

The psychosocial impact of COVID-19 on college athletes and their coaches:
A qualitative study of a highly performing men's college soccer program

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Abstract

In 2020, COVID-19 became a global phenomenon, significantly impacting facets of life for most communities throughout the world, inclusive of sport. This research study sought to understand the impact of the coronavirus experience (CE) on the psychology of members of an NCAA Division I men's soccer program by likening it to that of a serious injury – one that not only alters the sport participation of athletes, but also has the potential to influence their mental health and well-being. Based on the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998), this qualitative study revealed four categories of cognitive appraisals (assessing impact, dealing with uncertainty, reframing goals, reframing opportunity), four emotional responses (denial, sadness, frustration, optimism) and three behavioral adaptations (conditioning, socializing, self-care) that were commonly shared by players throughout the pandemic. These responses to the CE were influenced in part by various situational and personal factors unique to each player. Taken together, the findings of this study revealed that the CE disrupted the lives of the players significantly, including psychological stress that centered primarily on players' inability to express agency over COVID-19 in terms of returning to competitive play. The importance of understanding the impact of the CE on players' mental health, as well as helping coaches implement trauma-informed practices within the team setting, represent important implications of this research.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) has become a global phenomenon, significantly affecting virtually all aspects of society inclusive of education, commerce, politics and daily life across the socio-economic spectrum. The world of *Sport* has not escaped the virus either; indeed, the many examples of COVID-19 spreading through and among teams and athletes of all levels reminds us that nobody — not even the most well-conditioned athletes on the planet — are immune from the virus.

As the pandemic expanded throughout 2020-21, sport has remained a context of central importance in society, receiving widespread attention in the media as its response to COVID-19 has been scrutinized. This has given rise to the sharing of critical perspectives on the role of sport in the context of a global pandemic. Black's (2020) thoughtful problematization of the perceived importance of sport in society, for example, was a reaction in part to the words of Jurgen Klopp, currently one of the most well-known professional soccer coaches in the world. Klopp suggested that “football [i.e., soccer] is the most important of the least important things” (Wilson, 2020, as cited in Black, 2020, p. 1). As Black argued, surely few would disagree with Klopp by having the audacity to suggest that the importance of sport somehow supersedes that of a global pandemic. And yet, Black contends, the fact that such a statement is shared in the media suggests there is a belief held by “an Other who does believe in sport's importance (even in the face of a global pandemic)” (2020, p. 2). This “illusion without owner” as Pfaller (2014) calls it (cited in Black, 2020), highlights our collective, inherent desire for play, for the joy derived through physical expression in sport and physical activity, and for the

mapping of our identity onto external entities that can, in the context of the “field of play”, serve as a proxy for the innate human desire and capacity for competition.

Hence, while the relative unimportance of sport in the COVID-19 era must be acknowledged, nevertheless sport remains a significant part of the human experience for many. The void created by the absence of sport in the COVID-19 era across the globe (and at every level from the Olympic Games to professional sports to college sports to the local youth recreational leagues) reminds us of just how central sport is to society, culture, and the global economy. Further, given the hundreds of thousands of sport participants across the globe, it is not a trivial exercise to raise the question of how COVID-19 has, through necessary alterations in sporting practices and opportunities, impacted the physical and mental health of so many among us. The cancellation of professional, college, and youth sports, in addition to quarantine policies and social distancing recommendations that eliminate the possibility of team training or even informal “pick-up” games in the park have required athletes of all levels to adapt — i.e., to redefine “practice”, to change their training habits and physical activity routines, to find new avenues of social support, to engage fears of contracting the virus through their sport participation, and to overcome a new variety of challenges in the midst of the pandemic (Mehrsafar et al., 2020).

These challenges and resulting adaptations certainly apply in the realm of college athletics. In a survey of over 37,000 athletes across all levels and divisions, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA; 2020) reported numerous disruptions in the lives and experiences of college athletes attributed to COVID-19, and in particular the negative

impact of the threat (and actual effect) of the virus on both the physical and mental health of student athletes. Among other findings, the NCAA reported that athletes expressed concerns over risks inherent in their living conditions, the impact of the virus on their academic progress, their ability to maintain important social connections and resources, barriers to their continued athletic training, and general feelings of isolation, stress, anxiety, and depression.

These findings from the NCAA survey – confirmed by emerging studies in the research literature – speak directly to the work of sport psychologists who concern themselves with all aspects related to mental health among athletes. As Frank et al. (2020) have reported, sport psychologists around the world are noting increased demand for their support services particularly in the areas of anxiety, decreased sleep duration and quality, interpersonal conflicts, stress management, lack of coping skills, physical recovery after COVID-19 infection, and depressive episodes related to changing identities among athletes.

This increased demand for psychological support in the realm of athletics was anticipated by sport psychologists even as the pandemic was only just beginning to reveal the scope and significance of its impending impact. Leading psychological organizations began to outline the anticipated impact of, and potential responses to, the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-2020 as the Coronavirus began its relentless sweep of the world. The International Society of Sport Psychology, for example, published a series of editorials that began to outline this space, providing guidance for both caregivers and researchers interested in addressing emerging psychological needs among athletes. Henricksen et al.

(2020) began this conversation by noting how COVID-19 was creating widespread career disruptions among many athletes which included, among other stressors, the potential loss of identity, purpose, and motivation. Schinke et al. (2020a) noted the likely subsequent stress responses that would be exhibited by athletes (and in their particular examples, intending Olympians) during these disruptions, including sleep disorders, decreased appetite and related nutritional implications, increased anxiety, loneliness, and fear. Representing the Association for Applied Sport Psychology, Byrd et. al. (2020) predicted a rise in emotional instability among athletes due to changes in daily routines, mixed messages about the virus and its impact on athletes, concerns for personal health, and the risks of sport participation as a conduit for the spread of the virus. Finally, as Toresdahl and Asif (2020) suggested, interruptions in social networks and training regimens of athletes – critical components in management of anxiety and depression – are likely to increase demand for mental health support.

These anticipated areas of concern are synergistic with recommendations for an emerging agenda for sociological and psychological research in sport shared by Evans et. al. (2020). In particular, Evans and colleagues recommended focused inquiry in the areas of: 1) the changing future role of sport and physical activity in society, 2) changes in the organizational structures of sporting opportunities for participants, 3) the treatment of inequalities in sport revealed by the pandemic, 4) the impact of the pandemic on the lives of athletes (and how those impacts should inform future coaching practices), and 5) how the **coronavirus** may further exclude or stigmatize marginalized groups within the context of sport. The present study is squarely situated within these recommendations, most

specifically in the fourth suggested category for attention: exploring the impact of COVID-19 on the lives and experiences of athletes, and the related responses of coaches in the context of team sports.

As discussed in the review of literature that follows below, this study of college athletes is also nested within the sports medicine psychology literature. In establishing the theoretical framework for this research, I argue for the perspective that the impact of COVID-19 on athletes might be likened to that of a serious injury – one that not only alters the sport participation of athletes, but also has the potential to influence their mental health and well-being. Using well-regarded and tested models of sport injury psychology (e.g., Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998), this study sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 on college athletes, most notably their cognitive appraisals of COVID-19 on their experiences, their emotional responses to the loss of athletic opportunities, and the resulting behavioral responses they evidence in the process of finding new pathways and expressions of their athletic experiences within the context of the present global pandemic.

Review of Literature

Given its very recent emergence, conceptualizing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic within competitive sports team contexts is an interesting challenge. Certainly, for those athletes who have contracted the virus, various models of sport injury and rehabilitation apply in explaining how athletes cope with the COVID-19 experience (CE) as a form of “injury” that impedes their progress and development within their sport. For the majority of athletes who have not contracted the virus themselves, however, the

COVID-19 pandemic nevertheless has in effect interrupted their competitive careers as significantly as any serious injury might have done. As such, one might conceptualize and explain the psychosocial impact of the CE as a career altering event. The following review of literature is intended to provide the context for this conceptualization.

COVID-19 and its impact on athletes falls squarely within the domain of sport medicine psychology. A specific discipline within the broader sport psychology field, sport medicine psychology is multidisciplinary in nature, encompassing theory, research and practice relating to the psychological, behavioral and social aspects of injury experiences. Using the lens of sport medicine psychology is certainly appropriate when considering the experiences of athletes who have contracted the virus and as a result have had their own physical wellness challenged. Sport medicine psychology may also be relevant, however, for those athletes who have not contracted the virus. The CE has interrupted the sporting careers and daily physical activity routines of millions of people across the globe as significantly as any serious injury might have done. As such, existing sport medicine psychology models that have been helpful in explaining psychological responses of athletes in the context of sport injuries and the subsequent rehabilitation process may also provide a helpful conceptual foundation for the study at hand, as discussed in the paragraphs below.

The purpose of this literature review is two-fold. First, it is used to introduce two conceptual models, each equally important to the research described below, that provided the theoretical foundation for this project. Second, this literature review is used to highlight recent findings in the literature that both map onto these two conceptual models,

and also illuminate contemporary efforts to understand the impact of the CE on athletes. Both purposes – introducing sport medicine models and highlighting contemporary literature on COVID-19 – are intended to provide the backdrop for the research project described later in this document.

Both of the conceptual models highlighted in the paragraphs below emerge out of the sport injury psychology literature. First, Samuel and Tenenbaum's (2011) scheme of change for sport psychology practice provides a compelling framework for examining the cognitive and emotional change process athletes may engage during the CE. The first major section of the review of literature shared below begins with an explanation of this model, followed by the presentation of recent research findings that highlight the psychosocial impacts of the CE on athletes in three areas: changes in identity and self-schema, changes in athletes' stress responses, and changes in their social support networks.

The second model highlighted below again draws on the sports medicine psychology literature. The integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) provides a compelling foundation from which to examine the research questions framing this study. If one is willing to consider COVID-19 as a career change event similar to that of a serious injury, then the model has great explanatory power; pre-injury (i.e., pre-CE) factors (personality, history of stressors, coping resources, interventions) provide the context from which athletes initially experience the interruption in their athletic routines, which then initiates the subsequent cyclical process of cognitive appraisal, emotional response, and

behavioral changes. Moreover, the personal and situational factors that filter cognitive appraisals and responses would seem to map well onto the present landscape and, in particular, the responses of athletes and coaches to the CE and its impact on athletic competition and training. Given that this model compellingly informs the design of this study – particularly the approach to data analysis – it will be elaborated second, immediately prior to the description of the research methodology employed in the study.

While each of these models alone might have been useful (and adequate) to theorize this research, it is the intention to combine the two as a way to frame this research that is both a unique approach not yet explored in the research literature, and a powerful way to understand the experiences of the players within the CE environment. To set the stage for a more detailed description of each model below, the intent in blending these two models was to use the sport injury and rehabilitation process model (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) as the orienting, organizational framework for the study (e.g., documenting athletes' cognitive appraisals, emotional responses, behavioral adaptations). To support the understanding of these appraisals, emotions, and behaviors in the context of the CE, an orienting perspective of this research was to conceptualize the CE as an external source of pressure on athletes that created instability in their experiences as college athletes. In framing the study this way, it was conjectured that responses to this source of instability (the CE) would prompt changes in the thinking, feeling, and actions of athletes. Hence, the scheme of change model (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011) seemed an appropriate theoretical framework that would help explain the change process anticipated by athletes at the onset of the study. With this idea in mind

(blending the two frameworks), a more detailed explanation of each model follows below.

Conceptual Model 1: The Scheme of Change Model

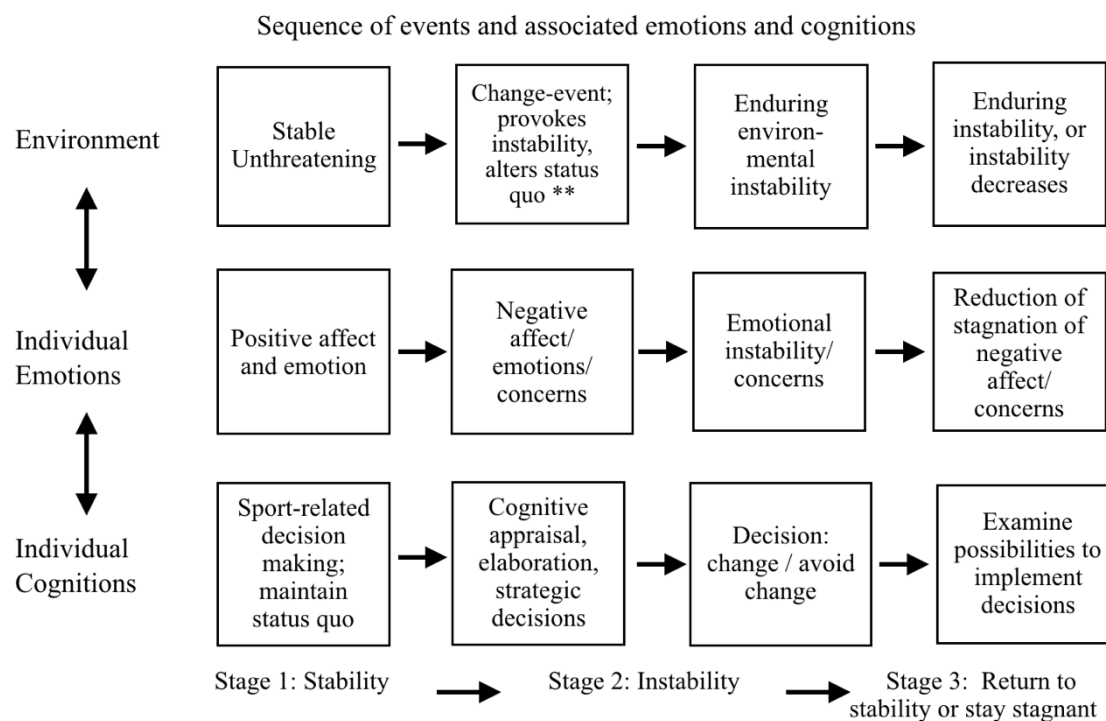
A fruitful way to begin this section of the literature review regarding change is perhaps to introduce Whitcomb-Khan and colleagues' (2021) notion of a "critical pause." The authors recently released findings from their qualitative study of eight elite athletes, each of whom was asked to narrate the most salient features of their experiences during the initial lockdown of COVID-19. After viewing these stories collectively, the authors suggested thinking of COVID-19 as a "critical pause" in the experiences of the athletes -- both within their competitive environments, as well as the myriad, related aspects of their lives and identities connected to their sport participation. Narrative analysis of the stories of these athletes revealed four threads that were concerning to each of the athletes interviewed: threats to their athletic goals, consequences of forced inactivity imposed by COVID-19, preoccupations with the challenges inherent in overcoming COVID-19 and returning to pre-pandemic levels of play, and adaptations made to their lives, training regimen, and other related factors. Within these broader categories, more specific anecdotes of challenge, personal loss, psychological adaptations, and even some unanticipated hidden benefits of the CE were shared.

In addition to providing an example of research similar to that which was undertaken in this project, this notion of a "critical pause" parallels nicely the scheme of change for sport psychology practice model (SCSPP; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011) that is being used to frame the present study. The Samuel and Tenenbaum model provides a

framework for understanding the CE as a career change event, similar to the ways in which Whitcomb-Khan and colleagues (2021) wrote about how the CE prompted a period of pause among athletes that forced them to reassess their present pathways, behaviors, and psychological perspectives in light of the pandemic. As depicted in the SCSPP model in Figure 1, any change in environmental conditions (from stable to unstable) that disrupts the status quo for an athlete – in this case the CE – puts into motion potential changes in both emotional responses and cognitive processes.

To begin to unpack the SCSPP model, we may first acknowledge that the CE had a major impact on the environmental stability of athletes. Programs were put on pause, training facilities were closed, social isolation was mandated, competition and training were halted, and access to coaches and trainers was limited to virtual interactions. There is no doubt that the stable environments so critical to elite athlete development were disrupted to say the least. This environmental instability is reflected in the top row of the scheme of change mode that appears in Figure 1 below.

Acknowledging the environmental instability of the CE then allows further exploration of possible changes in the cognitive processes and emotional responses of athletes as captured in the second and third rows of the model. First, one may consider that the cognitive appraisal process typically includes considerations about the impact of an event on an athlete's career, the coping resources they have at their disposal to react to the change event, the temporal nature of the event (i.e., a discrete event or a longitudinal process), its impact on communities of engagement (e.g., an athlete's team, coaches, teammates, family, etc.), the timing of the event relative to career milestones, and the

Figure 1*The Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice*

** COVID-19

Note. A more elaborated version of this figure appeared in “The Role of Change in Athletes’ Careers: A Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice,” by R. D. Samuel and G. Tenenbaum, 2011, *Sport Psychologist*, 25(2), 237. (DOI: 10.1123/tsp.25.2.233). 2011 by Human Kinetics.

impact of the event beyond the sport context. Second, and similarly, emotional responses to a change event often include feelings of anxiety over a perceived loss of control, possible changes in athletic identity, challenges to one’s “athlete-schema” (Whaley, 2004), changes in motivation, and catastrophizing around the long-term impact of the event.

To tie Samuel and Tenenbaum’s SCSPP model to the present context (and this research project), the onset of COVID-19 in the United States early in 2020 caused

sporting environments to quickly transition from relative stability to instability. As depicted in the cell at the intersection of the first row and second column of the SCSPP model, the CE represented a significant shift in the status quo which has continued to foster instability and uncertainty even some ten months later. As predicted in the model, this uncertainty has given rise to a host of negative emotions and concerns among athletes that have, in turn, also impacted athletes' cognitive appraisals, elaborations of their situation, and their decision-making processes. This picture is becoming clearer as contemporary research on the CE in sporting contexts continues to emerge. In the following paragraphs, recent research – focused particularly on the CE – in three primary areas is shared. Each of these bodies of research is connected to an aspect of the scheme of change model illustrated above: changes in identity (both an emotional and cognitive process), changes in states of stress, anxiety and mental health (cognitive and emotional processes), and changes in cognitive appraisals and goal setting (cognitive process). Each of these three bodies of research connected to the SCSPP model is summarized in the subsequent sections of this review.

Scheme of Change Model: The Impact of the CE on Identity. It is well understood in the research literature that highly performing athletes tend to emphasize, at times disproportionately, their athletic identities (Schinke, Papaioannou, Maher, et al., 2020). Driven by the goal of achieving the highest levels of excellence and achievement possible, these athletes often specialize in a given sport context that causes them to forego other outside roles that might otherwise have furthered identity development. As such, they can create a singular identity that is subject to disruption during events like the

CE in which social isolation and the loss of sporting contexts emerges (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

Costa and colleagues (2020) tested this hypothesis in their study of 1125 Italian athletes ($n = 207$ women, $n = 185$ men) that ranged between 18-50 years in age and cut across multiple sports (both team and individual) and levels (local, regional, national, international). The researchers employed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) as their primary tool, a survey designed to assess the strength and exclusivity of athletic identity by focusing on the athletes' social identity (e.g., "I consider myself an athlete."), exclusivity (e.g., "Sport is the most important part of my life."), and negative affectivity (e.g., "I feel badly about myself when I do poorly in sport."). The AIMS was administered shortly after the pandemic began ravaging Italy, and during the initial COVID-19 lockdown period (April-May of 2020) in the country.

The authors focused particularly on data generated from the AIMS survey during the lockdown period. While in the midst of the CE, elite athletes in the study showed significantly higher levels on all three constructs – social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity when compared to non-elite athletes. Moreover, those athletes involved in team sports scored higher on all three constructs than their peers who competed in individual sports. Finally, results from a one-way ANOVA that explored relationships between Athletic Identity scores and the "rumination" and "catastrophizing" dimensions of the Cognitive Emotional Regulation Questionnaire revealed that those athletes with higher athletic identity scores tended to ruminate and catastrophize their situation in the midst of the lockdown more often and more deeply than those athletes

with lesser athletic identity measures. The authors postulated that these particular effects were due largely to the fact that athletes were removed from their usual training routines and competitive environments, denied access to their teammates as forms of social support and identity confirmation, and forced to withdraw into social isolation by external mandate, rather than because of factors related to their personal situation (e.g., an injury).

These findings – removal from routines, removal from competition, lack of access to teammates, social isolation, etc. – are significant considerations when examining the potential impact of the CE on athletes' identities and are particularly related to the SCSP model shared in Figure 1 above. In support of this link between identity and the SCSP model, Whaley's (2004) discussion of "self-schemata" (p. 259) may be helpful. In her elaboration of identity constructs among individuals in the sport domain, Whaley describes one's "self-schema" as the cognitive structures that filter and represent information about the self. These structures include both the identification of behaviors that define oneself, and considerations of how those behaviors are significant to maintaining their self-image. For example, "schematic" exercisers view exercise behaviors as being descriptive of themselves, and moreover, consider such behavior (or attributes) to be significant to the maintenance (or enhancement) of their self-image.

Related to athletes in the CE, then, maintaining an "athlete-schema" requires ongoing adoption of behaviors representative of being an athlete, and moreover the implicit understanding that such actions serve to maintain their self-image as an athlete. Hence, given the evidence above that the CE has restricted many of the behaviors in

which athletes typically engage (i.e., creating environmental instability as reflected in the SCSPP model), it is reasonable to suggest that restricted behaviors have impacted athletes' self-schemas both in how they spend their time, and how activity confirms (or in this case does not support) one's identity as an athlete. As identity is thus challenged, it is not surprising that athletes would experience anxiety and mental health challenges such as those articulated in the following section.

