prevention: primary prevention, which involves promoting mental health proactively through behaviors such as modeling openness and emphasizing the importance of seeking support; secondary prevention, which includes identifying early signs of distress and guiding athletes to appropriate resources; and tertiary prevention, which focuses on supporting athletes already in treatment by maintaining confidentiality and adjusting athletic

demands as needed. Through daily interactions and leadership behaviors, coaches and support staff are pivotal figures in shaping the environments that either encourage or inhibit student-athletes' use of mental health resources. Trusted services must be accessible to Canadian student-athletes, and universities should continue to actively reduce stigma and reinforce help-seeking as a valued and supported behavior.

Now more than ever, Canadians and student-athletes alike are more knowledgeable and aware of services in place to support their mental health. Yet, it has been reported that only 22.4% of athletes engage in help-seeking behaviours, like the general population (Cosh et al., 2024). Such statistics mean that many student-athletes still do not engage in help-seeking behaviours considered to be in their best interest. Although people do not always act in the ways one would expect, people can act and make decisions contrary to what many might consider rational (e.g., seeking help when in distress).

Behavioural economists like Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein refute the assumption that people always make decisions that are in their best interest. Behavioural economics combines economics, psychology, and other social sciences to understand how individuals make decisions and how these decisions deviate from those predicted by traditional economics theory. Richard Thaler received a Nobel Prize in Economics in 2017 for his contributions to behavioural economics, namely Nudge Theory, which states that a change architect (i.e., an organization, an individual, a group, etc.) can influence human behaviour through nudges; small environmental changes that predictably alter one's behaviour without restricting freedom of choice (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

The most famous example of choice architecture and nudging can be seen in Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport bathrooms. In 1999, a black fly was etched into the men's urinals

providing them a spot to aim and as a result reducing spillage by 80% (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Sunstein (2014) further outlined 10 important nudges that are familiar in our everyday lives including default rules (i.e., automatic enrollment in an orientation session that includes mental health resources and academic support information), increasing ease and convenience (i.e., placing QR codes in locker rooms or lounges that instantly link to mental health booking forms, crisis lines, or support groups), and reminders (i.e., a text reminder the day before a doctor's appointment, coaches reminding athletes during team meetings that services are available—and that using them is supported and encouraged). Choice architecture and nudging could be beneficial in increasing student-athlete help-seeking behaviours.

The combination of student-athlete stressors, the increased prevalence of mental health concerns in Canadian university athletes, and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to declining mental health and increases in feelings of anxiety and depression. In combination with the stigma of student-athletes seeking mental health services, the barriers associated to disclosing psychological distress to coaches, and lack of help-seeking behaviours, further research is needed to understand the perspectives of U SPORTS student-athletes on mental health support provided by universities and if this support is enabling student-athletes to flourish or not in an endemic world. Such research can help universities better understand what mental health support is wanted by and needed for Canadian student-athletes. The insights gathered from such research can be used to engineer new forms of choice architecture and nudging in Canadian universities, helping more student-athletes access and benefit from support services.

Understanding Mental Health Beyond Illness: The Role of Flourishing

Flourishing, as conceptualized by Keyes (2002), represents a state of optimal mental health defined not only by the absence of mental illness but also by the presence of emotional,

psychological, and social well-being. Keyes' two-continua model challenges binary views of mental health by proposing that well-being and illness exist on separate but related axes.

Importantly, Keyes and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that reductions in levels of positive mental health predict future risk of mental illness, emphasizing the protective and preventative function of flourishing. Within sport contexts, flourishing offers a valuable lens to understand student-athlete well-being beyond physical health or performance outcomes. As Pankow et al. (2023) highlighted, flourishing is not synonymous with thriving; an athlete can still flourish despite setbacks such as injury or poor performance. This is because flourishing is grounded in the athlete's experience of meaning, personal development, and social connection, rather than solely on external outcomes or physical health. This distinction is crucial in high-performance environments where outcome-driven narratives often overshadow psychosocial well-being. Moreover, flourishing is a dynamic and context-sensitive state, influenced by both internal capacities (e.g., resilience, motivation) and external conditions (e.g., institutional support, team environments; Huta & Waterman, 2014; Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016). Taken together, flourishing provides a comprehensive and multidimensional framework for examining mental health in student-athletes—one that moves beyond risk prevention to actively support growth and well-being.

CHAPTER II: Methodology and Methods

The Researcher

I acknowledge my identity as a white, able-bodied, educated, cisgender woman, English-speaking, former student-athlete. I acknowledge my assumption that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted U SPORTS student-athletes' mental health and well-being and how this assumption may have influenced the knowledge production process during data collection and data analysis. To monitor my assumptions, I as a researcher continue to remain reflexive through self-reflexive journaling. I also recognize that I conducted this thesis holding a bachelor's degree in human kinetics with a minor in psychology, with six years of experience (2017-2023) as a U SPORTS varsity student-athlete, swimming for the University of Ottawa Gee-Gees. Being a student-athlete prior to, during, and following the COVID-19 pandemic, I have experienced many challenges and changes. I also recognize that as a researcher, I have prior personal experience with mental illness and utilizing the mental health resources available to student-athletes at my institution. I am familiar with the structure of U SPORTS as well as the typical performance expectations, practice demands, time commitments, competition schedules, and common language/slang used by student-athletes in this setting. My familiarity with the sporting context facilitated rapport-building with the participants.

Personal, Practical, and Intellectual Goals

Aligning with Maxwell (2013), I outline below my goals for engaging in qualitative research centered on student-athletes' mental health and support seeking. These goals have helped develop my thesis and it was important for me to clearly delineate why I was engaging in this thesis and what it could accomplish (Maxwell, 2013).

Personal Goal: To Advocate for Student-Athletes

Growing up as an athlete, I loved what I did. I thrived in the rigorous disciplined schedule I had to maintain to achieve high levels of athletic performance and academic success. However, after training over 20 hours a week for years, I was burnt out, stressed, and overwhelmed. I lost interest in the sport that was once my most cherished space. I was experiencing symptoms of depression for the first time. The pool where I felt at home and fully myself was no longer a place where I was excited to be. Shortly after, my coaches and my parents realized I was showing signs of depression, for which I did not want to seek or accept help. I struggled to enjoy school and swimming yet hoped that starting university would rekindle my love for both. I joined the Gee-Gees in 2017 where I would swim for the next six years as a U SPORTS student-athlete.

In each year that followed, my love for swimming changed and evolved, aided by finally seeking the mental health services that I needed. Through a combination of support from professionals, friends, teammates, and coaches, I was able to love the sport of swimming once again, succeed in my academic endeavours, and balance extracurricular activities. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic threw a wrench in my varsity career with facility closures, the cancellation of competitions and training, and the transitioning of many health services to virtual models. Navigating the pandemic sporting environment was difficult mentally and physically. Nevertheless, I persevered, returning to competition during the 2021-2022 season.

My experiences as a student-athlete were rich, strongly shaping who I am today. I am grateful for the opportunities and support I have been afforded through sport. Without access to mental health support, and my ability to reject the stigma around my mental illness, my time as a student-athlete would have ended swiftly and unfulfilled. I aspire to amplify the support services

offered by universities, reduce barriers and stigmas surrounding access to mental health services, and offer suggestions on how existing and additional services can meet student-athletes' needs.

Practical Goal: To Improve Institutional Mental Health Support for Student-Athletes

During my time as a student-athlete, I accessed and utilized many of the support services offered to me as a university student and as a varsity athlete. However, these services often did not offer the right client-practitioner fit, leading to referrals, extended wait periods in between services, or holes in my care.

I want to better understand the student-athlete experience outside of my personal experiences and what student-athletes believe can help improve structures of support at their institutions. I want to advocate for student-athletes based on what they share with me during the research process. My goal is to amplify the voices of current student-athletes and advocate for expanded institutional mental health support in response to current needs.

Intellectual Goal: To Make my Research Accessible

I have always found it easier and more enjoyable to access information in the form of narratives. In my research, my goal is to use narratives to guide the reader through the characters, setting, themes, flows, and conflicts that, through their relational dynamics, show the reader what the story means. By utilizing narrative inquiry and narrative analysis, I aim to make this research accessible and palatable to the population it impacts. My goal is to have the participants see a glimpse of themselves in the athlete profiles presented in this thesis by using creative non-fiction to make the findings relatable for student-athletes, coaches, practitioners, and administrators.

Paradigmatic Position

This research was informed by a relativist ontology and the epistemological stance of social constructionism. Ontologically, there are multiple concurrent realities as to how student-athletes experience mental health support. Constructionists believe that meaning is constructed consciously through interactions with the world and other social beings (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionism was used as a lens to guide this qualitative research because how individuals experience mental health is uniquely constructed and seeking mental health support is an inherently social experience to which individuals attribute their own motivations and meanings. During the research process, meanings were further co-constructed between the student-athletes and myself through my active roles in data collection and analysis (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). As a former Canadian (U SPORTS) student-athlete competing in varsity swimming, the similarity of my background and experiences to those of my participants gave me a valuable perspective for data interpretation. Epistemologically, the study focused on how U SPORTS student-athletes constructed their varsity experiences after the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to mental health support received from their institutions. A narrative approach was used to present the findings, where I (PI) used my varsity student-athlete background and experience to further understand and sympathize with the stories of current student-athletes. I intentionally refrained from fragmenting conversations into one-line quotations to keep their lived experiences whole, in the process conveying multiple facets of student-athlete's experience with mental health, well-being, and support. Furthermore, a narrative approach was consistent with the guiding relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology, whereby composite creative nonfiction stories were created to communicate the intricacies and complexities of accessing institutional mental health support.

Theoretical Frameworks

Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) and Keyes' (2002) two-continua model of mental health and mental illness guided this thesis. BPNT is a sub-theory of Self-determination Theory (SDT), which posits that all humans have an innate desire for growth and can be motivated internally to achieve said growth (Ryan et al., 1996). This type of motivation would be classified by Ryan and Deci (2000) as intrinsic motivation, the most internally regulated and highest quality of motivation on the SDT continuum. On the opposite side of the SDT continuum is amotivation, or the lack of motivation, which typically is non-regulated and perpetuated by a perceived lack of control. In the middle of the continuum, four types of motivation are proposed: external, introjected, identified, and integrated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As a sub-theory of SDT, BPNT posits that there are three basic psychological needs that every human must satisfy for optimal functioning: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to one's feeling of control over their behaviour, competence refers to one's feeling of mastery in their actions, and relatedness refers to one's feeling of being connected to others and the community (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). All individuals, including athletes, must satisfy their basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to achieve high-quality motivation and personal well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is recognized that one will flourish when their basic psychological needs are satisfied; however, when needs are frustrated, one has a higher propensity towards ill-being, and even psychopathology (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Basic needs frustration refers to when one's needs are being actively impeded (Chen et al., 2015). If autonomy is frustrated, one would feel controlled. Competence frustration would involve feelings of failure and doubt. Feeling excluded and lonely would represent relatedness frustration (Chen et al., 2015). BPNT helped answer the guiding research questions of this thesis. Specifically, the COVID-19

pandemic led to the creation of many guidelines and restrictions for Canadians, likely frustrating their basic needs. Changes imposed upon student-athletes were restrictive of individual autonomy to train (i.e., facility closures) and relatedness with teammates and coaches (i.e., social distancing) and the long break from sport impacted student-athletes' competence in their athletic skills. Using BPNT to examine student-athletes' perspectives on mental health support helped identify their motivations, from a need's satisfaction perspective, in terms of the aspects of care that are most needed to enhance mental health and flourishing.

Keyes (2002) conceptualized that mental health and mental illness are not two extremes on the same continuum but rather mental health and mental illness exist as separate dimensions, allowing for their simultaneous presence in an individual. Mental illness is identified through the presence of specific symptoms (e.g., major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder) over a set duration (Keyes, 2007). In contrast, mental health is assessed through subjective well-being, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social domains (Keyes, 2003). Within this framework, flourishing represents an optimal state of well-being, characterized by positive emotions, goal attainment, and a strong sense of purpose (Keyes, 2002; 2003). Languishing, by contrast, reflects low levels of well-being, marked by negative emotions, unfulfilled goals, and limited daily functioning (Keyes, 2002; 2003). Moderate mental health occupies the middle ground, where individuals are neither flourishing nor languishing (Keyes, 2002). Completely mentally healthy individuals are positioned as flourishing and free of mental illness (Keyes, 2002).

In past research, these flourishing individuals have shown superior psychosocial functioning, miss fewer days of work, have fewer chronic health conditions and diseases, and exhibit lower healthcare demands (Keyes & Grzywacz, 2005). For their part, languishing

individuals have been reported as having poor functioning in many facets of life, resulting in days of work missed, increased chronic health conditions, and poorer psychosocial functioning (Keyes & Grzywacz, 2005). Student-athletes' experiences and perspectives on institutional mental health services are influenced by their position in the two-continua model. Student-athletes experiencing lower mental health and higher mental illness may have different experiences than flourishing student-athletes when it comes to accessing and using institutional mental health services. The Keyes model has been helpful in answering the two research questions, notably by helping delineate how student-athletes at different positions on the two-continua model perceive institutional mental health support.

Combining Keyes' two-continua model with Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) offers a more nuanced understanding of student-athlete well-being by integrating both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions (Keyes, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Huta & Waterman, 2014). While Keyes captures the overall continuum of mental health (from languishing to flourishing), BPNT provides a mechanism—satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that explains *how* individuals move along this continuum. This integration strengthens the interpretive lens for understanding the lived experiences of student-athletes navigating institutional and personal challenges.

Methodology

When referring to mixed methods research, one might assume qualitative methods being mixed with quantitative methods. However, this is not always the case. Researchers can also choose to deploy all-qualitative or all-quantitative methods with the goal of answering one or many overarching research questions (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020). Qualitative pluralism,

specifically methodological pluralism, is situated as the use of multiple qualitative methods of data collection where all methods remain under the same paradigmatic underpinnings of the research project (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020). Another form of pluralism in qualitative research is analytical pluralism, which utilizes multiple approaches to data analysis (e.g., narrative analysis and IPA) to construct more complex interpretations than from just one analysis method alone (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020). The optimal use of pluralism in research must be intentionally planned with a clear rationale for the combination of multiple methods to answer research questions. Carefully planned pluralism has been suggested for use in research on mental health and emotional well-being as it can offer a holistic look into individual experiences (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020).

Rather than using multiple methods to triangulate data, I focused on bringing reflexivity into the research process. My intent was to build a relationship with participants to co-construct their stories (Chamberlain et al., 2011). Integrating two social constructionist methods (i.e., timelining and interviewing) enabled me to introspect deeper into the insights provided by the participants, allowing for fuller narratives to be constructed (Chamberlain et al., 2011). The multiple methods approach was implemented sequentially, meaning that the timeline was completed before the interview (Kolar et al., 2015). Participants attended an initial meeting during which I showed them sample timelines (Appendix A) to illustrate different renditions of what they can look like. I introduced the timelines as a tool to encourage participants to reflect on important milestones/events related to their mental health, well-being, and help-seeking behaviours to help me better understand their experiences prior to conducting the interviews. Taken together, the timelines and interviews helped generate interpretations of the lived

experiences of university student-athletes in relation to their mental health and help seeking behaviours.

Methods

Context and Participants

The research took place in the Canadian University Sport (U SPORTS) context. U SPORTS is the governing body for varsity athletics in Canada (i.e., 10 men's sports, 11 women's sports), with more sports added gradually (e.g., the addition of tennis for the 2024-2025 season). Eight student-athletes from the University of Western Ontario ($n=1$) and the University of Ottawa ($n=7$) were recruited, with athletes competing in the Ontario University Athletics and Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec conferences. Student-athletes represented the sports of artistic swimming ($n=1$), basketball ($n=2$), and swimming ($n=5$). Seven student-athletes identified as women, and one student-athlete identified as a man. Six participants identified as White, one as Asian, and one as Black. All participants were between 20 to 25 years of age. Three participants had previously attended a different university before attending their current university listed in this study. Two participants attended CEGEP prior to beginning their studies at the university listed in this study. Three participants were enrolled in a program in the Faculty of Health Science, three in the Faculty of Social Sciences, one in the Faculty of Arts, and one in the Faculty of Education. Six participants were completing their undergraduate degrees, and two participants were enrolled in graduate degrees.

Procedure

Following ethical approval (Appendix B), the recruitment process began. First, an information letter and poster (Appendix C) detailing the study was shared with athletic contacts

(i.e., varsity social media groups, alumni) within the U SPORTS community, inviting them to share the letter with current U SPORTS student-athletes. Second, a dedicated social media page was created on Instagram to post general information pertaining to the study and facilitate recruitment by sharing stories and posts on social media (Appendix D). Following slow initial recruitment, an ethics amendment (Appendix E) was made to expand recruitment to include in-person recruitment tactics such as printed posters (Appendix F) in areas frequented by student-athletes and gaining permission from coaches to verbally pitch my research to their athletes. In both social media and in-person methods of recruitment, I detailed what the study participation would consist of (i.e., creating a timeline, participating in a virtual individual interview over Zoom) and invited interested student-athletes to take part. Purposive sampling was used and to be eligible as participants, student-athletes needed to be English speaking, needed to have participated in their sport during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., at a competitive level in high school, university, college, etc.), were currently involved in their sport, and had at least one full year of varsity student-athlete experience specifically in the U SPORTS setting. Participants did not need to have previously sought help or use institutional mental health resources to be eligible. These criteria were established to ensure participants could (a) provide a timeline of their personal experiences as student-athletes and the changes that occurred in their life because of the COVID-19 pandemic and (b) offer insights into their university's mental health resources and if those resources meet or not their needs. Participants were accepted on a first come first served basis and the initial participants were encouraged to refer their teammates to participate (snowball sampling) in the research. Two participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

Data Collection

Data collection took place from September 2023 to April 2024. Once a participant was recruited and consent was obtained (Appendix G), data collection commenced by getting them to create a timeline of the major life events, changes, and challenges they faced while navigating the pandemic. Information was shared with the participants on how to password protect (Appendix H) their documents to ensure confidentiality on email communication.

