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## "IT'S MORE THAN JUST A GAME": NCCAA DIVISION II STUDENT-ATHLETES' PERCEPTIONS OF COACH CARING

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**“IT’S MORE THAN JUST A GAME”: NCCAA DIVISION II STUDENT-  
ATHLETES’ PERCEPTIONS OF COACH CARING**

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Science  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jordan Andee Schools  
May 2019

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my family, especially my daughter, Kylee. You are wise beyond your years and have a confidence that should be both feared and admired. One day sweet girl, we will write that article with Schools and Schools as the author. I know you will reach all your goals, but remember, anywhere, anytime that you need anything, count me in!

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and inspired me to pursue my dreams. You have most definitely had a profound impact on my life.

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I do not fear the soldiers, for my road is made open to me; and if the soldiers come, I have God, my Lord, who will know how to clear the route. It was for this that I was born!

I find peace in knowing that if at any point in my journey, I don't know what to do, I do not have to be afraid—I have God, my Lord and He will clear the way—because He created me and called me for this. I would like to leave you with my favorite scripture which inspires me and gives me strength, Romans 8:31 “What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us?”

## ABSTRACT

Care within the coach-athlete relationship has only recently been examined (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2017; Gano-Overway, et al., 2009; Knust & Fisher, 2015; Newton, et al., 2007). However, this research has yet to include athletes' perceptions of caring coaching. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine NCCAA DII athletes' perceptions of coach caring. The hope was that we may better understand how athletes perceive that their coaches do and do not care for them. A secondary purpose of the study was to explore whether a Christian context makes a difference in athletes' perceptions of coach caring. Using purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), 11 NCCAA athlete participated in semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 60 minutes. Using CQR (Hill, 2012) and a six-person research team – including two external auditors - 7 major domains were constructed: (I) *Christian University<sup>i</sup> student-athletes' perceptions of how they learned coach caring*; (II) *Christian University student-athletes' definition of coach caring*; (III) *Christian University student-athletes' description of the demonstration of coach caring: Athlete-centered coaching*; (IV) *Christian University student-athletes' definition of a lack of coach caring*; (V) *Christian University student-athletes' description of the embodiment of Christian coach caring*; (VI) *Christian University student-athletes' description of the relationship between coach caring and athlete performance*; and (VII) *additional influences*, where influences such as context, gender, and terminology related to coach caring at Christian University are examined. The final focus of the document is on the ways that sport psychology professionals can better understand how coach caring influences athletic performance.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I provide a brief history of my sport experience followed by a short literature review related to the construct of coach caring as well as a problem statement and purpose of the study. I end this chapter with the limitations, delimitations, and definitions of terms used through this study.

### **Brief Personal Sport History**

My original interest in coach care-athlete performance research stemmed from my own experiences in sport. As someone who has been involved in sport from the age of five, I been exposed to many different styles of coaching. While some of the coaches with whom I had interacted created a culture of care, others did not. As a young person, I was being shaped by the very context that I was in, and I have since come to realize the impact that each interaction with my various coaches has had on my life.

During my elementary years while playing basketball, I was exposed to mostly parent-coaches who looked after the team because we were their children, attempting to protect us from defeat or embarrassment. However, by the time I had entered into my adolescent years, I was introduced to new coaching styles that hinged on ridicule, punishment, and “win-at-all-costs” attitudes. I had begun swimming competitively and was told by coaches to leave all other athletic passions behind. At that time, I was being pushed to be my best and to meet the standards that were expected of me. I was told that I had potential which needed to be unlocked by engaging in numerous hours of practice and being forced to compete until the point of exhaustion. It was made clear that my purpose was to train and compete. My coach had no awareness of who I was as a person or who I wanted to be. All my coach knew of me was that I could swim fast and help win

meets. I was merely a number in an event heat. When I succeeded, I was praised; when I underperformed, I was a disappointment.

After being driven to the point of burnout, I stepped away from the sport I once loved. I was done. I planned to move on from sport and enter college like a normal young adult, without being belittled and berated by a coach who did not care about me. In my mind, good coaches only existed for little kids; you could not have care and high-level performance in the same arena.

I chose to go to the same college that my entire family had gone to—a Christian university. The university was founded as an institution to train young men to be evangelists; however, in more recent years, their focus expanded to educating young women and men for Christian ministry and other vocations. The university felt like home, and I was ready to start my new sport-free life. Within my first few weeks of being at the university, I was introduced to the basketball coach. I had not played basketball in what seemed like forever, and I was not particularly interested in playing then. However, there was something intriguing about the coach. He seemed different, but I was not sure how. As it approached the time for pre-season conditioning, I spent more time with the team. They seemed to be a “family,” and each athlete spoke highly of the coach, which was not what I had experienced prior in sport. Reluctant of what might happen, I still joined the team, even though I had sworn off sports for good.

Over the course of time, I began to see what a difference having a caring coach could make on my performance, desire, and holistic development as a person. Our coach made a habit of investing time and energy in our lives by having one-on-one conversations that focused on our lives holistically, and not just solely based on

basketball. Because of this purposeful dialogue, he knew us as individuals; he knew various aspects of our lives outside of sport. I soon found myself falling in love with sport again. I enjoyed practicing, playing, and simply being a part of a team, which I viewed as my family. I was loved by my team as well as my coach, and I felt that love manifest into me becoming a better athlete and person. For the first time in a long time in my sport experience, my performance excelled without having care withheld.

My college basketball coach's example became the benchmark for how I would view what I considered to be a caring coach. It also informed my thoughts on how the coach-athlete relationship has an impact on various components of an athlete's life, both in and out of sport. Through my experiences, I realized that the ways in which we (athletes, students, parents, etc.) interact and are interacted with ultimately help shape our lives and the views we hold. For me, sport had become tainted during high school through the negative interactions I had with coaches; however, my interest in sport became restored in college through the positive interactions I had with my college head coach. Understanding the impact that care, and the lack thereof, has on an athlete is a topic that I feel is of vital importance due to the complexity of the relationships formed through sport. It is my hope that as we examine these relationships, we will be able to better contribute to what are "best practices" in coach development, and aid in sport psychology professionals' understanding how coach caring influences athletic performance.

## **Brief Literature Review**

In this section, a brief literature review is given focused on the constructs of care, religious motivations to care, and religious scholars' definitions of love. I go into greater detail about each of these constructs in Chapter II: Literature Review.

**Ethic of care.** The Ethic of Care (Gilligan, 1982), also known as EoC, has been widely examined over a few fields (philosophy of education, psychology, etc.) but most recently in physical education and sport psychology (see Fisher, Bejar, Larsen, Fynes, & Gearity, 2016; Fisher, Shigeno, Bejar, Larsen, & Gearity, 2017; Gano-Overway, Newton, Magyar, Fry, Kim, & Guivernau, 2009; Knust & Fisher, 2015; Lachman, 2012; Newton, Magyar, Kim, et al., 2007; Noddings, 2005). The founder of EoC, Carol Gilligan (1982), as well as others who have built upon its foundation, believe care to be a relationship that is built upon the engrossment with and motivational displacement for an other (the cared for) by a carer (Noddings, 1984). In other words, the caring relationship entails the carer attending to the needs of the cared-for as a reality in a reactive as well as responsive manner (Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984). Care itself can be carried out through the larger community of athletics such as the administration or athletic department. However, at its core, care must be expressed as an interaction between two humans – inherently one that has power over the other - such as within the parent-child or coach-athlete relationship.

**Coach care-athlete performance relationship.** What is the caring coaching-athlete performance relationship? As stated previously, while care has been examined in other fields, it has only been recently studied in the context of physical education, sport psychology, and coaching (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2017; Gano-Overway et al., 2009; Knust & Fisher, 2015; Newton et al., 2007). The relational aspect of coaching,

similar to that of a teacher-student relationship, is complex, particularly in terms of how to define coach caring and its impact on athlete performance. Though recent studies have been conducted regarding coach caring, there has yet to be a study which seeks to understand the athletes' perceptions of the care they receive from coaches. As one of my committee members pointed out, it is also important to note the difference between the perception of care and actual care. This means that, for example, abusive coaching behaviors may sometimes be perceived as care by an athlete; however, they do not meet the descriptions according to the care framework described in the following chapter.

For the current study, I utilized a modified semi-structured interview guide based off of coach caring studies by Fisher and colleagues (e.g., Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015) to interview 11 National Christian College Athlete Association (NCCAA) Division II (DII) student-athletes at one college to understand their perceptions of the impact that caring coaching has on their performance and development.

**Christian care.** What role might religion play in athletes' perceptions of coach caring at a Christian college? Although athletes' perceptions of caring coaching was the primary focus of the proposed study, an understanding of literature related to the religious motivation to care within a Christian community is also important to consider (Mayseless, 2016). For example, Mayseless (2016) believed that by exploring Christians' use of prayer, religious convictions, and call to action, researchers may be better able to understand whether Christians might view their personal values as complimentary to the caring behaviors. However, just professing the Christian faith does not mean that a person will apply or properly execute care in relationships with others (Held, 2006).

Though it is recognized that religious beliefs may inform one's ethics and morals, other factors such as caring habits, knowledge, and imagination are necessary in moral consideration (Hamington, 2004). While acknowledging that having a Christian ethic paired with a care ethic may resonate with those who adhere to the Christian faith, moral philosophers also recognize that this is not the only means to achieving a caring relationship (see Held, 2006, for example). As one of my committee members pointed out, it is also important to understand the relationship between what the term "carer" means in the EoC framework versus what "caregiver" means in pastoral and theological terms.