The Scheme of Change Model: The impact of the CE on Stress Responses, Anxiety and Mental Health. To continue to elaborate the SCSPP model as one of the key theoretical anchors underpinning this research, this section of the literature review illustrates connections between the instability of the CE and its impact on athletes' stress responses, anxiety and mental health. These categories fit well within both the second and third rows of the model – i.e., the change effect of the CE on athletes' emotions and cognitions related to stress, anxiety, and general mental health concerns. Recent examples in the literature that provide evidence of this relationship between the instability of the CE and its impact in these aforementioned areas are shared in the following paragraphs.

During the early stages of the lockdown in Germany in April of 2020, Franke et al. (2020) began administering a standardized interview protocol to all patients who visited their mental health clinic. More than half of those individuals reported enduring increased mental distress and anxiety due to the CE, attributed in part to changes in routines, loss of social ties, and fears of future uncertainty. Similar findings are beginning to emerge in the sport literature as well. For example, Ozan-Tingaz (2020) completed semi-structured interviews with 18 elite athletes, the focus of which was to determine the

key psychological and emotional responses exhibited by these athletes during the CE. Analysis of the interview data revealed that 40% of the athletes interviewed reported being consumed by anxiety over the loss of their current competitive opportunities, as well as concerns about their future athletic careers. Notably, almost three-fourths (72%) of the athletes indicated growing anxiety around the fear that, post-pandemic, they would not be at the same level of performance achieved prior to the CE.

Similarly, in their cross-sectional study with 692 South African athletes across 15 sports and inclusive of both elite and semi-elite levels of competition, Pillay and colleagues (2020) reported various findings both physiologically and psychologically that attested to the impact of the CE on athletes' well-being. Regarding mental health in particular, 52% of the respondents reported depressive episodes at some point during the pandemic, with female athletes reporting depression at a significantly higher rate than their male counterparts. Nearly half (46%) of respondents reported a loss of energy, matched with 55% of the athletes indicating that they struggled to maintain motivation levels necessary to continue growth in their sport. Once again, female athletes tended to report greater levels of fatigue and energy loss, as well as larger declines in motivation.

Related work by McGuine, Biese, Petrovska, and colleagues (2021) revealed startling findings when comparing measures of mental health pre- and post-COVID-19 among adolescent athletes. In their cross-sectional study of over 3000 athletes in the United States, the authors reported that 32.9% of athletes in the COVID-19 era reported suffering moderate to severe symptoms of depression, more than three times the rate ($p < .001$) of their peers in pre-pandemic times. Moreover, these same athletes reported 50%

lower levels of physical activity ($p < .001$), and lower quality of life scores ($p < .001$) than their pre-pandemic peers. In a related survey of over 13,000 adolescent athletes, McGuine, Biese, Hetzel and colleagues (2021) revealed that reports of depressive symptoms were reported more often among athletes in team sports (74.1%) than those athletes participating in individual sports (64.9%) suggesting, perhaps, that the loss of social support and friendships available in the team context may impact the mental health of athletes, or perhaps that athletes in individual sports were better able to continue their exercise and training routines.

Another source of anxiety expressed by athletes in the study conducted by Pillay and colleagues (2020) involved concerns over the timing and protocol surrounding a return to competitive sport (RTS). Almost all athletes were enthusiastic about returning to play, and yet concerns over RTS dominated their responses. One-third of the athletes were unsure about the timing of RTS due largely to a lack of communication from federations and their sport's governing bodies. Further, fully half of the respondents were unsure whether or not they would in fact return to competition due to concerns over institutionalized risk mitigation (or lack thereof), provisions of protective equipment, financial support, and guidance from their federations and government about safe RTS protocols.

Di Fronso et. al. (2020) administered perceived stress and psychobiosocial state scales to 1132 Italian competitive athletes roughly one month after the Italian lockdown began in early 2020. The intent of the study was two-fold: to examine the extent to which the CE impacted the stress and integrated psychobiosocial states of athletes (compared to

data collected on the same measures prior to the pandemic), and to examine differences in athletes' perceived stress as a function of competitive level (elite vs. novice), and gender. The psychobiosocial states investigated included 7 functional modalities (body, cognition volition, pleasant, operational, motor-behavioral), and 7 dysfunctional states (volition, anxiety, operation, anger, cognition, motor-behavior, bodily related modalities). Data analysis revealed significant differences for both perceived stress and functional/dysfunctional psychobiosocial states. Specifically, perceived stress connected to losses associated to the CE and dysfunctional states increased during the CE, while healthy, functional psychobiosocial states decreased during the pandemic. The authors posited that the climate of uncertainty during the CE, cancellations of game events (if not entire seasons), the loss of normal team routines and social interactions, and redefinitions of the athletes' relationships (and contracts for professionals) with sport organizations and clubs were key contributing factors that led to the degradation of the psychological states of participants in the study.

Interestingly, Di Fronso and colleagues (2020) did not find any significant difference between individual and team sport athletes which runs counter to the intuition that the loss of positive relationships and social interactions common in group settings and experienced by team athletes would impact mood state, feelings, emotions and general psychological state. Also noteworthy, the authors reported that elite athletes reported lower perceived stress, and higher levels of functional psychobiosocial states, than non-elite athletes. As De Fronso and colleagues (2020) noted, highly skilled athletes may be more adept at dealing with adverse situations, and more effective in maintaining

and regulating stable emotional responses in the face of stress events. Additionally, it would also seem likely that elite athletes would benefit from stable, wide-ranging sources of support not available to non-elite athletes. Finally, findings revealed that the women in the study generally scored higher on measures of both perceived stress and emotional intensity than did the men. Women also reported higher scores on dysfunctional psychobiosocial states, and lower scores on the measures of functional psychobiosocial states.

In similar work, Bullard's (2020) study of 682 Division 3, NCAA student-athletes further confirms the appearance of stress reactions among athletes as they began to experience the CE and its impact on their sport participation. Of the 682 participants in the sample, 66% reported experiencing stress during the pandemic that was not present previously. They attributed the increased levels of stress to various factors, most often reporting that a lack of access to resources was of primary concern. Examples of this "lack of resources" included the loss of structured training sessions, closed facilities like weight rooms and gyms, lack of access to rehabilitation services, and an inability to find suitable training equipment and spaces while isolated in their homes during the lockdown period. Driving this concern over resources was the fear of falling "out of shape" both physiologically and pertaining to technical aspects of their training.

Bullard (2020) also contends that another source of anxiety that must be a consideration for athletes involves their inherent responsibility to prevent further spread of the virus, particularly true for team sport athletes who depended largely on social interactions and relationships for sport success. The Healthy Minds Network (2020)

reported that while only about a quarter of college students are notably concerned about contracting the virus, 64% are “very” or “extremely” concerned about people in their close network (e.g., family, friends) contracting COVID-19. Bullard reported that student-athletes carried fear on a daily basis that they might contract the virus and unintentionally spread it among teammates or family. Pillay et al., (2020) extended these fears to include athlete’s preoccupation with the establishment of proper protocols that would ensure athlete safety and mitigate against the spread of the virus among athletes and teams once the lockdown was lifted, and teams were permitted to train together again.

Taken together, the cumulative impact of these stress responses among athletes (exacerbated by their inability to engage in the very sport and exercise routines that had previously been so effective in keeping stress in their lives to a minimum) led to decreased motivation and a lack of engagement, as well as deep feelings of being overwhelmed, isolated, and ineffective in changing their situations (Bullard, 2020; Pillay et al., 2020).

The Scheme of Change Model: The impact of the CE on Cognitive Appraisals and Goal Setting. While research on the emotionally related stress responses of athletes during the CE has begun to proliferate, there is still relatively little published in the literature regarding the cognitive appraisals of athletes during the pandemic. This is a significant gap in the emerging literature on the CE, particularly in light of the SCSPP change-event model that suggests we should expect the instability of the CE to produce various cognitive appraisals among athletes, including strategic planning, goal setting,

decision making, and modifications in perspective related to their coping strategies in the midst of the pandemic and loss of sport activity. The following paragraphs share recent findings in the literature that reference changes in cognition and goal setting among athletes in response to the CE.

One example of emerging research on the cognitive appraisals of athletes may be found in the work of Mascaret (2020), who investigated the goal-setting strategies of 697 athletes, each of whom reported spending more than 7 hours on average in sport or physical activity exercise prior to the onset of the CE. The study sought to track the evolution of achievement goals of the participants during the pandemic related in particular to their “self-approach” goals (i.e., improving themselves), and their “self-avoidance” goals (i.e., avoiding regression in level of physical fitness). For example, pre-CE self-approach goals were measured in part by the question, “When I was exercising before confinement, my goal was to have better results than I had in the past” (p. 2). Similarly, post-CE self-avoidance goals were measured in part by the question, “When I am exercising during confinement, my goal is to avoid doing worse than I normally do” (p. 2). The research was guided by an interest in determining whether or not the confinement experienced by athletes during the CE (and resulting restrictions in exercise and sport activity) altered their pursuit of self-approach goals, or influenced their adoption of strategies useful toward addressing self-avoidance goals.

Mascaret (2020) found significant differences between the cognitive appraisals surrounding both sets of goals. For example, self-approach goals decreased during the CE; that is, the mean score for self-approach goals during the CE was significantly lower

than the period of time immediately before the pandemic. Conversely, self-avoidance goals appeared to increase during the CE. The mean score for self-avoidance goals was significantly higher during the pandemic than the scores reported for self-avoidance goals pre-SE. As the author notes, these findings are counter to what might be expected during a time of environmental stability. That is, taken together, these findings indicate that the CE impacted cognition around goal setting in a way not expected to be replicated in periods of stability. These emerging data are compelling, and certainly point to the need for continued research on cognitive appraisals among athletes during the CE particularly in light of the sports medicine psychology model articulated in the paragraphs below.

To summarize this first part of the conceptual framework for this research project, the SCSPP model suggests that environmental instability may cause athletes to undergo changes in both their emotional responses and cognitive appraisals regarding their athletic participation. The three subsections above highlighted recent findings in the literature on the CE to suggest that three primary areas in which athletes might indeed experience change include their identities and self-schema, their stress, anxiety and mental health responses, and their cognitive appraisals around goal setting in particular. These findings are important to the task of situating the research study at hand.

Conceptual Model 2: The Integrated Model of Psychological Response to the Sport and Injury and Rehabilitation Process

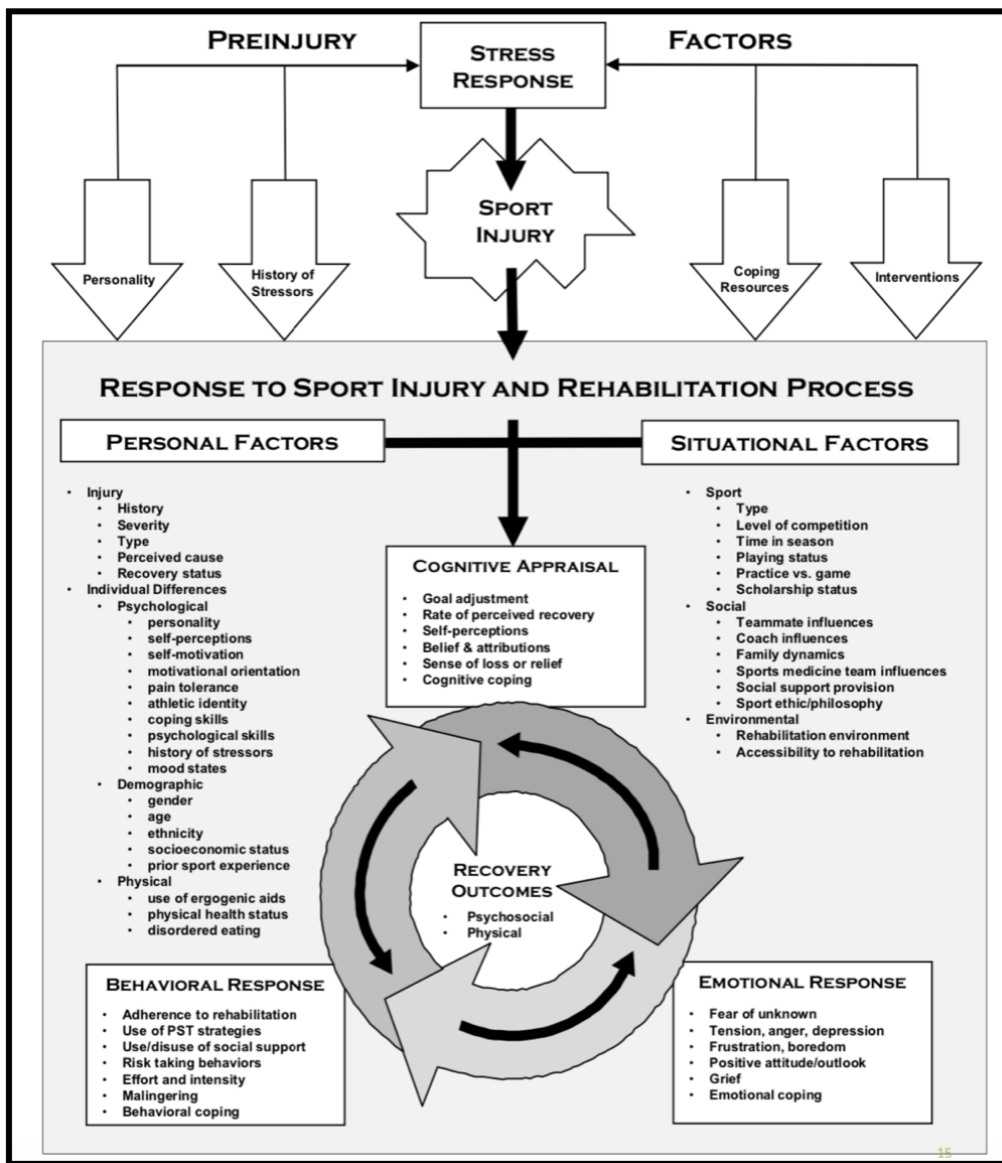
The integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998; Figure 2) has been widely cited in the sport injury psychology literature. Wiese-Bjornstal (2014) traced the evolution of this

model since its original conception, including a summary of the vast range of research that has supported its conceptual development and theoretical contributions. As she noted, the origin of the model began with a simple thought progression; injury may be thought of as a form of stress on the athlete, which then prompts cognitive reflection, followed by an emotional response, leading to behavioral action. Over time, Wiese-Bjornstal and colleagues built upon this linear progression, growing the model in complexity and breadth as it began to reflect emerging research that not only highlighted and confirmed the explanatory power of the model regarding injured athletes' experiences, but also paid note to the growing understanding of the psychosocial nature of injury and recovery. In particular, the model grew to include consideration of how the "psychosocial influences of others in their [the athletes'] social networks such as teammates, family members, fans, and media affect athlete risks of and responses to injury" (Wiese-Bjornstal, 2014, p. 412). As elaborated below, this notable emphasis on the psychosocial element of injury and rehabilitation becomes particularly salient in light of the social isolation inherent in the CE.

The breadth of research designed to both use and test Wiese-Bjornstal and colleagues' model is remarkable. Beginning in the late 1990s, consistent threads of research have been pursued across several key themes including: preinjury factors affecting both the injury and subsequent athlete reaction (e.g., personality, history of stressors, coping resources), personal factors unique to the athlete (e.g., nature and extent of injury, personality traits, pain tolerance, gender, age, state of physical conditioning), situational factors, social influences (e.g., coach influences, peer relationships, medical

Figure 2

Integrated Model of Psychological Response to the Sport Injury and Rehabilitation Process



Note: Reprinted with permission of the author from: “An Integrated Model of Response to Sport Injury: Psychological and Sociological Dynamics,” by D. M. Wiese-Bjornstal, A. M. Smith, S. M. Shaffer and M. A. Morrey (1998), *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 10(1), p. 49. Copyright 1998 by Taylor and Francis.

care team support, etc.), cognitive appraisals (e.g., pain coping, motivation, self-confidence, attitudes, etc.), emotional responses (e.g., fear, frustration, anger, catastrophizing, mood state, etc.), and behavioral responses (e.g., risk taking, behavioral coping, mental skills application, etc.) (Wiese-Bjornstal, 2014).

In general, Wiese-Bjornstal (2014) reported that the model has been shown to be extremely consistent over time: psychosocial variables accurately predict injury, injuries present athletes with acute stress, and resulting negative effects impact psychological states of athletes. More specifically, Wiese-Bjornstal noted the degree to which research has linked characteristics of injuries with particular psychosocial responses of athletes. For example, timing of (and time lost during) injury lead to varying severity in psychological response. Types of injury (e.g., overuse, acute, etc.) may also prompt differing psychological responses among athletes, particularly in cases when the injury may not have well defined starting and ending points, or when the impact of the injury is not readily obvious to others. With regard to both cognitive appraisals and emotional responses of athletes, the frequency, intensity, time, and type of emotional and/or psychological response has been shown to be dependent on contextual interactions and social influences unique to the injured athlete. Likewise, behavioral responses that tend to occur as a product of the cognitive appraisal and emotional responses of the injured athlete also appear to be heavily dependent on both internal (to the athlete) and external (social) resources.

In her more recent work, and particularly relevant to the study at hand, Wiese-Bjornstal (2021) summarized current understandings of both personal and situational

factors that interact to influence psychological responses of athletes in various phases outlined in the injury response model. First, as illustrated in Figure 3, Wiese-Bjornstal organized personal factors around four subcategories: injury factors, individual difference factors, sociodemographic factors, and physical/biological factors. Second, Wiese-Bjornstal used three category headings to organize her summary of contemporary findings about the role of situational factors in athletes' injury responses including: sport characteristics, social support, and the environment of the injury context. Two aspects of Wiese-Bjornstal's categorization of both personal and situational factors that influence the psychological responses of athletes within the CE are particularly germane to this

Table 1

Interacting Personal and Situational Factors that Influence Psychological Response to Injury

<u>Personal Factors</u>	<u>Situational Factors</u>
Injury Factors	Sport Characteristics
Injury history	Sport type
Injury type and severity	Level of competition
Perceived cause of injury	Timing of injury
Injury onset and healing status	Playing status
Individual Difference Factors	Scholarship status
Psychological Factors	Social factors
Personality	Teammate influence
Self-perceptions	Coach influence
Motivation	Family dynamics
Health locus control	Sports medicine team influence
Pain experience	Environmental Context
Coping style	Rehabilitation environment

Psychological skills	Sport ethic/philosophy
Mood state	
Mental Health	
Sociodemographic Factors	
Gender	
Age	
Culture and ethnicity	
Socioeconomic status	
Sport experience	
Physical and Biological Factors	
Use of ergogenic aids	
Health and recovery status	
Disordered eating	
Genetics	

research. Under the category of personal factors, “individual differences” (e.g., personality, mood state, motivation, etc.) would seem to be important considerations. Likewise, under the category of situational influences, various “social” factors that are potentially altered by the CE (e.g., teammate influence, coach influence, sports medicine influence, etc.) would seem likely to significantly impact the athletes’ psychological responses to the isolation imposed by the CE and, in particular, the cognitive appraisals, behavioral responses, and emotional reactions players experienced.

Given this summary of the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et. al., 1998), the most salient features of the model are relevant for this research study. For example, the model portrays the cyclical relationship between the cognitive appraisals, emotional responses,

and behavioral reactions of players after experiencing injury or, in this case, the CE. As Wiese-Bjornstal and colleagues suggest, the “recovery outcomes” experienced by an athlete – both physical and psychosocial – emerge through the cycle of interactions between cognitions, emotions, and behavior. This process – and these three constructs in particular – are the primary focus of the research, i.e., determining the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses of elite college athletes to the CE.

As the model suggests, the relationship between cognitions, emotions, and behavior experienced by injured athletes is filtered by personal and situational factors unique to each athlete. For example, experiences that athletes have had with prior injuries might help them understand the recovery process more objectively and recognize aspects of their emotional responses from a previous time. Or, as another example, the social support available to an athlete as a form of encouragement or accountability during the rehabilitation stage can make a large impact on athletes’ behaviors in regard to their adherence to the recovery process. Determining which of these personal and contextual factors most significantly impacted the cognitive-emotional-behavioral reaction cycle of athletes was a useful perspective for this research as coding criteria and analytic strategies were applied to the data record.

The intent of this brief summary of the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process was not only intended to suggest its applicability to the present COVID-19 experience. Specific to the research at hand, if one replaces “sport injury” with COVID-19 in the model, the framework has great explanatory power; pre-injury factors (personality, history of stressors, coping resources,

interventions) provide the context from which athletes initially experience COVID-19 as an interruption of their athletic experience, and subsequently athletes enter the cyclical process of cognitive appraisal and response — both emotional and behavioral. Moreover, the personal and situational factors that filter cognitive appraisals and responses would seem to map well onto the present landscape and, in particular, the responses of athletes to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on athletic competition and training.

The sport injury response model articulated above provided not only a conceptual framework for this study, but also informed its methodological design. But more importantly, perhaps, this model of psychological response to injury was fundamental to the very purpose of the research itself. As described in the following section, the intent of this research was to explore the spaces created between the various factors that appear in the model -- psychological responses, sociological context, physiological implications -- and permeate the experiences of elite athletes trapped in the midst of the CE experience.

Contribution to the Literature: Study Purposes

The review above reveals two primary gaps in the literature that largely drove the purposes of this research. First, although the literature base on the impact of the CE on sport and physical activity is growing monthly, few studies have to date situated their findings within sport injury psychology conceptual models such as the scheme of change and sport injury response models described above. The first purpose of this study, therefore, was to do just that – i.e., to use existing models to help interpret and understand the psychological responses of athletes in the face of the CE. Using well-known conceptual models to situate the findings of this research allows not only the opportunity

to contribute new knowledge to the applicability and relevance of the models, but also to provide coaches, trainers, and sport psychologists who are familiar with the models with greater understanding of the athlete perspective within the CE environment.