Subsequently, these timelines helped me construct interview guides with generic questions asked to all participants as well as additional specific questions derived directly from my (i.e., the researcher's) analysis of the timeline. Then, virtual individual interviews were conducted over Zoom, allowing more flexibility when scheduling interviews.

Timelining

Timelines are a way for participants to visually represent the course of events from a certain time in their lives (i.e., months, years, a lifetime). The most common timeline method used is the classic straight line where participants plot life events in chronological order on a single line (Marshall, 2019). In narrative research, timelining is considered valuable as it assists in producing rich data (Sheridan et al., 2011). Although the classic straight line is a quick and straightforward timelining method (Marshall, 2019), multiple forms of timelines exist with ranging artistic interpretations. Aligning with BPNT principles, participants were given autonomy with the timelining process and were allowed to present their experiences in ways that felt most authentic to them. Therefore, participants were not required to use a particular style of timelining, but all participants (n=8) opted to create timelines that resembled the classic straight line presented chronologically. Timelines are considered appropriate for research dealing with sensitive topics as they help strengthen rapport and increase participant collaboration in

interviews (Marshall, 2019). These advantages were all beneficial to my thesis and my goal of getting participants to speak about their mental health help-seeking experiences (i.e., or absence of help-seeking experiences). Participants were encouraged to create a timeline beginning in the 2019-2020 season (i.e., when the COVID-19 pandemic began), making sure to include important milestones/events related to their mental health, well-being, and help-seeking behaviours or lack thereof. Participants were also invited to describe events related to school, sport, or other contexts that were important to their student-athlete experiences.

I analyzed the timelines using the Keyes (2002) model to identify key events contributing to the student-athletes' emotional, psychological, and social well-being, help-seeking behaviours, and the contexts in which flourishing, languishing, mental illness, and help-seeking occurred. Using BPNT, student-athletes' competence (i.e., ability to identify and use services), relatedness (i.e., social support), and autonomy (i.e., the choice to access help, choice of type of help) towards accessing mental health services were analyzed to understand how and why help was sought. The analysis of each participant's timeline influenced the creation of their individual interview guide by generating specific questions. Participants timelines varied in length (i.e., between one to eight pages), creativity, and formatting.

Individual Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, the most common type of interview used in qualitative research, were conducted (Alsaawi, 2014; Stuckey, 2013). Questions were predetermined before the interview, but open-ended questions were asked to allow for the elaboration and expression of the interviewees' opinions (Alsaawi, 2014; Stuckey, 2013). Semi-structured interviews allowed for student-athletes' experiences and struggles to be explored and further probed through naturally flowing conversations (Brinkmann, 2013). A semi-structured interview guide was

developed for this thesis (Appendix I). The first section of the interview guide focused on student-athletes' current experiences. The second section examined personal experiences with mental health and mental illness. The third section centered on student-athletes' access to support structures and resources. The final section opened the floor to any additional comments the participants wanted to share and demographic information collection.

One pilot test was conducted whereby a timeline and an individual interview were completed by one participant. I analyzed the timeline and prepared a customized interview guide for the pilot participant. The piloting process allowed me to gain confidence in analyzing the timelines and refining my interviewing skills (i.e., asking follow-up questions, maintaining the flow of conversation, following the interview guide). Pilot data were not included in the thesis.

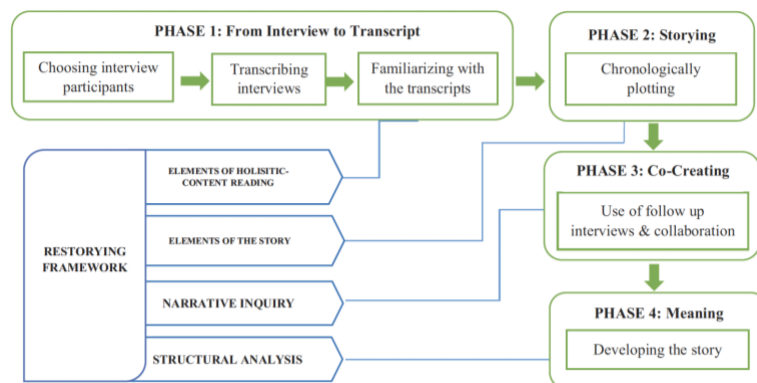
The combined use of timelining and individual interviews allowed for a more complete construction of the participants' experiences. Timelines facilitated rapport building, key for building trust with the interviewee and cultivating a richer interview (McGrath et al., 2019; Seitz, 2016). The two methods allowed for an insightful exploration of the participants' experiences as U SPORTS student-athletes through the COVID-19 pandemic and whether/how they believe universities are extending the mental health support needed for student-athletes to flourish in an endemic world. The interviews ranged between 34 and 86 minutes in length.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis places the focus on stories and emphasizes that human beings make meaning out of narratives (Smith, 2016). While there is no one way to conduct narrative analysis, I combined aspects from both Smith's (2016) thematic narrative analysis and Nasheeda and colleagues' (2019) multimethod restorying framework (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Multimethod Restorying Framework (Nasheeda et al., 2019)



The multimethod restorying framework presented by Nasheeda and colleagues (2019) outlines four steps that influenced how I used narrative analysis with multiple methods (i.e., modified to fit timeline and interview methods). I adapted this framework by engaging in *Phase 1* twice. The first time, *Phase 1* consisted of becoming familiar with timelines and creating tailored interview guides for each participant. The second time I engaged in *Phase 1: From Interview to Transcript*, I transcribed the interviews and became familiar with the transcripts. I then used the remaining three steps to guide my analysis as explained below.

As a story analyst, I focused on the content of stories and what was being said by student-athletes (Riessman, 2008). Analysis began when participants submitted their timelines. I used my analysis of the timeline data to create individualized interview guides for each participant with the goal of evoking rich, meaningful conversations between interviewer and interviewee. Then, I transcribed each interview using the integrated transcription software on Zoom. I edited when necessary to ensure accuracy, igniting the narrative indwelling process to become intimately familiar with the data (Smith, 2016). Transcripts were read and re-read, audio recordings listened to, and participant timelines reviewed. I ensured that the data remained organized by always

looking at the transcripts with the corresponding participant timelines. Notes were made in the margins of the transcripts specifically depicting my interpretations of how participants felt.

While engaging in the narrative indwelling process, I wrote thoughts in my reflexive journal on each participant I called “brain dumps”. Specifically, I wrote important, reoccurring, or memorable events for each participant, which proved useful in initiating the process of creating the stories. Additionally, I condensed the timelines for each participant into a single page each, emphasizing their time spent in university and the support received by their institutions. These exercises helped me begin the process of identifying narrative themes in the data while identifying important elements of the stories and using the timelines to plot the events spoken about during the interviews chronologically.

After I became intricately familiar with each participant’s transcript and timeline, I focused my analysis across participants (i.e., cross-case analysis) to identify narrative patterns across the dataset. Narrative patterns (e.g., feeling stressed out) were developed into wider narrative themes (e.g., there are many pressures to being a student-athlete) and organized into narrative relationships (e.g., student-athletes need a robust support system to flourish). Themes were refined by ensuring they describe a specific content or emotion. I also constantly revisited the relationships between themes, continually writing, revising, and editing my interpretations (Smith, 2016). The central narrative theme I identified was the following: student-athletes’ well-being is profoundly influenced by their institutional, social, or self-driven support systems. With my supervisor acting a critical friend, we discussed my interpretations, bringing up new ways to think about and with the data, and further questions (e.g., are other services beyond mental health services also contributing to well-being?). We also ensured the narrative themes remained within the scope of the research, focusing on endemic experiences (i.e., post COVID-19 pandemic).

Throughout the analysis, participants' COVID-19 experiences (i.e., from timelines and interviews) were used to contextualize changes in their mental health, coping strategies, and patterns of service use. These experiences also provided important insight into how basic psychological needs satisfaction and perceptions of institutional support evolved across the transition from the pandemic to the endemic phase.

As a storyteller, I created three composite CNFs to explore different student-athlete experiences of the central narrative theme (i.e., the influence of various support systems). The first CNF explores facilitators/barriers to accessing and utilizing support, while the second and third CNFs explore factors influencing student-athletes' flourishing or languishing. I developed storylines and characters that focused on lived experiences, expressed emotions, and key attributes of the participants that I identified during analysis. I avoided using direct quotations from student-athletes as to not fragment their stories nor threaten anonymity as many passages contained deeply personal or emotional content. Each CNF follows one composite character, representing the amalgamation of experiences and emotions of the eight participants of this thesis. I focused on how student-athletes *felt* by embedding lots of internal dialogue in the CNFs.

Study Quality

Throughout the study, in line with Smith and McGannon (2018), I employed a flexible list of criteria to help enhance study quality. First, I took part in a bracketing interview (McNarry et al., 2019), which I re-read and re-examined, reflecting upon the transcript to identify unconscious biases and bring awareness to assumptions I was making as a researcher. I also kept a reflexive journal, which I started at the end of data collection and used throughout the data analysis and thesis writing processes. Keeping a reflexive journal allowed me to record my emotions and thoughts, encouraged an ongoing internal dialogue, and helped me make sense of

ideas provoked during conversations with colleagues. Both Smith and McGannon (2018) and Andrews (2021) emphasize the need for critical reflexivity to enhance study quality. The critical friends approach serves as a form of collaborative reflexivity, where trusted peers provide constructive feedback to challenge assumptions, deepen analysis, and enhance credibility. The term originates from educational research, emphasizing the dual role of being both supportive (i.e., “friend”) and constructively critical (i.e., “critical”) with a common goal of upholding the integrity and impact of the work (Costa & Kallick, 1993). In this thesis, critical friends (i.e., thesis supervisor, academic peers) were utilized to help interrogate narrative interpretations and helped the stories reflect the meanings participants attributed to their experiences.

The narrative nature of my analysis merits the inclusion of Andrews’ (2021) indicators of study quality in narrative writing and publication of research. Attention was placed on contextualizing my research, mainly by presenting the results through a CNF, recognizing that the stories told are just a portion of the participants’ life stories (Andrews, 2021). Finally, I pursued a balance between scholarship and accessibility by making the research comprehensible to the student-athlete participants who engaged in the research process (Andrews, 2021).

CHAPTER III: Narrative Findings

Stories of the Varsity Student-Athlete Experience

Three narratives were created to present the findings of the study, illuminating the lived experiences of Canadian varsity student-athletes. Through the use of CNF techniques, each story follows a fictional composite student-athlete (i.e., combining the traits, experiences, and emotions of multiple participants into a single character). The goal of these composite CNFs is to capture the essence of participants' lives in manners that remain consistent with the data. CNF embraces artistic freedom while also providing authors the flexibility to examine internal dialogues and emotions in manners that are accessible to a wide audience (Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

These stories, derived from participant interviews and timelines, illustrate the challenges and triumphs student-athletes faced as they navigated the dual pressures of academia and athletics. With the intention to authentically illuminate the voices of current student-athletes, each narrative explores important dimensions of the student-athlete experience while remaining routed in the central narrative theme that I identified during data analysis. The demographics of the CNF characters reflect the composition of the study's participant group: the first narrative is presented as a white woman, the second as a Black woman, and the third as a white man. Although the sample included only one male participant and one Black participant, it was important to represent their voices through the CNF, as each story is a composite construction grounded in shared experiences across all participants.

Three narratives are presented to answer the two guiding research questions of this thesis.

1. Between the Lanes: A Glance into Institutional Mental Health Support

2. Just Do It (All): Flirting with Flourishing

3. The Weight of Water: Fending off Languishing

The first story follows Julia, a varsity student-athlete swimmer, as she struggles to balance her rigorous athletic commitments and academic demands while grappling with physical and mental health challenges. All the while, Julia is reluctant to engage in help-seeking behaviours. Julia's story was written using a first-person narrative and aims to answer the first research question: What are varsity student-athletes' perspectives on institutional mental health support provided by universities? The intent behind Julia's story is to allow the reader to become immersed in the daily routine of a varsity student-athlete and better grasp how student-athletes perceive and utilize (or not) available mental health support services.

The second the third narratives explore how different varsity student-athletes navigate the pressures of athletic performance and academic expectations. These two narratives are written from an all-knowing narrator perspective (i.e., third-person omniscient). Just Do It (All) follows Leah, an overinvolved women's basketball player, trying to balance her multiple roles. This narrative is intended to reveal the importance of prioritizing self-care and community. The Weight of Water follows Tom, a varsity student-athlete swimmer, whose strong athletic identity, intense self-inflicted pressure to perform, and resistance to help-seeking come together to worsen his mental and emotional well-being. These two narratives aim to answer the second guiding research question: Is the support provided enabling varsity student-athletes to flourish in an endemic world? The juxtaposition of Leah and Tom's stories demonstrates how differences in individual choices, help-seeking behaviours, and relationship building can influence student-athletes' well-being. All three narratives are deeply rooted in the participants' experiences.

Story 1: Julia—Between the Lanes: A Glance into Institutional Mental Health Support***Between the Lanes***

I slide my phone out of my pocket, the screen reads 1:43 pm. As I step into the changeroom, the familiar smell of chlorine hits my nostrils. I quickly slip on my swimsuit and rush out to the pool deck, just in time for the team's 15-minute activation before the 2:00 p.m. swim practice.

"How are you doing today, Julia?" Coach asks as I pass by.

"I'm fine, thanks," I reply automatically. It's the same response I give every day, a convenient answer that spares me from having to explain how I *really* feel. Fine feels accurate enough—or at least, it's what I keep telling myself and everyone around me.

Coach always says, "Leave it at the door. When you come to practice, don't bring life and school stress with you. Focus on swimming and give it everything you've got." I used to be able to do that. I could feel the water, feel every stroke, and my mind would stay sharp. I was almost trace-like, a flow state I've heard it's been called. But now, as I dive into the frigid water, my thoughts race like engines revving louder and louder. Two more hours left, I think to myself...

After practice, I scramble to get to my 4:30pm biology class. Luckily, the lecture hall is close to the pool so it's only a 3-minute walk to get there. I mentally prepare myself to absorb what the prof will lecture on while juggling a million other thoughts in my head. My mind races through all the assignments I need to complete, exams I need to study for, and the stress I'm putting on myself to perform well at an important upcoming swim meets. I settle into my seat, my laptop is open, but my focus is constantly drifting. I'm not really sure what the prof is lecturing on...

Following my biology class, I head to the gym for a team lifting session. The weight room is newer to me as I never really lifted much weights before university. COVID-19 kept most gyms closed my final year of high school. I've quickly grown to love lifting weights. Unlike swimming alone in my lane, the gym is loud. I can feel the energetic buzz when we have a team session. The combination of barbells clanging to the ground, my teammates' infectious laughs, and the latest playlist blaring, I can't help but feel motivated when I'm in the gym. But even in this very positive and joyful environment, I can't shake the weight of my responsibilities. I find myself rushing through my sets of squats, knowing the faster I get them done, the more time I will have to study for exams and finish my assignments.

Later in the evening, I find myself in the kitchen doing some meal prep, getting my lunches and dinners ready for the week. I chop vegetables and roast potatoes in almost industrial quantities, enough to feed a small village. Doing advanced meal prep saves me so much time. I cook a couple times a week and it helps me keep my nutrition on track. In the moment, it's a time-consuming task, but it's also a moment of calm amidst the constant chaos. As I sauté chicken and stir in spices, I find a rhythm. In this sense, meal prep feels almost meditative. Yet, the reality is that the clock is ticking and I can't help but endlessly glance at my phone to see how much time I have left to study for the biology quiz tomorrow. *There are just not enough hours in the day*, I think, as I let out a long and tired sigh. Life would be so much less hectic if I lived on a planet that had 30-hour days...

As I pack my meals into my army of plastic containers, I once again feel the pressure of figuring out how I can best balance my schedule. My constantly busy life is weighing down on me. I need to fuel my body and my brain for performance, but I also need to keep up with my coursework and make sure I study appropriately for exams. It's a constant balancing act that I'm

having a lot of trouble staying on top of. How exactly am I supposed to juggle my swim schedule with a full slate of university classes while meeting my basic human needs of proper sleep and nutrition? Each meal prepared feels like a small victory, but deep down, I worry that I'm slipping behind. The demands of being a varsity athlete are relentless and some days, I feel like I'm barely staying afloat. But that's how everyone feels, I justify to myself...

Swim Meet vs Bio Lab

This Friday's swim meet is three and a half hours away by bus and I regrettably have to miss my biology lab to attend. It's not the first time I've missed class for a meet, but this lab is mandatory, and rescheduling has been a nightmare, even with an official absence letter from Sports Services. The professor's curt reply to my request for an alternate lab time still lingers in my mind: *You'll have to make it up next week during your own time, try not to miss anymore labs this semester.* So, on top of all my regular heavy load of responsibilities, I'll have to miss a practice to catch up on lab work.

The meet itself goes sort of well. Not my best individual performance, but not my worst either. I place fifth in the 100-metre freestyle and our relay team takes first in the 4x100-metre freestyle, bringing in a good chunk of points, allowing our team to win the meet. Everyone around me is buzzing with excitement, high-fives and cheers echoing through the pool deck, but I can't bring myself to feel the positive vibes. I don't feel the rush of victory. I don't get that sense of pride. All I can think about is the long bus ride back to campus and the stack of assignments staring at me when I get back to my apartment. This constant juggling of swimming and schoolwork is really sucking out the fun of being a student-athlete.