**Expressions of love.** Lastly, what is the relationship between an Ethic of Care and love? Religious scholars have explored the concept of love by examining four types and their individual expressions: *Eros, philos, storge, and agape* (Brand et al., 2015; Hoexter, 2016; Lewis, 1960). For example, eros (see Proverbs 5:18–19) is defined as love derived from passion, philos (see Luke 11:8) is defined as a brotherly love, and storge (see Romans 12:9–10) is the natural love between family members (Brand et al., 2015; Hoexter, 2016; Lewis, 1960). In contrast, agape (1 Corinthians 16:14) love is expressed as unconditional love that is deliberate (Brand et al., 2015; see also Lewis, 1960, Manby, 2012, and Nelmes, 2007). In addition, according to the Christian Bible in 1 Corinthians 13, the values of love hold true for care as well. It is important to differentiate between the uses of these four expressions of love in the context of caring coaching. In other words, we need to understand the meaning of the word "love" when/if it is used by coaches or athletes in the particular context of sport. For example, when a coach expresses unconditional love for their athletes, are they emulating the fundamental

principles of care as an action rather than a feeling, or meaning something different entirely?

Also of importance is what is meant as “tough love” within the coaching context (Flett, Gould, Griffes, & Lauer, 2013). For some coaches, tough love is the way they express their care by demanding the athlete’s best. Similarly, the Apostle Paul admonished the Corinthian church out of love by saying that his stern words were not to condemn, but rather to correct actions that would otherwise hinder their salvation (2 Corinthians 7:2–12).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Care within the coach-athlete relationship has only recently been examined in interviews with NCAA DI head and assistant coaches (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2017; Gano-Overway, et al., 2009; Knust & Fisher, 2015; Newton, et al., 2007). However, this research has yet to include student-athletes’ perceptions of coach caring. Without knowing how student-athletes perceive coach caring, it cannot be assumed that coaches are acting in a caring way or that their version of caring is being perceived in the way they intended it.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine NCCAA DII athletes’ perceptions of coach caring. The hope was that we may better understand how athletes perceive how their coaches do and do not care for them. A secondary purpose of the study was to explore whether an Evangelical Christian context makes a difference in athletes’ perceptions of coach caring. Therefore, the guiding research questions were: (a) in what

ways do student-athletes feel that their coaches demonstrate care? and (b) in what ways has an athlete's religion/spirituality shaped the way they understand and perceive care?

### **Limitations**

1. Participants of the study consist of members of multiple NCCAA DII men's and women's athletic teams at the same institution.
2. Participants of the study are self-identified Christians.
3. The coaches of each team are self-identified Christians and work at a Christian University.
4. Sports offered at this school include: Baseball, basketball, cross country, golf, soccer, tennis, and volleyball.

### **Delimitations**

1. Participants in the proposed study are located in the southeastern United States.
2. All interviews took place in person, individually, over the course of a few days on or near the university where the participants attend.

### **Definitions**

Agape Love – “Unconditional love that is always giving and impossible to take or be a taken. It devotes total commitment to seek your highest best no matter how anyone may respond. This form of love is totally selfless and does not change whether the love given is returned or not” (Brand et al., 2015; Nelmes, 2007, para. 5).

Christianity – “The religion based on the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, or its beliefs and practices” (Christianity, n.d.).

Conviction – A conviction is considered to be a “strong persuasion or belief” (Conviction, n.d.).

Engrossment – When one chooses to step “out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s” (Noddings, 1984, p. 24).

Eros – Love stemming from desire or passion, such as a sexual drive (Brand et al., 2015; Lewis, 1960).

Ethic of Care (EoC) – Ethic of Care is an ethical theory pertaining to the practices of care. In EoC, it is considered a relationship which contains two fundamental components: Engrossment and motivational displacement (Gilligan, 1982).

Koinonia – A Greek word meaning fellowship, community, or joint participation (Mbaya, 2012).

Motivational Displacement – This is what happens when a person has a displacement of interest from [their] own reality to the reality of the other” (Noddings, 1984, p. 14).

National Christian College Athletic Association – A 501(c)3 not-for-profit association, whose purpose is to “provide a Christian-based organization that functions uniquely as a national and international agency for the promotion of outreach and ministry, and for the maintenance, enhancement, and promotion of intercollegiate athletic competition with a Christian perspective” (National Christian College Athletic Association, n.d.).

Pastoral Care – “Pastoral care is a person-centered, holistic approach to care that complements the care offered by other helping disciplines while paying particular attention to spiritual care. The focus of pastoral care is upon the healing, guiding, supporting, reconciling, nurturing, liberating, and empowering of people in whatever situation they find themselves” (Rumbold, n.d., as cited in Thomas, 2015, p. 7)

Philos – Brotherly love, similar to that of close friends (Brand et al., 2015; Lewis, 1960).

Storge – Love naturally shared between family members (Hoexter, 2016; Lewis, 1960).

Tough Love – This is practicing a demanding or hard coaching style that criticizes poor performance while also letting the athlete know that the criticism is done out of care (Flett, et al., 2013).

Values – Values are verbs—or actions— that act as a guide in various situations while allowing us to be held accountable and prove what we believe (Sinek, 2011).

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature pertaining to the current study. I begin with an overview of the Ethic of Care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). I then present literature which examines the relationship between coach caring and athlete performance (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2017; Gano-Overway, et al., 2009; Knust & Fisher, 2015; Newton, et al., 2007). This is followed by an outline of Christian care (Bain-Selbo & Sapp, 2016; Bennett et al., 2005; Egli, et al., 2014; Mbaya, 2012; Wilson, 2014). I then close with a detailed description of the meanings of the word *love* (Brand et al., 2015; Hoexter, 2016; Lewis, 1960).

### **Literature Review**

Researchers have explored the construct of care in a variety of fields and professions such as nursing and teaching (Lachman, 2012; Noddings, 2005;). In addition, having the ability and desire to place one's needs above your own in these professions is essential to a caring relationship (Noddings, 1984). According to Fisher and colleagues (Fisher, Bejar, Larsen, Fynes, & Gearity, 2016; Fisher, Shigeno, Bejar, Larsen, & Gearity, 2017), the construct of care can also be useful when exploring the coach-athlete relationship; coaches in their studies describe how, in their minds, a caring relationship with athletes can improve athlete performance, especially if it is first foundationally defined as the holistic development of student-athletes.

To relate a care perspective to the current study, I think about applying care theory to evaluate athletes' perceptions of the effect of the coach in their lives. Noddings (1984) discussed how the one who is giving the care, the coach in this case, will act from afar, meaning their influence goes deeper than just being in the athlete's presence; as

Noddings (1984) put it, “The student is infinitely more important than the [school] subject” (p. 20). As I attempted to gain insight into athletes’ perceptions of caring coaching, it was important to understand what care is as well as what athletes believed care to be.

### **Ethic of Care**

As stated previously, the subject of care has been studied in the fields of theology, philosophy, educational psychology, and more recently, in physical education and sport psychology (see Fisher et al., 2016, etc.). For example, Gilligan (1982)—the founder of the Ethic of Care or EoC—contended that care impacts both self and others. Gilligan was the first researcher to describe the care perspective. Gilligan (2008) posited a main tenant of Care Theory in that each person has varying degrees of dependence and interdependence with one another: “It calls attention to the fact that all human relationships, public and private, can be characterized both in terms of equality and in terms of attachment, and that both inequality and detachment constitute grounds for moral concern” (p. 32). Gilligan also described two distinct dimensions to moral development and human relationships: the justice perspective and the care perspective (Gilligan, 2008).

Gilligan’s (1982) foundational care research highlighted how men and women may be socialized to think differently about moral issues. For example, in her work, a second moral orientation—a care orientation—was discovered after she interviewed women about whether or not to keep their unborn child (e.g., the ultimate moral choice). This extended previous work by her mentor Kohlberg (1981) whose moral development model just contained a justice orientation (appealing to objectivity) and was developed

using an all-male sample. Gilligan (1982; 2008) described a caring relationship to be rooted in all participants having a voice and being respected and heard. She also noted the need for responsiveness within the caring relationship.

However, as Gilligan (1982) noted, in all moral relationships (containing both dependence and interdependence), power dynamics will be present. In addition, as Meyers (1998) stated, “No amount of care will make the problems of power disappear altogether” (p. 154). Just as in coaching, when one is charged with caring for an athlete, power over that person is inevitable due to the nature of responsibility.

Noddings (1984) furthered Gilligan’s (1982) work by describing a caring relationship as an interactive exchange between two parties, the carer and the cared-for (Noddings, 1984). According to Pettersen (2011), in this relationship, both parties involved are given similar regard (Pettersen, 2011); however, Noddings (1984) believed that the carer has greater responsibility in the relationship than does the cared-for. The carer also usually holds more power (Noddings, 1984).

Noddings (1984) also stated that a caring relationship contains two components that are fundamental to care: *Engrossment* and *motivational displacement*. *Engrossment* is the act of caring without motives in addition to being both attentive and receptive to the cared-for’s needs (Noddings, 1984). Noddings (2005) argued that engrossment is similar to empathy in that it is feeling what the cared-for is feeling and then trying to express it. This expression of engrossment is defined as *motivational displacement*, when the carer puts their own needs aside so that the needs of the cared-for are primary (Noddings, 1984, 2005). Noddings (1984) described care further as “...stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s” (p. 24).