The second purpose of this research also reflects a gap in the literature on athletes' responses to the CE. Specifically, the initial urgency to publish on the CE created a proliferation of studies that relied heavily on survey data and quantitative analyses. These studies certainly advanced our understanding, particularly in the early days, of the impact of a global pandemic on athletes throughout the world. In general, however, these studies were not designed to solicit deeper understanding of the nuanced experiences of athletes, and, particularly, to share the voices and rich contextual descriptions of athletes and their environments. This desire to use qualitative methods of research to give voice to athletes in the midst of the CE was the second driving purpose of the research.

These two purposes led to the articulation of the research aims that guided this study as shared below.

Specific Research Purposes. This study sought to examine the impact of the CE within the context of a men's college soccer program. Framed specifically by the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process described above (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998), and cognizant of the personal and situational factors (e.g., personality, history of similar stressful events, coping resources, social support, etc.) that filter individuals' experiences, the specific focus of the study

was to both understand and describe the impact of COVID-19 on male college soccer players in regard to:

- 1) their cognitive appraisals of the impact of the CE on their lives;
- 2) their emotional responses to the impact of the CE on their lives; and
- 3) the behavioral adaptations prompted by the impact of the CE on their experiences as student athletes.

CHAPTER 2: METHOD

The intent of Chapter 1 was to provide context for this research study that included both an articulation of the terrain of sport medicine psychology, as well as a summary of what is presently known about the impact of COVID-19 on the psychological, emotional, and behavioral perspectives and experiences of athletes. The present chapter looks to build upon this context by outlining the approach taken in this research study, and by providing theoretical justification for the use of qualitative methods as a means to better understand the CE for this subset of college athletes.

With the intent of providing accurate descriptions of these college athletes' responses to the CE, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were used to pursue the key questions of interest. The use of such methods has deep historical roots (Geertz, 1973), based on a relativistic ontological orientation (i.e., reality is multiple and unique to each individual), and epistemological constructivism (i.e., knowledge is constructed and, thus, subjective). Inquiries that lean on these philosophical precepts are necessarily based on the collection of descriptive data that emerge from the experiences of participants in the research context (Silverman, 2006), and are analyzed with the intent of capturing subjective meanings embedded in the lived experiences of participants. This practice has become widely accepted among researchers who endeavor to understand complex settings in which meaning is often situated in context and interaction (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Given the recent emergence of COVID-19 as a global phenomenon, and the great uncertainties that continue to linger regarding its impact on both society and individuals, adopting qualitative methodologies for this

study that are rooted in constructivist theories of knowledge creation would appear to be an appropriate decision.

Epistemological Foundation: A Relativistic Approach

Positivistic approaches of data collection and analysis promote objectivity and certainty. And yet, one must acknowledge that there are truths to be uncovered within the lived experiences of people that lie outside the boundaries of what might be ascertained through quantitative methods. A conundrum for researchers who seek to obtain deep understanding about the human experience continues to be relevant: subjective truth exists in context, and yet methods to understand and share those truths are often difficult to implement, and certainly subject to a different kind of scrutiny.

The notion of taking a “relativist approach” to the analysis of complex data remains a contemporary topic of conversation among qualitative researchers in the field of sport and exercise science (Burke, 2016) and seems particularly relevant for a study such as this one that endeavored to dig deeply into the thoughts and emotions of college athletes. Choosing such methods for this study requires an acknowledgement of contemporary discussions about commonly held assumptions regarding validity and rigor in qualitative research. As Smith and McGannon (2018) argued, for example, common methods for legitimizing the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research in sport and exercise science must be problematized. As they note, the time-honored methods of “member checking” and “inter-rater reliability”, for example, are both subject to concerns about their inherent validity based on ontological arguments – i.e., that reality is unique to the individual.

Similarly, Smith and McGannon (2018) also suggested that the commonly advocated application of “universal criteria” (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010) as a means of establishing validity and reliability in qualitative research likewise run counter to a relativistic ontological perspective. Burke (2016) builds on this notion by suggesting that dependence on such universal criteria is concerning and

inherently problematic because it calls on a researcher to judge any piece of qualitative research in pre-ordained and set ways. In so doing, new or different ways of doing research that could produce new knowledge or make a difference in society may fail some or all of the criteria, and therefore be deemed ‘invalid’ from the outset. Much then is lost and the field is not only policed but risks becoming stagnant, insipid and reduced to a technical exercise (p. 333).

Based on these concerns, then, qualitative researchers are presented with an issue that they must solve; even among their own community, there are questions about the selection and application of appropriate methods of analysis, and in legitimizing the subsequent findings generated therein. This perspective was certainly relevant for this study; given the extensive data set accumulated in this research that included hours of interviews with players, and given the depth of vulnerability and expressions of emotion shared by the athletes in those interviews, the concern to “get the story right” was notably felt throughout each phase of this research.

The confidence to tell this story was supported by thoughtful engagement in the debates about alternative philosophical perspectives and methodologies that may better establish reliability and validity in qualitative research within the domain of sport and

exercise science (e.g., Burke, 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Central to these efforts, as mentioned above, is a “relativist approach” that supposes that reality (i.e., truth) is multiple and unique to the individual and, similarly, that knowledge is both constructed by, and subjective to, the person. Despite the complexity of the task, relativists argue that we do have tools to understand nuances embedded in rich contexts, and that we can develop reasonable criteria that serve to provide a measure of confidence that such understandings are trustworthy.

For example, to generate reliability in qualitative research, a relativistic perspective suggests that criteria used to both determine and subsequently evaluate truth claims should be specific to the context of exploration, and “tailored to the study’s goals and the researcher’s choice of methods” (Burke, 2016; p. 334). Burke is not suggesting, here, that “anything goes” in qualitative research; rather, criteria used to judge the quality of such research must be appropriate to the research context. Consequently, both the methodologies and the criteria for judging the quality of the resulting knowledge claims are not generated through the satisfaction of an external and universal set of criteria, but rather through the use of “characterizing traits” (J. Smith, 2016) that emerge from the research context.

Within this paradigm, researchers must choose wisely the most salient criteria that may not only provide the rough boundaries within which the meaning-making process evolves, but also guide efforts to generate depth of understanding as well. Given the previous discussion regarding the epistemological framework adopted for this research study, and given recent studies in the literature that have modeled similar attempts to

capture nuanced understandings of complex phenomena in rich contexts, this study was inspired by the following “characterizing traits” that are intended to ensure the highest degrees of quality and reliability possible for this research. Recall that these criteria, emerging from the assumptions of a relativist perspective, are inherently related to the research context (i.e., the CE), the participants under investigation (i.e., college soccer players), and the research questions that guide this study. The criteria that provided the parameters for this study include:

Worthiness of the research: Does this research address contemporary issues of central importance? Is the knowledge generated in this research likely to make a significant contribution to emerging understandings of the CE among college athletes?

Rich rigor: Is the population sample selected for this research appropriate for the purposes of the study? Does the data collected in the study provide sufficient opportunity to generate significant claims that advance the knowledge base on the CE?

Coherence: Do the methods of data collection and analysis support the driving purpose of the research and, most importantly, any claims derived through the analytic process (internal coherence)? Are findings interpreted in light of existing theories and prior research (external coherence)?

Credibility: Was adequate time spent with participants, and in the research setting, to understand, interpret, and elaborate participants’ perspectives?

Transparency: Were both the methods of research, and subsequent findings, vetted through a process of openness and scrutiny, inclusive of sharing interpretations, encouraging reflection, and engaging various alternative explanations?

The previous discussion, and most specifically the five criteria listed above, are directly related to the methods employed in this research and reflect the central tenet of a relativistic framework for research, i.e., research methodologies must be appropriate for the research context, the questions at hand, and the theories that provide the backdrop for the research. For example, establishing the “worthiness” of the research requires a careful elaboration of the importance of the research, its theoretical basis, and connection to existing bodies of knowledge (Burke, 2016). Establishing “rich rigor” requires careful selection of the sample, a broad (and deep) body of data, meaningful indwelling (Maykut & Moorehouse, 1994) in the data, and a systematic frequency analysis of central themes in the data (Neuendorf, 2002; J. Smith, 2016) that also lends a certain “coherence” to the research. “Credibility” requires a commitment to participant reflection that creates dialogue about the quality, believability, and meaning of emerging interpretations (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019). “Transparency” demands the creation of an audit trail that makes use of “critical friends” (Burke, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2012) that provide a valuable sounding board and encourage reflection. A more detailed description of the application of these methodologies in this research study follows below.

Research Context

The context for this research study was an NCAA Division I men's soccer program in the upper Midwest of the United States. Like most college athletic programs across the country, COVID-19 interrupted the spring calendar in March of 2020, and prompted a complete shut-down of all face-to-face activities that otherwise would have comprised the off-season spring training regimen. The coaching staff maintained contact with the players during this lock-down period through group and individual meetings facilitated by video conferencing, including for example an eight-week series (with meetings once per week) that focused on team and leadership development meant to be an investment in the coming season (August, 2020).

As the impact of COVID-19 continued to grow across the continent, intercollegiate competitive events in most sports, including soccer, were again put on hold in August of 2020. At that time, the league conference to which this program belonged cancelled all competitive matches that had been scheduled for the fall of 2020. Guided by both NCAA and conference regulations, players were allowed to gradually resume face-to-face training sessions governed by tight precautions that limited the number of players assembled and the number of hours per week that the team could be together for training. Twice during the fall season, the university put the team into temporary "shut down" based on positive COVID-19 test results among team members. In November of 2020, the university suspended all in-person team activities until March of 2021.

IRB Approval

Approval to conduct this study was granted in November of 2020 by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the home university of the researcher with the support of the university of the soccer program as well. As part of the proposal, the researcher requested permission to include in the data record observational notes taken during video conferences and training sessions that occurred prior to the IRB approval. This request was granted by the IRB, and hence the data record for the study was in effect initiated in September of 2020. Participant consent (see Appendix A) was obtained per guidelines established in the IRB approval process. Also approved in the IRB process were guided interview questionnaires for both individual and group interviews (see Appendix B).

Participants

There were 34 players on the roster at the beginning of the academic semester (August of 2020). These players ranged in age from 18 to 23 years, and included representation across all four classes, from first-year students to fourth-year seniors. By the end of the first semester (December, 2020), the roster had been reduced to 29 players; two seniors on the team decided to end their competitive college careers and withdrew from the team, and three additional players were released from the roster.

While all players were invited to participate in the study and contributed to the data record as articulated below, a subset of 13 players (across all four classes) volunteered to participate in semi-structured group and individual interviews that were used to generate data about the collective experiences of players as members of the team

community. The identities of these athletes have been protected throughout this document.

Dual Role: Participant Observer

The researcher of this study was a member of the coaching staff of the program. Therefore, he had a window into the culture of the program both prior to the onset of the pandemic, as well as during the CE. His role as participant-observer in a sporting context being impacted by COVID-19 provides a significant opportunity to better understand the impact of the CE on participants, which was in fact the primary intent of the research. While there was no preliminary data set that informed this study per se, the researcher did have informal understanding of the context that not only contributed to the task of completing successful research, but also mitigated against the risk of propagating misunderstandings that might otherwise be construed by an outsider to the environment. These informal understandings included his observations and experiences as a member of the team culture, participation in team meetings throughout the past two seasons, notes from coaching staff meetings, participation in player meetings, and other related functions within the context of the program that occurred prior to the onset of formal data collection for the study.

A common criticism levied against qualitative methods is the potential of researcher influence on co-participants in the environment. For several reasons, this would appear to be of little concern for this study. First, the researcher was well-established in the culture of the program and had long-standing relationships with the players and fellow coaches that predated both the study, and the CE. Therefore, the risks

of “staged performances” or “questionable behavior” of participants (Monahan & Fisher, 2010) as a result of researcher interference was low. As Monahan and Fisher noted,

It is simply too difficult for informants to maintain a façade for researchers for months or years at a stretch. Indeed, with time researchers become integrated into the communities they study so that no façade is necessary because the barriers between researchers and informants become less important than the social practices in which individuals and groups are engaged” (p. 5).

Aside from video-conferencing interviews that occurred outside the normal training environment, there were no changes in the experience of players caused by this research study, nor in the relationship of the researcher with the players. And moreover, given that there were no intercollegiate, competitive matches to be experienced by players throughout the duration of the study and 2020-21 season due to COVID-19, there is little chance that participants might have perceived risks regarding “playing time” or “starting roles” with the team by virtue of their participation (or non-participation) in the study.

Finally, as Monahan and Fisher (2010) articulated, the sorts of deeply nuanced questions posed in research studies such as this one often may be answered *only when* researchers are deeply embedded in the context. As they noted, “Some of the greatest strengths of ethnographic research lie in cultivating close ties with others and dispelling the illusion that robust data are best achieved through distance” (p. 6).

Data Sources

Data were collected through the use of various qualitative research methods across a five-month period of time, inclusive of team functions that occurred throughout

the duration of the study as described below.

Observations

Observations made within the research context were gathered and recorded across various domains including, for example, notes of team training sessions, team communications (e.g., team emails), transcripts of recorded video-conferencing meetings, practice plans, and in general the interactions and relationships demonstrated among players. Such observations are important for qualitative research insofar as they provide insight into the typical features of the research context, as well as the regular routines and behaviors of individual participants within the community, that may emerge in the survey or interview data. For similar purposes, the researcher kept a journal throughout the research period that captured thoughts, ideas, beginning understandings of players' experiences, and questions for further exploration. These informal observations were not coded in the same fashion as the interview transcripts as described below, but nevertheless provided meaningful context for the meaning-making process of this research.

Focus Group Interviews

Three focus group interviews were conducted with players who volunteered to participate in the group and individual interviews (see Appendix C). The group interviews were organized generally around experience in the program, i.e., one focus group interview with four first-year players, one group interview with four senior players, and a third group with a mix of players across classes. The focus group interview questions were semi-structured in the tradition of qualitative research, and a guide (see

Appendix B) was used by the researcher to help facilitate discussion, prompt follow-up probes, and seek elaboration of key points. Transcripts were created from each of the recorded interviews and became part of the data record.

Individual Interviews

Six players volunteered to participate in the individual interviews. One player was interviewed in two separate sittings. Three players agreed to follow-up interviews, leading to a total of ten individual interviews in all (see Appendix C). Like the group interviews, the intent of the one-on-one conversations was to elicit more depth and nuance in the experiences of players related to the questions of interest for the study. A guide was established for the individual interviews (See Appendix B) which was used by the researcher to maintain focus in the interview, facilitate meaningful conversation, guide follow-up questions, and to seek nuanced understanding of these individual players' personal experiences with the CE, and within the context of the team experience. Transcripts were created from each of the recorded interviews and became part of the data record.

Data Analysis

As discussed above, this research study was informed by relativist theories of knowledge creation that provide both validity and reliability in qualitative research (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Under such assumptions, the criteria for developing and evaluating the quality of findings depend on the use of “characterizing traits” in the research that have immediacy to the context, as well as the questions of inquiry themselves. The traits adopted for this study include the following criteria, each

of which is considered in light of the ways in which college athletes engage the CE: topic worthiness, rigor, coherence, credibility, and transparency. The analytical methods described below, then, were selected for, and directly tied to, the ways in which they shed light on the characterizing traits of the project. For example, how can the worthiness of the topic be substantiated? In what ways will the sample selected, and the data collected from the sample, allow for rich rigor to be established in the research? What methods of analysis can be used to ensure coherence in the story to be told, as well as its credibility as an expression of truth in the context? How can the methods used to derive meaning from this broad data set become transparent so as to ensure authenticity and convey confidence? With these five criteria providing the methodological parameters for the study, the following analytical methods were used to make sense of the data set through an inductive process of thematic analysis.

Methodological Orientation

Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is a methodological approach useful in identifying and describing patterns of meaning embedded within a set of qualitative data. Historically used in a generic sense, the term “thematic analysis” has more recently been tightly defined and described with a particular orientation to complex data, becoming “a recognizable and reputable method of qualitative analysis... that offers a method for identifying patterns (“themes”) in a dataset, and for describing and interpreting the meaning and importance” of themes in the data (Braun et al., 2016, p. 191). Further, thematic analysis is not unique to any particular theoretical orientation, but rather is a “tool that offers the potential for nuanced, complex, interpretative analysis” (p. 191).

It should be noted that there are different versions of thematic analysis that, though sharing much in common, differ slightly in beginning assumptions. For example, narrative thematic analysis is tailored specifically to deriving themes and meaning from narratives – the “what” of a *story* (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Another form of thematic analysis is referred to as interpretative phenomenological analysis (B. Smith, 2016), which uses similar methodological tools to examine personal, lived experiences. As a third example, template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015) adopts the use of “coding templates” as a way to structure the analysis of data based on preconceived notions of where the “richest data (in relation to the research question) are found” (Brooks et al., 2015, p. 203). Given the context and aims of this study, both the interpretive phenomenological approach (i.e., examining personal experiences), and template analysis (preconceived notions of data categories) guided the process of sense-making within the data. This blend of perspectives facilitated first and foremost an understanding of the personal lived experiences of the players. Given that the integrated model of psychological response to sport injury and rehabilitation (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) was used to frame this study, however, also implied certain confidence that “rich data” (Brooks et al., 2015) may be found within particular areas that have been revealed as central to the model over decades of research. Hence, it must be acknowledged that initial coding and thematic generation was informed by key constructs elaborated in the injury model which falls well within the precepts of template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015).

Common to most orientations of thematic analysis, the following specific analytic tools were employed in this study.

Indwelling. Given a broad data set such as the one created in this study, the initial step in the process of meaning-making requires the researcher to engage in an act of “indwelling” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This process includes an immersion in the data that encourages the researcher to “think with stories” (Smith et al., 2016), and begin to generate ideas that may ultimately have explanatory power. Eisner (1981), among the first to highlight the “artistic” nature of qualitative research, spoke eloquently of the indwelling process as being empathic. That is, to “indwell” is to “imaginatively participate in the experience of another” (p. 6). Rather than to use evidence in a “statistical fashion” that is quick to seek causality in a way that disregards empathy, the indwelling process “banks on the observer’s ability to imaginatively project himself into the life of another in order to know what that person is experiencing. It is the content provided by this form of knowing that serves as a major source of understanding for artistic approaches to research” (p. 6).

Coding. The intent of qualitative analysis is to seek themes of meaning within the data set that begin to tell a story of understanding. This entails a systematic, cyclical, and iterative process of analysis that seeks to identify central patterns and relationships in the data, i.e., *themes*, which appear throughout and across a given data set. Doing so requires a process of “coding” in which key phrases, statements, ideas and words are highlighted in the transcriptions, along with notes and insights that may be generated by the researcher at the time. This process of coding is guided by several questions to which the researcher must repeatedly return: *What is familiar here? What sentiments are occurring repeatedly? Is this a common thread within this story, or across multiple*

perspectives? What can help contribute to my understanding of this data? These codes, then, are organized and clustered based on their relatedness, and further organized into a thematic structure. This process is continued until a state of exhaustion is achieved in which no new codes are detected, and no new organizational themes are required. Once this initial set of themes is created, they must be weighed for their legitimacy against the overall body of data, and then processed further as themes are again grouped, arranged and organized into a hierarchy of higher- and lower-order themes. Definitions of codes that emerged in this study may be found in Appendix D. Sample quotation taken directly from the data record based on the codes in Appendix D may be found in Appendix E.

Participant Reflections. Previous conceptions of “member checks” were used to verify results or confirm “truths” established by researchers through the analytic processes. A newer notion of “participant reflection” is emerging, however, that reframes member checking rather as an opportunity for the researcher and participants to discuss the inclusion of complementary – if not contradictory – points of view (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Hence, in an effort to increase credibility and quality of the analysis, participant reflection is moving away from the notion “verification” to focus instead on “generating additional data and insight. For instance, together a researcher and participant might engage in member reflections to explore any gaps in the results or similarities they share concerning interpretations of the findings” (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 33). Hence, upon conclusion of the initial thematic analysis, participant reflections with three players were conducted. The shared thoughts, impressions and understandings that emerged in these conversations were captured and added to the data record.

Critical Friends. Recent debates about reliability in qualitative research have consistently questioned the use of “inter rater reliability” as a method for assuring quality and credibility (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In its place, there is growing support to promote transparency and credibility in the final stages of meaning-making through the use of “critical friends” (Burke, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2012). As Smith and McGannon (2018) noted, establishing rigor remains essential to qualitative research; how rigor is defined, and moreover how it may be achieved, however, is an idea that remains in transition. In their recommendation to eschew inter-rater reliability as a means of achieving rigor, they argued instead for the use of critical friends, a “process of critical dialogue between people, with the researcher giving voice to their interpretations in relation to other people who listen and offer critical feedback” (p. 23). As Cowen and Taylor (2016) added, the role of critical friends “is not to ‘agree’ or achieve consensus but rather to encourage reflexivity by challenging each other’s construction of knowledge” (p. 9). The researcher drew on the insights of two contemporary peers, each familiar with the research context at hand, to serve the project in this important role of “critical friends.” Serving the project as a “theoretical sounding board” (Burke, 2016), these two perspectives allowed for particular reflection upon themes, interpretations, and alternative explanations that were beginning to emerge from the data record.