On the bus, as I stare out the window, the night covered highway rolls by in a blur. I feel the knot in my stomach tighten. I should be proud of myself for significantly contributing to the

team's win, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm drowning in a sea of coursework, practices, and expectations. I sometimes feel like my life is a video game. The levels keep getting harder but no matter how much effort I put in, I can't seem to beat the game. The final boss always wins.

When we finally arrive back on campus late that night, I literally have to drag myself off the bus, extremely exhausted with little time to rest before tomorrow's practice. The next morning, as I dive into the pool, I find myself counting down the minutes until I can get out of the water, which no longer feels like an escape, a safe haven anymore. Instead, I feel like I'm drowning, not from the water but from struggling to keep my head above all my assignments and training responsibilities.

The Weight of Concern

After what I felt was a quite sluggish practice on my part, I am convened to a meeting with my head coach and assistant coach. I sit down in their office, and my head coach immediately notices that I seem distracted.

"Julia, is everything okay?" she asks, looking at me with concern.

I shrug, offering my usual reply. "I'm fine. Just a bit tired, I guess."

She raises an eyebrow. "You've been off lately. I know you work hard, but I need you to focus during practice. We're counting on you for the upcoming championship. Is there anything we can do to help you?"

Her words feel simultaneously like an extra weight on my chest but also like an arm is being extended to help pull me back on my feet. I want to explain everything to her—the stress, the anxiety, the pressure to perform in class and in the water—but the words just stick to my throat, they never make it out of my mouth. Instead, I just nod and give a tight smile.

“Yes Coach, don’t worry, I’m going to lock in,” I say, leaving her office feeling more isolated than ever. Her concern, instead of making me feel supported, only amplifies my fears. Is there really something wrong with me? Am I good enough to be a varsity student-athlete? Are my issues getting to a point where other people are noticing that I’ve fallen off my usual rhythm? I walk away feeling like I’m letting myself and everyone down... Now I gotta run to my 7-10pm class.

Question: Can you come out with us? | Answer: No, I have practice ☹

Later that week, I get an invitation from some of my non-swimmer friends to go to a trivia night at the campus bar. I decline their offer because I need to attend a mandatory swim practice the next morning at 6am. As I lie in bed, unable to sleep, I scroll through social media, watching my friends’ Instagram stories filled with “trivia” laughter and fun. Right there and then, a pang of loneliness hits me. I can’t remember the last time I truly felt like I belonged—either in the varsity sports world or the wider university community. My endlessly busy life as a student-athlete feels like it’s separating me from many of my friends, leaving me trapped in a bubble of obligations and expectations.

Sometimes, I think about how nice it would be to have a “normal” university experience—going out with friends, making spontaneous plans without worrying that they’ll unravel my entire schedule. But the reality of my incessant commitments is draining me. Each day feels like a repetitive cycle: wake up, practice, study, repeat. There’s little time left for connecting, laughing, friending. I feel like I’m losing a part of myself that I desperately don’t want to lose.

Slow and Stupid?

Since my last competition, the weeks are all blurring together, a constant monotonous slog filled with early morning practices and late-night study sessions. When midterms roll around, I feel the weight of expectations pressing down even harder on my shoulders, on my mind, on my ego. I decide to prepare for my chemistry midterm exam with the fervor of an Olympian because I take pride in working hard both in and out of the pool. However, reality hits me when I see my grade: a disappointing C. That C feels like a Mike Tyson punch in the gut, I feel the wind knocked out of me as I look at my exam marked up with lots and lots of red ink. All those late nights studying and skipping social events seem to have been all in vain. I can't help but replay the events in my mind—missing that trivia night because I had an early practice, saying no to hanging out with friends who wanted to catch a movie. I'm left questioning everything: *Why am I giving up all my time and energy to school and the pool yet I still don't get good grades or perform well in swimming?* The pressures are definitely mounting. I can feel that creeping sense of doubt is settling in and taking up residence in my brain. I'm pouring all I have into school and swimming and still coming up short in both. Why am I doing this student-athlete thing? What price am I paying? Is it really worth it?

These questions swirl in my mind as I walk to practice, leaving me feeling even more isolated. I glance at my teammates, who seem to thrive in both academics and athletics, and I wonder if they, too, feel the burden of expectation.

Starting to Crack (in a physical sense)

I push myself to the limit during a particularly grueling practice. I suddenly feel a sharp pain in my shoulder, reminiscent of a previous injury. Panic floods through my veins. I slow down, I stop swimming, but my heart is racing. Oh no! Is it too late now? It dawns on me. Have I

been so focused on pushing my limits that I've ignored the subtle signs my body has been giving me?

Coach notices my weird antics in the pool and calls me over. "What's wrong?" she asks, concern etched on her face.

"I think I hurt my shoulder," I unfortunately admit, trying not to cry, trying to keep my voice steady.

She looks at me closely and I can see the worry in her eyes. "Take a break. I don't want to push you too hard. Your health is more important than a swim meet."

As I sit on the edge of the pool, feeling the cool tiles against my legs, I realize how fragile my sense of competence is. The fear of re-injury is very *real*. I worry that this little shoulder incident today in the pool might affect my performance in the upcoming championship. I've worked so hard to regain my strength and mobility since I hurt my shoulder last season. I don't want to go back to sitting out of practices and not competing when the championship is only a couple months away! After practice, as I head to the showers, my shoulder feels a lot better. It's a bit sore, but the mobility is still there, the pain is manageable. I think I may have (luckily) dodged the (major) injury bullet, for now, but I'm going to go see a physiotherapist for precautionary measures... Makes me wonder, wow, health is fragile... Perhaps I gotta do a better job of looking out for mine.

Things all Athletes Should Know (back in pre-season)

I think back to the athlete orientation meeting at the start of the season. There were 700 of us sitting in a packed room. A person talked about mental health counseling. The buzz of the new season, the excitement of being on campus, the chatter of my teammates—all of it drowned out the mental health counseling stuff. I didn't pay much attention at the time; I didn't think I

would ever need counseling. How things have changed in a matter of a few months...

Fortunately, I do remember the contact person's name.

Lately, I've started to wonder: I know things aren't running super smoothly but am I really in a bad enough predicament to need counseling? One of my teammates goes to counseling, but they have a diagnosed mental illness. I just feel a bit... off, like I'm stuck in a fog or something. Does that warrant getting counseling?

Many excuses flood my mind: *Things aren't "bad enough" to go to counseling. I'm not a big talker; what difference would it make if I saw a counselor? What if I don't get along with the counselor, are we then both wasting our time? Will my coaches find out and think I'm weak, stereotypically spilling my beans to a shrink?* And then there's the logistics. *I'm already stretched thin on time—where would I fit counseling into my full-to-the-brim schedule?* My days are a rigid routine: practice, eat, study, class, practice, eat, study, sleep. It feels like I'm living the same day over and over again. I sometimes feel like I'm Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, or I'm stuck on the same level of some never-ending video game. Even finding time for physiotherapy for my shoulder injury is a struggle.

The Elusive 'Turning Point'(just like in the movies)

At the end of one particularly long day, I drop my backpack with a thud as I walk inside my apartment. I sink into the couch next to my roommate, eager to hear the latest gossip from their "normal" university life—free from the all-consuming demands of varsity athletics. As the conversation drifts to a variety of different topics, my roommate brings up counseling services on campus. They mention how all students can get free counseling at the university health center, but the sessions are limited, and the wait times are long.

In my head, I'm thinking, that must be difficult for students who need prompt mental health support, brushing aside (but not really) the fact that I might be one of those students who needs help. Then, a thought creeps in: I have access to another avenue for counseling because I'm an athlete. The sessions are unlimited, the wait times are short. Why exactly am I not using this service? In that moment, I tell myself: Ok, that's it, tomorrow morning, I'm going to reach out and book an appointment with the mental health counselor. If there are some perks to being a student-athlete, then I might as well take advantage of them.

The First Step

That night, as I lie in bed, my mind buzzes with questions and fears. *Why is sending an email to a mental health counselor so stressful?* I'm never this anxious when I email my athletic therapist or massage therapist. *Counseling is just another form of therapy*, I try to convince myself. *I'm a high-performance athlete—taking care of my mind should be just as important as taking care of my body, they both inevitably constantly influencing one another.* I breathe deeply, counting in for four, holding, then out for four, over and over until I drift off to sleep. The alarm blares! I jolt awake! *Ok, I guess this is it, now I really have to send that email.* I scroll through my MS Teams messages to find the counselor's contact information. I take a deep breath, trying to keep my message simple and honest:

Hi,

My name is Julia, and I'm a member of the women's swim team. I'd like to set up a meeting. Lately, I haven't been feeling like myself and I'm not sure what my best options are since I've never worked with a counsellor before.

Thank you.

Best,

Julia.

I take my cursor, put it over the “Send” button, wait a few seconds, take a deep breath, and then I click. A loud “whoosh” sound signals the email has been sent. The simple act of sending that email felt monumental. It wasn’t just about booking a session—it was about admitting to myself that I couldn’t carry this weight alone any longer.

As I rush out the door to head to practice, a sense of relief washes over me. I suddenly feel energized. I’ve taken the first step. Let’s see what happens...

After the Email

After clicking “Send”, I did feel a glimmer of hope for a moment. Unfortunately, that hope quickly faded into impatience as days turned into weeks without a response. So much for the short wait times that we were told about. The waiting game was torturous and the idea of sending a follow-up email loomed over me like an unwelcomed shadow. When I did finally receive a reply, I was excited yet apprehensive. Coordinating a time to meet with a counselor proved to be a daunting challenge; between my packed schedule and his limited availability, it felt like I was trying to fit pieces of a puzzle not meant to come together. Each time we exchanged messages, I felt my enthusiasm wane. *Is it really worth it for me to meet with this man who has to juggle so many students and their problems?* More serious doubts began to creep in: *What if he can’t truly understand the pressures I’m facing? What does he know about being a woman varsity student-athlete?* With every delay, I questioned whether reaching out for help was the “right” move for me. I just kept thinking: *Am I just setting myself up for another disappointment?*

I started thinking about accessing counseling options outside the university, wondering if these would be quicker or more efficient. However, the thought of paying out of pocket for counseling felt daunting, especially on my meager student budget. The university service is free,

I can't justify spending money I don't really have anyways. *But can I really afford to wait any longer?*

My First Time Engaging in Counseling

Finally, I managed to schedule a meeting with Peter the counsellor and we connected over a video call. As I sat in my cramped room in my tiny student apartment with paper-thin walls, I asked myself. *Will my roommate hear me? Do I feel that this call is confidential? How is me asking this very question going to influence what I tell (or don't tell) this counselor dude?* Despite my doubts, fears, and apprehensions, deep down, I'm really hoping this call is the turning point I so desperately need.

Finally, it's time, the call starts.

"Hi Julia, my name is Peter from the counseling office, how are you?"

Over the span of 45 minutes, the conversation flows and I find myself sharing some thoughts and feelings. However, looking back on the conversation, I can now see how I was holding back—like I was only scratching the surface of what truly bothered me. *Maybe I just needed time to warm up to this Peter guy.* My roommate often talks about the importance of finding the right "fit" with friends, partners, and even counselors, emphasizing that when something clicks, you just know. But sitting there, staring at my reflection on the screen, I couldn't help but wonder what "clicking with a counsellor" was supposed to feel like. Is it supposed to be an instant connection, or does the clicking take some time to develop? Part of me worried that if we didn't have that immediate spark, it meant that our time together wouldn't work out, that I'd have to start the process all over again with a different counselor. It's sad to say, but I just don't have the time to waste time trying to click with a counsellor. The prospect that I may be wasting my time is itself stressing me out. Am I really wasting my time with a

counsellor who is not the right match for me, or was our first session together just the beginning of something that needs more time to strengthen?

Back to the Grind

A few days after the counseling session, I feel swallowed up again in the whirlwind of class and practice. After another tough speed session in the pool, I plop myself down in the sauna with a few of my teammates. We make jokes about how hungry we are and how red our goggle marks look in our faces. I try as much as I can to stay in that moment. It's nice to spend good quality time with my teammates. Lately, I've been isolating myself more often, cramming in as much studying as I can to try to rectify my poor midterm exam performances. I waited for a while to book a follow-up session with Peter the counsellor. The decision to reach out again weighted heavily on my mind. My contemplations grew louder and louder, I couldn't keep my thoughts surrounding counselling to myself anymore. So, on that day, in the sauna, I opened my mouth and the following words fell out: "I had my first counselling session this week."

Without missing a beat, Claire chimed in and said "Great! How did it go?" In that moment, because of Claire's quick and unassuming reaction, I was left in shock. *Why did she feel that me seeing a counsellor was so normal, even great?*

I'd been dreading saying anything counselling-related for days, convincing myself that it would be awkward and that my teammates would see me differently because of it. But Claire's reaction was so matter-of-fact, like it was no big deal. It made me wonder whether all my apprehensions related to counselling were overblown, if I'd been inventing problems in my head. I hesitated in my response to Claire, unsure of how much I should be sharing. "It was... okay, I think...". As I felt the heat of the sauna on my skin and all my teammates' eyes on me, I added: "I don't know really. I'm not sure if it helped. I felt like I was holding back."

My teammates nodded up and down, looking like they understood exactly what I meant. Claire leaned in towards me, her voice casual but sincere: ‘You know, I felt the same after my first session,’ she said, her expression softening. ‘But sticking with it made a huge difference.’ Her words hung in the steamy air, leaving me both comforted and curious.

Part of me regretted a bit the sauna conversation. I wondered: *Is it in my best interest to be so vulnerable with my teammates?* But another part of me felt a mild sense of relief. I wasn’t the only one on the team struggling to figure out all this scheduling, schooling, training, and mental health stuff. It was like a tiny olive branch, Claire sharing with me that she also got counselling. It was a confirmation that I wasn’t alone, that I wasn’t the only one experiencing some struggles.

Internally, the sauna moment opened the floodgates of my thoughts. So many questions and doubts came to mind: *Did I overgeneralize the way I felt? Was I really that exhausted, that burnt out? Is it better to isolate myself and study, or should I make more efforts to socialize with my friends, share my thoughts with teammates? If I know I need help and others need it too, why am I still feeling weaker than others because of it?*

Ongoing Connections

Peter reached out to me two weeks after my first appointment to follow up and ask if I wanted to schedule a second appointment. To my surprise, I said yes! *Maybe Claire’s attempts to destigmatize counseling had started to penetrate my psyche.* Maybe I was turning a corner. *Yet, if Peter hadn’t contacted me, would I’ve ever seen him again?*

Flashbacks to the tumultuous back and forth that took place scheduling my first appointment flooded back. Then my phone buzzed.

Hi Julia,

Great to hear you are up for a follow-up session! Seeing as 1pm on Tuesday's worked for your schedule last time, would you like to do the same day and time in 3 weeks? We can continue to meet virtually through video calls or transition to in person meetings going forward if you'd like. Please let me know at your earliest convenience.

Regards,

Peter

WOW! That was much easier than last time. With one email, Peter had just wiped away the stress and worries of booking my next appointment. I didn't need to rearrange my hectic schedule. The three weeks in-between, I felt at ease, almost as if just having an appointment booked prevented any major crisis from boiling over. I had a safety net. If anything happened, I wouldn't be left alone to pick up the mess, Peter would be there to help guide me through it.

My second session was quite like the first, I kept my guard up like I had something to hide. I spoke about my week, my classes, practice, how tired I was, my fear of being overloaded with assignments, things I knew weren't exactly the proper topic of conversation for counseling. In movies, counseling is all about breakthroughs and big emotions, I was convinced I was doing the whole thing wrong. I spoke to Peter the same way I would speak to a friend and yet, when the hour mark struck, I felt a sense of relief, a sense of pride, a sense of agency. *Maybe I was doing counseling right after all, given that it was making me feel better.* It almost felt like I had gone to the gym for an hour-long stretching routine after a difficult week of practice. For the first time in a long time, I was actually taking care of my mind.

By the third session, I noticed something surprising. Talking to Peter felt less like pulling teeth and more like catching my breath. Even without dramatic revelations, the act of unpacking

my thoughts made the load feel lighter. *I didn't think I would ever need counseling, let alone like counseling. How things have changed in a matter of a few months... Back then, I thought counseling was for people with 'real' problems. Now, I realize that asking for help is about maintaining strength, it doesn't need to be perceived as a show of weakness.*

Finding My Village

With the support of Claire and Peter, counseling became part of my routine. I was still much busier than my roommates. I still had to juggle swimming, school, and my physical and mental health. But such is the territory that comes with being a student-athlete. Varsity athletics and full-time university studies are inherently time-consuming. I've come to accept that—it's something all student-athletes face. It's all about finding one's way to manage the load.

In all honesty, I didn't think I would warm up to Peter the counselor. But over the last few months, we've developed a good relationship. He's significantly helped me manage my load. Claire and I have grown even closer, and I have her to thank for kickstarting my journey to better well-being.

I know it sounds corny, but it really does take a village. For so long, I believed asking for help was a sign of weakness. I pushed away the helping hands extended by my coaches, isolated myself from friends and teammates, and left myself overworked and under-recovered. Now, I understand that there is no perfect solution—no magic words from a counselor that make being a student-athlete easier. It's just arduous, ongoing work. But I've learned that having the courage to trust others and open myself up to their support can make all the difference. The village was always there; it just took me time to embrace it and see its value.

Looking back, I realize the village wasn't just there to hold me up when I stumbled. It reminded me that strength comes from connection, trust, and the willingness to lean on others.

From Claire's encouragement to Peter's guidance, from my teammates' camaraderie to my coaches' quiet support, each person in my life added something unique to the foundation I needed. It wasn't about finding a magical solution or expecting one person to solve everything for me. It was about recognizing the value in small, consistent acts of care—an olive branch, a kind word, a shared laugh. Together, these acts make the impossible feel manageable.