Consequently, Noddings (1984) stated that care is then built upon the foundation of relationship, a relationship that is both self- and other-serving. As a result of the strong relational aspect involved in the act of caring, emotions are considered to be valued and assist in guiding and cultivating an Ethic of Care (Held, 2006). Emotions and feelings such as love, respect, empathy, and responsiveness allow for the concern of the carer to then be placed onto the cared-for. This action is called *displacement of interest*. It allows for the carer to view the cared-for's interests, needs, and desires as a reality that they must attend to and pursue (Held, 2006; Kierkegaard, 1941; Noddings, 1984). Noddings (1984) defined the caring relationship best saying:

When we see the other's reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream. When I am in this sort of relationship with another, when the other's reality becomes a real possibility for me, I care (p. 14).

When we conceptualize care in this manner, it becomes apparent how reactive and responsive care is, requiring a consistent relational transaction between two human beings (Noddings, 1984).

Understanding the need for and having a desire to care is the beginning step. However, one cannot simply stop there. Responding to the needs of the cared-for via action is a necessary component in care (e.g., Fisher et al., 2017; Mayseless, 2016; Noddings, 1984). Noddings (1984) maintained that action must take place in order for it to be a true caring relationship; in fact, even working towards a caring relation is not sufficient if this is not followed up with action. In addition, while the carer endeavors to do no harm, they must also seek to prevent harm (Pettersen, 2011). In other words, when

one is actively working towards the betterment of another while diligently striving for the prevention of harm, then one is acting in a caring manner (Mayseless, 2016). As Pettersen (2011) stated, “Today, thoughts about care have coalesced into an ethical theory with the power to change the way we evaluate personal relationships, professional conduct, public policy, international relations, and global issues” (pp. 51–52).

Gilligan (2008) and Noddings (1984) have both provided a wealth of knowledge and research into Care Theory or Ethics of Care (EoC). However, only recently has the topic of caring been examined in light of the coach-athlete relationship and in physical education/activity contexts (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2017; Gano-Overway, et al., 2009; Knust & Fisher, 2015; Newton, et al., 2007). Coaches play a vital role in the lives of their athletes; they have the ability to shape and influence athletes’ lives, so many believe they also have the responsibility to care holistically for athletes they have been entrusted (Becker, 2013). It has been suggested that teachers and coaches should instruct in a way that demonstrates care so that the deepest and most meaningful form of learning can begin (Gearity, 2009; hooks, 1994). If care can be this transformative in all facets of life, we must attempt to better understand its impact on the coach-athlete performance relationship.

### **The Coach Care-Athlete Performance Relationship**

In accordance with the *U. S. NCAA DI Coach Care-Athlete Performance Relationship Heuristic*, when coaches’ foci is on whole-person development and care rather than simply on improving athletic skills or “winning”, a caring relationship can form and positive results continue to perpetuate the cycle of caring (see Appendix A; Fisher et al., 2019). As mentioned before, coach caring has only recently been a topic of

research, despite the fact that the relationship between the athlete and coach is one of the most important relationships within the sporting world because of its ability to impact performance (Jowett, 2003, 2005). In addition, between the pressure to win and the numerous controversies that arise in athletics, some consider sport to be lacking in moral and ethical excellence (e.g., Ehrmann et al., 2011); this could include a lack of caring coaching.

Recent studies suggest that there are both effective and ineffective relationships between coaches and athletes (Jowett, 2003, 2005) and that care is a factor in effective coach-athlete relationships. For example, Jowett (2003) explored coach-athlete relationships using the 3 C's model that utilizes three interpersonal constructs: Closeness, Co-orientation, and Complementarity. Jowett and colleagues (2012) described closeness "in terms of mutual trust and respect" (p. 183), which can be said to relate to the concept of care as described by Noddings (1984). In 2005, Jowett again examined the dynamics within the coach-athlete relationship and focused on ways in which the relationship could be enhanced or repaired. In addition, results from a study by Egli, Czech, Todd, Shaver, Gentner, and Bieber (2014) suggested that for many coaches, managing relationships is one of the key aspects of their job along with athletic performance responsibilities. However, by far the most work on care in the U.S. and at the NCAA DI level has been done by Fisher and colleagues (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015). They suggest that there are certain components contained within caring coaching that impact athlete performance (see Appendix A).

For example, in their first study, Knust and Fisher (2015) interviewed those female NCAA DI coaches with a mean experience of 20 years within their professions

who were identified as “exemplary” caring coaches by athletes, coaches, and staff. During the interviews, the coaches were given time to reflect upon their personal caring practices. Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, 2012) was used for data analysis and the results showed the emergence of four domains (e.g., major themes): Team as “Family,” Holistic Care of Student-Athletes, Development of Self-as-Coach, and Institutional Care. In the second study, Fisher and colleagues (Fisher, Bejar, Larsen, Fynes, & Gearity, 2016) interviewed nine male, and nine female NCAA DI head coaches. In contrast to the first study, these coaches were selected not because of being identified as “exemplary” carers, but rather because they were at the NCAA DI level. Again, CQR was used for data analysis and similar domains arose in the analysis; domains included developing the holistic/whole person for life, giving athletes what they need to be successful, and building lasting relationships (Fisher et al., 2016). These findings are congruent with their previous work which also showed that NCAA DI coaches placed a high value on the concept of whole-person development (Knust & Fisher, 2015).

If there are some “exemplar” caring coaches (e.g., coaches identified by others as great relationship-builders, holistic developers of athletes, and providers of athlete tools for success), by what means have they been able to acquire these qualities? Research supports the idea that coaches often learn from mentors as well as experiences they had as athletes themselves (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al, 2018; Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015; Werthner & Trundel, 2006). Ehrmann (2011) –a former professional football player and defensive coordinator for the Gilman School – affirmed these results stating that his own football coaching style was “a hodgepodge of unsorted, memory-driven impulses” (p. 48). This tends to be a common thread among coaches. They have

been influenced either positively or negatively by previous coaches and experiences; however, “exemplar” coaches choose to replicate the positive coaching experiences they’ve had (e.g., Fisher and colleagues, 2018). Unfortunately, it is also true that when a coach learns roles and behaviors within an uncaring environment, such as being shouted at to perform better, then those are the actions which later may get applied (subconsciously) in work with their own teams (Luschen & Sage, 1981).

Further, in the case of uncaring coaches, Gearity (2009) showed that athletes described poor coaches as uncaring when their interests were in themselves rather than others and when they provided very little support—emotionally or relationally—to the athlete (Gearity, 2009). His research included 33 athletes from various levels of competition from youth to professional participating in soccer, baseball, basketball, softball, or football. These participants took part in an interview where they were asked, “Tell me about a specific time you experienced poor coaching” (Gearity, 2009, p. 51). The answers were then broken down into five themes of poor coach behavior: *Not teaching, unfair, uncaring, inhibiting, and coping*. According to participants, these types of coach behaviors lead to athlete withdrawal from the relationship and ultimately to decreased performance. It is also important to note that harmful or uncaring actions can take place, even if the overall rights of the other are not being violated (Perrersen, 2011). In addition, an athlete can still be performing well, and the program can be experiencing success even within an uncaring environment.

In contrast, caring coaches in previous studies expressed care by viewing team as “family”, working to build lasting, meaningful relationships and executing individualized care (Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015). The view of “team as family” creates a

system where the coach or coaches are viewed as parents and the players are viewed as the children (Knust & Fisher, 2015). This idea replicates a maternal type of care, where the parent has an instinctual need to care for the child (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). This need to care can, in turn, encourage the building of lasting relationships, where the coach has a desire to know about the athlete's life outside of the context of sport (Fisher et al., 2016). However, as one committee member pointed out, it is crucial to examine each individual's understanding and experience of the word "family", due to the fact, family is a socially constructed concept, and each athlete has their own experience and understanding of what that word means; some family experiences leave lasting and damaging effects.

Lastly is the concept of executing individualized care, where the coach recognizes those on the team as both athletes and individuals (Knust & Fisher, 2015). In doing so, the coach is viewing the relationship as an interpersonal interaction, which allows the athlete to feel as though they matter as a person. These forms of caring relationships are cultivated over time, and, often times, become reciprocal (Held, 2006).

In another study, Fisher and colleagues examined the ways that twenty-three (14 female, 9 male) assistant coaches defined and implemented care across nine different sports (Fisher et al., 2017). In their study, four domains were constructed: (a) development of care, (b) definitions of care, (c) manifestations of care, and (d) factors influencing care. They reported that two of the ways that NCAA DI assistant coaches demonstrated their care was through communication and relationship-building. In other words, it appears that when assistant coaches have support from their immediate supervisors (e.g., head coaches) to engage in clear communication and relationship-

building, they are able to experience a connected relationship with their players rather than a transactional exchange (Ehrmann, et al., 2011).

**The coach caring-athlete performance heuristic.** Fisher et al. (2019) argued in the coach care-athlete performance model (see Appendix A) that based on previous findings focused on coaches' perceptions of caring, when a coach defines care as whole-person then demonstrates that care, coaches believe that athletes will perceive that care. After that, one or both of the following may happen: the athlete gives more effort, which leads to increased performance, and/or the athlete develops holistically, which all leads to the coach feeling successful and perpetuating the cycle (Fisher et al., 2019). Whole-person care and development means not just helping the athletes become better performers, but also better citizens at large. Fisher and colleagues believe that coaches must equip athletes with the tools necessary to succeed, both in their sport and in the community.