Procedures

The timeline of procedures for the study is highlighted in Figure 3 below. To add context to what appears in the figure, this study emerged out of the researcher’s well-established role as a coach in the program. As such, the first stage in the process of

understanding the research context was not so much a procedure as it was an immersion into the culture of the team, a process that was in place well before the start of the CE. At the point in time at which approval to conduct the study was received, the researcher had already established a strong sense about team norms, training routines, the social setting, and overall team culture through his role as a coach in the program. This was instrumental in assuring the integrity of both the data collection and beginning analysis.

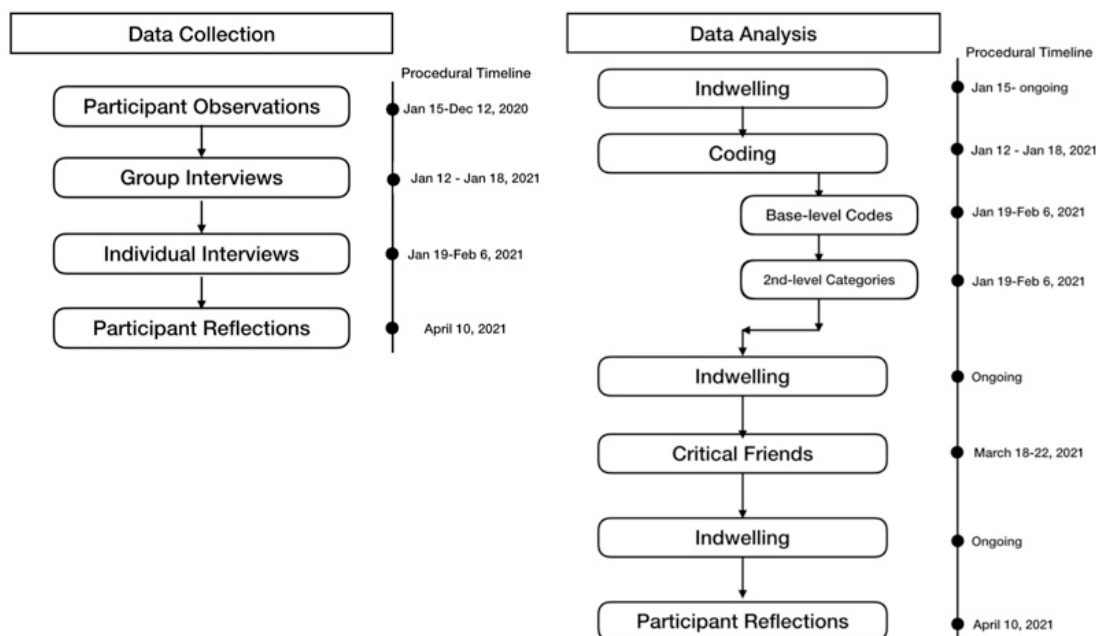
The formal procedures of the study began with both group and individual interviews with a total of 13 players in the program. In all, 12 interviews were conducted across four weeks in January and early February of 2021. The transcriptions for each interview were created and stored for later analysis. The transcription process conducted by the researcher was more than transferring spoken words to the page. Rather, this process represented the first instance of the “indwelling” in the data that would be common practice throughout each stage of the data collection, and during each round of thematic analysis.

Once all transcripts were prepared, the coding process began by the researcher who has extensive experience in coding qualitative data. Using the guiding principles of template analysis as a foundation, three first-order themes were established as the initial framework for the coding process. Based on the Wiese-Bjornstal and colleagues’ (1998) injury response model, these three overarching themes included cognitive appraisals, emotional responses, and behavioral adaptations. These three themes provided the organizational structure for the entire analysis that followed; sub-categories and base-

level codes were ultimately assigned to at least one of these three, first-order organizational themes.

Figure 3

Methodological Procedures



With this larger framework established, two primary passes were made through the data set, the first of which was intended to generate broad, initial, base-level codes (e.g., *What is familiar here? What sentiments are occurring repeatedly?*). Examples of these initial, base-level codes included terms such as, for example, anger, loss, self-care, opportunity, goal setting, etc., appear in both in Table 2 and Appendix D below. Although not exclusively, many of these initial codes were informed by Wiese-Bjornstal’s (2021) recognition of the “personal” and “situational” factors that often act as filters for athletes’ responses to injury.

The second pass through the interview transcriptions was done with the intent of organizing the initial base-level codes, seeking to situate them within a larger set of second-level categories. These second-level categories, then, acted both as a repository for related, base-level codes, but also as categorical differentiators underneath the three overarching, first order themes (i.e., cognitive appraisals, emotions, behaviors). For example, under the heading of “cognitive appraisals”, four second-level categories emerged: assessing impact, uncertainty and a lack of control, reframing goals, and reframing opportunity. This hierarchical structure of the most salient base-level codes, second-level categories, and first-order themes is presented in Table 2 which may be found in the next chapter.

After the coding was completed, “critical friends” were used to facilitate additional reflection upon themes, interpretations, and alternative explanations that were beginning to emerge from the data record. Two individuals who were familiar with the general intent and nature of the research engaged in discussion with the researcher about understandings and assertions that were beginning to form through the analytical process. One of the critical friends selected was a doctoral student in a mental health and public policy program at a leading state university. He was selected because of his specialization in mental health and trauma among young adults and adolescents with particular focus on athletes, as well as his familiarity with qualitative research methodologies. The second critical friend was selected for his knowledge of the soccer context and was a former coaching colleague who has never been affiliated with the university or the soccer program under study. These discussions encouraged additional reflection (and

indwelling) as the process of constructing knowledge about the impact of the CE on the athletes in the study was developing.

The final stage of the analytical process included participant reflections with three of the athletes who had previously participated in the individual or group interviews. The intent of participant reflection is to allow opportunity for participants to participate in the analytical process, sharing their own complementary, and sometimes contradictory, points of view. To facilitate this process, the research shared an earlier version of the hierarchical analytical structure appearing in Table 2 below, along with various interpretations of the experiences of the players. They were then provided with the opportunity to offer their own interpretations and conclusions in response to the primary driving themes of understanding shared by the researcher.

These stages in the research process led to the conclusions and interpretations shared below in the results and discussion sections of this document.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

The thematic analysis process described above, in addition to the complementary qualitative research methodologies of indwelling, participant reflections, and critical friends, provided insight into the impact of COVID-19 on the male college soccer players who participated in this study. Both the SCSPP model (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011) and the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) were helpful frameworks to orient initial coding strategies toward the goal of understanding and describing the impact of COVID-19 on male college soccer players in regard to:

1. their cognitive appraisals of the impact of the CE on their lives;
2. their emotional responses to the impact of the CE on their lives; and
3. the behavioral adaptations prompted by the impact of the CE on their experiences as student athletes.

To help frame the following discussion of results below in pursuit of these research purposes, emergent themes uncovered in the analysis were mapped onto Wiese-Bjornstal and colleagues' (1998) injury response model, particularly the cyclical relationship of athletes' cognitive appraisals, emotional responses, and behavioral adaptations to the CE. Doing so with fidelity required special attention to the personal factors that may have impacted the participants' appraisals and responses throughout the CE. In the discussion that follows, direct quotes from the research record are shared as illustrations of given themes and their relationships (vertical and horizontal) to one another. Before addressing the overarching themes that support understandings of the

research purposes, however, a description of the first-order themes, second-level categories, and the base-level codes that emerged through the thematic analysis process is shared.

Analytical Organization: Themes, Categories, and Codes

At its most basic level, the thematic framework created through this analysis of the data was three-tiered: overarching first-order themes, second-level categories under each theme, and base-level codes that provided evidence for the categories and themes above them.

Using the guiding principles of template analysis as a foundation, three themes were established as the initial framework for the coding process. Based on the Wiese-Bjornstal and colleagues' (1998) injury response model, these three overarching themes included cognitive appraisals, emotional responses, and behavioral adaptations. As described above, these three themes provided the organizational structure for the entire analysis that followed; sub-categories and base-level codes that were ultimately assigned to at least one of these three, first-level organizational themes. With this larger framework established, implementation of the methodological strategies presented earlier (e.g., indwelling, coding, participant reflection, critical friends), led to the base-level codes and second-level categories captured in below in Table 2.

Table 2

First-Order Themes, Second-Level Categories, Base-Level Codes

Cognitive Appraisals (1st-Order Theme)

Assessing Impact: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Repeated loss	Evidence of multiple experiences of loss
Worry	Evidence of being in a state of worry or anxiety
Assessing impact	Evidence of an appraisal of loss
Shifting mindset	Evidence of a shift in mindset

Uncertainty and Lack of Control: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Repeated loss	Evidence of multiple experiences of loss
Worry	Evidence of being in a state of worry or anxiety
Uncertainty	Evidence of uncertainty, unresolved questions
Assessing impact	Evidence of an appraisal of loss

Reframing Goals: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Shifting mindset	Evidence of a shift in mindset
Goal setting	Evidence of goal setting (or goal adaptation) as a strategy for coping
Reassigning	Evidence of reassigning value to contextual factors
Proactivity	Evidence of a proactive mindset

Reframing Opportunity: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Shifting mindset	Evidence of a shift in mindset
Reassigning	Evidence of reassigning value to contextual factors
Proactivity	Evidence of a proactive mindset

Emotional Responses (1st-Order Theme)

Denial: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Denial	Evidence of denial of impact of the CE
Sadness	Evidence of sadness
Anger	Evidence of anger

Sadness, Demoralization, Depression: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Sadness	Evidence of sadness
Demoralization	Evidence of a lack of spirit; demoralization
Anger	Evidence of anger
Frustration	Evidence of frustration
Fear	Evidence of fear

Futility Evidence of a sense of futility; inability to affect change

Frustration: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Anger Evidence of anger

Frustration Evidence of frustration

Fear Evidence of fear

Futility Evidence of a sense of futility; inability to affect change

Optimism: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Optimism Evidence of positive outlook, forward thinking, optimism

Behavioral Changes (1st-Order Theme)

Conditioning: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Working out Evidence of purposeful, engaged physical activity

Technical training Evidence of soccer-specific, technical training

Identity maturity Evidence of cognitive or emotional maturity

Fear Evidence of fear

Purpose to train Evidence of recognition of the purpose(s) for physical training

Coach influence Evidence of the impact of coaches

Teammate influence Evidence of the impact of teammate relationships and influence

Train alone Evidence of purposeful, solo, physical training

Physical resources Physical resources (e.g., weight room, training room, field access, etc)

Campus resources Resources on campus to support players during the CE

Socializing: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Social interactions Evidence of social connectedness, interaction, togetherness

Identity maturity Evidence of cognitive or emotional maturity

Fear Evidence of fear

Teammate influence Evidence of the impact of teammate relationships and influence

Train alone Evidence of purposeful, solo, physical training

Self-care: (2nd level category)

Codes and Definitions (Base level)

Identity maturity	Evidence of cognitive or emotional maturity
Self-question	Evidence of moments of self-doubt or self-examination
Fear	Evidence of fear
Manage time	Evidence of efforts to effectively manage time
Parents	Evidence of parental influence
Self-care	Evidence of care for self

Research Purposes: Cognitive Appraisals, Emotional Responses, and Behavioral Change

Understanding the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses of players in response to the CE was the focus of this research study. Various themes emerged from the data record that illuminated each of these respective constructs, and research purposes, as discussed below.

Research Purpose 1: Cognitive Appraisals

The first question of interest in this study revolved around the cognitive appraisals players made in response to the CE. For the purposes of this research, cognitive appraisals were defined as individuals' subjective interpretations to stimuli, events, or experiences in their environment. The data was rich with examples of such appraisals made by the participants in response to their changing environment and experiences due to the CE. This definition resonates with the definition of cognitive appraisals used in the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) -- personal, subjective interpretations of situations or contexts that have some bearing on whether or not (and the extent to which) a person perceives the given situation as a stressful event. Each of the four primary cognitive appraisals that emerged in the data analysis process (as outlined in Table 2) are

highlighted below, including: assessing impact, dealing with uncertainty and a lack of control, reframing goals, and reframing opportunity. A discussion of these four themes follows.

Cognitive Appraisal: Assessing Impact. Early in the CE, the players in the program were forced to engage the reality that COVID-19 would significantly impact their lives. As news of the spread of COVID-19 across Europe continued to dominate headlines in the U.S. in early 2020, players began to get a sense that their much-anticipated team trip to Spain over spring break might be in jeopardy. The NCAA allows one international trip every three years in which teams may, out of season, compete internationally. Typically, therefore, most players get one opportunity for such international travel during their four-year playing career. Sure enough, in early March, the university made the decision to ban all international travel for university sponsored events. This disheartening news initiated what players would later find out to be a year of stops and starts, opportunities lost, and in the case of their cognitive appraisals, the first instance in which they were forced to assess the impact of the CE on their experiences.

Even after losing the opportunity to travel to Europe, some players remained in denial that the CE would have a significant impact on their experiences. Despite soaring numbers of deaths in Spain during what would have been the timeframe for the trip, there was much conversation in virtual team meetings (which would themselves become a major impact on players as the new norm for team communication for the subsequent 6 months) about COVID-19 being exaggerated. Numerous players expressed frustrations that the trip had been “taken from us for no good reason” based in part on their denial of

the seriousness of the growing pandemic. One player shared his recollection that, “At first, it was just like, this is going to blow over. I wasn’t worried” (P7, personal communication, January 12, 2021). And yet, COVID-19 certainly did not blow over. As another player noted, the early phases of the CE were full of false promises: “They’d say two more weeks and we’d be back. And then, still, nothing would change, nothing would happen” (P8, personal communication, January 19, 2021). Eventually, players began to assess the impact of the CE in concrete terms. As one senior on the team noted, “You lose your friends, what you do every day, no competition... everything. Everything just changed from what we had been doing for four years.” (P7, personal communication, January 12, 2021).

This growing despondency related to the players’ cognitive appraisals of impact and loss did not go unnoticed among the coaching staff. Weekly Zoom meetings with players throughout the spring of 2020 became increasingly dispirited. It was evident -- almost one by one -- that players were becoming despondent. In a post-meeting conversation among the coaching staff, the head coach remarked: “Even in Zoom, you can see it in the guys. They are starting to realize this is over, man. We’re not playing in the fall. Did you see [Joel]? It’s like it just hit him today; he’s done. It’s over. His career is over” (Head coach, personal communication, April 18, 2020).

Cognitive appraisal: Dealing with Uncertainty and Lack of Control. As players’ assessments of the impact the CE would have on their careers became more concrete, their thinking turned to a question of when: “When will we get back? When will we be able to train again?” Inherent in these questions, of course, was embedded

uncertainty which, indeed, became the companion of every member of the team throughout the pandemic. In one team meeting in late spring, the head coach shared a sentiment with the team intended to give them a framework for dealing with the uncertain timeline regarding the return to play process. As he noted, “If somebody gave me six hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend the first four hours sharpening the axe.” (Head coach, team communication, May 12, 2020). The point of the message was to encourage the players to view the CE as a period of preparation, and the metaphor of “sharpening the axe” became part of the discourse of the team in the weeks that followed. And yet, stemming from a place of uncertainty and the frustrations it prompted, players began to question the metaphor: “How much longer do we have to sharpen these axes?... When can we start chopping?”

Almost to a person, players expressed frustration in the waiting -- the uncertainty of not only waiting to return to play, but more generally the uncertainty of the entire situation prompted by the CE. Will we have a season in the fall? Will we be back on campus? Will we get to train again as a group? When can we hang out together again? One of the senior captains -- himself forced to engage the question of whether or not he would be able to come back for a fifth season to play out his eligibility -- captured the sentiments of many of his teammates when he recalled that, “The hardest part was just not knowing anything. There was never any news. That was by far the most frustrating part of the whole spring. No news, nothing. We just have to wait, again” (P8, personal communication, January 19, 2021).

The issue of control -- or a lack thereof -- was mentioned in connection with players' uncertainty on multiple occasions. At times this sentiment of a lack of control was associated with players' motivation. As one senior player stated, "When you have no idea when you can play again, why train?" (P7, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Other players noted how the lack of control over their situation was leading toward despair and confusion about the way forward. Said one, "It was the first time I just didn't have a plan for my future. I didn't know exactly what that meant. I had no control over it, and that's something that I did not like and struggled with... All of the routine and schedule just taken away left me lost and, like, 'What do I do?'" (P8, personal communication, January 19, 2021). Another player noted similar feelings of futility as he tried to understand what little control he had over the CE. As he mentioned, "It's that aspect where you felt like you were doing all the right things, and people are taking it away from you. I felt like that was a lot harder and kind of a humility check of, like, how little we really are in control of everything that we think we are" (P5, personal communication, January 20, 2021).

And yet, several players also recognized and noted that at some point during the CE they began to realize that while they could not change the way in which the pandemic was unfolding, they could rescue control of aspects of their experience. As one player noted, "There comes a time when you have to say, you know, I'm done being sad and I'm done being angry. I can use those emotions as fuel to do something better than what I was doing, you know?" (P6, personal communication, January 12, 2021). In response to this statement, one of his teammates added, "Exactly. A lot of people will play the victim

card. But you can change that conversation to, yeah, it's shit for you and shit for me, but let's figure out a way that we can, you know, make it feel like we're doing something positive" (P7, personal communication, January 12, 2021).

One of the seniors who decided to come back for his fifth year of eligibility noted a similar transition of both embracing those elements of his experience that were out of his control just as he might also find agency to start to assert himself and his aspirations once again.

When I decided to do that [come back for a fifth year], that was that point I tried to take back control of my life. There's this little saying my dad said since my grandma died. It was her prayer card. It says, 'God grant me the strength to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.' So I think I kinda just looked at that a little bit too. I can't change Covid, I can't change what happened. But I can change how ready I'm going to be. We do get to start again. I can play. All that stuff helped. (P9, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

As these examples indicate, by the time the interviews with players were conducted, they had clearly been able to move through their initial feelings of loss and lack of control to state more positive and proactive stances on the way forward which included, as noted in the following section, attempts to reframe their goals, both near term and far.

Cognitive Appraisal: Reframing Goals. One of the most commonly documented cognitive appraisals evidenced by injured athletes involves reassessment (and redefinition) of their goals. Not surprisingly, this process of reframing goals was

evident throughout the data set in this study. Many of the players arrived at this cognitive exercise on their own, while others -- primarily rising seniors who faced the prospect of losing their final season of play -- were forced more objectively to make difficult decisions about redefining career goals and timelines.

There were 11 rising seniors on the team faced with the decision of either graduating on time in the spring of 2021 (i.e., foregoing their final year of eligibility), or slowing down their academic progress so as to postpone graduation for an additional semester, allowing them to compete in the subsequent fall season. Of these 11 players, seven chose to delay graduation for the opportunity to play out their eligibility in the fall of 2021. The other five made the painful decision to move on with life after graduation. Regardless, all of these senior players were faced with changing goals related to their academic and athletic pursuits.

One of these seniors in particular spoke eloquently of letting go of the goals driving him toward what would have been his final season of play, redirecting his energy toward graduate school. "Not having soccer in my life," he remarked, "was initially very difficult. The question of, 'Okay, now what?' This has been my identity since I was five years old" (P12, personal communication, January 24, 2021). He went on to share, however, that the process of letting go of the goals that were driving him toward his senior soccer season enabled him to put focus on other aspects of his life that were also part of his identity. "I have other characteristics that are part of my identity too. So, my goals for soccer are gone. But I have this, now [graduate school]. Use that energy to

make other characteristics of my life really a part of my identity, stronger” (P12, personal communication, January 24, 2021).

Other players adjusted goals much more specifically to the game itself. One of the first-year players spoke at length of the changes he made in his goals that, originally centered simply around making the team his freshman year. With the season shut down, the immediate goal (make the team) that had been driving him since he committed to the program as a senior in high school immediately became irrelevant. As soon as he became aware that the season had been canceled, he recalled a quick change in his goals: “If we aren’t going to have a regular season, then I am changing my focus to just getting better myself” (P4, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Another player spoke not so much of changing his goals, but rather, putting them on pause: “I was focused on the belief that I can be relied upon to do my job extremely well. And when it comes to how that goal is changed, it really hasn't. But with COVID, it feels like I'm not necessarily set back, but, just like on hold. I didn’t get the chance to establish myself in that way. So I just kind of feel like I've just put my goals on hold, just waiting longer” (P2, personal communication, January 12, 2021).

Other players identified very specific goals that acted as sources of motivation in the months leading up to the CE. One player talked about the goal of beating a particular opponent who had knocked the team out of the playoffs the previous year: “Obviously, it was all about training for [opponent]. And now what? Will we play them again?” He went on to reference a specific player on an opposing team with whom he had a particular, individual rivalry. “All year I have been envisioning playing [opponent name].

I have been training specifically to shut him down in that one game. should that still be my focus? Will I get to play against him again? That would give me a lot of peace.” (P8, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

As a final example (from many others available), a player likened the CE to his personal recovery from a torn ligament in his knee. He was discussing the goal-driven process inherent in his injury rehabilitation. “Working back from an ACL tear, you say things like, ‘I’ll come back stronger... I have nine months... these steps are what I need to do...This is how I know I am getting better.” As he continued, he noted how the CE, though in many ways like an injury, differed in the sense that setting goals during the pandemic was challenging given the uncertainties around timelines for returning to play: “Just having the season canceled. We’re like, ‘I don’t know when I’m going to play next or even if I am going to play next.’ Your goals are just taken away from you” (P8, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

Cognitive Appraisal: Reframing Opportunity. Similar to the way in which players discussed changes in their goal orientations, they also reframed their sense of opportunity -- i.e., opportunities lost, as well as opportunities gained, through the CE. This was particularly evident, again, with both the youngest and oldest players in the program. The rising seniors mentioned previously -- those that decided to return for a senior season -- almost to a person had a turning point in which they let go of the loss of the season that might have been, and instead embraced the opportunity of a fifth year at the university. As one such senior noted, “As soon as I decided to come back for a fifth year, everything changed in that moment. I started thinking ahead for next season.” (P10,

personal communication, January 18, 2021). Another player evidenced a similar viewpoint as he, too, reframed the loss of one season by highlighting new opportunities he might not otherwise have had: “And it wasn't until I started thinking ahead -- we're going to play Notre Dame next year. We're going to have to do a lot to be there and show ourselves well. That kind of shifted my focus more to that macro scale” (P5, personal communication, January 20, 2021).