For so long, I thought flourishing as a student-athlete meant grinding harder, doing more, and proving I could handle it all on my own. Now, I understand it's about balance and connection—about building a life where my ambitions and my well-being can coexist. My village didn't change who I am; it helped me rediscover what I was capable of all along.

Story 2: Leah —Just Do It (All): Flirting with Flourishing***Every Minute Matters***

Every night, Leah uses her ballpoint pen to meticulously schedule the next day in her planner before clicking off her bedside lamp. Her eyelids shut, she fades into the comforting darkness of sleep. But that sleep doesn't last long. A mere six hours later, her alarm wakes her up with a loud ring. Leah jumps out of bed, tosses on the clothes she set out the night before, stuffs her lunch straight from the fridge to her backpack, and then skips out the door. A happy tune loops in her head as her excitement for the day builds.

Today is like any other day for Leah. It's jam-packed with a morning basketball practice, two back-to-back psychology classes, a meeting with BSAAC (her school's Black Student-Athlete Advocacy Council), an afternoon shooting practice, a sociology class, and then returning home for board game night with her housemates. For many, this would almost seem like a weekly schedule, but for Leah, this is the daily norm. In her first year of university, she took the frosh week message of "get involved" very seriously, and she has no regrets. Leah has built an army of friendships across many groups at her university and wouldn't trade those connections for the world.

The next day, Leah's coach invites Jasmine, a speaker from the university wellness centre, to talk with the women's basketball team, replacing the usual film study during game weeks. Coach thought having someone motivate the players would help build team morale before getting into the winter game schedule, which is filled with away games. The speaker's words on gratitude expressing thanks resonate heavily with Leah. There was something about Jasmine that Leah saw a lot of herself in.

Breathing Room

After hearing Jasmine's motivating messages, Leah found herself compelled to get involved as a volunteer with the university wellness center, on top of her already full docket of commitments. The wellness centre frequently hosts public events, practical workshops, yoga sessions, animal therapy, themed study sessions—you name it. After Jasmine welcomes Leah to the wellness centre and introduces her to other staff members, she wonders: *why haven't I ever been here before? I've never attended any events at the wellness centre before. Maybe this is exactly what I need, it just feels right being here, almost peaceful.* After meeting everyone and visiting the centre's facilities, Leah feels at home; she fits right in and begins volunteering with the mental health and wellness services that are offered.

After a grueling conditioning practice, Leah sits in the locker room, listening to her labored breaths as they wheeze in and out. She remembers to utilize a new breathing technique she learned at the wellness centre to slow her heart rate. Jasmine said it is often used for people to calm their nervous system. Her teammates notice Leah engaging in this unusual and deliberate breathing practice and ask her what she's doing. Eager to share, Leah teaches them how to do it. She then proceeds to invite her teammates to the next animal therapy event she's helping out with.

Resources to the Rescue

Following a quick lunch after practice, Leah attends her stats class, where students are to receive their grades for their first major project. The professor steps into the large, echoing lecture hall. Immediately, the students freeze, collectively fearful of what's to come. This mark will determine if Leah is on track in terms of understanding the course material or if she derailed somewhere along the way. Her professor wastes no time addressing the elephant in the room. "I

have graded your work and will return assignments to you at the end of today's class," he says, before starting his lecture on confidence intervals. Worry builds in the room. It's palpable. There are 200 restless students struggling to stay focused, all thinking, as Leah is, of the grades written in red pen on the front of their assignments. Finally, the lecture ends, and Leah shuffles in a long line to collect her project. Her eyes are met with a large, glaring C, burning through the title page. Anxiousness creeps up Leah's throat. *How has this happened? C? I'm usually a straight A student! Am I doomed for the rest of this course? Have I just tanked my mark for this semester? I can't afford to fall behind, I'm too busy for that.* After the initial feeling of panic subsides, Leah springs into action, quickly checking the stats professor's office hours and booking an appointment with him. Leah also reaches out to her basketball team's academic advisors to begin searching for tutoring help.

Two days later, Leah sinks in the chair across from her academic advisor, Jason, who quickly perks up, "Leah, it's so great to see you! I've been seeing you all over campus. Looks like you're really involved this year!"

"Yeah," Leah replies in an oddly somber tone by her standards. "I've been able to really 'do it all' this year, but I'm really struggling with one of my courses and was wondering if you could help me find a tutor so I don't fall behind. The new content of my stats course builds on the previous content, so if I don't figured things out..." she rambles on, her voice growing louder with every word.

Jason amicably cuts her off. "Leah, don't fret. It takes a smart student to recognize that they need help mid-semester, rather than right before final exams. There's plenty of time to improve your grades, and tutoring is a great step. Sports services will pay for 10 tutoring hours, making them free of charge to you!" Jason continues explaining other options, such as the

faculty help center, which Leah promises to check out. When their 30-minute meeting is up, Leah leaves Jason's office feeling revitalized. *I can do this*, she thinks strolling down the hallway, *I just need to put in the effort. I can't let this one grade derail me. I'm strong enough to get back on track*. Leah feels confident she'll be able to do well in her stats class and remain a top academic performer on her team, as usual.

A Quiet Surrender

After her meeting with Jason, Leah's confidence carries her through her afternoon study session, catching up on assignments and studying for upcoming mid-term exams. Rays of late afternoon sun peek through sparse clouds into the large windows in front of Leah's table at the library. An overwhelming sense of gratitude fills Leah's mind as she pencils in her upcoming tutoring session. She feels so lucky to have access to great learning resources, supportive academic advisors, and free tutoring. Even the study room at the library Leah is using is reserved for the women's basketball team without them having to lift a finger. The groundwork has been done by the university, so the resources are at student-athletes' disposal, without hassle, when they need them.

A handful of Leah's teammates come in and out of the study room that day, some for 20 minutes, killing time between classes, others, like Leah, for hours on end. Leah is determined to study until the sun goes down and hunger force her back home for dinner. After eating a satisfying portion of spaghetti, Leah dives into writing her sociology essay, carefully curating her topic to perfectly align with the course content and her personal interests. She begins by doing an online database search, looking for supporting literature. She then swiftly proceeds to compose her essay outline. Leah thrives when she's free to just write, and this paper has very few guidelines apart from the word count. When writing, Leah gets wrapped up in letters and words

swirling around like a tornado in her head. She builds a beautiful story that eloquently gets her arguments across. Like an orchestra conductor, Leah transcribes a symphony of phrases on her keyboard, thinking faster than her fingers can move.

Leah is writing her essay in a highly sensory active environment. There's the clacking of her laptop keys, the murmuring of her teammates, and the stomping of students passing by the study room. Glaring fluorescent lights reflect against the dark windowpanes, combined with the bright glow of her laptop screen. Without warning, her head starts to buzz. The strain makes her vision spotty, forcing her to take a break.

Leah steps into the hallway for a drink of water. As she leans over the water fountain to quench her thirst, her neck stiffens, and a sharp, shooting pain starts to crawl up the back of her head. Now back in the study room, Leah does her best to regain focus. She tries to think about her next argument, but the room is suddenly too loud. The noises and lights are piercing into her skull. After spending ten minutes with her head down on the table and her noise-cancelling headphones on her ears, things aren't getting better. At this point in the evening, Leah accepts that she'll not be getting any more schoolwork done. She packs her laptop and walks home, taking the long route to avoid the heavy traffic and car horns blaring from the main road. Once home, she skips dinner and doesn't fill out her daily planner. She decides to simply close the curtains and slip into bed, surrounding herself with darkness and silence, hoping the night will remedy her pounding head.

The Next Day

Leah's alarm blares for morning practice. She rolls over and hits snooze on multiple occasions, feeling very sluggish and drowsy. When she finally makes it to practice, Coach calls out her infamous running drills, which she knows she'll have trouble getting through. Given her

current less-than-optimal predicament, Leah knows she must speak to her coach about the events that happened the previous night in the study room.

“Hey Coach, can I talk to you for a minute?” Leah meekly asks. “Yesterday, I had this intense headache while I was studying, and I don’t feel 100% yet. My neck is still aching and the constant sound of dribbling basketballs, squeaky shoes, and the bright gym lights are already making my head pound.”

“Oh Leah, that sounds like a migraine,” Coach replies. “Everyone faces setbacks—our bodies and minds are not invincible. Let’s go talk to Michelle the athletic trainer to see how she can help you.”

Both Coach and Leah walk over to Michelle, who asks, “So, Leah, tell me what’s going on?”. Leah explains her pain and Michelle recommends that Leah should see the sports medicine doctor and establish how her training load may need to be adjusted until she feels well again.

Calling a Timeout

At the next practice, Leah’s migraine pops up again in the highly stimulating basketball gym. To get away from the squeaky basketball shoes, Michelle tells Leah to go to the small but quiet exercise bike room, where two other girls are cycling as they try to recover from mid-season injuries. Leah shoots a commiserating look at her teammates, obviously not thrilled to be joining them in this little dungeon. Quickly, Anna redirects Leah’s thoughts by chiming in, “Stop, Leah. It’s not a bad thing to be on the bike—you’re practicing to the best of your ability today. It doesn’t mean that you’ll be sitting on the bench for the rest of the season.” Leah struggles to readjust her mindset. Usually, she’s the voice of positivity and reason on the team, but being on the receiving end of encouragement makes her feel uncomfortable. She acknowledges how far her mental state has strayed from her upbeat, bubbly norm, which she

hopes to soon return to. But the uncertainty of these migraines is making her antsy. How long are these going to last? I don't have time for these useless headaches, there's too much I need to accomplish.

During the 45 minutes Leah is on the bike, the three girls have ample time to talk. Typically, Leah is so focused on running from one activity to the other that she seldom has time for conversations that extend beyond "How are you? I hope things are well. I have to run, so let's catch up later. Bye." Today, Leah's 45 uninterrupted minutes mimic a therapy session, moving quickly past the small talk stage. Leah lets her guard down, admitting to her teammates that her plethora of commitments and now these recurring migraines have been weighing heavily on her mind. She confesses that she may have spread herself too thin this year, trying to be a poster child for "getting involved," which has taken its toll, based on the signs her body and mind are giving her. Her two teammates prove to be excellent soundboards, helping Leah put things in perspective. She hops off the bike and heads to the showers with lots of internal thoughts and interrogations bouncing in her mind.

A New Game Plan

Later, in the locker room after practice, the girls slowly clear out. Leah watches as her teammates say goodbye and head home. Leah knows she won't have the energy to walk home and then return to campus in an hour, so she sits in silence, trying to minimize the sensory stimuli around her. Menacing thoughts swirl in Leah's head, left over from the conversations with her bike companions, *why did I think I could do everything? Maybe it's not too late to change things, but I feels like I'm running on empty.* She remembers Anna's suggestion to figure out what her top priorities are, *but how do I choose what to cut? Everything I do is so important to me. Then again, Anna's right. I can't keep doing a million things at a million kilometers an*

hour. I need to prioritize. That way, Leah could give herself more time to rest, recover, and avoid burnout. So, Leah starts thinking: *Really, what are my priorities? What is it that I am ultimately trying to accomplish here at university?*

As her mind continues to wander, Leah remembers how Anna had also mentioned that keeping a journal could be useful to organize her thoughts, especially when she's feeling overwhelmed. No stranger to a pen and paper, Leah pulls out her planner and swiftly flips to an empty page. She starts with the date, as if preparing a class assignment. *What do I write about?* Leah ponders. *Anna is right. I do need to clear a little more time each week for myself, especially while I'm dealing with these stupid migraines.* Leah tabulates her commitments, flipping her planner back and forth as she cross-references her weekly schedule. Upon finishing that exercise, she realizes: *Wow, I really leave no minutes unaccounted for.* Except for Sunday afternoons, Leah is busier than a bee in springtime. *And I'm going to lose my peaceful Sunday afternoons as soon as we start our demanding winter game schedule,* Leah admits. *So many away games, so much travel, so little time for me. I never realized just how many things I was involved in.* Leah ponders if her full-throttle lifestyle is sustainable long-term. All this introspecting is a lot to take in. As she reflects, she concedes that her fast-paced life is in fact taking its toll. She looks down at her notes and feels overwhelmed by her upcoming practices, film reviews, classes, study sessions, BSAAC meetings, social time with friends, and most recently, volunteering at the wellness centre.

Leah's been lucky to start the season with mostly home games. However, after her journaling exercise, she accepts that her filled-to-the-rim calendar will need to be adapted when her team sets out on the road for their busy winter games schedule. She knows her teammates will always be in her corner, to help her and guide her, just like they did on the bike in the

dungeon. Leah loves basketball and playing at the university level is fulfilling a promise to her younger self to compete at the highest level possible. As a people pleaser, Leah knows choosing a commitment to step back from will be a highly difficult choice. How could she leave any of the groups she's become so close to? She thinks to herself, *people will think I'm letting them down, how do I step away from something I committed to?* So many people she's met have become such important pillars in her life. Leah decides that now is not the time to make difficult choices. *Let that be a Sunday afternoon problem*, she jokes to herself.

Leaning on Strong Shoulders

Sunday rolls around, and Leah finds herself exhausted after another chock-full week. The "Sunday afternoon problem" has yet to be solved, and to Leah's surprise, it's already 3 p.m. As she basks in the sunlight shining through her window, she decides that choosing commitments to pull back from is not something she wants to do alone. She picks up her phone and calls her mom. They have always been close; the two of them are so similar. Growing up, Leah's mom was a devout volunteer at the youth basketball association, on top of working full-time and raising Leah and her brother, Sean. Moving away for university was hard at first, but Leah knew she'd always have her family in her corner.

After a long back and forth discussion, Leah's mom suggests that she step away from volunteering at the wellness centre until the basketball season is over, but take part as a participant in 1-2 events each month. This would clear time in Leah's schedule while also allowing her staying connected with the people she met there. Leah also decides that taking four courses instead of five in the winter semester would alleviate both academic pressure and mental stress with all the away games starting in January. Leah feels optimistic about the months to come and promises herself to continue to refine her planning skills. *It feels like a fresh start*,

Leah thinks, *I finally see the balance I need. It's not about quitting, it's about taking control. I can still do what I love, but I need to be kind to myself first.* Her mom's words echo in her mind: *'It's okay to let go of something if it means holding on to yourself.'* That thought carries her as she drafts an email to step back from her wellness center volunteering.

Fuller Crust, Fuller Life

For the rest of the fall semester, Leah blossoms. Team doctors determine that Leah's migraines were stress-induced. Ever since she reined in her schedule, the migraines have gradually disappeared. She now has ample energy and focus to put her best foot forward in all her commitments. Leah even joins the BSAAC planning committee for "Holiday Hoops," an event to promote Black youth sports participation. It's fun and fulfilling work! Leah notices how she has returned to her usual vibrant self. She feels in control again. The migraine episode made her understand that if she spreads herself too thin, all her commitments suffer. As she leaves her apartment to head to class, Leah remembers her mom's baking analogy: "If you roll out the pie dough too thin, it won't be able to hold in all the delicious berries—your slice of pie will fall apart."

"A thicker pie crust (that's me) with less pie filling (that's all my commitments) will result in a better pie. Who wants a sloppy piece of pie anyways?" Leah jokingly tells herself.

Even coach pulls Leah aside after practice to let her know that she looks like she has regained her "pep in her step". After just a few weeks, Leah is *back*, revving her engine at every practice like she never left. She races up and down the court, running circles around the defense, hitting free throws with great accuracy, and rallying team morale when they need it most. Leah tells Coach the pie analogy and how "building her crust" has helped her be a better teammate, student, and BSAAC member. Coach is so impressed with Leah's turnaround that she invites her

to speak to the team to share her story. Coach has always been supportive of Leah's involvements beyond basketball; she calls it a "life resume." She often reminds the team that basketball will never be the most important thing, even as a basketball coach. Her top priority is the person—person first, athlete second.

A Season of Balance

Leah is excited to plan her talk to the team at their last practice before the winter holidays. Knowing how boring some presentations can be, Leah is looking to get all the girls involved. Instead of making the talk all about her, Leah reaches out to Jasmine to help her create a "wellness toolkit" of school resources, coping strategies, and self-care practices that will enable all the girls on the team to feel confident reaching out for help and protecting their wellbeing. Using her software skills, Leah crafts an aesthetically pleasing pamphlet, letting her creativity shine through. She makes one for each teammate, matching the sheet to each girl's favorite color. It's this attention to detail that makes Leah such a great role model for her teammates.

On the day of her talk, Leah takes out her mom's famous recipe and bakes Christmas cookies for the whole team. She pulls the sweet treats out of the oven and heads straight to campus, her excitement evident in the cheerful energy she radiates. As she hands out the pamphlets, she thinks back to her mom's pie analogy. "*Thicker crust,*" she reminds herself with a smile. "*A solid base holds everything together.*" It's a small thought, but it anchors her in the truth she's come to embrace.

As everyone bites into their cookies and settles into their chairs, Leah begins sharing her story. She talks about the times she felt overwhelmed and stressed, how trying to "do it all" had become a defining part of her identity. But it came at a cost—migraines, exhaustion, a C in stats, and the realization that she was running on empty. Leah explains how she learned the hard way

that when you take on too much, you can't show up fully for your commitments or for the people who count on you.

Wrapping up her talk with her trademark enthusiasm, Leah says, "Just like Coach always says, if you take care of your body, your body will take care of you—and that goes for your mind too! So this holiday season, make it a priority to rest, recharge, and spend time doing the things you love with the people you love. Let's come back in January ready to crush the rest of the season!"