However, to date, previous care studies by Fisher and colleagues have not examined the perception of care from the athlete's point of view. Following Noddings, they rightly pointed out that the act of caring is not complete until the cared-for has recognized the care they are receiving (Noddings, 1984, 2005). Questions remain concerning how athletes perceive care and how that perception impacts performance. Noddings asserted that when a caring relationship is formed, the cared-for conceptualizes the care and then responds, similar to that of a child smiling in response to its mother's care (Noddings, 2005). In parallel, an athlete might respond by giving more effort to their performance (see Appendix A). In this sense, coach caring might be seen as connected to athlete motivation (e.g., caring as external motivation for athletes who want to feel valued

and develop more holistically as well as be more congruent with the coaches' wishes; Jowett, 2005; Mayseless, 2016), although this relationship has yet to be explored. Due to the cyclical nature of the coach care-athlete performance relationship heuristic (see Appendix A), the coach then feels successful, which then encourages future care (Fisher et al., 2019).

However, while it is true that care can serve both self and other, it is important that desires of self do not supersede the needs of the cared-for (Noddings, 1984). Ultimately, the focus of the carer remains on attending to the cared-for (Fisher et al., 2017a). When a coach places the needs of self—such as winning or titles—over the needs of the athletes whom they are responsible for, care can change into coercion (Noddings, 2005). This can often arise from a “win-at-all-costs” attitude where the focus is on the outcome, not the process. When this behavior takes place, athletes may feel that if they give satisfactory performance, they will receive care; however, if their performance is less than satisfactory, they will have care withheld from them. This is not a representation of true care which views both the carer and the cared-for as mutually interconnected (Pettersen, 2011).

### **Christian Care**

As someone who adheres to the Christian faith, I have read about examples of care dating back to Biblical times. These examples include the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-39), the Apostle Paul's ministry and care to the churches (Ephesians 6:23-24), and Jesus giving His life as a sacrifice for humankind (Mathew 20:28). These illustrations, and many others, serve as a model for pastoral care, and care in general. Care in a similar sense to the Ethic of Care is not only a feeling but rather an action that is lived out

through one's values and informed by one's beliefs. In this sense, care is then embraced as a part of discipleship to the Christian faith (Mayseless, 2016).

In addition, there are many arguments that can be made for the motivation behind the carer's actions such as instinct, moral obligation, and religious responsibility (Mayseless, 2016; Noddings, 1984). However, in sport, it appears that care and relationships are not at the forefront of many coaches' priorities (Cumming, Smoll, Smith, & Grossbard, 2007; Gearity & Murray, 2011). Some coaches place value on results over relations. This makes sense because coaches work within systems, and systems, organizations, and even institutions cannot care; they are not capable of relational interaction (Fisher et al., 2016; see also Noddings, 2005). However, in order for care to occur, those who work within these social structures need to help create the opportunity for care to succeed and thrive (Kawamura, 2013). Therefore, Christian Ethics - much like the Ethic of Care - is at the same time an orientation, motivation, and action which leads to the displacement of interest that I referred to in an above section. The difference between an Ethic of Care and Christian care, however, rests in what urges the motivation. For a Christian, care is a part of our embedded theology—the implied teachings of daily Christian practices that are engrained in the fabric of a faith community (Stone & Duke, 2013). Care is an act that Christians do not see as separate from themselves because it is a calling, or expectation, that is instructed to be followed based on Biblical examples (see Leviticus 19:18, Luke 10:29-39, Philippians 2:4). It is also important to note that in many ways, care - in terms of Biblical references - is spoken about in terms of love; I further examine this idea in the following section.

Within the context of sport, those who work within the athletic department have the ability to support and encourage a care ethic within each team as part of the larger care community on campus (Close, n.d.). As one of my committee members noted, this type of community can resemble that of the Christian concept of Koinonia, which means fellowship, community, or joint participation (Mbaya, 2012). In a Christian context, this would be seen as the coming together of like-minded people for the purpose of edification and for sacred rituals. Similarly, in a secular context, Koinonia is demonstrated by the sport community including administration, teams, and fans, creating a culture that encourages both structure—assigned roles and statuses—and *communitas*—spirit of community (Bain-Selbo & Sapp, 2016; Mbaya, 2012). However, it should come as no surprise that in athletics today, coaches feel discouraged from expressing love, empathy, and engrossment, and they shy away from true communication because it deviates from the cultural norm of athletic toughness (Ehrmann, Ehrmann, & Jordan, 2011).

In a study conducted on experiences of Christian prayer in coaching, six NCAA DI coaches (three male, three female) were purposefully sampled in order to explore the phenomena (Egli, et al., 2014). Five of the participants identified as Caucasian and one identified as African-American. The researchers used a humanistic framework and existential-phenomenological interviews (Dale, 1996) to understand the lived experiences of each coach. After bracketing and analysis, four uses of prayer were constructed from data: (a) *performance prayers*, (b) *prayer routine*, (c) *thankfulness*, (d) and *God's will*. For example, results demonstrated that some coaches felt as though God placed them where they were (God's will) so that they could impact the lives of their athletes. If

religious coaches feel as if it is their responsibility (through God's will) to positively impact athletes and help them develop holistically, I believe it is important to understand the aspects of Christian care both as a motivation and as a practice.

Many coaches use their Christian ideologies and values as tools in the sport context which they report helps them form and strengthen relationships within their teams (Egli, et al., 2014). However, caring relationships do not require identical ideologies or values (Pettersen, 2011); as Noddings (2005) suggested, "Without imposing my values on an other, I must realize that my treatment of him may deeply affect the way he behaves in the world" (p. 6). In a recent study which focused on the caring practices of NCAA Division I assistant coaches, those who worked at a Christian or religious institution stated that they felt their institution matched and supported their philosophies on student-athlete care (Fisher et al., 2017). In the Christian faith, God and Jesus are the examples of care and serve as role models for how Christians are to live their lives (Maysless, 2016). If the Christian faith is then understood as a guide which informs and influences certain coaching behaviors, it is important to examine how religion intersects with coach-athlete relationships.

Many Christian coaches view God as a source of strength, as one who provides opportunities as well as guidance (Bennett, Sagas, Fleming, & Boenn, 2005; Egli, et al., 2014; Wilson, 2014). This guidance often informs the care that coaches give to athletes. Decisions concerning members of their team become influenced by coaches' moral and religious convictions. These convictions then impact coaches' views and practices regarding player growth and can often lead to a focus on holistic development (Egli, et al., 2014). Furthermore, results from the study on Christian prayer in coaching mentioned

above suggested that prayer is frequently used by coaches as a way to unite a team and build relationships (Egli, et al., 2014). When prayer is used in this way, it helps coaches shift from a transactional relationship towards a transformative relationship (Ehrmann et al., 2011) where coaches view themselves as role models and accept the responsibility of the relationships in which they engage.

However, just because one acts in a certain way due to religious beliefs does not mean that the person cares. The caring relationship is multi-faceted (Close, n.d.; Noddings, 1984). Furthermore, it has been suggested that even though religious convictions may inform one's morality, their caring habits, knowledge, and imagination are also necessary in moral consideration (Hamington, 2004). While action is a vital component in care, beliefs, values, and motivation may also inform how and to some extent even why one cares.

Further, those from both the theological side of care as well as the Ethic of Care have agreed that while aspects of the EoC framework may be akin to that of the Christian concept of caring, there are stark differences that cannot be ignored (Noddings, 1984; Ryan, 2009). For example, Noddings (1984) believed that agapism, or universal love, is primarily unattainable and a distraction. She also felt as though agapism made love, and potentially even care, obligatory; therefore, this would mean that only those whom were closest to the carer would be cared for.

While I agree that differences do indeed exist, I would additionally argue that as one who adheres to the Christian faith, I see that there are numerous similarities. I view my Christian ethic as a complementary piece to my care ethic. Subsequently, I also agree with Held (2006) who stated that, "When a morality depends on a given religion, it has

little persuasiveness for those who do not share that faith” (p. 21). Once more, I would like to clarify that my position is that a Christian ethic can complement a care ethic; however, it is not necessary to hold those values in order to engage or be successful in caring relationships. I do believe that the understanding that unconditional love is at the crux of Christian adherence, as noted in 1 Corinthians 13:13, and arguably, even care itself, is crucial in helping to explain why being Christian may have an effect on one’s conception of coach caring.

### **Expressions of Love**

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7, New International Version)

Love is a term which can lead to confusion. It is complex in nature, holds many connotations and meanings, and elicits different emotional responses based on interpretations (Maysless, 2016). In the Christian Bible, which contains large portions originally authored in Koine Greek, love is distinguished by four separate terms each with its own explicit meaning: *Eros*, *philos*, *storge*, and *agape* (Brand et al., 2015; Hoexter, 2016; Lewis, 1960). For example, *Eros*, which yielded the English word *erotic*, is the expression of love that stems from desire and passion, such as sexual drive. It is circumstantial at best, meaning that it requires certain stipulations in order to exist and can, therefore, fade. *Philos*, best known as brotherly love, is the expression of love most often resembling that of close friends. However, *philos* can be seen as conditional as

well, in that it is subjective to wrong-doing, time, distance, and various other parameters that could instantaneously alter the relationship (Brand et al., 2015; Lewis, 1960). *Storge*, the expression of love between family members, is an instinctive form of love. While it adheres to less conditions than *eros* and *philos*, it has an instinctual essence that requires a relative connection formed by familiarity, which makes it subject to stipulation. Lastly, there is *agape* love, which expresses love as unconditional. This type of love is what the belief in the Christian faith is built upon. It has been described as “a deliberate and unconditional love that is the result of choices and behaviors rather than feelings and emotions” (Manby, 2012, p. 32). *Agape* love is not only the driving factor in the choice to love, but also in the actions displayed as a product of the love.