Another rising senior – a player who had played a total of 90 minutes in the three years leading up to the CE – demonstrated remarkable insight as he pondered the timing of the CE on his personal development related to, but also extending beyond, his soccer experience. He spent several minutes working through the ways in which the CE represented an opportunity for him that he would not have otherwise had. In attempting to summarize his thoughts -- and contextualizing them in his admission that he had played in only two matches in his career and yet still intended to return for a fifth season - - he remarked, “The whole coronavirus thing came at the right time for my personal growth. For me right now, I know there's a lot of steps that I have to take to develop into the person that I want to be. And this [the CE] is just one more building block for my life; that's how I like to take things in life. It's just a block -- to add to my big collection of blocks at the end of my life” (P6, Personal communication, January 12, 2021).

Some of the younger players in the program who had yet to even put on a jersey for the program were much quicker to shift their perspective away from loss, and toward opportunity. Most common among the four first year players interviewed was the opportunity afforded by the CE to mature -- physically, and emotionally. Said one of the

first-year players, “I can work on myself, my game, get stronger in the weight room, get to know the players on the team” (P3, personal communication, January 12, 2021).

Another looked a bit more broadly at the opportunity afforded by the CE to make the broader adjustment to college life which, in the end, would support his acclimation to the soccer environment: “I was pretty disappointed in August. But then as soon as I got on the campus I was like, ‘Well, I’m here. You gotta make the most of what you have.’”

Instead of jumping straight into the season and probably not playing at all, now we have an adjustment period. So we're going to be able to get used to college life, school. And then, [we can] adjust and play soccer -- get used to a higher level. It's a higher level than we've been playing” (P3, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Another first year player looked at the CE strategic opportunity -- beyond simply providing a year of growth, but also as a way to increase his chances of breaking into the team in the following season.

At first, I thought a goal for me was to just see if I can get minutes on the field - like five minutes even. I mean, honestly, just to find some sort of involvement in the squad. And then that changed. I could get a feel for the squad, find out who were the top dogs and then figure out how to break in with those guys... I mean, the change [CE] was hard but it was something that had to be done. You have to look at it as a different perspective and approach it correctly. And I think how I approached it was just trying to think about what I could do in the spring and then how that gets me to the fall season and prepares me for the future” (P1, personal communication, January 12, 2021).

This process of reframing opportunity would turn out to be a significant motivational element in shaping players' behavioral responses to the CE as discussed below in a subsequent section of the findings of this study.

Research Purpose 2: Emotional Responses

A second key construct in the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) involves the emotional responses experienced by athletes after suffering a debilitating injury. Examples of such emotional responses of athletes in this study -- related to their engagement in the CE -- were in fact foreshadowed in the previous section on cognitive appraisals. The sections below elaborate the emotions represented most frequently in the data, and hint at the impact of these emotional responses on players in the midst of the CE. These categories of emotional response emerged through the process of thematic analysis described above. Bear in mind, however, that not all emotions uncovered in the data record fell neatly into one of the primary categories below and, thus, may not receive the same level of attention (and by association, weight), as they might deserve from the players' point of view.

As one example, one of the strongest emotional reactions that surfaced in the interviews by two of the players was the notion of "fear." While there was not enough evidence to raise fear to the level of, say, "denial" for example, those players who did express emotions of fear did so with the same level of intensity and import as any other emotion that surfaced in the data. By way of illustration, one player stated very directly

and with palpable anxiety detected even through the virtual Zoom context, “I’m losing ground, by the minute” (P5, personal communication, January 20, 2021).

This example represents one of the challenges of qualitative analysis -- i.e., capturing the full range of themes in the data record and representing them proportionally and fairly in a discussion intended to provide a synopsis of findings that tells the most accurate story possible. While it is difficult to leave some of these powerful individual expressions (particularly in the domain of emotions) out of this discussion, it is worth noting that they do exist. Nevertheless, the following paragraphs capture the most well-defined categories of emotional responses shared by athletes in the study.

Emotional Response: Denial. As suggested in cognitive appraisals players made with regard to assessments of the impact of the CE on their experiences, the emotional response of denial was commonplace, particularly as players recalled their initial reactions to the CE. Soon after the university canceled all in-person activities on campus, all team functions shifted to remote settings -- players working out independently, and team meetings conducted virtually. In the earliest of these team meetings, players’ reactions to the CE mirrored those of people around the globe -- uncertainties, questions, and in some measure, inherent denial that COVID-19 would fundamentally impact life over the long term. Despite news to the contrary from other parts of the world, numerous conversations in initial team zoom meetings centered around a rather rapid return to normal activities, with both coaches and players expressing optimism that the virus would quickly dissipate. There was particular denial around whether or not the virus

would – or even could – negatively impact young people in the college-aged demographic.

Players were quick to cite examples in the popular press indicating that COVID-19 was not a serious threat, including examples of NCAA Division 1 football programs in the news that were, at the time, suspected of spreading the virus throughout their teams in order to develop “herd immunity” within the program, thus providing a competitive advantage for the anticipated season later in the fall (McDonald, 2020). This perspective led numerous players to treat the CE with a sense of denial: “At first it was just like, this is going to blow over. I wasn’t worried.” (P7, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Another reported, “I was thinking that by the summer it's probably going to be a little bit better” (P12, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Likewise, one of the senior captains noted, “The idea of no fall season put me in denial. I know. I can see it's all over the news, whereas college sports may be cancelled next year. But I never believed that. I didn't honestly believe it. I always thought it was going to blow over after summer” (P10, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

This perspective began to temper, however, as the first (of eventually 16) players on the team would test positive for COVID-19. By mid-summer, denial had disappeared as an expressed emotion among the team, right about the time that one player -- among the first to contract the virus -- was repeatedly unable to pass the required return-to-play cardiology exam that, indeed, put any future playing experience in jeopardy. (He never passed the exam, and subsequently quit the program.)

Emotional Response: Sadness, Demoralization, Depression. Perhaps not unexpectedly, the denial that accompanied the early stages of the CE was soon replaced by a sense of sadness that was expressed by many of the players. Attributed to several specific concerns, sadness was most often shared in regard to lost social connections and support. “You’re just sad,” said one player, “because you can’t see these guys you have spent four years with.” (P7, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Said another player, “It got to the point where it was more like depression, just sad to not be able to see you guys that you see every day. It's all we know for the past three, four years; now, I don’t have that” (P10, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

As might be expected, a different expression of sadness was felt by those seniors who would forego their final year of eligibility, choosing not to return the following year. The decision point that they were forced to meet -- to stay another year or graduate on time -- led to distinct feelings of loss and sadness. Said one player about the moment he realized he would be moving on, “That's why I started to feel more emotions, like sadness, because I came to that realization that this is definitely my last season.... So yeah. It was difficult, you know?” (P12, personal communication, January 24, 2021). Another senior stated, similarly, “That news [losing the season], just demoralizing to know that our last senior season was going to be cancelled and we may not even have the opportunity to play ever again, together. Yeah, [long pause], so rough” (P10, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

This suggestion of “demoralization” was raised by others, linked with both sadness, a lack of control, and a lost sense of direction. One of the senior captains likened

it to getting punched: “Blow after blow, punch after punch, taking and hearing all that bad news. We weren’t getting any good news. Demoralizing is a good word for it because for the first time I just didn’t have a plan for my future. I didn’t know exactly what this meant, and I had no control over it” (P8, personal communication, January 19, 2021). The thin lines between sadness, demoralization and depression were crossed more than once. Like the mention of depression above, another player also described his emotional state in similar terms: “It really was crushing. There's a state where depression would be a good word to use for it. I was in a pretty bad mental state for a couple months, just having to hear that we weren't gonna be able to do anything that had set out to do” (P11, January 18, 2021).

As the players began seeking some measure of control over the situation, the feelings of sadness and demoralization gave way to frustrations – if not anger – over their lack of agency to act and to improve the situation.

Emotional Response: Frustration. Even the players noted the thin line between sadness and frustration, another commonly expressed emotion that persisted throughout the CE. There were multiple references to frustration -- e.g., frustration with a lack of information, frustration with the social isolation, frustration with the university, frustration with the gradual slipping of time in which no apparent progress toward a return to play was evident. Said one of the first-year players, “Just frustration. Every day, frustrated because there is nothing you can do” (P1, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Stated uniquely, one of the senior captains captured the frustrations felt by himself

and many of his teammates quite succinctly: “I’m not going to lie: stuff in my apartment got broken” (P8, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

The frustrations expressed by the players fell into several primary categories. As reflected in quotations shared previously, players noted that the uncertainty and lack of definitive messages from the university, from the coaching staff, and indeed as reflected more generally in society were all sources of frustration that, when added together, became exasperating. While these sources of frustration might have been expected given the extent to which the CE interrupted the players’ academic and athletic experiences on campus, other frustrations at a more nuanced level were shared by some of the more experienced players in particular.

One sentiment that was expressed by two seniors in particular was the frustration they felt about their perception of inequities in the ways in which different college programs were reacting to the CE. While their program experience had been put on indefinite pause, they were well aware of friends and former teammates from high school that were in fact training and even preparing for league competition. “I’ve reached out to a couple of my other buddies,” said one senior. “I’ve just been asking them, like, how is their transition into the spring of this coronavirus season. How does that work that the Big Ten released their schedule last week? And you know, games starting for them in February where they are playing each other? They’re ready to go” (P6, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Another player, a senior coming back for his fifth year, spoke even more directly about his frustrations that he was being shut down while

other programs in the conference were training full time, preparing to play a competitive, intercollegiate spring season:

I just wanna add one thing – something that is difficult is seeing other teams doing what we can't do. It's similar to being injured. You want to do something so bad, and you see other people do it. But you are injured, and you can't. I wish I could, but I can't. So right now, we are not allowed to play. That's really the part that's unfair. How we're all in the same boat. It's the exact same risk, but yet other teams get to play when we can't. Why not? They get to do what we want to do, but we can't? That's not fair" (P8, personal communication, January 19, 2021).

Of all the themes that surfaced in the analysis of this data set, players spoke openly and freely – almost to a person – about their ongoing frustrations with the CE, and how those frustrations returned in different forms throughout the semester.

Emotional Response: Optimism. A final emotion that was found repeatedly across participants could be expressed most accurately as optimism. Similar to the ways in which the players reframed goals within the context of their cognitive appraisals, they also were able to express how their original sadness, anger, and frustration gradually dissipated, being replaced by a sense of optimism as they looked forward. Obviously, the timing of the interviews had allowed the players to work through various stages of their emotional responses by the time they were asked to reflect specifically on their response to the CE. Had the interviews taken place earlier in the experience, it is likely that there would have been fewer references to emotions that could be categorized as optimistic in nature. That said, a number of the players had turned the corner toward optimism which

was fueled in part by the first experiences they had getting back into a training schedule again with the full team that began early in 2021.

When the group of seniors was asked if they could remember a moment when they began constructing a more positive view of the future, one of the fifth-year senior players responded immediately.

Okay. I've broken stuff. I've gotten pissed off. I've expressed all the emotions I have. I gotta figure some shit out now. I gotta get my head back in the game here... And right then I finally made a decision. I'm saying. Follow the plan. I've got to get in a lot better shape. Let's turn this around. This is the moment. (P8, personal communication, January 19, 2021).

After this player made that comment, others in the group interview chimed in as well with similar sentiments. "Yeah," said one. "I think I completely turned off which was honestly probably good for me to jump off of soccer for a little bit -- honestly a good break from all the bad news. But I think right when I realized that there was an opportunity to play another year, I jumped right on it" (P10, personal communication, January 18, 2021). A third player in that interview concurred: "I kinda just looked at that a little bit too. I can't change Covid; I can't change what happened. But, I can change how ready I'm going to be for this one. We do get to start again; I can play again. All that helped" (P9, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

Some of the younger players actually found the CE to be potentially beneficial to their growth and development as players, and within the program. Despite dealing with the loss of the first-year experience they all had imagined as incoming players,

nevertheless each of the first-year players interviewed found a silver lining in the CE.

Said one,

Honestly, I think with Covid there's been some bonuses for me. If we would have played in the fall, I'm not sure how much I would have played honestly. But like talking to Coach and having our one-on-one interview, it sounds like in the spring we're going to get a chance to get some more minutes and he's going to be flexible with things and test some things out. So I mean, it sounds like it's a good chance for us incoming guys to figure out the squad and really figure out what our place is and how we can benefit the team. So that's what I've kind of thought about as a big plus for me. (P1, personal communication, January 12, 2021)

Another first-year player shared his optimism similarly: “So for me it was just like, well, instead of jumping straight into the season and probably not playing at all, we're going to have an adjustment period. We're going to be able to get used to college life. [We will] be able to adjust and play soccer and get used to the level. It's a higher level than we've been playing. So I think it's just more of an adjustment period which will help. That's how I kinda sorted it out” (P3, personal communication, January 12, 2021). While each player interviewed took a different path through the various emotional stages of loss, sadness, grief and frustration, ultimately each of them had arrived at a point where they were optimistic about the possibilities ahead and, in the case of some of the younger players, perhaps were able to recognize how in fact the CE might have actually benefited their status in the program and their development as college athletes.

Research Purpose 3: Behavioral Changes

The third key construct in the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) involves the behavioral responses exhibited by athletes as they respond to the injury and subsequent rehabilitation in the return to play process (assuming return is possible). According to the model, these responses include, for example, behaviors related to the athletes' adherence to rehabilitation, their use of psychological strategies to support their rehabilitation, their use (or disuse) of available social support, risk taking behaviors they may engage, and their effort and intensity toward returning to play to name a few. Of course, the CE does not include the same sort of rehabilitation process common in serious injuries and therefore we might expect a somewhat different set of behavioral responses from the athletes in this study when compared to the typical behaviors outlined in the sport injury rehabilitation model. Nevertheless, there were some notable parallels in the behaviors exhibited by the players in this research as elaborated below.

Behavioral Changes: Conditioning, Lifting, and Technical Training. One of the most common descriptions of the behavioral adaptations made by players throughout the CE was their adherence (or lack thereof) to various conditioning recommendations established by the coaching and training staff. A general pattern emerged almost to a person early in the CE; initial emotional frustrations and a sense of futility as a result of the lockdown contributed to a kind of apathy that changed behavior in a negative sense -- players dropping established routines of lifting and physical conditioning. Players were quick to discuss this element of their experiences, sharing sentiments similar to the

following recollection from one of the more experienced players: “When you have no idea when you can play again, why train?” (P7, personal communication, January 12, 2021). As suggested in the previous section on the motivational responses of the players, this sentiment was shared by many on the team.

In a related sense, players also indicated early on that the limitations in access to training resources was also an impediment to maintaining their conditioning routines. For several months early in the CE, all resources at the university were closed, including the training field, the track, and all indoor spaces including the training room, weight room, and gyms. Said one first year player who was struggling with a nagging muscle injury upon his arrival to campus in the fall, “It would be nice if we had access to something - like getting into the training room to see a trainer (P2, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Another player shared similar frustrations, noting in particular how limiting it was to be restricted to his apartment for such a long period of time. “Just having no place to train is the most frustrating. Even the weight room being closed. We have a pull up bar and a yoga mat in our apartment. That’s it. You have nowhere to go, nothing you can do” (P7, personal communication, January 12, 2021).

As time passed, however, players’ perspectives on their conditioning, their resolve to return to previous training regimens, as well as their creativity in finding training solutions began to replace the initial feelings of loss and helplessness, and general patterns of inactivity evidenced early in the CE. There emerged in the data record a kind of growth in perspective that began shaping their behaviors during the lockdown. “I realized that I needed to mature and start taking care of myself better,” said one player.

“I need to get back to like I would have if we were in season” (P6, personal communication, January 12, 2021). One of the senior captains recalled a similar shift in perspective -- an outward facing viewpoint -- that rejuvenated him particularly related to returning to his conditioning program: “Just knowing my teammates were in the same boat, I didn’t want to let them down” (P10, personal communication, January 18, 2021).

Some of the players discussed the need for establishing new routines, new training habits and creative solutions in order to maintain their physical and technical conditioning. “It was difficult to get on a routine initially. But once I understood that I need -- not like a super strict schedule -- but to make sure that I put on a calendar or journal or whatever like that... just being more conscious about the way that I spend my time.” (P12, personal communication, January 24, 2021). While it was not always easy for the players to do so (e.g., “The hardest part is training by yourself, every day, alone” (P4, personal communication, January 12, 2021)), they nevertheless began to see the importance of working individually to better themselves during this unique period of time, particularly as some physical resources were starting to become available on a limited basis. “From an individual goal standpoint,” said one, “I guess I shifted a lot more focus into the physical aspects of lifting and running more and getting into the weight room” (P5, personal communication, January 20, 2021). Others made reference to finding simple ways to stay in touch with the ball and their technical skills: “I just try to get a bunch of touches by myself on the wall” (P4, personal communication, January 12, 2021). These responses, and the subtle mindset shift they reflect, echoed the sentiment shared by the head coach (as noted previously) to use the time in quarantine to “sharpen

our axes” (head coach, team communication, May 12, 2021) in anticipation of the day in the future when the team could once again train together.

Finally, a number of the more experienced players sought opportunities to play outside the university environment. Being well connected with peers (and even competitors from other college teams in the league) across the region, players found ways to train amongst themselves despite knowing it was a violation of COVID-19 protocols for social distancing and limiting participation in larger group activities. This was particularly true for those players who had already contracted COVID-19. In defending his decision to break “the bubble” and play with a local men’s league team, one of the seniors responded by saying, “I already got the virus. Why shouldn’t I be able to play since I already had the virus?” (P8, personal communication, January 22, 2021). At least six of the players on the team reported that they were training regularly with a local semi-professional team in the area. Ironically, out of his desire to simply keep playing at a high level to maintain his skill level during the shutdown precipitated by the CE, one of the players who was participating in these club training sessions received a devastating knee injury at one of the practices, tearing his ACL and effectively ending his college career. Although this player did not wish to share his experience in an interview for the purposes of this study, he did share his frustration in an informal conversation that “none of this would have happened” if he had not felt the need to change his behavioral routine and seek training opportunities outside the university.

Behavioral Adaptations: Socializing. One of the defining characteristics of this program is the strong cultural tradition experienced, and perpetuated, by players. There is

a significant emphasis put on the legacy of the program, with traditions being passed from one class of players to the next. It is no surprise, then, that the loss of the social context due to the CE impacted the players' behavioral patterns significantly.

In previous descriptions of players' cognitive appraisals and emotional responses, suggestions of the impact of the loss of social support may be seen. Notions of "training alone" or "shifting to an individual goal perspective" point to players' recognition -- perhaps both conscious and subconscious -- that the loss of the social component of their experience mattered and, moreover, required them to adapt their routines and engagements with the team and teammates in particular. One player shared an observation that was echoed by most in the group: "We can't hang out like we used to -- in the locker room, eating together, hanging out after practice" (P7, personal communication, January 12, 2021). On numerous occasions players lamented this loss of social support provided by the team environment. As noted previously, the lack of personal contact forced players to adapt and seek new ways to remain engaged with teammates and to continue to offer (and receive) social support.

While examples of these efforts were abundant, most striking were the moments during which players carefully examined the changes in their own behavior that were directly linked to maintaining relationships and fostering the sense of camaraderie and "brotherhood" that was so important to the team, and them as individuals. As one might expect, the more experienced players tended to ruminate on these issues more than their younger peers. One of the captains, a self-professed "lead-by-example" role model, astutely examined how his communication and leadership style was forced to change in

regard to fulfilling his role as captain and a key provider of the tone of the team culture.

As he noted,

Not being able to see everyone every day has changed the way I communicate with the team. I used to be the kind of leader by example: I show up to practice, I practice hard. It used to be that me doing my best to show people that I'm working hard, playing well would be enough leadership. But recently I have been more focused on building relationships because that usually comes automatically, right? But that's been really tough now. For incoming freshmen and for the transfers - it would usually be automatic for them to just instantly be part of the group. But now they are pretty much on their own. So that's something I've done more than before -- reaching out to people, especially new guys [since] we're not having a preseason, hanging out, playing soccer, where you get to know people on a personal level. (P8, personal communication, January 19, 2021)

Another player spoke similarly deeply about his cognizance of the loss of the social component of the team during the CE and, moreover, his role to fill the gaps in the social fabric of the team during that time. His reflections in this regard started with the recollection of his own experience with COVID-19 which left him quarantined for two weeks early on in the pandemic. "When I got covid, there was that span when you're just isolated. It was only ten days, but it was just missing that relationship aspect -- I've just gotta be here alone, and kind of do nothing. And that was kind of a different shift, not having that same, I guess, purpose-driven idea -- when you are in a group and you're like, we got this. When you stick together with other people, really strong, the stuff after

practice. I just missed that” (P5, personal communication, January 20, 2021). This realization prompted a subsequent follow-up by this player in which he indicated how the isolation he experienced encouraged him to change his behavior particularly after looking to the example of one of his favorite professional basketball athletes.