As the team bursts into applause, Leah's excitement gives way to a deep sense of gratitude. *How lucky am I?* she thinks. *I get to play the sport I love, pursue a degree I'm passionate about, give back by volunteering, and share my journey with such amazing people.* She smiles to herself, knowing this is just the beginning of the balance and support she's building in her life

Beaming, Coach is so proud of Leah for going above and beyond for her teammates. Leah doesn't know this yet, but Coach is confident that Leah will make an amazing captain the following season. With Leah's permission, Coach has a large poster version of the pamphlet printed and hung in the team locker room—a daily reminder for the entire team to look out for themselves, to know they aren't alone, and to never be afraid of asking for help.

Story 3: Tom—The Weight of Water: Fending off Languishing***The Burden of Expectation***

The echo of his heartbeat matches the muffled roars of the crowd. Tom stands on the blocks, squinting against the bright lights at his home pool, his eyes scanning for his approaching teammate and how he measures up to the relay team one lane over. It's a crucial race that will most assuredly determine whether Tom's team takes first place in the meet. He wipes the water from his brow with the back of his hand and carefully places his goggles over his eyes as he feels the weight of expectations on his shoulders. The sound of his teammates hollering as the third relay swimmer approaches the wall fades into the background. He dives in. Now, all that matters is winning.

As Tom launches himself off the block, his instincts take over as he propels himself into the pool, feeling the familiar rush of his body cutting through the water. He focuses on his strokes, the rhythmic pull of his arms, the powerful flutter of his kicks. With each stroke, he fights to close the gap with the swimmer in the next lane as every muscle in his body screams for oxygen. The only thing on his mind is reaching that wall first.

As he tilts his head to breathe, he sees that the other swimmer is still ahead, pushing with fierce determination. Tom digs in, trying to find that extra gear within himself. He can feel the roar of the crowd vibrating through the water, but he tries to keep his focus on the black line beneath him and the shrinking distance to the wall.

He touches the wall and, for a moment, he can't tell if he's won. When he looks up at the scoreboard, he sees his team's name just behind the other, hitting second place by mere milliseconds. His heart sinks, a flood of anxiety washes over him. It was a close race, but not good enough. Even if the pool area is loud with cheers, Tom feels hollow inside. All he can think

about is that stupid catch phrase from an old Will Farrell movie: “If you ain’t first, you’re last”. He barely acknowledges his teammates’ congratulations. He forces out a tight smile, muttering a quick “sorry” to those around him. His legs wobble as he climbs out of the pool, his exhaustion entangling with his disappointment.

His teammates try to lift his spirits, offering pats on the back and words of encouragement. But Tom can’t get himself to shake the feeling that he’s let everyone down. He was designated as the anchor for a reason. He was supposed to be the one they could rely on, but tonight, he feels like an utter failure.

Back in the locker room, the mood is mixed. Some of his teammates brush off the loss by joking around, already thinking about the next meet. For his part, Tom lingers on the edge of the room, making efforts not to spoil the team mood with his pessimism and “Debbie Downer” attitude. He is completely aware that the team’s success isn’t placed just on him—swimming at the university level is a team effort—but the weight of his perceived failure gnaws at him.

"Tom, you alright, man?" the team captain, Jack, asks, his voice tinged with concern.

"Yeah, just tired," Tom says, shrugging off Jack's gaze. It was a lie he had grown accustomed to telling—because tiredness is easier to admit than anxiety. The last thing Tom wants is for the team captain to think he’s weak.

Learning Obstacles

The next morning, Tom is running late for his economics class. It took him hours to fall asleep the night before; he was stuck in an endless loop replaying the race in his head. All groggy, he sprints across campus, his backpack bouncing up and down. When he arrives at the lecture hall, the classroom door is already closed and the professor is already lecturing. He pauses, contemplating whether to go in late or skip class entirely. With a sigh, he turns away.

A part of Tom misses the days of online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, being able to pause the lectures when he didn't understand the content. He had adjusted to virtual schooling quite well, but the transition back to in-person classes has been an adjustment for him.

His grades have been slipping for a while now. He knows it, his professors know it, and soon enough, his coach will probably know it too. He tries to study after practice, but when he's exhausted, he can't focus on economics or any other subject. When he does sit down to study, his mind constantly wanders, too drained to absorb the material.

He's been thinking for a while about getting help—maybe asking his professor for a meeting or visiting the academic support centre on campus. But the idea makes him uneasy. “Would they just see me as another athlete who can't keep up?” he wonders. He decides to figure it out on his own. He always has.

Weeks of Apathy

Days pass and Tom continues his busy draining routine. Practice, class, study—an endless cycle, each day bleeding into the next. His grogginess continues to increase, and he starts withdrawing more and more from social gatherings. His teammates plan a night out after a practice, but he makes up an excuse about needing to finish an assignment. In reality, he just wants to be alone, but he doesn't want others to notice his increasing desire for isolation.

One evening, after much self-convincing effort, Tom does decide to join his teammates at Jack's apartment to play video games and have a few drinks. Tom sits on the couch with the guys, scrolling through his phone. When everyone is ready to head to the bar, Tom quietly slips away and goes home instead. Later that night, he scrolls through social media and sees his teammates' pictures and videos laughing and dancing. Tom groans and throws his phone onto the couch. He thinks to himself, “Why the heck didn't I go out? Why am I not allowing myself to

have fun? What's wrong with me?". As he tries to fall asleep, his mind wanders again into an endless loop of morbid and depressing thoughts.

He hasn't felt this depressed before, ever. He's usually the life of the party. He loves to joke around to forget about the pressures of school and sport. Now, he just feels like he's losing control over his grades, his sport performances, and maybe even his friendships. Despite his growing disinterest and reclusion, Tom pushes through hard practices and tedious drills. His coaches have always been clear—the team has resources. If an athlete wants to talk about performance, training plans, or injuries, they just need to reach out. But when it comes to his personal struggles, Tom doesn't know if or how he should approach the coaching staff. Really, what would he say to his coaches? That he's tired of being tired? That's just absurd. His coaches would just brush him off, he thinks. Instead, Tom throws himself even more into training, as he always does—asking for more repetitions, faster pace times, extra lift times, and more pool time.

Every Second Counts

Day after day, Tom spends an increasing amount of time in the water. He adds extra individual practices whenever he can fit them into his schedule, sometimes even skipping class to get an additional hour in the water. He tells himself: *"It's fine. Missing one lecture won't make or break me"* as he stuffs his swim cap and goggles into his bag.

Pushing himself to his limits, Tom leaves each training session more exhausted than the last. Each morning, he's in the pool. During the small breaks he allows himself to take, he chugs bright orange cans of Monster Energy Drink. *This is what it takes. This is what champions do*, he tells himself as the rush of caffeine settles uneasily in his empty stomach.

Tom is spending huge amounts of time at the pool, yet he feels more removed than ever from his team. The laughter and camaraderie around him feels like a distant hum. He's trying his

best to stay focused. *They don't get it*, he thinks as he adjusts his cap and slips into the water. *Every millisecond counts. Every breath matters. Every stroke is important. I can't afford to relax like they do. I'm the anchor.*

When Tom isn't in the pool, he's in the gym, grinding through punishing workouts to get stronger and more explosive. He wants more power in his starts, more snap in his flip turns. But the harder he works, the heavier the weight of his own expectations grows. At the pool, his silence is deafening. His teammates' attempts at banter are barely registered. *Stay locked in. Don't lose focus*, he tells himself repeatedly, ignoring the disappointment in their faces. The thought of slipping up another relay is unbearable, he can't, he won't lose by milliseconds again. He knows he's pushing himself to the limit, but he doesn't allow himself to think too much about that. If he was to let his mind wander—even for a moment—he fears he'd crumble entirely.

During long, arduous practices, Tom traces the black line at the bottom of the pool with his mind, over and over again. Stroke, breathe, kick, turn. The monotonous rhythm is his safety bet. But sometimes, when the fatigue does creep in, unwelcome thoughts surface. *What if I'm just not good enough? What if all this training—every hour, every lap—isn't enough to make me better? Am I putting all my eggs in the wrong basket?* After a moment, he snaps back to reality. *Fuck! I can't think like that. I just gotta keep training, keep swimming.*

Extinguished Flame

Days turn into weeks and Tom continues his relentless training regime, pushing his body to the brink. Skipping classes becomes an unfortunate yet all-too-common occurrence, with evenings spent catching up on missed schoolwork. *I'll catch up later. It's worth it. Sacrifices now will pay off in the long run*, he tells himself, even as exhaustion makes his vision blur as he tries to skim over his textbooks.

Late-night study sessions bleed into the few hours he usually reserves for sleep, leaving him chugging more and more Monster Energy Drinks, more than he knows he should be drinking. *It's just temporary. I'll stop all this caffeine nonsense after the season,* he tells himself, cracking open another can and feeling the rush of caffeine that barely masks the constant aches in his limbs.

Tonight is different though. Coach sets up a race simulation practice, complete with racing suits and starts off the blocks. It's a chance for Tom to test his mid-season form and see where he stands. For Tom, this isn't just a practice—it's a straight up proving ground. A dual meet against the best team in Western Canada is only a week away and Tom can't afford to disappoint himself and others. *This is my chance to show everyone how all my extra work is paying off. No excuses tonight,* he thinks as he tries to mentally and physically psych himself up.

Treating the simulation practice as an actual meet, Tom goes through all of his swim meet rituals with precision. He eats his usual pre-race meal of chicken and pasta exactly two hours before practice and arrives 30 minutes early to execute his full activation routine. Each stretch, each warm-up is calculated, purposeful. *If I don't take this shit seriously, no one else will do it for me. This is how champions prepare. I'm a champion, let's go!!*

Beneath the Surface

The cold water hits Tom like a terrible shock, something's wrong. His arms feel sluggish, his kicks are weaker than they should be. *Come on Tom. Go faster! Move!* he screams internally, but his body literally refuses to cooperate. As he reaches the final turn, his lungs are burning and his muscles are screaming way too loud. He pushes hard, desperate to claw back time, but the wall comes too soon. Tom finishes the night with a time that sits far below his expectations. He slaps the water in frustration as the results flash on the board, screaming internally, *What the fuck*

is this? How can I be this slow? This makes no sense! Before Coach can get a word out, Tom goes underwater, pushing off the wall and launching straight into his cooldown.

Usually, cooldown is meant to shake out the body after a hard race but today, Tom needs to extinguish the flames burning behind his eyes. The initial burst of anger quickly fades into utter disappointment. *How could this mockery of a race time have happened?* Tom's mind races down negative rabbit holes, each thought sharper and more painful than the last. *I've been training harder than anyone else on the team. Swimming is ALL I care about! I used to be the best! I should still be the best! What the hell do I do now?*

The disappointment then turns into a spiralling internal narrative of self-doubt. *Maybe I'm not good enough anymore. Maybe my excruciatingly hard work is all in vain.* His fists clench at his sides, the aches in his muscles are drowned out by the storm of bad thoughts in his mind. *I've done everything right. Every extra practice. Every hour in the gym. Every sacrifice. For what? To have slower times than my teammates, to not even be the best swimmer on my own team?* His gaze flicks to his teammates who are laughing as they cool down in the water. The laughing sounds irritate him tremendously. *They don't get it. They don't care as much as I do. And yet... they're still beating me. What's wrong with me? How did I let my life get to this point?*

Tom's throat tightens, his eyes get watery but he blinks rapidly, refusing to let himself break down. *Come on Tom, get it together. Are you really going to cry like a little baby and fall apart here, now, in front of everyone?* However, the weight of expectations is too much. The months—no years—he has poured into swimming press down on him. The terrible feeling that everything he's worked for has slipped through his fingers is omnipresent. He can't hold on any longer.

Tom swims until all his teammates leave the pool deck, only stopping when a lifeguard taps him telling him it's time to get out of the pool. A youth water polo team stands at the end of his lane, ready to jump in. Crossing his fingers, Tom hopes none of his teammates are lingering in the showers that night. Hastily, Tom chucks his hoodie over his head, pulls on his sweatpants, and makes a beeline for the door.

Athlete is my Identity

Tom cognitively and emotionally processes his poor simulation performance as a huge letdown. Usually, he thrives in high-pressure race settings, able to reach that extra gear, push harder, and come out on top. But today was different. Instead of basking in the usual highs of winning, Tom slips into the depths of defeat.

Tears well up in his eyes. *I used to love swimming*, he says to himself. Tom's mind flashes back to National's last year — feeling the gold medal around his neck and his teammates array of pats, slaps, and cheers. *Back then, I loved coming to practice and catching up with my friends. Now, swimming feels like a chore, a burden, a prison even...*

Every extra practice, every skipped class—this is supposed to make me better, but all it does is make me feel trapped. He looks at his reflection in the locker room mirror and barely recognizes himself. *Who am I if I'm not the fastest swimmer? I've spent so long chasing the next victory, the next personal best, I don't even know who I am other than a swimmer.*

At this point, it's becoming clearer and clearer that the team would be better off without me, Tom concedes. *I can't even beat my teammates anymore. How will I contribute to the team as the anchor at Nationals against the best in the country?*

Defeated, Tom weighs his options. *I could quit...* he thinks, but quickly pushes the idea away. *I've invested so much time and energy into swimming—not just this season but the last 15*

years of my life. Plus, I've already let me grades slip, swimming is literally all I have left, the only thing I still have a chance to be the best at. He decides to take a step back, go back to basics, and remember why he's swimming at university in the first place. Those simple yet immensely important realisations reaffirm his belief that he has more to achieve. Tom is also very aware that his sport scholarship covers all his tuition. If he quits swimming, the scholarship will disappear, leaving him strapped for cash. *Quitting's off the table*, Tom decides.

Now that the idea of quitting is gone, Tom's next option is counselling but he's not exactly sure what those types of services could do for him. Tom creaks at the very idea of getting help from a shrink. *What would the guys on the team say if they knew? What would Coach think?* he wonders. *Champions don't have shrinks. They push harder, fight through the hurdles. I'm supposed to be the backbone of this team, the fastest, the strongest. If I admit I need help... if I need to talk to someone about my feelings, doesn't that make me weak? I think it does...*

Tom convinces himself that counselling is not for him. *Anyway, I don't even have a mental illness. Talking to a shrink about my feelings wouldn't help. It'd just be a waste of time.* He turns away from the mirror, steeling himself for another grueling day.

Sink or Swim

The evening chill hits Tom as he steps outside the aquatic centre, his breath visible in the cold air. The silence on campus is intense, broken only by the faint rustling of leaves and shuffling of students headed to their evening classes. Tom pulls his hood tighter over his head, covering his eyes, his head drooping under the weight of every negative thought constantly circulating in his head.

The pool lights still glow behind him through the aquatic centre's huge windows, their reflection shimmering faintly on the pavement. He stares at them for a moment and a bitter taste

risks in his mouth. The pool used to feel like home, a sanctuary. Now, it feels like a cage, a prison, a place where every stroke reminds him of how far he is falling behind his dreams, his hopes, his expectations, his vision of what his life could be, of what his life *should* be.

He knows tomorrow will be the same. He'll wake up early, gulp another Monster or two... or three, push through another practice, and drag himself through the rest of the day. He'll paste on the same tired smile and avoid his teammates' gaze when they ask if he's okay. He'll tell himself, *Just one more lap. Just one more day.*

But tonight, the thought of it all makes his chest ache. Walking back home, Tom reaches the edge of campus and stops. As he gazes the starry night sky, all he feels is the numbness of not knowing how to move forward but knowing he can't stop.

The idea of asking for help still feels like defeat, a surrender he cannot fathom. He latches on to all the stereotypes related to seeing a shrink to convince himself that he can't go down that road. But those "shrinks are useless" arguments are becoming less and less convincing as he suffocates under the weight of his internal thoughts and high expectations.

In the distance, Tom hears the laughter of some of his teammates who are also walking home. He quickens his pace, his eyes fixed on the ground. He doesn't want to see them. He doesn't want them to see him, especially when he's in such a messy emotional state. *I'll figure it out eventually*, he thinks, though the words feel hollow and unconvincing. As he latches on to what he knows are his very last pieces of hope, he decides to just keep on swimming.

Although he's a terrific swimmer, Tom is languishing. he's sinking. He really hopes his "all my eggs in one basket" training approach can deliver some results, before it's too late... Until then, he latches on.

CHAPTER IV: General Discussion

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this master's thesis was to investigate student-athletes' perspectives on institutional mental health support and if they believe the support provided is enabling them to flourish in an endemic world. Three narratives were presented, detailing student-athletes' lived experiences of community, life balance, coping strategies, and help-seeking behaviors. It is important to recognize that during the conception of this thesis, the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, causing major disruptions at all levels across the country. Mental health concerns were rising during those uncertain times. This thesis focused on flourishing and languishing in an endemic world to directly acknowledge the long-lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Using a narrative approach, the findings were presented as co-constructed stories, consistent with the project's guiding relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology. The primary goal of using narrative analysis and CNF was to make the research accessible to various (non)academic populations. I hope that Julia, Leah, and Tom's narratives resonate with readers personally, provoking student-athletes, coaches, parents, and support staff to (re)evaluate the physical, mental, and emotional weight often felt by varsity student-athletes.

Revisiting the Findings

Julia, a varsity swimmer, struggles to balance the intense demands of practices, classes, assignments, and her mental health. At first, she pushes through, bottling up her feelings and isolating herself until the stress becomes impossible to ignore. Despite feeling overwhelmed, she takes small but monumental steps toward seeking support—booking her first counseling session

and leaning on the people around her, including a teammate who opens up about her own mental health journey. Julia realizes the importance of connection by leaning on her “village”.