In a previously mentioned study related to NCAA DI assistant coaches, it was found that they often viewed (appropriate) love as an aspect of the care they felt for their athletes (Fisher et al., 2017). This love appears to be *agape* love; when a coach experiences *agape* love for an athlete, it allows the focus to be on whole person care due to the removal of conditional factors such as performance. This unconditional love emulates engrossment (Noddings, 1984), which is necessary in care. In practice, it appears, therefore, that *agape* love occurs when the coach is demonstrating care, without motive, for the betterment of the athlete. It is not love expressed as a feeling, but rather as an action of care which provokes the athlete on the receiving end.

Another type of love that is commonly described in coaching is *tough love*. Tough love is noted as having a demanding or hard coaching style where coaches criticize poor performance while also letting athletes know that the criticism is done out of care (Flett, et al., 2013). This type of love requires communication and relationships to

be formed so that the coach understands the needs of the individual athlete and can react and affirm accordingly (Flett, et al., 2013). Flett and colleagues (2013) argued that if a coach failed to ensure that the athlete knew why the expectations were high and focused on personal instead of performance criticism, then the coaching style is less effective and is often seen as cruel. I would argue that this style of love, if executed properly, has similar characteristics to that of the love referenced throughout the Bible. For example, the apostle Paul portrayed tough love in his letters to the church at Corinth. In his second letter (see 2 Corinthians), he wrote to them saying that the instructions and corrections he gave were coming “out of the abundant love” (2 Corinthians 1:24 English Standard Version) he had for them. This concept is that of calling a person up, rather than calling them out, and in doing so the expectations are being set out of love and with the best interest of the other in mind. These actions parallel that of a coach instructing and correcting their team so that they ensure whole-person development.

However, the problem with the term *tough love* is that it is rarely used in the way defined above. In fact, most often it is used as a cover for an abusive or authoritarian style coaching (Flett, et al., 2013). This is why we must be cautious when we use this term – we need to properly define the parameters of tough love (if we believe in its use) and also be sure to set clear expectations for how it is to be implemented.

In addition, in a true caring relationship, care could be defined as being patient, kind, unselfish, truthful, trusting, forgiving, dedicated, hopeful, and tenacious (Corinthians 13:4–7). The choice to care, much like the choice to express unconditional love, is difficult in that it requires laying aside one’s own needs to serve another.

However, this choice can lead to meaningful involvement and improvement in relationships and performance.

Finally, while it has long been stigmatized for a coach to express love for their athletes, it is helpful to understand that all love is not equal. In fact, for a coach to express unconditional love to a member of their team is to show a deep care, which places that person above the coach him/herself.

### **Summary**

Despite the previous lack of research concerning care within the realm of coach-athlete relationships, recent studies have demonstrated that it is a topic of significance (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015), particularly at the NCAA DI level. While the essential components of the Ethic of Care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) inform the construct of care, the coach care-athlete performance relationship heuristic (see Appendix A) allows for a clearer understanding of the dynamics that exist within the coach-athlete relationship and how to better incorporate care within collegiate programs such as at the NCAA Division I level. Furthermore, by considering how influences such as religious beliefs impact the way coaches approach and even value care, it becomes clear that the care given is greatly influenced by the intricacies of the carer's learned experiences. As we move forward to better understand athletes' perceptions of coach caring, it is vital to understand how athletes define what care is and the ways in which they perceive that coaches demonstrate care toward them. Of secondary interest is how this all plays out in at Christian institution of higher learning.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I present the positional epistemology and ontology that I claim for the current study. I then explain the method that was used, Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, 2012). This is followed by an explanation of the context as well as the procedures for the study. I close by addressing the processes used for data analysis.

#### **Positional Epistemology and Ontology**

Consideration of epistemology or the nature of knowledge, belief and truth as well as ontology or the nature of reality is crucial to understanding the positions from which a researcher constructs and understands their study (Given, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Pernecky, 2016). This study was taken up using a constructivist interpretivist view, meaning, I assume that one's reality and knowledge is socially constructed and that each individual interprets their understanding in their own way (Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As someone who has been involved in sport for the majority of their life, I find that my understandings and experiences were different based on each situation. However, based on my experiences, I perceived coach caring to be a holistic type of care where the team became a family. Because my collegiate basketball career was tied solely to my time at my Christian university, it was common for my team and I to express the fact that we loved each other and that we perceived that our coach loved us. The realities and knowledge that I gained were true to me; however, my teammates may have experienced them differently. As a person who adheres to the Christian faith, I believe that I construct meaning of various events based on my belief systems which influence the ways in which I view the world. My faith is a pillar of who I am. It informs my decisions and gives me peace in the journey I take. I also feel that my

female identity in the sport world has led me to hold the position that my voice and experiences matter because they are uniquely my own and they stand for equality in the midst of a male-dominated society.

Because this research focuses on the coach-athlete relationship, it is important to understand that the reality of the participants in this study is constructed by the social nature of said relationship. By being situated in this understanding, I hold the view that each participant within this study has an individual experience, and that individual experience has meaning, and those meanings inform our data (McLeod, 2011). I also acknowledge that my background or positionality—as an evangelical Christian, a woman, and as an athlete—shapes the way that I interpret a study and will continue to do so throughout the research process (Creswell, 2009; Luker, 2008).

## **Method**

As stated previously, the purpose of this study was to examine NCCAA DII athletes' perceptions of coach caring. The hope was that we may better understand how athletes perceive how their coaches do and do not care for them. A secondary purpose of the study was to explore whether an Evangelical Christian context makes a difference in athletes' perceptions of coach caring. The guiding research questions were: (a) in what ways do student-athletes feel that their coaches demonstrate care? and (b) in what ways has an athlete's religion/spirituality shaped the way they understand and perceive care?

Therefore, the method selected for the current study was Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, 2012). This method was chosen for several reasons. First, Fisher and colleagues used CQR in their previous work on caring coaching in NCAA DI sport. Second, CQR (Hill, 2012) is a qualitative research method that has five key components,

the first of which is the *multiple member research team*. This allows for multiple perspectives to be present throughout the data analysis process. CQR researchers must also use *open-ended questions* for their interviews. Instead of using a Likert scale, semi-structured open-ended questions allow for participants to speak their mind and for the researchers to gather as much data as possible (Hill, 2012). CQR researchers rely heavily on words (e.g., raw data from the transcripts) and label these “core ideas.” Hill (2012) also stated that it is imperative to know the context in which the words are being spoken. *Domains, categories, and core ideas* are used in place of themes and are confirmed by *consensus of the research team* and are then reviewed by at least one *external auditor*. Therefore, it was important to know the background and history of the athletes who were participating in the current study. Depth is also very important when doing CQR; small samples should be utilized to encourage deeper thought and analysis.

A team approach to analysis is also vital (Hill, 2012). When researchers with different experiences and backgrounds look at the same raw data, more perspectives are brought into the fray to complete the analysis. It is also important that all of the researchers come to consensus about the analysis. Hill (2012) used the term “consensus” to describe this process. Hill (2012) stated that reaching consensus demands discussion amongst the research team as well as consideration given to the researcher who conducted the interviews to provide further understanding of the environment and the nonverbal interactions that took place. The next point that Hill (2012) described pertains to how the research is conducted; as she stated, “Following ethical guidelines, trying to conduct the analyses in a trustworthy manner, and attending to the cultural context are

major features of CQR” (p. 11). Finally, Hill (2012) stressed the importance of returning to the data. This allows researchers to tell the story that is consistent with the data.

### **Context**

The National Christian College Athletic Association (NCCAA) is a not-for-profit, Christian-based organization that serves the purpose of “maintenance, enhancement, and promotion of intercollegiate athletic competition with a Christian perspective” (National Christian College Athletic Association, n.d.). The NCCAA’s goal is assisting colleges in producing the leaders of tomorrow and “winners in the ‘game of life’” (National Christian College Athletic Association, n.d.).

An initiative started by the NCCAA called Game Plan 4 LIFE (GP4L) is a character initiative focused on developing the Biblical characteristics of “Love, Integrity, Faith, and Excellence” (National Christian College Athletic Association, n.d.). Both the coaches and athletes are encouraged and challenged to show love throughout all aspects of their lives, not just on the court.

The NCCAA currently has 92 member schools, over 17,000 student-athletes, and offers 24 championship sport options broken down by men’s and women’s teams with six Division I (DI) regions and four Division II (DII) regions. While some athletes within the NCCAA are on scholarship, all of the athletes in the current proposed study will be non-scholarship athletes. One unique aspect of the NCCAA is that it welcomes dual affiliation with schools from the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II and Division III.