Steve Nash is known as one of the greatest teammates. [He] does like 200 or 400 high fives in a game. Being that guy is going to help me not to be as focused on myself and like, what we're missing. Being more team oriented, like, this has gotta be a lot worse for freshmen. They may not have an opportunity to step on the field, and so I guess I'm trying to help people or just be that side-by-side player. That was kind of an overall driving force for motivation and kinda helps me cope or deal with the loss of that camaraderie that would've been there” (P5, personal communication, January 20, 2021).

These two examples provide a glimpse into the depth of introspection some of the players engaged as they reconciled the loss of the physical context in which so much of their social relationships and support were developed and shared. These two players got to the point of being able to express how their behaviors in regard to the social dynamic changed, requiring them to do more to keep personal relationships vital during the CE. In retrospect, this particular thread in the data set probably deserved more probing than it received throughout the interviews. It appeared as though other players were on the brink of coming to terms with the loss of their social connections in a way that was perhaps deeper than simply “not being able to hang out with each other” as most of them indicated. Again, in retrospect, additional conversation with players on this topic would

have likely revealed a deeper understanding of the impact of the loss of social interactions of the kind that can only take place in the team environment, on the pitch, in the locker room.

Behavioral Adaptations: Self-Care. As noted previously, several players confessed that after a period of feeling “victimized” by the CE, they realized they needed to act in order to regain a level of agency and proactivity as athletes. The notion of “maturity” surfaced in three of the interviews. “I realized,” said one senior, “that I needed to mature and start taking care of myself better - like I would have if we were in season” (P6, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Two of the first-year players also mentioned their own personal growth, self-awareness, and maturity throughout the pandemic. Said one, “I definitely think I've matured a lot during this time. I feel like I have aged three years in this pandemic. I live in a place where in the summers it's super locked down. So it's a lot of time by yourself and I think it led to a lot of personal growth, maturity” (P4, Personal communication, January 12, 2021). Pointing to his own self-schema in the face of the CE, another senior confessed that, “Covid forced me to think: Who am I without soccer?” (P11, personal communication, January 18, 2021). This question led this particular player, and others like him, to engage the question of how the CE might require changes in perspective that, ultimately, would lead to changes in their behavior patterns regarding their self-care as they navigated away from the structures and physical routine of the team environment that had always been a primary source of their own physical fitness, health, and mental well-being.

Two primary themes emerged as players discussed ways in which they responded to their growing awareness of the need to focus on their own self-care. The first of these was their dependence on relationships that perhaps they would have taken for granted outside the CE. One player introduced this first notion of the importance of relationships while reflecting on the early days of the CE. He started by noting the importance of his relationships:

I found that the summer was one of the hardest times for me as that was at the height of some of the quarantine and isolation rules that were put into effect. This led to me not seeing friends and family as much which was a challenge and took a toll on me emotionally and psychologically because as humans we desire that interaction with those that are close to us. To cope with this I found myself on numerous zoom or facetime calls with friends or family as a way to still stay in touch and “see” each other” (P9, personal communication, April 10, 2021).

Another player responded similarly in noting the importance of his friendships as a stabilizing factor in his mental health and wellness. As he noted, “Getting those chances to see my soccer friends and go kick the ball a bit was huge for me. I remember [H], [J], and I took a trip to some random park down the road and literally just kicked the ball and got fresh air for a few hours. Those were the days that really swung my mood and kept my mental health intact” (P10, personal communication, April 10, 2021).

The second theme that emerged under the category of self-care involved the recognition by players that in the absence of the typical daily patterns of life they knew as student athletes, they needed to create their own structure as a way to maintain a positive

outlook and psychological stability. One player indicated that he had become conscious of his mental health, and as such,

there were a few things that I did to take care of myself during Covid. I found that having a schedule or routine for my days helped it to feel more normal. For example, I'd always get up and get a workout in to start the day and then take the dog for a walk before hopping on a weekly zoom call at night with family. I think that having some structure in a time where we didn't really know what was going to happen next was beneficial" (P9, personal communication, April 10, 2021).

Another one of the senior players made similar remarks, noting his realization of the importance of establishing "a pretty consistent schedule of lifting/working out and getting good sleep. With not much going on around me in the outside world – everything being essentially shut down or closed – it was much easier to focus on my own health and what I needed to stay both mentally and physically sharp" (P10, personal communication, April 10, 2021).

As one final example of self-care, one athlete reported a combination of staying active and deepening his faith as methods of self-care that helped him maintain health and wellness. As he noted, "I noticed on days when I didn't do anything, after basically just being home all the time, I didn't feel tired and ready to go to sleep when bed time came around" (P5, personal communication, April 10, 2021). This led him to refer to his personal faith when he noted that one element of taking care of himself

was going deeper in my faith which had to become almost all self-motivated because nothing was open. Being more conscious of finding time to pray and to

read really helped me find more purpose in the mundane routine of the day as well as remind me that there's more to life than what's here in front of us. (P5, personal communication, April 10, 2021).

While perhaps not using the construct of self-care in an explicit way, nevertheless a number of the players described steps they took to regain a sense of normalcy in their lives to offset the unsettling nature of the CE and, in particular, the challenges it presented in terms of their mental health and well-being. These self-care measures -- primarily taking extra steps to maintain relationships and establishing new routines in their lives -- appeared to emerge after a period of weeks into the CE, after initial emotional stages of anger and frustration had seemed to pass. It was also interesting to note that those players with the clearest descriptions of their own self-care measures were largely the more experienced players who, it may be hypothesized, had developed greater networks of friendships after several years in the environment when compared to the first-year players who were new to campus and the team environment. Regardless, the CE appeared to prompt a period of reflection ranging across all age groups of players that the experience demanded additional reflection, maturation, and specific action steps to replace the systems and routines that had previously, under normal circumstances, provided the balance of opportunity to maintain physical, psychological, and emotional health.

Summary: Research Purposes

The intent of this chapter was to share the key themes that emerged from the analysis of this data record and, in particular, players' cognitive appraisals, emotional

responses, and behavioral adaptations in response to the CE. These general categories that provided the overarching structure for the analysis and presentation of key findings in the study were drawn directly from the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) which outlines both personal and situational factors (e.g., personality, history of prior stress events, coping resources, interventions) that serve as filters for athletes' initial experiences with injury (and in this case, the CE). As noted in the model, these filters impact the cognitive appraisals athletes construct of their situation, the emotional responses they experience, and the behaviors they exhibit as they move through the stages of response to the stress event. The primary intent of this research was to examine these three responses to the CE, and the way each interacted with one another as players progressed through the various stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their lives as student-athletes.

With regard to cognitive appraisals, the players shared several common threads in their responses to the CE which seemed to follow a general linearity across time. Players initially engaged a process of assessing the impact of the CE on their lives, most particularly the loss of the competitive season for which had worked hard to prepare. This assessment led them to consider issues of uncertainty and the lack of control they had on their development as players, their identities as soccer players, and their lives as college students. With time, the appraisals began to turn away from being reactive in nature, and toward a more forward-looking approach as they began to reframe goals and in fact recast the CE as an opportunity for growth and development that may not have been otherwise available under more normal circumstances.

With regard to their emotional responses to the CE, players generally progressed through a series of emotions across time that in a way mirrored their cognitive appraisals. The initial emotions of denial quickly led into anger and frustration. As it became obvious that the pandemic would impact them for months (as opposed to weeks), many of the players fell into emotional states that could best be described as sadness, demoralization and even depression. At some point, almost every player who participated in the interviews for this research indicated a turning point in which their frustration and sadness turned toward optimism -- i.e., a sense of hope and anticipation for the opportunity to train again, together with their teammates. These emotions of optimism accelerated as the sanctions placed upon the program by the university and the NCAA began to be lifted one small step at a time.

The third response to the CE evaluated in this study were the behaviors exhibited by players in response to COVID-19. The first primary behavioral adaptation evidenced by the players included the steps they took to redefine their conditioning and technical training patterns in response to the loss of regular practice and conditioning sessions and the unavailability of physical resources to which they had become accustomed over their years as athletes (e.g., weight room, training room, access to the training field, etc.). Eventually, most of the players found ways to continue training -- either by themselves, or in small groups -- that included a mix of technical training, aerobic conditioning, and strength conditioning in their homes or at public parks until the weight room and training field on campus were reopened. The second behavioral adaptation players described entailed their efforts to replace the loss of their social networks connected to the team –

e.g., practices, being together in the locker room, bus rides to competition, etc. This included their efforts to find creative ways to be with each other that did not violate protocols in place around the CE. Both their efforts to continue training, as well as connect with teammates to combat the isolation they were feeling, were aspects of the steps they took as part of their own “self-care”, which was the third primary behavioral adaptation precipitated by the CE. Connecting with friends and family, finding time to play with each other in small groups, as well as their recognition for the need to establish new routines and regular schedules were primary examples of their efforts to maintain both physical as well as psychological health and well-being.

Given the previous description of these primary findings, the following chapter discusses the implications of this research as our collective understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on student athletes continues to grow through projects such as this one that closely examined the lived experiences of athletes who have had their careers significantly impacted by the CE.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this final chapter is to summarize the findings of this research study as they pertain to the questions that guided this investigation. In addition, efforts are made to highlight the ways in which this research has contributed to our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on high-level athletes and, moreover, how it contributes to existing models of the psychological responses athletes' experience as they react to sport injuries. Limitations of the research, as well as practical implications for athletes, sports psychologists, coaches, and researchers are also discussed.

Return to Epistemological Considerations: Trustworthiness and Validity of the Research

This final chapter begins with a return to the epistemological considerations that framed this study. Recall that contemporary thinking among some qualitative researchers – a perspective adopted for this research – includes the application of a set of criteria to the research process that act in part to ensure trustworthiness and validity in the methods used to evaluate the research context, and the conclusions that may subsequently be drawn. I return briefly to the five criteria that helped to ensure the integrity of this research.

Worthiness of the Research

The first question that must be asked of this research was whether or not it was in fact worthy of pursuit. Did this research reflect contemporary issues of central importance in the research space regarding the impact of the CE on, in this case, college athletes? As this project was unfolding, it was indeed a challenge simply to keep up with

the rapidly expanding literature base on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact in the sport and physical activity domain. This research does seem well in line with the efforts of other researchers who are presently working diligently to understand the impact – both short term and lasting – of the CE on athletes of all levels and does stand to make a contribution to this emerging literature base particularly given the rich descriptions of participants' experiences shared in this study that have heretofore been missing in emerging research studies of the CE.

Rich Rigor

The rigor of both the processes of collecting and analyzing the data set for this study is an important consideration. As noted previously, rigor refers to the relationship between the purposes of the study, the population examined, and the data collected from the participants within that population. That is, does the data collected in the study provide sufficient opportunity to generate significant claims in order to advance the knowledge base of the topic at hand, in this case the CE? Based on this definition, it would appear that this criterion of rigor was also met in the study insofar as the participants were well suited to provide rich descriptions of their personal experiences with the CE and, in reference to the research questions driving the study in particular, their own cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, and behavioral responses to the CE.

Coherence

Internal coherence in qualitative research requires integrity inherent in the methods of data collection and analysis to support the driving purpose of the research and, most importantly, any claims derived through the analytic process. The internal

coherence of this study was supported through the iterative process of coding the data, the use of both participant reflections in follow up interviews, and the use of “critical friends” as a sounding board for conclusions drawn in the research. Throughout this process, attempts were made to interpret emerging themes and findings in the data record in light of existing theories, prior research, and the emerging body of literature on the impact of the CE on athletes around the world. These efforts suggest confidence for the external coherence of this research.

Credibility

As noted previously, the credibility of qualitative research may be judged largely on the degree to which adequate time was spent with participants in the research setting to understand, interpret, and elaborate participants’ perspectives. Given the researcher’s intimate knowledge of the setting and his (almost) daily interactions with the participants, the credibility of this research would not appear to be in question.

Transparency

Finally, transparency in qualitative research includes the process of articulating both the methods of research, and subsequent findings, as vetted through a process of openness and scrutiny, inclusive of sharing interpretations, encouraging reflection, and engaging various alternative explanations. As noted previously, the methodological steps for this research included multiple opportunities to share and reflect upon various interpretations drawn from the data record, to encourage ongoing reflection among both the participants and the researcher, and within the iterative process of culling the data, to

consider a full range of explanations that accounted for the cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, and behavioral responses of the participants throughout the CE.

As the analytical processes inherent in this research project have drawn to a close, the criteria established at the onset of the study that were put in place to provide both a guide for, and confidence in, the methods of inquiry remained relevant throughout the research. These criteria were helpful in maintaining integrity in the research and particularly in guiding the methods employed to create meaning around the specific objectives for the research.

Summary of Results

This research was organized around three primary purposes that were pursued in order to understand and describe the impact of COVID-19 on male college soccer players. Specifically, this study examined college athletes and:

1. their cognitive appraisals of the impact of the CE on their lives;
2. their emotional responses to the impact of the CE on their lives; and
3. the behavioral adaptations prompted by the impact of the CE on their experiences as student athletes.

Brief summaries of each of these research purposes are provided in the subsequent sections below.

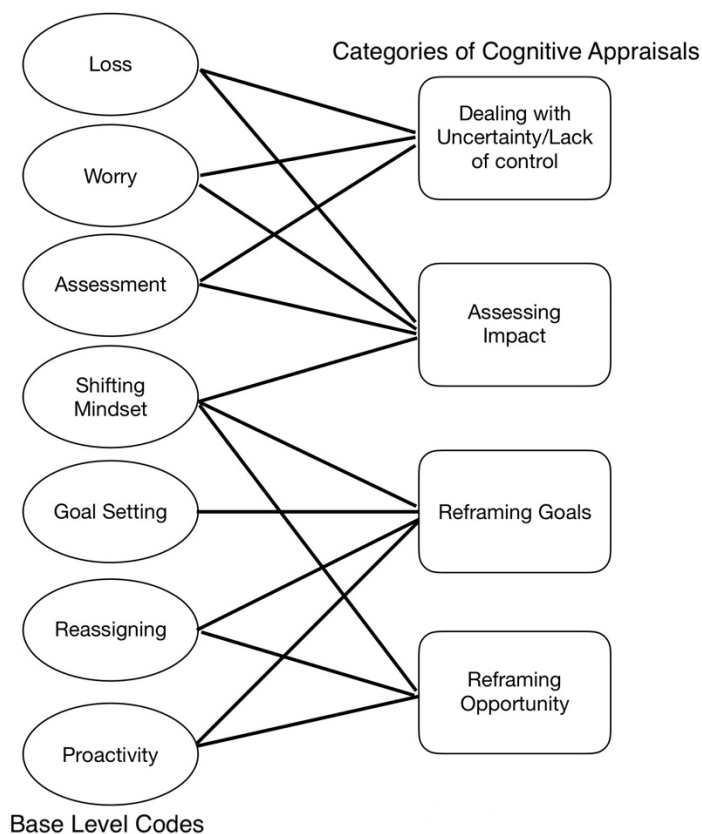
Summary: Cognitive Appraisals

The thematic analysis revealed four primary categories of cognitive appraisals made by players throughout the CE. These categories included players' reflections about (1) uncertainty and a lack of control imposed upon them by the CE, (2) assessments of

the impact of the CE on their development as athletes as well as the more immediate impact of the CE on their training and competitive season ahead, (3) players' inclination over time to begin the process of reframing existing goals toward new objectives that better reflected the reality of life in the pandemic, and (4) their reframing of the CE not as an impediment on their development, but rather as an opportunity for development not otherwise available. These four primary cognitive appraisals are captured in Figure 4 below, which includes some of the most salient lower order themes that contributed to these four broader categories of cognitive appraisals.

Figure 4

Attributions for Cognitive Appraisals: Base-Level Codes

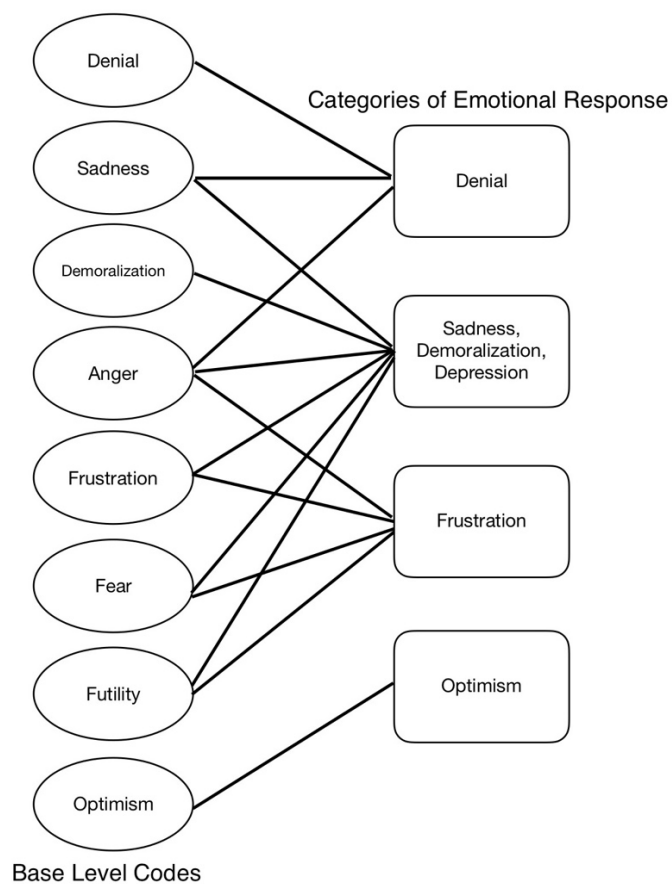


Summary: Emotional Responses

The second research question was intended to generate understanding of athletes' emotional responses to the CE. As described, the CE elicited a wide range of emotional responses that, across participants, generally followed a similar arc -- i.e., from (1) denial and disbelief, to (2) sadness, demoralization, and depression, to (3) frustration, to (4) a sense of optimism as restrictions were being lifted and a return to play seemed imminent. Figure 5 illustrates the first order themes that contributed to the understanding of the emotional responses of athletes as grouped into the four primary categories noted above.

Figure 5

Attributions for Emotional Responses: Base-Level Codes

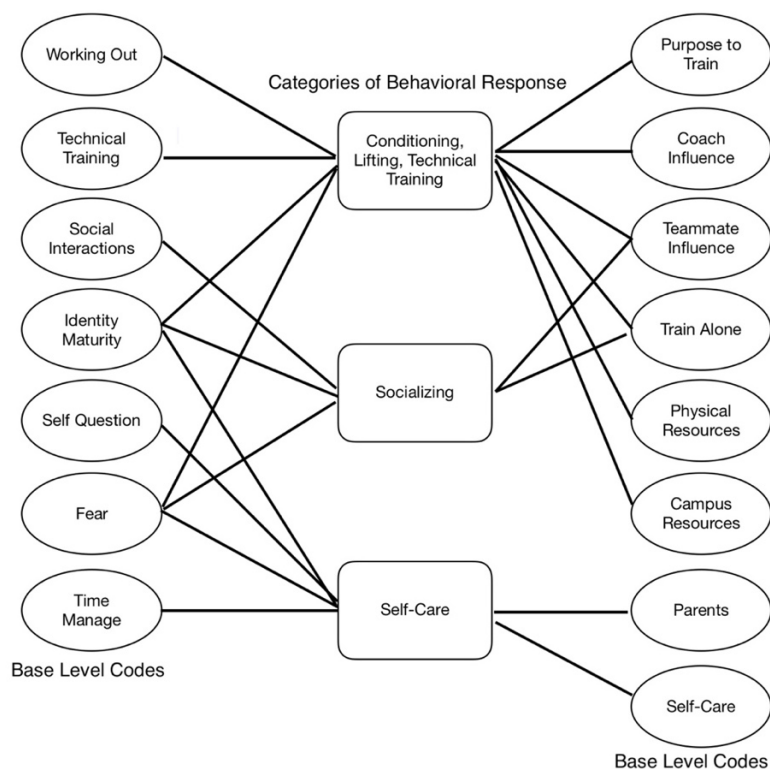


Summary: Behavioral Changes

The third research question focused on the behavioral responses and adaptations evidenced by players as they progressed through the CE – from initial lock-down to the gradual return-to-play protocols established both by the university and the NCAA. As illustrated in Figure 6, three primary categories of behavioral responses emerged, including (1) players' commitment to conditioning and physical fitness during the exile from team activities imposed by the CE, (2) their efforts to regain the socialization and peer support typically enjoyed as members of the team prior to the CE, and (3) measures of self-care they implemented in to promote a sense of normalcy, if not protection, for their mental and physical health. As illustrated in Figure 6, numerous sub-themes coded in the data record contributed to these three broader categories of behavioral response.

Figure 6

Attributions for Behavioral Adaptations: Base-Level Codes



Synthesis: The CE as a Form of “Injury” Among College Athletes

As articulated in the theoretical framework for this study, one of the potential contributions of this research was to explore the degree to which the CE might impact high-performing athletes in a way that mirrored the impact of serious injury on athletes. It was this question that encouraged the use of the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) as a guide for the thematic analysis, but also to provide a lens through which the experiences of these athletes might be better understood. With some notable exceptions, the impact of the CE did appear to have such an impact on the athletes in this study.

An Anecdote: Comparing the CE to a Knee Injury

In order to provide context for the discussion below in which the findings presented in the previous chapter are mapped back onto a theoretical model, the story (and analogy) shared by one of the athletes interviewed in the study seems both relevant and revealing. One of the senior captains on the team was among the most passionate of the participants in describing various aspects of his experience with the CE. At one point he began to draw parallels between the CE and an ACL knee injury he suffered in his first year in the program. His reflections encompassed all three of the research questions central to this study: cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, and behavioral responses commonly exhibited throughout the return-to-play process.