Leah is the ultimate example of someone who “does it all”— varsity basketball, academics, volunteering, and social events. At first, she thrives in this fast-paced, busy lifestyle, but as the semester progresses, the weight of her packed schedule takes a toll. Migraines, exhaustion, and a drop in her grades force her to pause and reflect. Recognizing her own limits, Leah takes charge of her well-being by making intentional, autonomous decisions to prioritize what truly matters—like scaling back her course load and stepping away from volunteering. These changes allow her to strike a balance, fueling her success both on and off the court.

Tom, a high-performing swimmer, finds himself spiraling as the weight of expectations and his identity as an athlete consume him. After losing a relay by milliseconds, he pushes himself harder and harder, skipping classes, overtraining, and withdrawing from his teammates. He convinces himself that asking for help is not an option, clinging to harmful stereotypes. Tom feels like he is losing control of not just his performance, but his sense of self. His competence is shot. Yet, Tom clings to the hope that his relentless training will pay off before it is too late.

Together, these three CNFs depict the variability of lived experiences of varsity student-athletes. Julia, Leah and Tom’s stories explore different ways student-athletes engage (or not) in help seeking. The stories also illustrate some of the barriers and facilitators to help seeking while acknowledging the added pressures dual roles create. Ultimately, the stories help uncover how varied experiences of “varsity life” influence one’s autonomy, competence, and relatedness as well as one’s relationship with mental health and mental illness.

In the following discussion, I draw from Keyes’ (2002) two-continua model of mental health and mental illness and Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Basic Psychological Needs Theory to

examine how flourishing is understood not simply as the absence of mental illness, but as the presence of psychological well-being fostered through the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—core elements that shape student-athletes’ lived experiences within university sport.

Keyes’ Two-Continua Model and Student-Athlete Well-Being

When examined through Keyes’ (2002) two-continua model of mental health and mental illness, the well-being of the eight student-athlete participants varied dynamically across both continua. Rather than existing as fixed or binary states, mental health and mental illness were fluid and intertwined, reflecting the complex, multifaceted nature of well-being. Therefore, each participant’s experience of flourishing or languishing was not fixed but evolved over time, influenced by life events, coping mechanisms, and support networks.

The three composite narratives were written to vividly illustrate this variability. For instance, Julia’s reluctance to initially seek help positioned her closer to languishing as her feelings of isolation and being overwhelmed intensified her mental load. However, through incremental steps—such as counseling and leveraging her social network—her position on the mental health continuum gradually shifted toward flourishing. Similarly, Leah’s story shows how flourishing can wane, yet with intentional adjustments to her commitments and accessing her social support, she maintained a high sense of well-being despite facing some challenges. Tom’s narrative underscores how unmet support needs and self-imposed pressures can draw an individual closer to languishing, even if they are performing relatively well in athletics.

Further, it is important to note how inherent to the Keyes model, the goals of mental health promotion and mental illness prevention are distinct yet can coexist. Indeed, prior reviews of the literature examining postsecondary populations have suggested that mental illness

prevention strategies alone are insufficient for cultivating higher levels of mental health (Conley et al., 2013). Despite this evidence, the dominant focus among researchers and policymakers remains largely on preventing mental illness, often overlooking the strength and worth of strategies aimed at promoting mental health in college and university settings.

For Canadian student-athletes, flourishing through the active promotion of mental health can be achieved by emphasizing known protective factors such as positive social connections, coach communication, as well as strong planning and time management skills (Pankow et al., 2021). Accepting the challenges related to one's dual career and actively using available resources have also been shown to be protective factors (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014). Therefore, Keyes' framework guided my interpretations of flourishing and languishing throughout this thesis, particularly when analyzing the fluidity of states of mental health and mental illness, as revealed in the CNFs. These narratives reinforce Keyes' assertion that mental health and mental illness can and do coexist, with shifts along the continua influenced by a constellation of interconnected factors. This perspective broadens our understanding of student-athlete well-being, encouraging institutions to design support systems that address mental health and mental illness concurrently, recognizing the diverse and shifting needs of the student-athlete population.

Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) and Student-Athlete Well-Being

I also drew on Deci and Ryan's (2000) Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT), which identifies three core needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that must be satisfied to promote optimal well-being and motivation. Student-athletes who have these needs fulfilled are more likely to experience greater well-being and increased motivation, whereas unmet needs can translate into mental struggles and diminished motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Turgeon et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic magnified the challenges student-athletes faced,

which included widespread restrictions on sports and social activities that left many reporting reduced autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as an overall decline in mental health and motivation.

Each CNF highlights the interplay of the three basic psychological needs. It is important to note that according to Basic Psychological Needs Theory, the satisfaction of all three needs is essential for optimal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For example, even when autonomy and competence are supported, frustration of relatedness can still lead to languishing or diminished psychological functioning. Julia's story emphasized relatedness whereby she initially isolated herself, yet her mental health improved once she reached out for help and reconnected with her social circles. Leah's narrative centred on her strong sense of autonomy and competence as she was able to find ways to adapt her goals and commitments in manners that enhanced her well-being. In contrast, Tom's well-being unravelled alongside his sense of competence as he lost confidence in his athletic ability, leading to debilitating self-doubts that exacerbated his social withdrawal.

Student-athletes who experienced basic psychological needs satisfaction tended to exhibit positive affect, resilience, and a more well-rounded identity in their dual role (e.g., Leah), which is consistent with Keyes' principles of flourishing. In contrast, student-athletes who experienced basic psychological needs frustration tended to feel "stuck", going through persistent negative thoughts and emotions (e.g., Tom) that led to languishing. Across these accounts, satisfying one basic psychological need often enables the satisfaction of other needs, aligning with Ryan and Deci's (2017) important notion of needs interdependence. For example, Julia's new connections with her teammates fostered a sense of relatedness that bolstered her feelings of competence and control. Alternatively, Tom's faltering sense of competence played a key role in diminishing his

sense of autonomy and relatedness. Collectively, these patterns, as storied in the three CNFs, demonstrate how the satisfaction or frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can influence and are deeply entangled in student-athletes' experiences of flourishing or languishing.

Student-Athletes' Perspectives on Institutional Mental Health Support

To better understand student-athletes' perspectives on institutional mental health support, I storied the dual-career pressures that they must navigate. School-related stressors—such as academic deadlines, grades, finances, and class scheduling—were shown to overlap with sport-related stressors like pressures to perform, injury, fatigue, and training load, together impacting the experiences of the eight student-athletes who participated in the elaboration of my thesis.

Dual-Career Pressures and Barriers to Help-Seeking

Stambulova and Harwood (2022) defined the specific combination of sport and studies as a dual career, offering a framework (see Appendix J) that aligns with the broader theoretical underpinnings of BPNT and Keyes's two-continua model. Dual-career pathways highlight the dynamic interplay between autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as how the satisfaction or frustration of these needs influence flourishing or languishing. Student-athletes may align with or shift between the three pathways illustrated in the Stambulova and Harwood (2022) framework based on the relative importance they place on school and sport. In the first pathway, student-athletes prioritize their education over athletics. In the second pathways, they prioritize athletics over education. In the third pathway, they strive for an optimal dual-career balance by dynamically shifting priorities between education and athletics.

Previous Canadian research conducted by Crocker et al. (2021) identified *role sacrifice* as a significant challenge faced by student-athletes pursuing dual careers, limiting their ability to participate in extracurricular activities and career networking opportunities. Further, the

reconceptualization of athlete development by Richard and colleagues (2023) advocates for a paradigm shift, calling for integrating “open spaces” in athletic training environments. Allowing time for athletes to explore diverse interests outside of their sport (e.g., cross-training, creative endeavours, pursuit of other goals) is argued to foster holistic-development and promote psychological well-being (Richard et al., 2023). The concept of role sacrifice is on full display in the second and third CNFs. On one hand, Leah flourishes due to her strong time management skills, allowing her to balance her athletic and academic commitments effectively (i.e., minimizing the effects of role sacrifice). Leah’s success in her dual career reflects her optimal usage of institutional and social support systems, reflective of her strong dual-career competencies. On the other hand, Tom sacrifices his academic responsibilities for his athletic role, exhibiting a strong athletic identity compelling him to neglect his other identities, such as his student identity (i.e., maximizing the effects of role sacrifice). Tom reinvests his time into overtraining, pushing aside other interests and hobbies, and becomes singularly focused on his swimming performance (Kidd et al., 2018). Strong athletic identities, as seen with Tom, often leave athletes unprepared for life beyond athletics, increasing the risk of a difficult transition out of sport and heightened symptoms of mental illness following retirement (Roberts et al., 2023).

Yet, beyond the inherent challenges of a dual career, other barriers to help-seeking exist and must be examined if we are to better understand student-athletes’ perceptions of institutional mental health services. In the present thesis, stigma was identified as one of the most significant obstacles, particularly for male student-athletes like Tom, who viewed seeking help as a marker of their weakness. This stigma often amplifies feelings of isolation and discourages help-seeking behaviours. Additional hurdles identified by the eight student-athletes included: lack of time, the perception that their struggles were not “bad” enough, and strained coach-athlete relationships.

These hurdles corroborate barriers identified in previous Canadian research with student-athletes (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020; Giovannetti et al., 2019). The often long wait times for services was also identified as a barrier for student-athletes to seek support. Julia's struggle to find time for therapy appointments reflects the reality that juggling a varsity training schedule with academic commitments can directly limit one's capacity to engage with available mental health resources (Crocker et al., 2021; Giovannetti et al., 2019). This barrier is consistent with findings reported for the Canadian general population (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2018).

A key message I wanted to convey in Julia's story is the idea that she was *aware* of the resources at her disposal—she knew where to look if she needed help—yet she remained reluctant to initiate help-seeking. This finding reveals that knowledge alone might not be enough to motivate one's engagement with support services and nuances those of prior research suggesting that lack of awareness is a prime barrier to support-seeking (Giovannetti et al., 2019). Tom's avoidance of professional support provides another key viewpoint, aligning with studies indicating how male student-athletes are less likely to seek mental health services due to heightened perceived stigma (Giovannetti et al., 2019; Kaier et al., 2015; Moreland et al., 2018). Together, the stories shared in this thesis shed light on the complexities underlying whether—and why—student-athletes embrace or reject institutional mental health resources.

Stigma, Coach Influence, and Coping Strategies

A recurring theme when discussing *perspectives* on institutional support is the presence of persistent norms and expectations within sport environments that shape how mental health is perceived and addressed. Tom's narrative, for instance, highlights how the desire to maintain a certain "tough guy" facade can undermine a student-athlete's willingness to disclose psychological distress or use mental health services (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020; Crocker et al.,

2021). In contrast, Julia's gradual willingness to engage with counseling coincides with her coach's supportive and communicative approach. Therefore, coaches who foster supportive team environments and prioritize student-athletes' holistic well-being can play a pivotal role in lowering the barriers to help-seeking for some student-athletes.

Knight et al. (2018) noted how successful dual-career pathways often hinge on strong support networks that acknowledge the demands of balancing sport and academics, anticipate potential problems, and create autonomy-supportive environments. In the present thesis, Leah and Julia's stories both illustrate how social support from parents, peers, and mentors can reduce the heavy mental loads associated with dual careers. Meanwhile, Tom's reluctance to reach out—paired with an environment that he perceives as expecting toughness and grit—cemented his negative perspective on available resources. Such diversity in experiences reinforces the notion that student-athletes' perceptions of institutional support vary widely based on stigma, cultural expectations, personal characteristics, and day-to-day interpersonal dynamics.

Building on these important notions, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a unique context through which coping strategies were tested and developed. While stigma remained a persistent barrier, the pandemic also created space for reflection, adaptation, and the emergence of new coping mechanisms. For some participants, they developed an increased openness to mental health services, seeking peer support, or adopting reflective practices such as journaling. These strategies played a key role in how participants processed their experiences and managed mental health challenges. These differences in adaptive capacity informed the way composite narratives were constructed, illustrating how coping mechanisms shaped the trajectory of well-being across different institutional conditions. Although the endemic phase has seen an increase in available mental health resources and more open conversations in some sport settings, the findings suggest

that the capacity to cope effectively with mental health challenges remains uneven, often shaped by individual resilience, interpersonal support, and systemic conditions.

Factors Conducive to Varsity Student-Athlete Flourishing

The second and third CNFs delved into how specific forms of university mental health support can promote student-athlete flourishing. Leah and Tom's experiences illustrate how the uptake (or lack thereof) of such resources (e.g., counseling sessions, academic support, wellness workshops) can push student-athletes toward flourishing or languishing.

Holistic Support Systems and Preventative Measures

The importance of holistic support was identified as a central theme. To be considered holistic, support must address all dimensions of the person, including academic, athletic, and psychosocial needs (Knight et al., 2018). The fostering of holistic support also requires everyday practices and environments that promote and normalize the use of mental health services (Habeeb et al., 2022). Coaches play a particularly influential role in shaping these environments, as their behaviors and communication practices directly affect student-athletes' help-seeking behaviors and willingness to disclose psychological distress (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020; Habeeb et al., 2022). Leah's story demonstrated this principle well: she communicated openly with her coaches, medical staff, and teammates about her migraines, promptly received support, and was encouraged to prioritize her health. In contrast, Tom avoided disclosing his struggles to his coaches, teammates, and friends to maintain his "tough guy" image and protect his status as a top athlete on the team, a decision that ultimately contributed to his isolation and experience of languishing (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020).

Although support services such as therapy and counseling can be used for both mental illness prevention and mental health promotion, the student-athlete participants in this study

primarily discussed engaging with counseling reactively—during times of psychological distress to prevent further escalation of crises. Rather than waiting for crises to occur, universities could implement more *nudging strategies* to proactively support student-athlete mental health. Nudges are subtle changes in how choices are presented that encourage healthier behaviors without restricting freedom (Sunstein, 2014). For example, as seen in Julia’s story, simple appointment reminders can significantly increase student-athletes’ likelihood of engaging with support services. Without Peter’s email reminding Julia to book another session, she likely would not have continued attending counseling. Other nudges that may be effective for the student-athlete population include automatically scheduling wellness check-ins at the start of the season (i.e., default rules), embedding mental health resources directly into athletic spaces (i.e., increasing ease and convenience), sending supportive text reminders before exams or major competitions (i.e., timely reminders), and promoting social norms by highlighting how many athletes access mental health services (i.e., social norm messaging). These small, low-cost strategies can play a significant role in encouraging consistent engagement with support services and fostering better mental health outcomes across the student-athlete population.

Linking Support Services to Endemic Flourishing

Leah’s story demonstrates how timely use of support services, and an autonomy-supportive coaching environment allowed her to flourish amidst her busy schedule. As her migraines appeared, she sought help early, leveraging her social support networks to stay as close as possible to the flourishing end of the mental health continuum. In many ways, Leah’s proactive approach highlights the crucial role that mental health promotion plays in offsetting potential declines in well-being. Conversely, Tom’s story underscores how athletes can quickly drift away from flourishing—even when resources are available—if cultural stigma, time

constraints, and personal misconceptions about mental health remain unaddressed. In his case, negative self-comparisons and an all-consuming focus on athletic identity amplified barriers, ultimately preventing him from reaping the benefits of institutional support services. Such variations in the uptake of institutional support services suggest that while supports *can* foster flourishing, their effectiveness largely depends on how they are perceived by potential users.

Findings from this study underscore that mental health is not a static trait but a dynamic state influenced by both individual and institutional contexts. The evolution of sport-specific mental health services over the past decade emphasizes this fluidity: the Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport (CCMHS) was established in 2018 as the first organization of its kind in Canada (Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport, n.d.), and universities such as the University of Ottawa have appointed dedicated Varsity Mental Health Coordinators to support student-athletes seeking assistance (University of Ottawa Gee-Gees, n.d.). However, as the institutional context evolved into the endemic phase, service provision expanded, reflecting a broader trend of growing responsiveness in Canadian universities over the past decade. These shifts highlight the importance of recognizing flourishing as contextually embedded—not only shaped by personal resilience or needs satisfaction, but also by the adaptability and accessibility of the systems in place to support mental well-being.

While direct support often comes from the university level, U SPORTS, as the national governing body, plays an essential role in shaping the broader environment in which student-athletes exist. During the pandemic, U SPORTS implemented mental health criteria aimed at minimizing mental illness, but these actions fell short of actively promoting mental well-being or flourishing (U SPORTS, 2020b). This research argues for a paradigm shift: U SPORTS should not wait for crises to respond but should take a proactive stance in embedding mental health

literacy, stigma reduction, and flourishing-focused policies into its mandate. Student-athletes across all institutions deserve access to environments that not only prevent distress but actively support growth, belonging, and flourishing.

Contributions

This master's thesis has made some theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions to student-athlete mental health support seeking in the Canadian university context.

Theoretical

First, through the use of the Keyes two-continua model (2002) and Deci and Ryan's (2000) BPNT, this research highlights how mental-health and mental illness coexist and fluctuate in student-athletes. The thesis demonstrates the application of the Keyes model to populations experiencing intense dual-career pressures and how prioritizing athletics over academics (i.e., pathway 2) can frustrate basic psychological needs satisfaction (i.e., autonomy, competence, relatedness), thereby increasing the risk of languishing compared to optimal dual-career balance (i.e., pathway 3; Stambulova & Harwood, 2022). Such results add depth to our understanding of Self-determination Theory by exploring how competing identities and role conflicts (e.g., athlete vs student) challenge needs satisfaction.