## **Procedures**

**Participants.** Eleven NCCAA Division II male and female current and former athletes participated in the current study (see Table 1). All of the participants identified as Caucasian, with four of the participants identifying as male and seven identifying as female. The participants had an age range of 19–33 years (mean age = 26 years). The participant's sports included Basketball, cross country, soccer, and tennis. They had been involved in their sport between 1 and 18 years (mean involvement = 9.6 years). All 11 participants identified as Christian.

**Interview guide.** Prior to data collection, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted to and approved by the University. This included the attachment of a semi-structured interview guide modified from Fisher and colleagues' studies so that it could be used to explore student-athletes' perceptions of coach caring in the current study. In addition, questions regarding student-athletes' religious values were also included.

**Bracketing and pilot interviews.** Both a bracketing and pilot interview was completed before participant interviews began. A bracketing interview consists of the interviewer being asked the same questions as they will ask their participants, in order to recognize preconceived ideas, beliefs, or biases they may have before beginning the interviews with the participants. During the bracketing interview, I became aware of biases such as the impact of my religious beliefs on my sporting experience and the idealistic view I had of the NCCAA context in which I played sport in college. Once the bracketing interview was complete, a question on the interview guide was changed to focus on participants' perceptions of the role of the institution in coach caring.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Sport	Years in Sport	Injuries/Body Issues	How you got started in sport	Year in school	Major/ Profession	Professional Goal	Age	Generation	Disabilities	Religious Identity	Ethnic/ Racial Identity	SES growing up	Indigenous heritage	National origin	Gender Identity
Brooke	Basketball	15	N/A	Mom played	Senior	Sport and Fitness	Physical Therapist	21	Gen Z	N/A	Christian	White	Middle Class	American	USA	Female
Bartholomew	Soccer	3	N/A	Played with friends/MK	Junior	Sport and Fitness	Coaching	20	Gen Z	N/A	Christian	White	Middle Class	Irish	USA	Male
Christina	Soccer	6	Asthma	Playing at school for fun	Junior	Human Services	Counseling	21	Gen Z	N/A	Christian	Caucasian	Lower Class	Irish/ Cherokee	USA	Female
Jen	X Country	1	N/A	Ran Track when younger	Senior	Human Services	Graduate School	19	Gen Z	N/A	Christianity	White	Middle Class	American	USA	Female
Noah	X Country	8	N/A	Mom encouraged him	Junior	Preaching/ Youth ministry	Youth ministry position in Germany	21	Gen Z	ADHD	Christian	White	Middle Class	American	USA	Male
Ace Jackson	Basketball	18	Osgood-Schlatter Disease	Parents encouraged	Senior	Marketing	Youth ministry	21	Gen Z	N/A	Christianity	Caucasian	Middle Class	American	USA	Male
Rocky Cummings	Basketball	14	N/A	Aunt was coach	N/A	Teacher	Continue Teaching	29	Millennial	N/A	Christian	Caucasian	Lower-Middle Class	American	USA	Female
Lindsey	Soccer	13	N/A	Started playing at camp	N/A	Stay at home mom		33	Xennials	N/A	Christian	White	Middle Class	American	USA	Female
Roxas	X Country	7	N/A	Started running for other sports	N/A	Turf Facilities	Facilities Director	26	Millennial	N/A	Christian	White	Middle Class	American	USA	Male
J	Soccer	16	Hip impingement	Brothers played	Sophomore	Human Services	Health Care social worker	19	Gen Z	Reading, Writing, Comprehension Learning disability	Christian	Caucasian	Middle Class	American	USA	Female
Cali	Soccer/ Tennis	13/2	N/A	Soccer from childhood/ Tennis invited to play and thought it was fun	Sophomore	Education (Elementary /ESL)	Teach/ Coach	20	Gen Z	N/A	Christian	White	Upper Class	American	USA	Female

A pilot interview also was conducted with an athlete who played sport in a similar NCCAA context to that of the participants. Conducting the pilot interview gave me insight into the sequencing, flow, and understandability of the interview guide questions so that changes could be made if necessary. Upon the completion of the pilot interview, no changes were made to the interview guide.

**Main study interviews.** Potential athletes at one Christian University were then contacted using purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and via email. Once interested participants were identified, I traveled to the participants' location, as this provided an opportunity to conduct face-to-face interviews, scheduled at the participants' convenience. Due to the nature of this study and the intent to research athletes' perceptions of coach caring at a Christian institution, all participants were from a single collegiate institution. This relatively small sample size allowed for greater depth regarding the participants' stories (Hill, 2012).

Participants were asked to read and sign the informed consent form before the interviews were conducted (see Appendix B). Each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym that was used in place of his/her actual name. The interviews were semi-structured, with a focus on open-ended questions consistent with that of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, 2012) and lasted approximately 30–60 minutes (mean = 45 minutes). The interviews focused on understanding participants' perceptions of care as well as their perceptions of their coaches' caring. Each interview also included demographic and background questions (see Appendix C for interview and demographic/background questions). Each interview was recorded and then transcribed.

The participants' audio recordings, notes, and transcripts were stored in an encrypted computer file on my password-protected personal computer. Only the research team had access to the data. All copies of the audio computer file were deleted after the interviews were transcribed. The identity of the participants will remain confidential in all presentations and publications that result from the collected data through the use of pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis**

Once interviews were completed, a research team was selected—made up of four members from diverse backgrounds—who wrote bias statements prior to analyzing any interview transcripts. Biases about coach caring that the group had prior to the study included the following: Religious affiliations, previous sport experience, past experiences with coaches, previous participation in coach caring research, and research background in sport psychology. Once the statements were circulated, then each individual research team member signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix D) and independently reviewed the transcripts and grouped sections into domains. The domain lists, which Hill (2012) described as, “Meaningful and unique topic areas examined in the interview” (p. 104), were created based on the review of literature and, most importantly, by reviewing the transcripts to find the themes. When sorting the data into different domains, “the researchers think about the different types of ideas that have emerged in the data, develop labels for these different types of ideas, and then place the raw data under these domains” (Hill, 2012, p. 12). The summaries of these domains are the core ideas. Once these ideas were completely fleshed out by the team of researchers individually, they met to come to consensus about what they had constructed.

The team then coded the data blocks into the appropriate domain, again, coming to consensus. Each individual domain is “a unique cluster of data that captures one aspect of the focus of the qualitative study” (Hill, 2012, p. 107). While it is best for each data block to remain in a singular domain, there may have been times where double or even triple coding was necessary. It is also important to note that during the coding process, the research team may have come across some data that was irrelevant to the study. This data was disregarded and left without coding. Once the consensus version was complete, myself and my advisor began the cross-analysis.

During the cross-analysis phase (Hill, 2012), myself and my advisor explored the transcripts to see how many participants described the categories and core ideas across interviews. In order for this process to be done effectively, it requires the researchers to have “immersed themselves in all cases and know the data intimately” (Hill, 2012, p. 119). Once the categorization process is completed, frequencies are used to show the representativeness of the themes. In CQR, a category is considered to be “general” if it consists of data from all, or all but one of the participants. If the category consists of data from over half of the participants, however it does not meet the requirements for general, it is considered to be “typical”. The category is “variant” if it includes data from three participants to half of the participants, and if category contains data from less than three participants it is considered “rare” and were added to larger categories.

Once consensus was reached for the cross-analysis, it was sent to an external auditor for review. In this case, I used two external auditors—one who also worked at a Christian institution and one who did not; both were experienced qualitative researchers. The external auditors also reviewed the transcripts independently prior to looking at the

domain table that the research team had created. Categories and core ideas were checked for a repetitiveness of themes by reviewing the frequency that the category was used across all cases. After completion of the review, the external auditor sent the research team feedback about the “fit” of the domains with actual participant raw data from the transcripts. In this case, the external auditors asked the research team to reflect on the category titled “metaphor of team as family”, pertaining to which domain it should be located in; the idea of tough love, and how it is represented; and the inclusion of the influence of administration. Then, the team met again to decide, through consensus, if they would make recommended changes or not to the domain table, categories, and core ideas.

I also sent each participant their transcript to ensure that their interview experience was represented accurately. No changes were requested by the participants. Some participants also wanted to see the final thematic structure that represents all participants.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss the results from the CQR analysis. Seven domains and 23 categories were constructed from the analysis by a four-person research team and then also two external auditors (see Table 2). The five domains included: (I) *how Christian University athletes learned coach caring*; (II) *how Christian University athletes defined coach caring*; (III) *how Christian University athletes described the demonstration of coach caring: Athlete-centered coaching*; (IV) *how Christian University athletes defined a lack of coach caring*; (V) *how Christian University athletes described the embodiment of Christian coach caring*; (VI) *how Christian University athletes described the relationship between coach caring and athlete performance*; and (VII) *additional influences* such as metaphor of team as family, gender differences, and questionable coach behavior. Using domains, categories, and core ideas, along with quotes from the participants as well as previous literature, I present these findings along with relevant literature.

### **Domain I: How Christian University Athletes Learned Coach Caring**

In the first domain, the athletes described how they had learned what care is. This domain contained three categories: (a) family; (b) past experiences with coaches; and (c) other athletes' stories.