In the midst of describing the sense of loss he felt as the CE began, “Ian” likened the experience to his torn ACL. He described similarities in the initial reactions to both the ACL and CE: disbelief, denial, and despair. He recalled feeling as though both

situations were unfair; he was well-prepared, physically and mentally fit, took his conditioning very seriously, and didn't feel like he was at fault for the ACL, and certainly not for COVID-19. Although he did not use the word "catastrophize" in his description, nevertheless he described the depths of his concerns about being able to come back from the ACL, likening it to "never being able to play at a high level again." He discussed how his relationships with teammates changed as he was no longer able to participate with them in the daily routines, instead spending time isolated in the training room or on his own rehabilitation. Indeed, there were many similarities in his descriptions of both events.

And yet, there were some profound differences as well that highlight unique aspects of the CE on athletes that are worthy of sharing more broadly in the research and coaching communities. While Ian pointed to a number of similarities between the two experiences, they diverged for him in regard to his ability to assert control over his situation. As he shared, at a certain point with his ACL – as was the case with his response to the CE – he began to understand his situation, and to reframe his goals toward returning to play. Whereas he was able to take tangible steps toward his return with the ACL, however, Ian suggested that the CE was completely out of his control to impact. He could follow his ACL rehabilitation plan with fidelity and, what's more, he could measure his progress in multiple ways as his recovery continued – e.g., walking, then jogging, then running; increased mobility, increased strength, increased confidence in testing his knee, and so on.

Similarly, the CE represented an obstacle that prevented him from playing, like the ACL injury. And yet, he described his frustrations of having absolutely no agency over the CE with regard to a return to play, a return to the social structures in his life through sport that had become so meaningful for him, a return to competition, and a return to the context to which much of his personal identity as an athlete was fixed. In these regards, then, Ian reflected about how much more psychologically challenging the CE had been on him relative to previous injuries. He described the need to identify new ways to motivate himself, develop new coping strategies that centered around dealing with uncertainty, find new patterns for enjoying his personal relationships with his closest friends, and as shared previously in reference to his role on the team, to develop a new set of skills as the captain of the team.

The similarities and differences that Ian identified between the CE and a previous serious injury that kept him out of competition were enlightening and provide good context for the following discussion and a return to the theories upon which the findings of this study are mapped.

Return to Theory: Personal and Situational Factors

Returning to Wiese-Bjornstal's (2021) more recent work is fruitful toward the goal of outlining the similarities and differences between the CE and injury on athletes' experiences, as well as formalizing the previously elaborated descriptions of the impact of the CE on the athletes in the study. Recall that Wiese-Bjornstal highlighted the interaction of both personal and situational factors as key influencers on the psychological responses (e.g., cognitive appraisals, emotional responses, behavioral

responses) of athletes in various phases of the injury and rehabilitation process (see Figure 2). The following paragraphs revisit this framework with particular interest in articulating ways in which personal and situational factors of the model did (or did not) similarly filter athletes' appraisals, emotions, and behaviors relative to the CE.

Personal Factors

Wiese-Bjornstal (2021) noted that the nature of the injury, individual differences among injured athletes, sociodemographic factors relevant to the participants in the context, and individuals' physical/biological characteristics were key contributors to the responses of athletes to injury. Two of these personal factors would seem to be less relevant to the CE. Given that the "injury" experienced by all players was the same – i.e., the arrival of COVID-19 and its impact on their experiences – it would appear that differences in the injury (e.g., a ground-derived injury vs. an injury perpetuated by an opponent) that might otherwise have impacted response and recovery is not as relevant in the CE context. Second, the unique biological and physical characteristics of individual athletes that might otherwise have bearing on their return to play also would not appear to be significant considerations in the CE since the loss of access to participation precipitated by COVID-19 was not related to physical injury. (Of course, that statement is notwithstanding differences in the physiological responses of athletes who actually contracted the disease, which is beyond the scope of this study.)

Therefore, in regard to the personal factors that Wiese-Bjornstal (2021) has suggested are influencers on athletes' responses to the injury, the individual differences in the psychology of the athletes (e.g., personality, motivation, locus of control, coping style,

mood state, mental health, etc.) as well as the sociodemographic differences that may have existed within the group membership (e.g., age, socioeconomic differences related to access to resources, prior experience) remain as factors that impacted the responses of athletes (see Figure 7 below).

The data record would appear to support that indeed these two categories of influence on the players' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to the CE are relevant in interpreting their experiences. Differences in players' personalities, particularly the degree to which they moved through various emotional stages, was evident as some athletes tended to ruminate longer on the negative consequences of the CE on their soccer participation, whereas others appeared able to "bounce back" much more quickly. Players demonstrated differences in their perceptions of "control" both in terms of their inability to impact the uncertainty and future direction of the CE, but on the other hand, also in terms of the degree to which they were able to reframe goals and exercise new control over their environment and return to meaningful activity. The coping strategies players shared (e.g., establishing new routines, shifts in their mentality, etc.) as well as their mood state and mental health allowed them, for example, to reframe the sense of loss inherent in the CE as an opportunity for growth and preparedness that might otherwise not have been available under more normal circumstances.

Regarding sociodemographic differences among players in the community, the relative time players had spent in the program (i.e., their age) appeared to impact individual responses to the CE. Whereas the seniors in the program felt acutely the impending "loss" of their season and indeed their careers, first year players were more

inclined to associate “loss” with the more immediate and temporal opportunities to assimilate into the team and gauge their readiness to be college soccer players. The subsequent ruminations of players, as well as the behavioral responses such psychological and emotional elicited, varied accordingly. Older players tended to lean on each other; younger players tended to see opportunity within the CE to have additional time to improve on an individual level. Age may also have impacted players’ ability to access resources as, in general, the younger players remained isolated on campus where virtually all physical resources and spaces (e.g., weight room, training room, etc.) were closed for much of the CE, whereas older players tended to live off campus and have transportation that allowed them to find alternative outdoor spaces and opportunities for engagement and physical activity related to the game.

While evidence for the impact of socioeconomic status on the players’ responses to the CE is less abundant, it may still be proposed that players’ access to resources may have varied by socioeconomic status. One player indicated, for example, that the only resources he had for strength and conditioning were limited to what may be found in his apartment -- a pull up bar and a yoga mat. Other players were able to purchase (or use existing) weight training equipment in their homes. Another player referenced the ability to purchase an in-home training program supported by videos and access to a private website.

Situational Factors

With regard to the situational factors proposed by Wiese-Bjornstal (2021) as impactful on athletes’ responses to injury, there would appear to be significant overlap

with the experiences of athletes in the CE. Wiese-Bjornstal outlines three primary categories under the heading of situation factors that interact and influence the psychological response to injury which, this research suggests, are equally appropriate to consider among athletes within the CE. There is evidence in the data record to suggest that the sport characteristics (e.g., timing of “injury”, level of competition, playing status, etc.), social factors (e.g., coach, teammate, family, and sports medicine influence), and the environmental context (e.g., rehabilitation environment, sport ethics, etc.) inherent to the research context all impacted the participants in the study (see Figure 7 below).

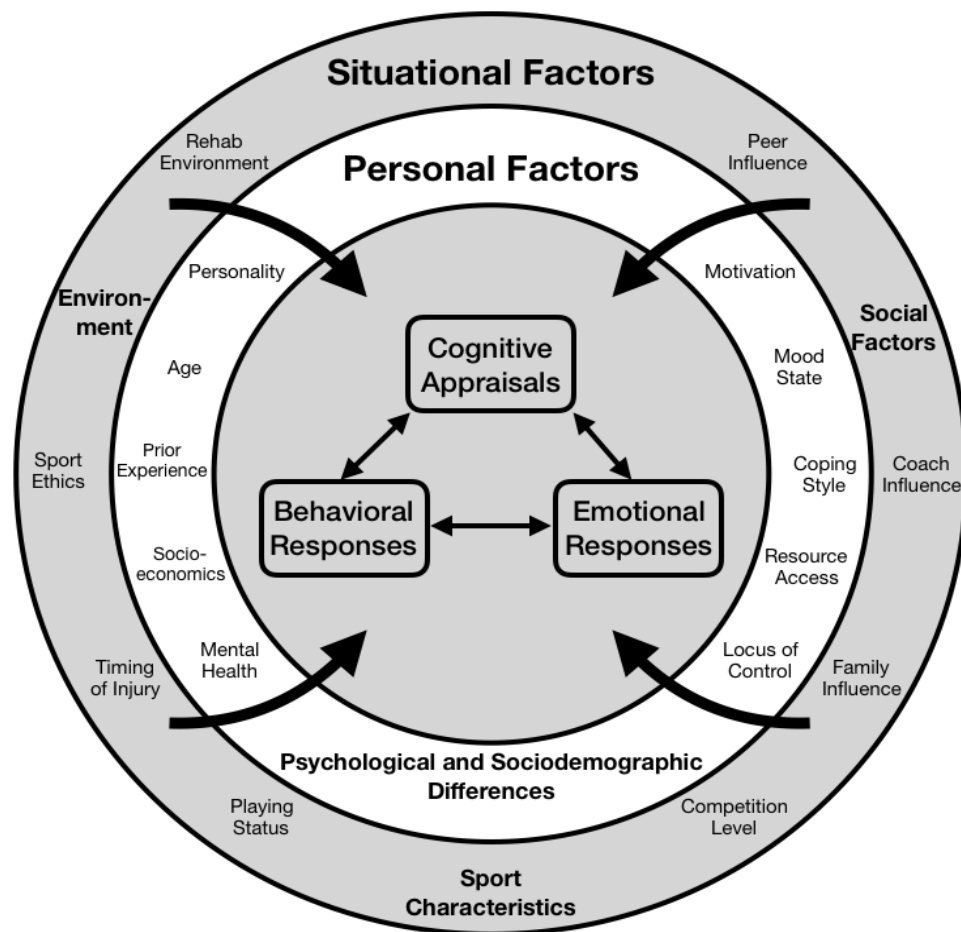
Obviously, the timing of the descent of COVID-19 on these athletes was significant. As noted in the contextual description of the environment, the team was preparing for a trip to Europe when the CE caused a shut-down of all university-related activities. The impact of the CE continued across time, cancelling all spring training, and the subsequent fall season. Another “sport characteristic” relevant to these findings involved the level of competition of the team. As multiple athletes reported, the stress of “falling behind” and seeing other future opponents continuing to train while they could not was a source of stress for most players. As noted repeatedly above, the uncertainties players experienced regarding the impact of the CE on their opportunities to establish themselves in the team and earn playing time was notable.

Social factors were also commonly reported by participants as central components in their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to the CE. There were multiple references in the data record to the social support experienced players in regard to their coaches, family members and specifically their teammates. At first, players reported a

sense of loss and isolation when the community aspect of their athletic identities (i.e.,

Figure 7

Personal and Situational Factors That Filter Players' Appraisals, Behaviors Within the Context of COVID-19



their role and participation within the team group) was eliminated by the CE. What Shifted across time with regard to social support was the recognition by numerous players that they needed to find alternative ways of both providing and receiving social support despite the restrictions for social gatherings put in place during the CE. They did

this creatively, in ways previously not part of the team environment, e.g., via zoom meetings with family and friends, meeting informally for training sessions and informal “kick-arounds”, and organizing themselves in “pods” that would create protective “bubbles” to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and allow for continued social interactions.

With regard to the environmental context, players expressed their frustrations with the ethical dilemma presented by the CE. Even as coaches urged the players to see the COVID-19 lockdown as an opportunity to “sharpen the axe” and pursue individual development, several players could not wrap their heads around the fact that they “were doing everything right” and yet being prevented from playing while their friends in other college soccer programs (and indeed other athletic teams on the same campus) were able to continue training and competing. Those players who themselves had recovered from having COVID-19 were frustrated that they were not permitted greater freedom to train together based on their assumption that they were no longer a threat in the community to spread COVID-19. Other players articulated a willingness to risk getting the virus themselves if it meant they could continue to play, while at the same time being cognizant that such actions could put others in their family, for example, at risk as well.

As a final example of the role of the environmental context in dictating their experiences with the CE, it must be acknowledged that the entire experience of the team was nested in the larger university community, subject as well to local county and state restrictions for social gatherings, to say nothing of additional governing sanctions and policies disseminated by the NCAA. Whereas such influences might be less relevant in the case of serious injury (as opposed to the CE), nevertheless it must be acknowledged

that the environmental context within which the CE unfolded had a significant impact on these athletes just as it might influence an athlete in the return-to-play contexts who, for example, would be subject to the guidance and authority of the sports medicine team of the university guiding the return to play process.

It would appear, then, that the use not only of the sport injury and rehabilitation model (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) but also Wiese-Bjornstal's (2021) more recent articulation of the personal and situational factors that influence athletes' responses to injury are quite relevant as orienting frameworks to understand the impact of the CE on college athletes.

Return to Theory: Scheme of Change Model

Recall that the scheme of change model (Tenenbaum & Samuel, 2011) proposes that a change event – in this case the CE – provokes environmental instability that is manifest in the subsequent cognitive and emotional activity expressed by the athletes in the context. With the passage of time, the model suggests, the instability either persists or begins to settle but, regardless, athletes gradually adapt, thereby reducing the impact of the instability on their thinking and emotions. While there may not be a full return to the pre-stress status quo, nevertheless athletes tend to find a reduction of negative affect, as well as cognitive reframing that leads to new possibilities and decision-making processes (see Figure 1). Results from this study suggest that this model accurately captured and mapped athletes' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses precipitated by the instability thrust upon them by the CE.

With regard to cognitive appraisals, recall that athletes initially responded to the CE with great uncertainty, worry, perceptions of a lack of control, and anxiety. As the model predicted, however, over time the cognitions of the athletes gradually regained a sense of stability as their focus turned away from initial anxieties to a reframing of goals and opportunities. Some even got to the point of viewing the CE as being beneficial for their short-term development and overarching aspirations as a player.

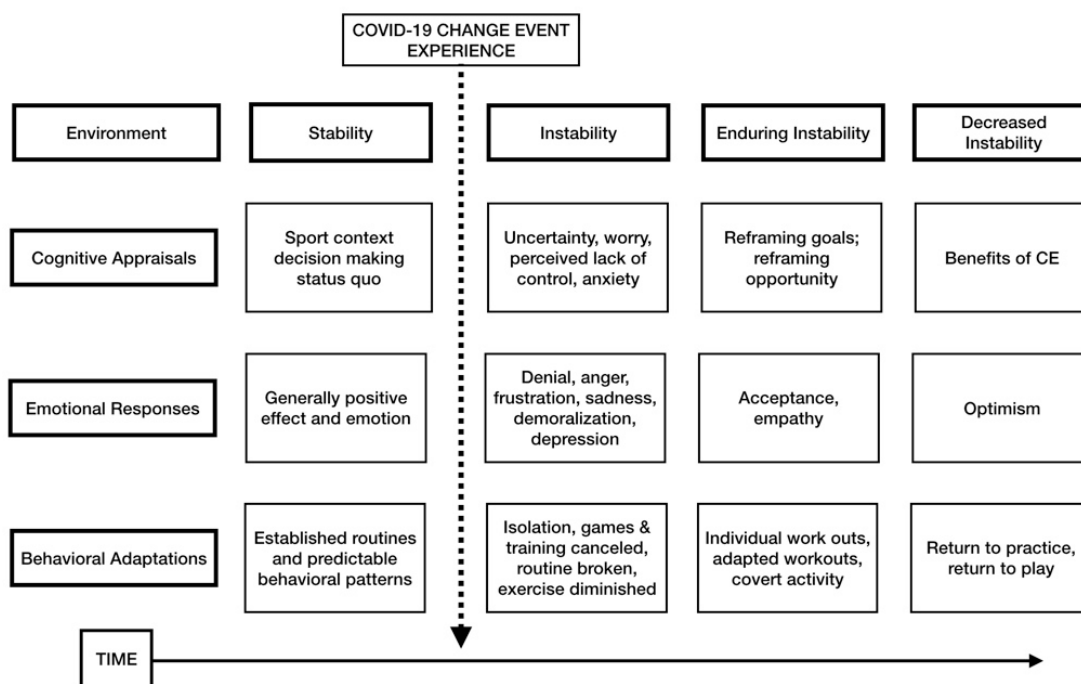
A similar pattern was observed with players' emotional responses. The instability caused by the CE prompted initial emotional responses of denial, anger and frustration. Those emotions were followed not surprisingly by sadness, demoralization, and in the case of several players, mild depressive episodes. In parallel to the gradual shift evidenced in their thinking around reframing goals, their emotional responses returned to a more stable spot in which they even spoke with acceptance, empathy for teammates, and even optimism about the challenges ahead as the world, and sports more specifically, emerged from the shadow of the pandemic.

Finally, the behavioral adaptations of the players to the CE also followed a similar pattern. Although behavioral changes are not explicitly outlined in model, this research indicated that behaviors follow a similar pattern to cognition and emotion when the instability of the CE mounted. This is one notable contribution of this research that could inform a future rendition of the scheme of change model. The initial paralysis players felt as their university, the soccer program (and indeed many areas of life) shut down persisted throughout the initial stages of the CE. Players remained in isolation, competition and practices were terminated, their workout patterns changed, exercise was

curtailed, social interactions dwindled, and life on campus was brought to a standstill. In short, the instability of the CE had a significant impact on players' behaviors. Over the

Figure 8

An Adaptation to the Scheme of Change Model



course of the first few months of the CE, however, glimpses that players were seeking to bring rhythm and routine back into their lives in the form of behaviors were evident.

They found ways to train. The adapted and found resources that helped them return to conditioning and weightlifting practices. Despite at times bending the rules for physical distancing, they found creative ways to maintain social connections and support. In short, they began demonstrating steps toward self-care. Despite the fact that the stresses and instability of the CE on behaviors of athletes continues to be present, nevertheless the

athletes in this study showed remarkable reserve in creating new activity routines that provided a familiar sense of routine, training, and social support.

Taken together, these findings that cut across the three primary analytical themes (e.g., cognition, emotion, behaviors) provide support for the initial decision to frame this research both with the injury response and scheme of change models. While the injury response model predicted areas of impact, the scheme of change model successfully predicted the arc of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adaptations shown by athletes in the study, and depicted in the modified scheme of change model in Figure 8 above.

Limitations of the Research

The primary limitation of this research is, ironically, inextricably bound to the very impetus of the study itself: COVID-19. Any qualitative study depends in part on the degree to which the researcher can develop deep understanding of the research context and, in a study like this one, the lived reality of participants within the context. The time at which the CE was beginning to take its toll on society in general and the participants in this research in particular would have been the opportune moment to be in the research context, observing the behaviors of athletes, documenting their emotional responses, listening to their appraisals of the situation, and in general getting a sense of the impact of the CE on the team, and individual players in particular. The restrictions that cost these players so much of their student-athlete experience, of course, were the same ones that prevented a closer, and timelier, exploration of the research questions at hand.

Hence, it must be acknowledged that by the time approval for this study had been granted, players had clearly moved beyond their initial reactions to the CE, already well

into the process of moving forward in their lives both on and off the soccer field. As a result, the interviews upon which much of this research rests were done retroactively, asking players to recall the impact of the CE on their psychology and physical health some weeks later. This raises concerns about the accuracy of the reflections of the players, the true timing of events as they reconstructed them from memory, and the inevitable details, feelings, ruminations, appraisals, and behaviors that had been altered in their memory by the time the primary data collection for the study took place.

The other primary limitation of the research study was that only about half of the players on the roster were involved in the data collection process. While there was a certain saturation in the data record that suggested few, if any, significant themes may still remain undetected in the experiences of players, nevertheless it is important to acknowledge that the research might have benefited from interviews with additional members of the team.

Implications and Future Directions

The primary implications of this research revolve around the depth of the psychological stress experienced by players during the CE, persisting even to the writing of this conclusion. While there were indications of eventual optimism and the ability of players to reframe goals for their athletic careers, it is undeniable that the CE had a significant impact on the psychology of these players. As noted, for some players, the CE was the equivalent of a career-ending injury. For others, it created weeks of isolation that called them to question their very identities; for the first time perhaps, they had to consider themselves as something other than soccer players. The isolation and lack of

social support during the pandemic was expressed by just about every participant and offered as a life-altering reality more than any other issue.

These findings echo trends across the larger society regarding mental health of young people throughout the pandemic. Bringing this back to athletic contexts in particular, this research points to the need for increased education and preparation of coaches in regard to mental health training -- i.e., recognizing when student-athletes are exhibiting signs of mental distress, and being aware of trauma-informed coaching and communication strategies that can be applied to support young adults experiencing psychological stress. This research also points to larger socio-ecological issues pertaining to services and support structures that create the perimeter around athletics that may, in the future, be provided as scaffolds for athletes who undergo situations like the CE that promote insecurity and a host of other psychological stresses.

Finally, the athletes in this study pointed repeatedly to the strength of relationships forged in this team community which were in part a testament to the strength of the culture of the team. This raises questions, and perhaps future research interests, around the question of how cultures are held -- by coaches and by players -- during times like the CE, and how the strength of team culture can act as a buffer to the psychological stress experienced by student-athletes.

Conclusion

As the spread of COVID-19 gripped the world in the early months of 2020, it soon became apparent that nobody, not even exceptional athletes, would be able to escape the reach of the pandemic. The gravity of the situation globally -- if not in the

local community of this college soccer program -- started to become apparent to the coaching staff as the virus spread, making it seem more likely with each passing day that the program would be shuttered for some time. The natural questions in the minds of the coaches early on had to do with the impact on the team -- e.g., *How much will the CE set us back? When can we train again?* Initial virtual team meetings via zoom carried a similar theme, with questions from players revolving almost entirely around getting back on the field. However, as the bad news mounted (e.g., no trip to Europe, no spring training, no fall season), a palpable change in the demeanor of the players emerged as their anger turned to sadness, and their spirits spiraled. At the conclusion of one virtual team meeting, it became apparent to the coaching staff that the loss of the coming competitive season was not the only thing at risk; so were the players.