In the present thesis, a strength of using the Keyes model and Basic Psychological Needs Theory lies in how both approaches complemented one another by connecting the *what* of flourishing (Keyes's well-being dimensions) with the *how* (BPNT's psychological needs satisfaction). Even when mental illness is absent, unmet needs (e.g., lack of relatedness in a team environment or diminishing academic competence) can place student-athletes in states of languishing. Conversely, flourishing student-athletes can manage bouts of mental illness more

effectively when their basic psychological needs are met. During analysis, both approaches worked well together because Keyes's three overarching domains (i.e., emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being) complement in many ways basic psychological needs satisfaction. For example, social well-being (i.e., social acceptance, social integration) can be said to reflect in many ways experiences of relatedness while psychological well-being (i.e., environmental mastery, purpose in life) mirror the satisfaction of autonomy and competence. Finally, experiencing emotional well-being (i.e., positive affect, life satisfaction, happiness) is congruent with the overall satisfaction of one's basic psychological needs.

This research contributes to the flourishing literature by illustrating how internalized performance expectations and student-athletes' self-concept evolves in relation to institutional support. While Keyes conceptualizes mental health on a continuum from languishing to flourishing, BPNT offers insight into the mechanisms that drive this movement—namely, the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Although Keyes' framework is often applied categorically, this study demonstrates its dynamic nature, as participants moved fluidly between states of well-being depending on life events, institutional supports, and personal expectations. Unlike “thriving,” which often emphasizes performance outcomes, “flourishing” in this context encompasses broader psychosocial well-being and meaning making beyond sport (Pankow et al., 2023).

Methodological

The present thesis used qualitative pluralism (i.e., timelines and interviews) to explore student-athletes' experiences through narrative analysis and the creation of three CNFs that told Julia, Leah, and Tom's stories in manners that were infused with theory (i.e., BPNT, Keyes's model). Taken together, this methodological approach offered a deep engagement with the

challenges faced by student-athletes and illustrated the dynamic nature of mental health and mental illness. Utilizing both timelines and individual interviews fostered participant self-reflection, thereby generating rich data. Integrating timelines also allowed the participants to map their experiences of mental health and mental illness over time, revealing the dynamic and evolving nature of student-athletes' well-being. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share insights on sensitive topics (e.g., stigma, mental illness), offering glimpses on how they navigated instances of autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfaction and/or frustration in their daily lives. Building the thesis project around the notion of qualitative pluralism aligned with the social constructionist epistemology emphasizing co-construction of knowledge and the importance of participants' voices.

Practical

First, student-athlete support systems must consider the whole person. Participants expressed a strong desire to be seen as more than just athletes as many closely identified with Stambulova and Harwood's (2022) third pathway prioritizing optimal dual-career balance. Universities should recognize the importance of offering support services that address not only mental health and mental illness but also academic and athletic demands in integrated manners. Such services include academic advising, nutrition information, skills-oriented workshops (i.e., time management, mindfulness, coping mechanisms), and athletic therapy. Offering such services can alleviate role conflict and reduce stress through the prioritization of student-athletes' personal and athletic development in balanced manners. Coaches can reinforce the ideals of whole person support by creating team environments that normalize mental health discussions.

Given their daily proximity to athletes, coaches are among the most influential figures in shaping the conditions for student-athlete flourishing. Research shows that coach behavior and

the broader coach-athlete relationship significantly impact athletes' psychological well-being, motivation, and help-seeking attitudes (Bissett & Tamminen, 2022; Knight et al., 2018). Coaches can foster psychologically safe spaces by modeling openness around mental health, initiating regular check-ins, and avoiding language or behaviors that reinforce stigma. Small, consistent actions—such as encouraging rest, validating emotional challenges, or connecting athletes with professional support—can make mental health conversations more accessible and less stigmatized (Bissett et al., 2020). From a BPNT perspective, coaches who create autonomy-supportive environments—by offering choices, explaining rationales, and inviting athlete input—are more likely to satisfy athletes' basic psychological needs. Supporting competence through constructive (i.e., not just performance-based) feedback and relatedness through authentic, trust-based relationships can further enhance athlete well-being. When coaches intentionally centre the whole person, they contribute to environments where help-seeking is normalized, well-being is valued, and flourishing is more likely to occur.

Second, mental health approaches that integrate both mental health promotion and mental illness prevention must be prioritized. For example, academic assistance (e.g., early course selection, tutoring, peer mentoring) is conventionally not labelled as a mental health promotion initiative but by its very nature, it can proactively reduce the likelihood of student-athletes experiencing mental health challenges by reducing potential stressors of dual-careers before they occur. By eliminating stressors, universities can reduce the need for crisis-level mental health interventions and alleviate the burden on their existing mental health services. Likewise, mental illness prevention can be optimized by developing screening tools and protocols that help identify athletes showing early signs of languishing. These initiatives can prevent mental health challenges from escalating, saving resources in the long term.

Third, tailored mental health services are crucial to student-athlete well-being. Because student-athletes face particular challenges in their dual-careers, fostering flourishing requires eliminating existing barriers (e.g., long wait times, financial burdens). As presented in the CNFs, institutions that provide free mental health services to student-athletes and use forms of nudging (i.e., appointment reminders) can foster desired help-seeking behaviours. To promote the successful utilisation of mental health services, universities must continue to play active roles in reducing stigma surrounding mental illness for student-athletes. Beyond individual universities, U SPORTS also holds a responsibility to lead national efforts that promote student-athlete mental health and foster environments where flourishing is possible across all member institutions.

Limitations and Future Directions

Four limitations to this thesis are addressed, with future research directions considered.

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment posed significant challenges, requiring multiple months to recruit a sample of eight participants who engaged meaningfully in both timelines and individual interviews, providing 16 data points. Initial online recruitment efforts were largely unsuccessful and were subsequently pivoted to in-person strategies following amendment to the ethics certificate. Recruitment began in September 2023, at the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic, when pandemic fatigue may have influenced student-athletes' willingness to participate. Additionally, the multiple components embedded within the data collection phase may have deterred some potential participants due to their already demanding schedules as varsity student-athletes.

Participant Demographics

Participants were predominantly white female-identifying swimmers from the same institution. Although three participants had experiences studying at/competing for multiple universities due to transferring, seven participants attended the University of Ottawa and all participants currently attended university in Ontario. Of the eight participants, seven identified as female, reflecting a gender imbalance that is undesirable, yet not uncommon as male participants are often underrepresented in mental health research (e.g., Graper, 2023; Pankow et al., 2021). Six participants identified as white, further emphasizing the limited diversity within the sample.

Future research in this area should seek more diversified samples to address the current study's demographic limitations. Such efforts should be aimed at recruiting more male athletes, athletes from equity-deserving groups (e.g., 2SLGBTQ+, Indigenous Peoples, racialized communities), as well as athletes from diverse sports to help construct a complex analytical portrait of mental health help seeking behaviours amongst Canadian varsity student-athletes. Additionally, integrating the perspectives of coaches, academic advisors, and mental health professionals could provide key insights into institutional mental health services and their impact on student-athletes.

Methodological Constraints

This thesis has methodological limitations, whereby some participants showed limited investment in the creation of their timelines. Most produced simple, chronological timelines, with only one participant offering a more creative representation. Therefore, the timelines offered valuable opportunities for participants to peer into past experiences but the extent to which the potential of timelining was tapped into remained suboptimal.

Limited Exploration of Intersectionality

The limited exploration of intersectionality in this research represents another constraint. This thesis did not address how overlapping factors such as race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or disability shaped the experiences of the student-athletes, particularly regarding access to mental health services. Future research should aim to collect broader demographic data and engage participants in discussions about intersectionality to better understand how multiple identities influence mental health experiences. Expanding this focus could deepen our understanding of the structural and systemic barriers faced by marginalized student-athletes and enhance institutional support systems.

Conclusion

Through storytelling, this thesis delved into student-athletes' perceptions of mental health support and their experiences of languishing or flourishing within Canadian universities. This thesis was, for me, a narrative journey, giving me the privilege to listen to individual narrated accounts, develop overarching narrative themes, and craft evocative composite stories that communicate the research findings in an accessible manner.

The findings revealed that student-athletes face significant challenges in balancing their dual roles in athletics and academics. Barriers such as stigma, team environment, time constraints, and the dynamics of coach-athlete relationships significantly influence student-athletes' willingness and ability to access mental health support. Moreover, increased awareness of existing services alone does not appear to be sufficient to compel help-seeking behaviors.

To foster student-athlete flourishing, universities must continue to strive to adopt holistic support models that go beyond traditional mental health services and address/integrate the academic, athletic, and social dimensions of student-athletes' lives. Furthermore, support must be coordinated across diverse stakeholders, including coaches, teammates, friends, parents, administrators, and healthcare providers to create more inclusive and effective support systems. Alongside structural improvements, behavioral nudges like reminders, default rules, and social norms can strengthen mental health engagement and prevent crises.

In sum, this master's thesis research examined the importance of satisfying student-athletes' basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) while also reinforcing Keyes's two-continua model positioning mental health and mental illness as interconnected yet distinct and fluid constructs. Together, these frameworks reflected the

multifaceted nature of well-being and its critical role in promoting flourishing among university varsity student-athletes.

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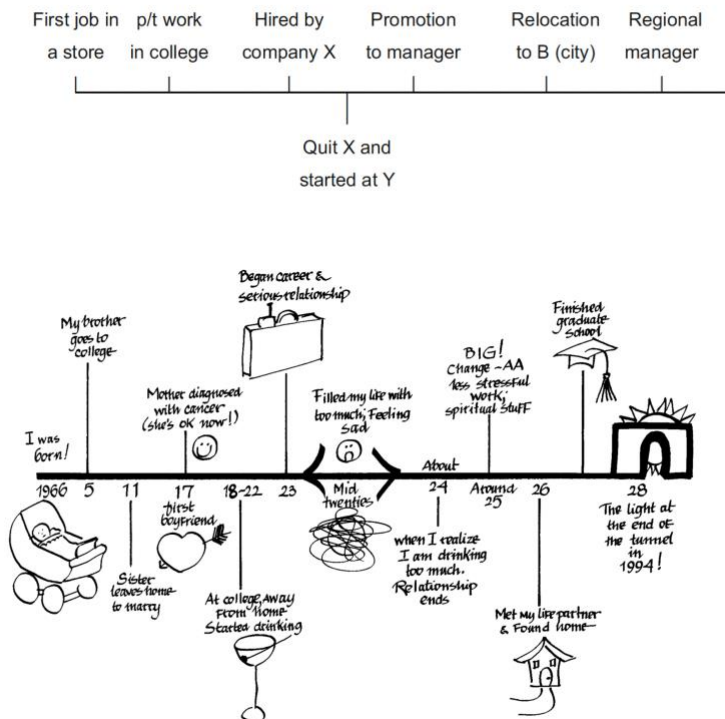
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Appendices

Appendix A – Example Timelines for Participants

Some Timeline Examples

Simple:



Artistic/ continuous/meandering:



Appendix B – University of Ottawa Certificate of Ethics Approval

08/06/2023

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number

H-04-23-9051

Titre du projet / Project Title

 Canadian Varsity
 Student-Athletes' Perceived
 Institutional Mental Health
 Support: Are Universities
 Extending the Care Needed for
 Flourishing in an Endemic
 World?

Type de projet / Project Type

Thèse de maîtrise / Master's thesis

Statut du projet / Project Status

Approuvé / Approved

Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

08/06/2023

Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

07/06/2024

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher	Affiliation	Role
Lauren SHEARER	École des sciences de l'activité physique / School of Human Kinetics	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Martin CAMIRÉ	École des sciences de l'activité physique / School of Human Kinetics	Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

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08/06/2023

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CÉR) de l'Université d'Ottawa, opérant conformément à l'*Énoncé de politique des Trois conseils* (2014) et toutes autres lois et tous règlements applicables, a examiné et approuvé la demande d'éthique du projet de recherche ci-nommé.

L'approbation est valide pour la durée indiquée plus haut et est sujette aux conditions énumérées dans la section intitulée "Conditions Spéciales ou Commentaires". Le formulaire « Renouvellement ou Fermeture de Projet » doit être complété quatre semaines avant la date d'échéance indiquée ci-haut afin de demander un renouvellement de cette approbation éthique ou afin de fermer le dossier.

Toutes modifications apportées au projet doivent être approuvées par le CÉR avant leur mise en place, sauf si le participant doit être retiré en raison d'un danger immédiat ou s'il s'agit d'un changement ayant trait à des éléments administratifs ou logistiques du projet. Les chercheurs doivent aviser le CÉR dans les plus brefs délais de tout changement pouvant augmenter le niveau de risque aux participants ou pouvant affecter considérablement le déroulement du projet, rapporter tout événement imprévu ou indésirable et soumettre toute nouvelle information pouvant nuire à la conduite du projet ou à la sécurité des participants.

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, which operates in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (2014) and other applicable laws and regulations, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above-named research project.

Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and is subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions or Comments". The "Renewal/Project Closure" form must be completed four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval or closure of the file.

Any changes made to the project must be approved by the REB before being implemented, except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) only pertain to administrative or logistical components of the project. Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes that increase the risk to participant(s), any changes that considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project or the safety of the participant(s).

Germain ZONGO

Responsable d'éthique en recherche / Protocol Officer

Pour/For **Daniel LAGAREC** Président(e) du/ Chair of the **Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences de la santé et sciences / Health Sciences and Sciences Research Ethics Board**

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154
Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

613-562-5387 • 613-562-5338 • ethique@uOttawa.ca / ethics@uOttawa.ca
www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie | www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics

Appendix C – Recruitment Information Material

Hello!

My name is Lauren Shearer (PI), a master's student in Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. I'm reaching out today to ask your help in disseminating a research project to USPORTS varsity student-athletes at your university and within your social networks. Please let me know if you're able to help in sharing this out! Attached is a handy poster to make this easier!

We are looking for student-athletes to participate in a study titled: *Canadian Varsity Student-Athletes' Perceived Institutional Mental Health Support: Are Universities Extending the Care Needed for Flourishing in an Endemic World?* Participants will be asked to share their experiences as a USPORTS student-athlete through two methods. First, through a short introductory meeting with the PI (15 minutes), followed by completing a timeline on their own, detailing their experiences in sport over the last four years to provide a comprehensive timeline documenting changes (both temporary and permanent) that occurred in their sporting life because of the COVID-19 pandemic (30-45 minutes). Second, by participating in an individual interview conducted by the PI (a master's student and former USPORTS student-athlete; 60 minutes) to provide insights into the student-athlete experience and their university's mental health resources and if those resources aid athlete well-being and mental health (flourishing).

Eligible USPORTS student-athletes must meet the following criteria:

- 1) Speak English
- 2) Have experience competing in their sport during the COVID-19 pandemic
- 3) Be currently involved in their sport at the varsity level
- 4) have at least one full year of varsity student-athlete experience specifically in the USPORTS setting.

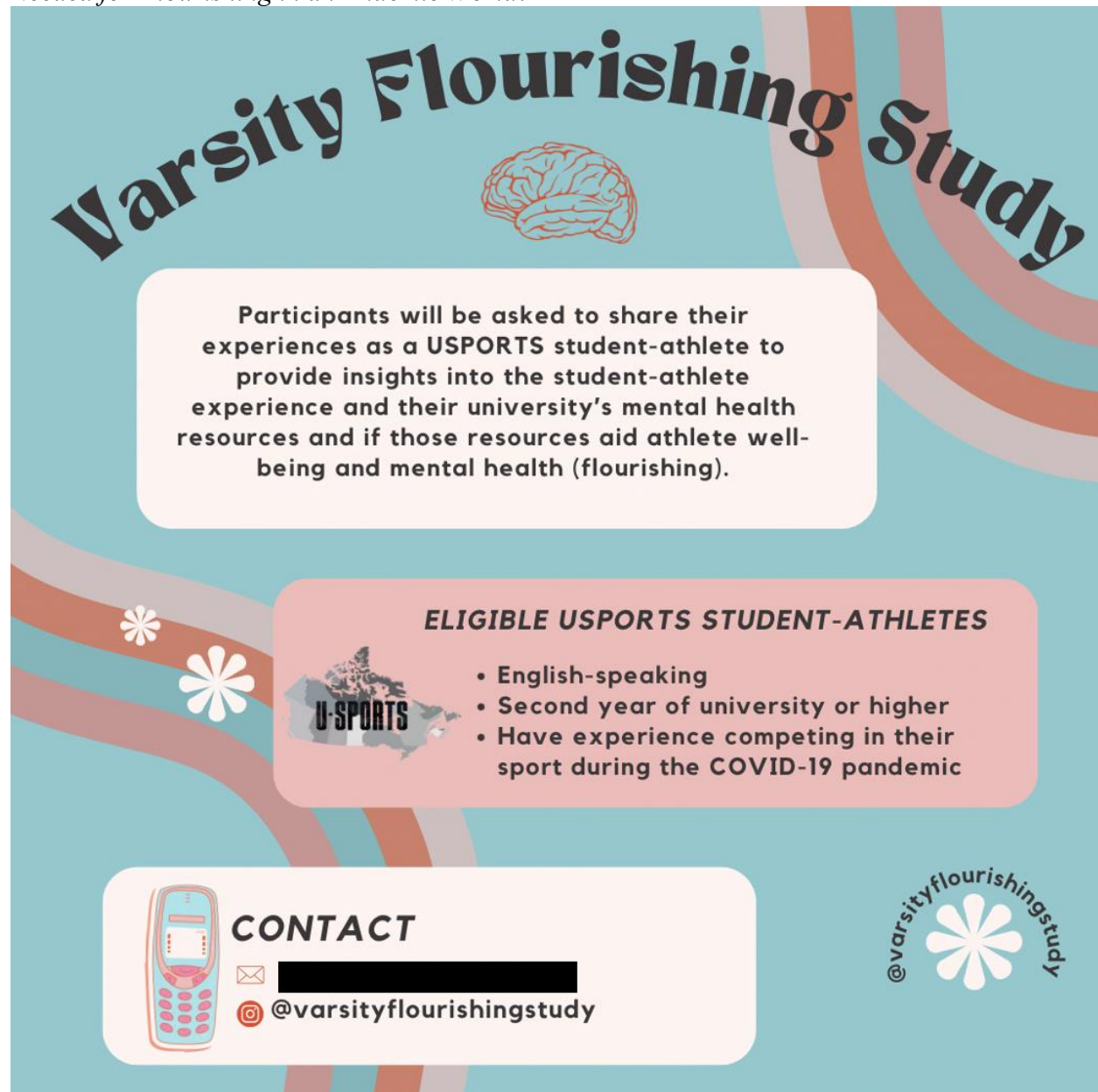
Interested and eligible participants are encouraged to contact the PI, Lauren Shearer at

Thank you,

Lauren Nicole Shearer
M.A. Student
School of Human Kinetics
University of Ottawa

My name is Lauren Shearer (PI), a master's student in Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. I'm reaching out today to ask your help in disseminating a research project to USPORTS varsity student-athletes at your university and within your social networks. Please let me know if you're able to help in sharing this out! Attached is a handy poster to make this easier!