Table 2. Domains, categories, and core ideas

Domains/Categories	Illustrative Core Idea	Frequency
<b>Domain I: How Christian U Athletes Learned Coach Caring</b>		
a) Family	How They Support; Family as Coach; Giving Independence; Encouragement; Family Examples; Providing	10 of 11 (General)
b) Past Experience with Coaches	Comparing/Contrasting Coaches; Seeing What Worked and What Did Not	9 of 11 (Typical)
c) Other Athletes' Stories	Seeing Others Treated Poorly; Other Athletes Tell You That You're Lucky	6 of 11 (Typical)
<b>Domain II: How Christian U Athletes Defined Coach Caring</b>		
a) Holistic Care	Player Development; Personal/life Skills Development	11 of 11 (General)
b) Love	Unconditional; Relational; Spiritual Context	10 of 11 (General)
<b>Domain III: How Christian U Athletes Described the Demonstration of Coach Caring: Athlete-Centered Coaching</b>		
a) Athlete-Coach Dialogue	Give and Accept Feedback; Open Communication	11 of 11 (General)
b) Relationship Building	Relationship Building with Teammates; Importance of Relationship with Coach	11 of 11 (General)
c) Growth as Player and Person	Technical Skills; Better Athlete; Better Person; Tough love	11 of 11 (General)
d) Individualization	Individual Motivation; Individual Attention	7 of 11 (Typical)
e) Goal Setting	Understand Athletes Goals; Help Set Goals; Team Goal Setting	6 of 11 (Typical)
<b>Domain IV: How Christian U Athletes Defined a Lack of Coach Caring</b>		
a) Focus on Winning vs Player Well-being	Attitude; Stats vs Improvement	8 of 11 (Typical)
b) Authoritarianism	Yelling; Toxic Masculinity	6 of 11 (Typical)
c) Lack of Communication	Yell Instead of Explain; Withhold Communication	5 of 11 (Variant)
d) Favoritism	Labeling; Focus on Star Players	4 of 11 (Variant)
<b>Domain V: How Christian U Athletes Described the Embodiment of Christian Coach Caring</b>		
a) Teaching Christian Values	Prayer; Devotions; Spiritual Growth; Christ as Example	11 of 11 (General)
b) Higher Expectations for Christian Coaches	Expected Spiritual Care; Expectation of Attitude	6 of 11 (Typical)
c) Sport as a Gift/Form of Worship	Talent Comes from Christ; Play for Christ	5 of 11 (Variant)
d) Sportsmanship/Role Model	Higher Expectation of Self; Embody Christ	5 of 11 (Variant)
<b>Domain VI: How Christian U Athletes Described the Relationship Between Coach Caring and Athlete Performance</b>		
a) Reciprocal	Removal of Pressure—Freedom to Play Well; Encouraged to Work Hard; Projecting Mood to Athletes; Desire to Play	9 of 11 (Typical)
b) Team Cohesion	They Fight, We Fight; Part of a Family; Togetherness	9 of 11 (Typical)
<b>Domain VII: Additional Influences</b>		
a) Metaphor of Team as "Family"	Coach as Parent; Team as Family; Care Like a Parent; Brotherhood;	7 of 11 (Typical)
b) Gender Differences	Closer Connection to Coach of Same Sex; Willingness to Open up; Assumptions About Care	5 of 11 (Variant)
c) Questionable Coach Behaviors	Giving of Gifts; Showing What a "good man" in Romantic Relationships Should be Like	4 of 11 (Variant)

**Category a: Family.** When the athletes were asked where they felt they had learned what the demonstration of care looks like, 10 of the 11 participants stated that they had learned from a family context. Brooke described her family's care, saying:

They're that rock, that comfort you can always turn to. You know that they'll be there for you as they constantly love you, and they'll help you learn and grow even if you mess up, they'll tell you like 'ok we love you still' like they'll help you grow through that. Uhm for care, they'll give me a hug. They're just there for me. I know I can always lean on them.

The majority of participants, in fact, explained that they learned care from the ways their families demonstrated care towards them through support and encouragement. These results are consistent with Fisher and colleagues' previous studies on care, where assistant and head coaches also reported learning care in the context of family (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2017). In addition, three participants spoke about the experience of having either their mother or father serve as their previous coach.

**Category b: Past experiences with coaches.** Nine of the 11 participants explained that one of the ways they had learned about coach caring was by comparing and contrasting previous coaches. They explained that through these interactions, they were able to see what worked and what did not work. Noah explained this idea saying:

I think that would be the contrast between my cross-country coach in high school and my track coach in high school because our cross-country coach, like I said, he, he rarely cared about anybody but the top seven. Also, uh, he didn't really care when we were tired. He like for example, um, a couple of times after races, like immediately after races, we would have a workout. Also, if we were doing a

workout and we were legitimately tired, like we felt like we couldn't do it anymore, he would expect you to do that anyway. Whereas in high school, or in track, our coach was the opposite. He realized when we were tired before really, we realized that we were tired, and he told us to stop and he cared about all of the runners. So that contrast.

Similarly, Fisher and colleagues (2016) found that previous experiences as athletes also shaped the way that coaches viewed care. These findings are supported by coaching development research which also shows that many coaches learn from their past experiences as athletes (Jiménez, Lorenzo, & Ibáñez, 2009; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003)

**Category c: Other athletes' stories.** Six of the participants stated that by seeing others treated poorly, even if they themselves had not experienced a lack of care, they were learning how coaches should care. For example, Cali described her friend's experience of a lack of coach caring when she said, "She's like my best friend and roommate and I hated to see her lose a love for something that was like super important." J further explained this idea, saying:

I just saw a friend, she's a softball player and she played in college. She is the most talented person I've ever met, and I love her. She loves the sport, but she quit because her coach was terrible and I was like, oh. And she's like, 'Yeah, I wish I had your coach because just seeing him, just like things you post about him, like that, that's what I want'. I got pretty lucky.

## **Domain II: How Christian University Athletes Defined Coach Caring**

In this domain, the athletes explained the ways that they defined coach caring. This was described through two categories: (a) holistic care; and (b) love.

**Category a: Holistic care.** All of the 11 participants described holistic care as a way they feel cared for by their coach. The participants stated that they wanted to experience growth as athletes, while also experiencing growth as a person outside of sport. Christina stated, "I think it's really important for coaches to prepare their athletes to be an adult that's not an athlete one day." Ace Jackson explained this further, too, by saying:

I think it means kind of just like...getting to know the players outside of basketball and getting to create a relationship with them off the court, um, is what I think a big part of coach caring is because it's more than just a game. It's about creating those relationships and creating them to be, you know, a man outside of, of basketball. So, I think that's a big thing is just off court relationships.

He went on to say:

Like I, I again, I keep going back to like the off-court sense of care. But I think that that's a big thing is just really being real with someone on the court and then off the court and really getting, getting deep and like seeing what's going on with a person, with school, with their family and really just being real with someone. I think that that's the root of, of caring for someone.

The type of holistic care described by the participants includes player development as well as personal or life-skills development. In previous sport psychology and coaching psychology literature, it has been stated that the holistic development of an athlete is

crucial to the coach-athlete relationship (Ehrmann et al., 2011; Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2017; Jowett, 2005; Knust & Fisher, 2015;). This concept appears to be consistent with the findings of the current study. This type of coaching behavior has also been labeled as relatedness-supportive behavior according to Self-Determination Theory where the coach is attending to athletes' needs of relatedness by showing care (Rocchi & Pelletier, 2018).

**Category b: Love.** Of the 11 participants in the current study, 10 stated that love is another way they would define care. They described love as being both unconditional and relational, as well as being displayed in a spiritual context. Rocky Cummings illustrated this idea saying:

Because as a Christian, he loved us because we were Christians. As a coach, he loved us because we kind of was like his daughters I think, and you love your daughter. So, it was like Christian love or brotherly love, if that's what we want to call it, but I think that it could be construed as like relationship, like we had personal relationships.

J further explained this saying:

I've been taught that you need to be careful, well not careful but care, like care for people and love people no matter where they come from, no matter who they are, that because you don't know their background and you don't know the little things that you could say could really make somebody mad or upset, just be a positive, uplifting person.

As mentioned earlier, love in the context of caring without motives and being attentive and receptive to the someone's needs resembles what Noddings (1984) defined as engrossment.

It is also important to note that many of the participants referenced love in the spiritual context. As part of the evangelical Christian culture, love is a word that is often used in place of or in conjunction with care. As Cali states when asked about potential other words that could be used instead of care:

I think, in a non-biblical context, this could be kind of misunderstood, but I think just love in general is another, especially like spiritually, just like loving others. Um, I think that could definitely maybe embody that a little better. You know, just like love because I think a part of love is showing care, but a part of love is also other things. So, I think it embodies a lot more.

### **Domain III: How Christian University Athletes Described the Demonstration of Coach Caring: Athlete-Centered Coaching**

This domain highlights the actions and philosophies that the participants believed demonstrate coach caring. Throughout this domain, principles of athlete-centered coaching such as coaching towards self-determination and transformation, collaborative learning for athletes, and the importance of care over results were referenced (Dohsten, Barker-Ruchti, & Lindgren, 2018). The domain is separated into five categories: (a) athlete-coach dialogue; (b) relationship-building; (c) growth as a player and person; (d) individualization; and (e) goal-setting.

**Category a: Athlete-coach dialogue.** One demonstration of coach caring that was mentioned by all 11 participants was athlete-coach dialogue. Brooke said, "I think

you have to care for the kids and communicate with them. Be flexible, be intentional, and knowing the game plays a part”. Bartholomew further described athlete-coach dialogue as:

Um, in regard to like caring for us as people, you know, kind of like what our coach says is, you know, make sure that it's an open line of communication, wanting what's best for us within our lives. Um, in regard to like athletics, you know, make sure that we're not, that we're in under a good headset to play and make sure we're not, you know, caring about the injuries that we picked up throughout the season, that kind of stuff.