That prompted a change in the strategy of the coaching staff toward the inclusion of more team building, leadership training, and tactically oriented mental engagement via distance learning. It also provided the initial inklings that the team might provide an important research context to better understand the impact of the CE on players' psychology that could be of central concern not only during the pandemic, but also as players and the team eventually engaged in the return-to-play process. What would they have been through? What lingering mental stress and anxiety would be present? How much of the culture of the program would be viable after months apart? Most importantly, how would the trauma of the CE impact the long-term development of these young men as they entered the prime years of their athletic careers?

It was this latter set of questions that provided the driving impetus for this project. What this research revealed is that, indeed, the CE influenced players in many of the same ways that a serious injury does -- e.g., appraisals, emotional reactions, behavioral adaptations. And yet, in some ways the CE might actually be *worse* than a serious injury – i.e., there is little agency or control to be had over the CE; no solace may be found regarding the *cause* of this stress event; there is no way to put certain parameters around the duration of the event and its debilitating impact on players; until vaccinations become available to the players there remains concern about the spread of the virus among family members and friends, to say nothing of contracting the virus oneself; and, finally, it is nearly impossible to find a metric to gauge progress being made toward full time “recovery” and return-to-play. Indeed, for the players, the CE appeared to be a consistent, unrelenting source of anxiety and bad news.

This research, then, is significant in raising our awareness of the myriad of issues – in this case related to the CE – that can impact the mental health of young people, even among those young adult athletes who appear of strong mind and body. It is imperative that the coaching community continues to develop collective understanding and increased expertise in recognizing trauma among the athletes they serve, and tools to address such trauma within the context of coaching. While COVID-19 appears to be on the decline as vaccinations and public health initiatives take hold, it would be naive to assume that mental health challenges experienced by college athletes will dissipate in parallel with the decline of COVID-19. On the contrary, mental health issues among young adults are a significant issue to be addressed by the NCAA, college athletic departments, programs

and coaches. If there is good news to be found through this examination of the impact of the CE on young adult athletes, perhaps it is the recognition that every college coach in the United States – regardless of program level, size, or season – was forced to engage the CE and its impact on their programs and players. This shared experience that cuts across every program on every university campus may be an inflection point in our collective understanding of, and response to, the mental health challenges that confront this generation of young, talented college athletes.

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Appendix A

IRB Approved Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT**October 10, 2020**

Study Title: The psychosocial impact of Covid-19 on college athletes and their coaches: An ethnographic case study of a highly performing men's college soccer program

Project Director: Jeff Frykholm (Student Investigator)

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Diane Wiese-Bjornstal

Investigator Team Contact Information

Student Project Investigator: Jeff Frykholm; 720-979-3001; frykh015@umn.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Diane Wiese-Bjornstal; dwiese@umn.edu

School of Kinesiology; (612) 625-5300

Invitation

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to explore the impact of COVID-19 on your experience as a member of the Men's Soccer Program at [UNIVERSITY]. The purpose of this document is to describe this study and answer any questions you may have about your potential participation. This study is being conducted by Jeff Frykholm of the School of Kinesiology at the University of Minnesota. The University of Minnesota faculty advisor for this study is Dr. Diane Wiese-Bjornstal. There is **no financial support** nor **financial interest** related to this research study.

Key Information: The following summary provides you with information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate in this research study. The goal of any research project is to learn new things in order to help people in the future. As such, investigators follow the same plan with multiple participants, which means they do not usually make changes to the plan for individuals. You may or may not be helped by volunteering for a research study. You have the right to discuss this study with another person who is not part of the research team before deciding whether to participate in the research.

Why are you being invited to take part in this study?

As a member of a highly competitive men's collegiate soccer program, you are uniquely positioned to reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced your participation and experience as a college athlete.

Before agreeing to participate, please understand that:

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part, and then later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask any question you want before you commit to participating in the study.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to examine the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted team culture, team development, and the cognitive and emotional responses of players and coaches within a men's college soccer environment. Specific objectives include the examination of: 1) how is COVID-19 impacting players and coaches; 2) how is COVID-

19 impacting the program; and 3) how the program culture mitigates the impacts of COVID-19 on players and coaches in the team environment.

How long will it last?

This research study will continue until the end of the spring training session (May, 2021) for the Men’s Soccer Program at [UNIVERSITY].

What happens if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research”?

If you choose to participate in this research:

- A timeline description of the activities that will occur related to this project (e.g., team meetings, group meetings, individual conversations, etc.), including a schedule of events that require your participation, will be provided. All of these events will take place within the context of your participation as a member of the Men’s Soccer Program at [UNIVERSITY].

- You may be asked to participate in either individual or group interviews with Jeff Frykholm. The interview(s) will be conducted by Zoom so as to avoid unnecessary physical contact.

What are my responsibilities if I take part in this research?

As a participant in this study, you may be asked to participate in either individual or group interviews with me during the fall portion of the 2020-21 season. The purpose of these interviews is to seek to understand your experiences as an athlete/coach who has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to gain your perspective about how the pandemic has perhaps impacted the program itself. Aside from the possibility of participating in interviews, no other specific request will be made of you for this study apart from your regular participation as a member of the team community. While I will be collecting data throughout the season that will help understand the research questions (e.g., unique practice plans altered for COVID-19 restrictions, my observations and field notes, notes from team meetings, etc.), there is nothing extra that any player or coach will have to do for this study beyond participation in interviews.

Taking part is voluntary. There is no known way this study can be bad for you.

To reiterate, your participation in this study is voluntary. It has no impact on your status in the team, or your relationships with coaches or players. Nor will your participation (or lack thereof) be used in any way to jeopardize your role and participation in the team. You may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue at any time, and/or you may refuse to answer questions that make you uncomfortable with no penalty or judgment on your standing as a member of the team.

What happens if I say “Yes”, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the study at any time, and nobody will be upset by your decision. Simply indicate your preference to not participate in this research project, and you will not have any role in the study, nor will you participate in any data collection event specific to the research project. Any scheduled interviews that include your participation will be canceled, and you may simply continue your participation as a member of the team

without any further interruption. You may express this intent to leave the study by contacting the lead investigator for this project in person, by phone/text, or by email.

Investigator: Jeff Frykholm

Email address: frykh015@umn.edu

Telephone: 720-979-3001

Benefits: How might being in this study be helpful for me?

While there are no direct benefits of participation, there is the possibility of indirect benefit as a result of participation in this study. For example, your personal reflection on the impact of COVID-19 on your development and identity as an athlete may provide a better understanding of yourself, your goals, and your future growth in the game.

Risks and discomforts: Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research project aside from, perhaps, any personal discomfort you might have discussing your personal experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, at no point will you be required to give information or respond to questions that put you at legal, physical, social, economic, or emotional risk. You have the right to respond (or not respond) to any topic raised in the interviews.

Compensation/Cost for participation

- There is no compensation or other tangible benefit for participating in the study.
- There is no cost to participate in this study.

If you agree to participate in this research study...

- You will join other members of the team (players and coaches) in participation.
- A timeline of the activities required of you will be shared.
- The length and duration of participation events will be shared.
- All data collection will be done in the context of team functions, or by Zoom meetings.
- The data collection will be done by the end of the spring season.
- You may be contacted to participate in follow-up research.

What happens to the information collected in this research?

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security

Your privacy and confidentiality will be protected throughout this study and in any subsequent sharing of the findings for the common good that emerge from the analysis of data. At no point will the name of the university, the names of any players, or the names of any coaches be disclosed throughout the duration of the project. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all players, and all personal information that could be used to identify players will be removed from the data record. Signed consent forms will be kept separate from the data record. Your participation in Zoom interviews will not be reported to other coaches or players in the program. The only person who will have access to the Zoom

recordings beyond myself is the University of Minnesota faculty advisor for the project. Once transcripts for the Zoom recordings are created (typically within 24 hours after recording), the video recordings will be deleted. Transcripts will be stored on a password protected computer (with back-up copies stored on a password protected server). No data collected for this study will be used in a subsequent research project.

Your confidentiality will be protected at all times to the degree permitted by the technology being used. We cannot guarantee against interception of data sent via the internet by third parties, for example, although we believe the risks of such violations of privacy to be extremely low.

Will I have access to the research results? Will I be able to provide feedback after the study?

Yes, you will be able to read any of the research findings that emerge from this study by simply requesting manuscripts or data reports generated throughout the study by the Investigation team.

Yes, you will be able to provide feedback to the researchers at the conclusion of the study through a survey instrument that you may choose to submit or not.

Will anyone besides the study team be at my consent meeting?

You may be asked by the study team for your permission for an auditor to observe your consent meeting. This is one way the University of Minnesota ensures that your rights as a research participant are protected. The auditor is there to observe the meeting, but will not document any personal or confidential information about you.

Audio/Video Recording

Given the ongoing restrictions and safety precautions that mandate social distancing, all interviews in this research project will be conducted by Zoom. None of the recording(s) will be used for any other purpose than creating understanding about the questions guiding this research. The intention is to record the Zoom interviews for later analysis. You have the right, however, to refuse to participate in the interview, or to have the interview recording. You may indicate your willingness to be recorded by checking the one of the boxes below and providing your signature.

I do not want to have this interview recorded.

I am willing to have this interview recorded:

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Whom do I contact if I have questions, concerns or feedback about my experience?

This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB within the Human Research Protections Program (HRPP). To share feedback privately with the HRPP about your research experience, call the Research Participants' Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 (Toll Free: 1-888-224-8636) or go to z.umn.edu/participants. You are encouraged to contact the HRPP if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the researcher.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Will I have a chance to provide feedback after the study is over?

The HRPP may ask you to complete a survey that asks about your experience as a research participant. You do not have to complete the survey if you do not want to. If you do choose to complete the survey, your responses will be anonymous.

If you are not asked to complete a survey, but you would like to share feedback, please contact the study team or the HRPP. See the “Investigator Contact Information” of this form for study team contact information and “Whom do I contact if I have questions, concerns or feedback about my experience?” of this form for HRPP contact information.

COVID-19 Precautions: [University]

As noted above, all precautions will be taken to ensure that this project does not increase the risk of transmitting COVID-19 to any member of the Men’s Soccer Program at [University]. All policies and established protocols of the [University] regarding protections for COVID-19 will be followed. Please see the following website for additional information about COVID-19 policies and procedures at [University].

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. My signature indicates and documents my willingness and consent to take part in this research study. You will be provided a copy of this consent form.

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Your Name (printed): _____

Signature of person obtaining consent: Jeffrey A. Frykholm October 1, 2020
Printed name of person obtaining consent. Jeffrey Frykholm

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for five years beyond the end of the study.

Appendix B

IRB Approved Interview Questionnaire

Interview Question Template: Student Athletes

Study Title: The psychosocial impact of Covid-19 on college athletes and their coaches: An ethnographic case study of a highly performing men's college soccer program

SI: Jeff Frykholm

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Diane Wiese-Bjornstal

Player Interviews will be guided by the following questions. While it is not realistic to include all of these questions in the context of a single guided interview, it is from this list of questions that material for the interviews will be drawn.

- 1) At what point did you realize that COVID-19 was likely going to interrupt your 2020-21 season in a significant way?
 - How did that realization make you feel?
 - What did that realization make you think?
- 2) What were your initial thoughts when you first heard that one of your teammates had contracted the virus?
- 3) How has your thinking about the impact of the virus on your soccer career changed over time?
- 4) Can you describe the range of emotions you have felt as COVID-19 has impacted your college career?
- 5) How has COVID-19 affected your daily life as a student-athlete?
- 6) How has COVID-19 affected your identity as a college soccer player?
- 7) How has COVID-19 affected your personal goals and aspirations as a player? As a young adult?
- 8) What resources do you feel you had available to you to help you navigate COVID-19?
- 9) Has COVID-19 impacted your friendships and social network?
- 10) Are you able to identify any positive outcomes of COVID-19 on your experience this season? If so, elaborate.

Focus Group Interview Questions

- 1) How has the team – the group of players in particular – responded to the loss of what would have been the traditional fall season?
- 2) How has COVID-19 changed the team? (Prompts include...)
 - the way it functions and behaves
 - its collective attitude
 - its goals and aspirations
 - the quality of training
 - emerging leadership among players
- 3) Have there been positive aspects of COVID-19 on the team?
- 4) What changes can you identify, if any, in your coaches? (Prompts include...)
 - Their attitudes toward the season?
 - Their interactions and relationships with players?
 - The nature, quality, and intentions of training sessions?
 - The way they talk about the program?
 - Their standards and expectations for players?
- 5) What do you think will be the long-term impact on XXX Men's Soccer due to COVID-19?

Appendix C
Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

<u>Date</u>	<u>Interview</u>	<u>Participant(s)</u>
1/12/21	First-year players	P1, P2, P3, P4
1/12/21	Mixed age players	P5, P6, P7
1/18/21	Senior players	P8, P9, P10, P11
1/19/21	Individual	P9
1/19/21	Individual	P8
1/19/21	Individual	P10
1/20/21	Individual	P5
1/24/21	Individual	P12
2/6/21	Individual	P13
2/13/21	Individual	P13
4/10/21	Participant Reflection	P10
4/10/21	Participant Reflection	P8
4/10/21	Participant Reflection	P4

Appendix D

Coding Table

Definitions: 1st Order Themes, 2nd Level Categories, Base-Level Codes

1st Order Themes	Definitions
Behavioral adaptations	Actions in response to a particular situation or stimulus.
Cognitive appraisals	Individuals' subjective interpretations to stimuli, events, or experiences in their environment.
Emotional responses	A natural state of mind derived from circumstances, mood, relationships, behaviors, or outcomes.
2nd Level Categories	
Assessing impact	An evaluation of the effect of the CE on their lives, routines, health, etc.
Conditioning	Behaviors intended to improve health or fitness.
Denial	A refusal to accept the reality of the CE.
Frustration	Being upset or annoyed, especially because of an inability to change or achieve something.
Optimism	Stated hopefulness or confidence about the future or about a desired successful outcome.
Reframing goals	Adjustments to goals based on present circumstances.
Reframing opportunity	Adjustments to opportunities that are available.
Sadness, demoralization, depression	Expressions of sadness, demoralization, or depression.
Self-care	Taking action to improve or protect health and wellness.
Socializing	Participating in social activities or otherwise engaging socially with others.
Uncertainty and lack of control	Being uncertain or feeling little agency to manipulate a situation.
Base Level Codes	
Anger	Evidence of anger
Assessing impact	Evidence of an appraisal of loss
Campus resources	Resources on campus to support players during the CE
Coach influence	Evidence of the impact of coaches
Demoralization	Evidence of a lack of spirit; demoralization
Denial	Evidence of denial of impact of the CE
Divert attention	To change the focus of attention from one topic to another
Fear	Evidence of fear
Frustration	Evidence of frustration
Futility	Evidence of a sense of futility; inability to affect change

Goal setting	Evidence of goal setting (or goal adaptation) as a strategy for coping
Identity maturity	Evidence of cognitive or emotional maturity
Influence to train	A person or situation that has the capacity to affect training levels
Manage time	Evidence of efforts to effectively manage time
Maturity	Reaching a more advanced stage in the mental, emotional or physical domain.
Opportunity	Circumstances that makes it possible to do/achieve something
Optimism	Evidence of positive outlook, forward thinking, optimism
Parents	Evidence of parental influence
Physical resources	Physical resources (e.g., weight room, training room, field access, etc.)
Proactivity	Evidence of a proactive mindset
Purpose to train	Evidence of recognition of the purpose(s) for physical training
Reassigning	Evidence of reassigning value to contextual factors
Reframing	Re-examining a situation or phenomena from a new perspective
Repeated loss	Evidence of multiple experiences of loss
Sadness	Evidence of sadness
Self-care	Evidence of care for self
Self-question	Evidence of moments of self-doubt or self-examination
Self-reflection	Evidence of moments of personal reflection
shifting mindset	Evidence of a shift in mindset
Social interactions	Evidence of social connectedness, interaction, togetherness
Teammate influence	Evidence of the impact of teammate relationships and influence
Technical training	Evidence of soccer-specific, technical training
Training alone	Evidence of purposeful, solo, physical training
Uncertainty	Evidence of uncertainty, unresolved questions
Working out	Evidence of purposeful, engaged physical activity
Worry	Evidence of being in a state of worry or anxiety

Appendix E

Coding Table: Example Quotations

Cognitive Appraisals	Definition: individuals' subjective interpretations to stimuli, events, or experiences in their environment.
Reframing goals	"If we can't have a regular season, then I need to just focus on getting better myself." (P4)
Reframe timeline	"As soon as I decided to come back for a fifth year, everything changed in that moment. I started thinking ahead for next season." (P10)
Assessing impact	"You lose your friends, what you do every day, no competition... everything just changed from what we had been doing for four years." (P7)
Uncertainty	"The hardest part was just not knowing anything. There was never any news. That was by far the most frustrating part of the whole spring. No news, nothing. We just have to wait, again" (P8)
Repeated loss	"They'd say two more weeks. And then, still, nothing would change, nothing would happen." (P8)
Opportunity	"I can work on myself, my game, get stronger in the weight room, get to know the players on the team." (P3)
Emotion	Definition: a natural state of mind derived from circumstances, mood, relationships, behaviors, or outcomes.
Denial	"At first it was just like, this is going to blow over. I wasn't worried." (P7)
Demoralization	"I was just demoralized. That's the best word I can think of." (P9)
Frustration	"Just frustration. Every day, frustrated because there is nothing you can do." (P1)
Anger	"I'm not going to lie: stuff in my apartment got broken." (P8)
Sadness	"You're just sad because you can't see these guys you have spent four years with." (P7)
Futility	"Ambiguity, the sense of worthlessness that we're just kind of like, you know, we're literally animals and we just start kinda sitting in our houses right now because there's not really much to do." (P6)
Optimism	"It might actually be a positive thing for me moving forward." (P1)
Fear	"I definitely had a feeling -- and I guess still do -- like I'm losing ground by the minute." (P5)
Behaviors	Definition: actions in response to a particular situation or stimulus.
Working out	"Just training, working out, getting in the weight room... that's just kind of all you can do." (P2)
Technical training	"I just try to get a bunch of touches by myself on the wall." (P4)
Social interactions	"We can't hang out like we used to — in the locker room, eating together, hanging out after practice." (P7)

Self-care “I realized that I needed to mature and start taking care of myself better - like I would have if we were in season.” (P6)

Personal Factors

Identity

Definition: distinguishing character, personality or self-schema of an individual.

Self-reflection “I’ve been a soccer player since I was five years old.” (P9)

Maturity “This time without the team forced me to mature.” (P6)

Self-question “Covid forced me to think: Who am I without soccer?” (P11)

Motivation

Definition: causes of action or belief reflected in *choices* people make (toward a given task), *persistence* exhibited in pursuit of the task, & *intensity* of engagement.

Purpose to train “When you have no idea when you can play again, why train?” (P7)

Training alone “The hardest part is training by yourself, every day alone.” (P4)

Influence to train “Just knowing my teammates were in the same boat, I didn’t want to let them down.” (P10)

Mind State

Definition: the present state of thinking and feeling, consisting of a mental representations and attitudes.

Worry “I also just worried, besides just the technical aspect of my touch on the ball, but more like the competitiveness of not being able to play, wanting to get back to that competitiveness and worrying about that as a player.” (P5)

Shifting mindset “Let's figure out a way that we can, make it feel not as bad or we can make it even feel good or, or feel like we're doing something positive” (P6)

Proactivity “But but there comes a time where you have to say, you know, I'm done being sad and I'm done being angry. These are just emotions that I feel right now. I can use those as fuel to do something better than what I was just doing.” (P6)

Coping Skills

Definition: psychological mechanisms useful in addressing problems, meeting challenges, and managing stress/conflict/anxiety.

Divert attention “It helped to not be as focused on myself, and like, what I’m missing out on. Just like being more team oriented, like, this has got to be a lot worse for freshmen.” (P5)

Manage time “It was difficult to get on a routine initially. But once I understood that I need -- not like a super strict schedule -- but to make sure that I put on a calendar or journal or whatever like that... just being more conscious about the way that I spend my time.” (P12)”

Goal setting	“From an individual goal standpoint. I guess I shifted a lot more focus into the physical aspects of lifting and running more and getting into the weight room.” (P5)
Reassigning	“And it wasn't until I started thinking ahead -- we're going to play Notre Dame; we're going to have to do a lot to be there and show ourselves well. Like that, kind of shifted my focus a bit more to that macro scale.” (P5)

Situational Factors: Definitions and Examples

Resources	Definition: assets available to an individual to facilitate effective functioning, adaptation, and response to environmental factors.
Campus resources	“It would be nice to get into the training room, to see [the trainer].” (P2)
Physical resources	“Just having no place to train is the most frustrating. Even the weight room being closed. We have a [pull up bar] and a yoga mat in our apartment, but that is it. You have nowhere to go, nothing you can do.” (P7)
Influence	Definition: an effect on one's character, development, thinking, emotion, or behavior.
Teammate relationships	“We spend a lot of time talking to each other. It helps knowing that we all are going through the same stuff.” (P7)
Coaches	“The coaches were always there for us.” (P7)
Parents	“My dad helped a lot. He just said, expect the worst, and be pleasantly surprised.” (P10)