We are looking for student-athletes to participate in a study titled: *Canadian Varsity Student-Athletes' Perceived Institutional Mental Health Support: Are Universities Extending the Care Needed for Flourishing in an Endemic World?*



The poster features a light blue background with abstract orange and grey curved lines. At the top, the title 'Varsity Flourishing Study' is written in a large, bold, black font, with a red brain icon centered below it. A white rounded rectangle in the middle contains text about the study's purpose. Below this, a pink rounded rectangle lists eligibility criteria for USPORTS student-athletes, accompanied by a small U-SPORTS logo. At the bottom left, a white rounded rectangle provides contact information, including a phone icon, an email icon, and an Instagram icon. On the bottom right, there is a circular logo with a white flower and the text '@varsityflourishingstudy'.

Varsity Flourishing Study

Participants will be asked to share their experiences as a USPORTS student-athlete to provide insights into the student-athlete experience and their university's mental health resources and if those resources aid athlete well-being and mental health (flourishing).

ELIGIBLE USPORTS STUDENT-ATHLETES

- English-speaking
- Second year of university or higher
- Have experience competing in their sport during the COVID-19 pandemic

CONTACT

  [Redacted]
 @varsityflourishingstudy

@varsityflourishingstudy

Interested and eligible participants are encouraged to contact the PI, Lauren Shearer at [or](mailto:or@varsityflourishingstudy) [@varsityflourishingstudy](https://www.instagram.com/varsityflourishingstudy) on Instagram

Canadian Varsity Student-Athletes' Perceived Institutional Mental Health Support: Are Universities Extending the Care Needed for Flourishing in an Endemic World?



Eligible USPORTS student-athletes must meet the following criteria:

- 1) Speak English
- 2) Have experience competing in their sport during the COVID-19 pandemic
- 3) Be currently involved in their sport at the varsity level
- 4) have at least one full year of varsity student-athlete experience specifically in the USPORTS setting.

Study Description: Participants will be asked to share their experiences as a USPORTS student-athlete through two methods. First, through a short introductory meeting with the PI (15 minutes), followed by completing a timeline on their own, detailing their experiences in sport over the last four years to provide a comprehensive timeline documenting changes (both temporary and permanent) that occurred in their sporting life because of the COVID-19 pandemic (30 minutes). Second, by participating in an individual interview conducted by the PI (a master's student and former USPORTS student-athlete; 45 minutes) to provide insights into the student-athlete experience and their university's mental health resources and if those resources aid athlete well-being and mental health (flourishing).

Contact:

 Lauren Shearer   MA. Human Kinetics
Supervisor: Dr. Martin Camiré

Appendix D – Social Media Recruitment Content

Who Can Participate?

**ELIGIBLE USPORTS STUDENT-ATHLETES
MUST MEET THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:**

- VARSITY ATHLETE**
Be currently involved in their sport at the varsity level in a Canadian Institution (USPORTS)
- MINIMUM SECOND YEAR STUDENT-ATHLETE**
Have at least one full year of varsity student-athlete experience specifically in the USPORTS setting.
- LONG TIME ATHLETE**
Have experience competing in their sport during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2020 season)
- SPEAK ENGLISH**
Comfortable Participating in an English speaking interview

Contact Information

★ **LAUREN SHEARER**

✉ [REDACTED]

📷 **@VARSITYFLOURISHINGSTUDY**

🎓 **MA. HUMAN KINETICS**

Supervisor: Dr. Martin Camiré
[REDACTED]



how?

THIS RESEARCH IS BROKEN DOWN INTO THREE SIMPLE PARTS

10 minutes	A short introductory meeting with myself (the Primary Investigator) to explain the project (conducted virtually)
30 minutes	Timelining activity detailing your experiences with sport and mental health over the last 4 years
45 minutes	One-on-one interview with PI to gain further insight into your student-athlete experience (conducted virtually)

Varsity Flourishing Study

Participants will be asked to share their experiences as a USPORTS student-athlete to provide insights into the student-athlete experience and their university's mental health resources and if those resources aid athlete well-being and mental health (flourishing).

ELIGIBLE USPORTS STUDENT-ATHLETES

- English-speaking
- Minimum one season as a varsity athlete
- Involved in competitive sport during the COVID-19 pandemic year (2019-2020)

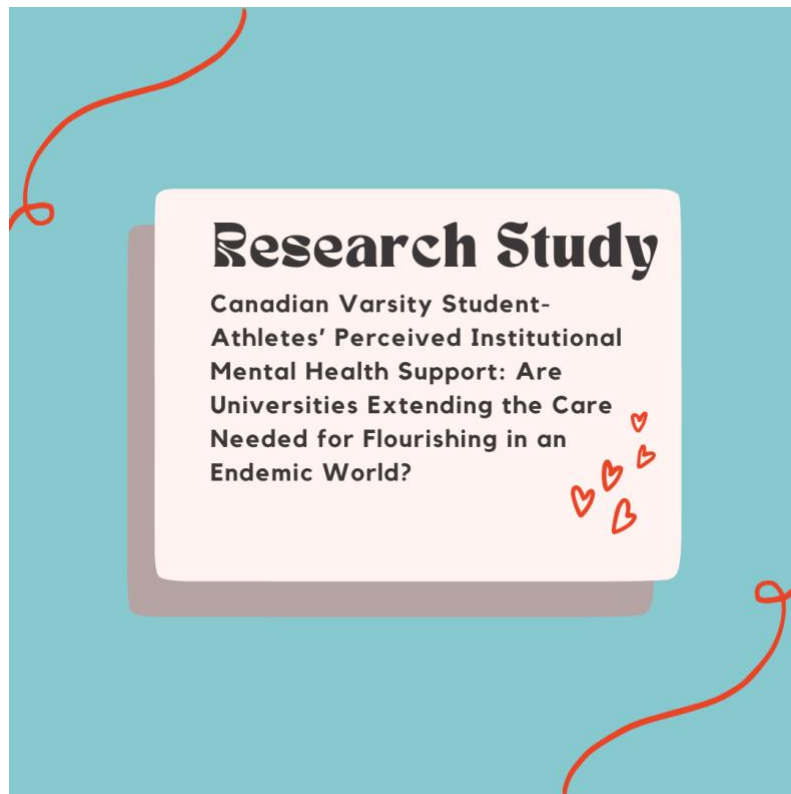
CONTACT

 [Redacted Email Address]

 @varsityflourishingstudy







Appendix E – University of Ottawa Ethics Modification Approval

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

H-04-23-9051 - MOD1-9051 - Modification approuvée / Modification Approved

(English message follows)

Cher/Chère Lauren Shearer,

Merci d'avoir soumis une demande de modification pour votre projet de recherche intitulé «Canadian Varsity Student-Athletes' Perceived Institutional Mental Health Support: Are Universities Extending the Care Needed for Flourishing in an Endemic World? ».

Ces modifications ont été approuvées et sont assujetties au certificat d'approbation éthique, valide jusqu'au 07-06-2024.

Participant recruitment process or documents: the recruitment process has been modified.

Si vous avez des questions, n'hésitez pas à communiquer avec le Bureau d'éthique au ethique@uottawa.ca ou au 613-562-5387.

Vous pouvez voir votre demande en vous connectant à votre compte [eReviews](#).

Cordialement,

Coordonateur / Coordinator
Coordonnateur de l'éthique
Président(e) : Daniel Lagarec
CÉR : Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences de la santé et sciences / Health Sciences and Sciences Research Ethics Board

Ceci est une réponse automatisée, merci de ne pas répondre à ce courriel.

Dear Lauren Shearer,

Thank you for submitting a modification request for your research project titled "Canadian Varsity Student-Athletes' Perceived Institutional Mental Health Support: Are Universities Extending the Care Needed for Flourishing in an Endemic World? ".

These modifications are now covered under the certificate of ethics approval, valid until 07-06-2024.

Participant recruitment process or documents: the recruitment process has been modified.

If you have any questions, please contact the Ethics Office at ethics@uottawa.ca or 613-562-5387.

You can view your project at any time by logging into [eReviews](#).

Best regards,

Coordonateur / Coordinator
Ethics Coordinator
Chair: Daniel Lagarec
REB: Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences de la santé et sciences / Health Sciences and Sciences Research Ethics Board

This is an automated message. Please do not reply directly to this email.

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Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Attachement(s) / Attachment(s)

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154
Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

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www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie | www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics

Appendix F – Printed Recruitment Poster

Varsity Flourishing Study



Participants will be asked to share their experiences as a USPORTS (Canadian) student-athlete to provide insights into the student-athlete experience and their university's mental health resources and if those resources aid athlete well-being and mental health (flourishing).

ELIGIBLE STUDENT-ATHLETES IN CANADA



- English-speaking
- Minimum one (1) season as a varsity athlete
- Involved in competitive sport during the COVID-19 pandemic year (2019-2020)

THIS RESEARCH IS BROKEN DOWN INTO 3 PARTS

10
min

A short introductory meeting with myself (the Primary Investigator) to explain the project (conducted virtually)

30
min

Timelining activity detailing your experiences with sport and mental health over the last 4 years

45
min

One-on-one interview with PI to gain further insight into your student-athlete experience (conducted virtually)



Contact

Lauren Shearer MA, Human Kinetics




@varsityflourishingstudy

Supervisor: Dr. Martin Camiré 

Appendix G – Consent Form for Participants



uOttawa

Université d'Ottawa
Faculté des sciences
de la santé

University of Ottawa
Faculty of Health
Sciences

Consent Form

Canadian Varsity Student-Athletes' Perceived Institutional Mental Health Support: Are Universities Extending the Care Needed for Flourishing in an Endemic World?

Name of PI: Lauren Nicole Shearer
School of Human Kinetics
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Ottawa
Email: [REDACTED]

Name of Supervisor: Martin Camiré Ph.D.
School of Human Kinetics
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Ottawa
Email: [REDACTED]

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in a study entitled *Canadian Varsity Student-Athletes' Perceived Institutional Mental Health Support: Are Universities Extending the Care Needed for Flourishing in an Endemic World?* conducted by Lauren Nicole Shearer for her Master's Thesis, under the supervision of Dr. Martin Camiré.

Purpose of the Study: I understand that the general purpose of the study is to get the USPORTS varsity student-athletes perspective and experience of mental health/illness, well-being, and flourishing/languishing throughout COVID-19 as we progress into an endemic world. Additionally, the study seeks to understand the resources accessible to varsity student athlete and determine if said resources are compressive or if alternative recourses should be developed and provided to enhance and support student-athlete flourishing.

Participation: My participation will consist of taking part in one (1) introductory virtual meeting lasting approximately 15-20 minutes, one (1) timeline to be completed on my own in a style of my choosing depicting my experiences as a USPORTS student-athlete lasting approximately 30-45 minutes, and one (1) individual interview lasting approximately 60 minutes during which I will discuss matters related to my area of expertise and experience as a student-athlete. The timeline I create will be analyzed by the researcher to better understand my student-athlete experience as well as inform the personalization of my individual interview. My timeline, will be photographed and any photos I provide in my timeline may be used as data. The interview will be both video- recorded, and audio-recorded (with my prior consent) and occur via videoconferencing.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I discuss sensitive topics, and this may cause me to feel psychological and emotional discomfort. I have received assurance from the researchers that every effort will be made to minimize these risks (e.g., option to withdrawal, identities will be protected using pseudonyms/ codes, resources will be provided). A list of pertinent resources will be provided to me during my participation in the research process.

☎ 613-562-5432
📠 613-562-5437

451 Smyth (3028)
Ottawa ON K1H 8M5 Canada
www.uOttawa.ca

Benefits: Participation in this study will allow me to share relevant information with the researcher related to my personal experiences as a USPORTS varsity student-athlete. Engaging in conversations about mental health, mental illness, psychological well-being, and flourishing as a student-athlete, and speaking to the mental health recourses and help-seeking behaviors I have experienced at my intuition.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will only be used in the PI's Master's Thesis. Only they will have access to the data and codes/ pseudonyms (rather of names) will be used to ensure anonymity. With respect to legally required disclosure, I have been informed that in circumstances where disclosure is necessary by law (e.g., reasonable grounds to believe a person is in face of harm such as suicide), that protection of identifying information will not be guaranteed.

Conservation of data: The data collected will be kept in a secure manner on a password-protected computer for 5 years after the end of data collection, where only the PI and her supervisor will have access to the data.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate in the study and if I do choose to participate, I may withdraw at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions without any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed and not used for any research purposes.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the study conducted by Lauren Nicole Shearer from the University of Ottawa, under the supervision of Dr. Martin Camiré. I understand that by accepting to participate, I am in no way waiving my right to withdraw from the study.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the PI:

Lauren Nicole Shearer
M.A student
School of Human Kinetics / École des sciences de l'activité physique
Faculty of Health Sciences / Faculté des sciences de la santé
University of Ottawa / Université d'Ottawa
125 University Private
Ottawa, Canada, K1N 6N5

If I have any ethical concerns regarding my participation in this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, (613) 562-5387 or ethics@uottawa.ca.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Student Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix G –How to Password Protect your Documents for Secure Sending

Password Protect your Documents for Secure Sending.

Since communication over email is not a secure, private channel this study will password protect all pdfs, word documents, etc. that are send via email.

Here is how to do it!

PDFs:

Open the PDF and choose **Tools > Protect > Encrypt > Encrypt with Password.**

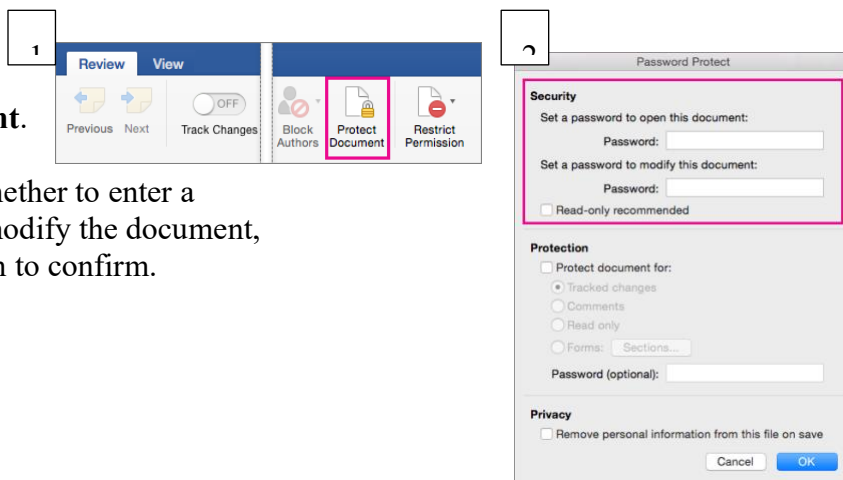
Word Documents:

PC

1. Go to **File > Info > Protect Document > Encrypt with Password.**
2. Type a password, then type it again to confirm it.
3. Save the file to make sure the password takes effect.

Mac

1. Go to **Review > Protect Document.**
2. Under **Security**, you can select whether to enter a password to open the document, modify the document, or both. Enter each password again to confirm.
3. Click **OK.**



Appendix I – Sample Interview Guide

Example Interview Guide: individual timelines will be analyzed for each participant prior to the individual interview. Specifics will be used to customize the interview guide and tailor it to each individual's lived experiences.

Introduction

- Explain the purpose of the study, tell participants that their participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any point.
- Ask if they have any questions before beginning and thank them for their participation.

Current Experience

1. What are your personal experiences as a university varsity athlete?
2. Why did you choose to pursue sport at the varsity level?
3. What has your varsity experience been prior to the pandemic?
4. What has your varsity experience been during the pandemic?
5. How was it to come back to sport after pandemic restrictions were lifted?
6. Are there any lasting changes to your sport/team because of the pandemic?

Mental Health

7. Do you have any personal experiences with poor mental health or mental illness?
 - If yes, do you feel comfortable speaking to these experiences?
 - Subjectively how would you define your well-being?
8. Did you notice any changes to your mental health during COVID-19? Do you feel comfortable sharing more information about this experience?
9. In the endemic phase of COVID-19, has there been any changes to your mental health (positive, negative)?
10. Have you experienced changes to your motivation?
 - Do you feel as though you experience feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in your daily life as a student-athlete?

Support and Wanted Services

11. Are you familiar with the health services at your university? Mental health services?
12. Have you used any of the services?
13. Can you describe the support/care you received?
14. Are there certain services you did not receive that you would have found useful for mental health support?
15. Do you have recommendations as to how universities should optimally provide mental health services to student-athletes?

Conclusion and Demographics

- Ask demographic information (e.g., age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, program of study, sport played).
- Is there anything that you want to share that I haven't asked you about?
- Thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix J – Stambulova and Harwood (2022) Dual Career Pathways

Athletic career: Initiation ... Development... Mastery... Discontinuation →