Through this, it is clear that the participants expected athlete-coach dialogue to encourage the coach to check in on them and be aware of what they may be focused on. It is important to note that without that open line of communication, it becomes increasingly difficult for the athlete to connect with their coaches (Rocchi & Pelletier, 2018). This type of communication allows for openness and purposeful feedback which focuses on meaningful relationships and transformation rather than transaction (Ehrmann et al., 2011; Fisher et al., 2017; Noddings, 1992).

**Category b: Relationship-building.** In the current study, 11 of 11 athletes interviewed noted that the building of relationships was a vital part of the demonstration of care. Noah spoke about how the relationship built with his coach influences the way that he performed, saying:

The fact that I have a better relationship with my, with my coach here, means that I'm, I actually care about what, uh, what I'm, I actually care more about what I'm doing, and I care more about my performance and how I, how well I do.

While the coach-athlete relationship is essential, it is also significant to note that the relationships built among team members are equally important; therefore, it is crucial that coaches aid in fostering an environment where that is possible. Pill (2018) argued that “All games are social, and thus involve athletes in complex relationships with both coach and teammates”. Cali further explained this idea affirming:

I think he's very concerned with making sure our team as a whole are, we're connecting with each other. Um, so I think that's really important. He doesn't want us to just be good athletes, but he wants us to be good people and he wants us to be connected and that's something obviously you can't force like good chemistry with, like among your teammates and you, you can't force them to be friends and he doesn't expect us all to be friends, but he does a good job at setting us up to be good teammates to each other, I guess.

In previous studies, it was shown that head and assistant coaches view relationship-building as a way that they can demonstrate care for their athletes (Dohsten et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2017). These results are consistent with previous care literature which explains caring as highly relational in nature (Noddings, 1984).

**Category c: Growth as player and person.** In this category, growth was explained by all 11 participants as encompassing technical skills, being a better athlete, and being a better person. As mentioned earlier, the phrase *tough love* may sometimes be used to describe this way of inspiring growth in athletes (Flett et al., 2013). However, as Pill (2018) stated, “While some people might refer to fairness and honesty with a negative tone as ‘tough love’ or constructive feedback, coaches who utilize an athlete-centered approach will find ways to facilitate ongoing communication that empowers

their athletes.” Ace Jackson further explained the need for coaches to be harsh but coupling it with positive and empowering language when he stated:

I think part of it is being, you do have to be kind of harsh at sometimes, but there, you have to also have a lot of positivity and coming here there's a lot of positivity and a lot of like ‘you can do this’. Like, ‘I know I have the confidence, you can do this’, and playing for someone like that was totally different from high school and I really felt that he cared and had confidence in me.

Jen also noted the importance of the coach developing the player and person, declaring:

Um, I think the biggest thing for me was like pushing me, like I know that people like care about me when they challenge me or when they, like they say like do this and I think that I can't, but yes you can, like, I like picked this time for you because I know that you can do it. And so like, even though it was challenging, I feel like that was like the biggest way that I saw that he cared because he pushed me. But it also like helped me feel stronger after I accomplished it. So, kind of like expecting, expecting more kind of. Moving you towards that. Yeah. Just like, and challenging.

Brooke also noted that while caring and empowerment is important, the coach must be knowledgeable about the game and know how to help the athlete improve in her technical and tactical skills; as she said it, it is difficult if a coach is “super caring, but [does] not know the game, you can't be that great coach that you expect. So, if you put the caring and the knowledge together then it just like it flows better for the team” (see Frost, 2009 for example).

**Category d: Individualization.** In the current study, seven of the 11 participants reported that they feel cared for when their coach individualized his actions towards them based on their unique needs. Purdy and colleagues (2016) posited that care requires the coach to see the individuality of their athletes, which Christina illustrated stating:

Something that like we talked about is he, he has 14 players on the team that he has to address 14 different ways kind of thing. So, like he doesn't yell at me, but he'll yell at somebody else because it pushes them to try harder kind of thing.

She continued this idea stating "...it's more than just like the game itself, but like knowing your players individually and like how they handle things and how we, you know, emotions...".

As one external auditor pointed out, part of individualization is the coach showing that they are intentionally investing in the athletes. This investment can come in the form of time or resources. Several of the participants spoke about their coaches taking the time to take them to the doctor or help them in the process of reaching their personal goals.

Noah shared about how his coach showed care asserting:

Okay. So, last year I ran [a big] marathon, and this was obviously outside of cross country, but coach still took the time to, uh, to help train me. And he joined me on some of my runs. So, uh, that, that would be a time that I would say that he cared.

This concept of individualization is congruent with athlete-centered coaching where coaches advocate for individual programming based on the needs and strengths of each athlete (Dohsten et al., 2018; Pill, 2016). Previous studies have also noted the significance of executing individualized care within the coaching context (Knust & Fisher, 2015).

**Category e: Goal-setting.** This category encompasses goal-setting for individuals as well as for the team, and six participants referenced this during the interviews. In some athlete-centered coaching literature, goal-setting is considered to be a helpful assessment and encouragement tool (Pill, 2016). However, Dohsten and colleagues (2018) argued that athletes must have autonomy in the goal-setting process and the coach should be supportive of those goals even if they do not directly benefit the team's performance. This is similar to Noddings' (1984) understanding of motivational displacement, in that the coach would put aside their own needs or goals to attend to the goals of their athlete. Roxas described coach caring using goal-setting as:

Just making sure that, you set goals and they, they're seeing you to it along the way. So, like the beginning of a year, and set a goal of this is what I want to get out of the year and they're going to hold you to that. Then making sure you're taking the proper steps to get to that goal. Yeah. Ultimately, as an athlete, you want to be able to achieve what you set out to.

In addition, participants mentioned that when coaches help create team goals, it allows the group to have a common goal to work towards. Cali spoke about this process and noted that the goals also served as expectations and a way to hold each other accountable:

Um, he, we all meet together and talk about what we want the purpose of our team to be, talk about what goals we want to meet. Like at the beginning of the season we had like a long meeting where we like draw things out, write things out. Um, and then throughout the season he revisits those goals and those purposes of like who we are as a team. Um, he even has this, he even prints, like at the end of that meeting, like prints it all out for us so that we have them to keep,

um, and like reflect on like, okay, these are the things we said we want to be together as a team. These are the kinds of expectations he has for us and then like that we have of him kind of thing.

#### **Domain IV: How Christian University Athletes Defined a Lack of Coach Caring**

In this domain, the participants shared how they would define of a lack of coach caring. As previously mentioned by participants in Domain I, some of the defined behaviors were exhibited by their former coaches while some were from outside observation. There were four categories constructed within this domain: (a) focus on winning vs. player well-being; (b) authoritarianism; (c) lack of communication; and (d) favoritism.

**Category a: Focus on winning vs player well-being.** When a coach shifts their attention away from the payer and onto the results, they are no longer practicing care but rather could be demonstrating coercion (Noddings, 2005). Many times, participants in the current study stated that these behaviors are revealed through a “win-at-all-costs” attitude or the focus being on stats rather than improvement. In fact, eight participants noted that they had experienced a coach who focuses on winning rather that player well-being. Lindsey, noted that these types of behaviors show the coach’s lack of care: “They are not supportive and it's all just about winning. I don't know. Those things are things that stick out to me. I was like, no, he cared about this [the sport], you don't care about people.” Jen further explained the need for a coach to not solely focus on winning when she said:

I think if you have a good balance of like, caring about your team, then you're gonna plan your practices or um, talk about games in a different light than you

would if you only cared about success, you're going to be more invested in like improvement as a team than just like getting numbers or wins or whatever.

According to Noddings' (1984) theory, if the cared-for (e.g., athletes) feel the care they receive is dependent upon their performance, there is no longer true care being displayed because the carer (e.g., coach) is no longer engaged in motivational displacement (Noddings, 1984). While previous research has demonstrated the conflict coaches have expressed between caring for athletes and the need to win (Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015), it has also been shown that these types of behaviors are among the list of reasons athletes end their participation in sport (Pill, 2016).

**Category b: Authoritarianism.** Six of the participants referenced the concept of authoritarianism within sport; however, there are many ways that authoritarianism can be displayed such as yelling, screaming, or belittling. Dohsten and colleagues (2018) used the term “sport as commodity” where the coach is seen as the knower and the athlete is the learner. Because this coaching style has been widely accepted, many athletes have come to expect it from their coaches and might even consider it as “caring” behavior. Ace Jackson gave an example of this:

I kind of expected all coaches to be negative like that and to kind of, just kind of be harsh in that sense. Like I just, I know a lot of coaches, especially public places are really harsh, and they'll cuss you out and everything like that. So, I expected that to be the norm.

Many times, athletes become conditioned to this authoritarian style due to the fact that they are told that it is used because the coach cares. However, when a coach chooses to abuse their athletes, it is clear that care is not present. As Roxas stated:

One of my favorite coaches used to like dog cuss me for like two or three years. And then my senior year was basically the nicest person I ever met just because I took all of his shit. I took all his shit for, for three years and was able to push through it and became a better football player because he like, he wanted me to do well. That was just the way he coached us, because nobody else would care.

As stated in a previous chapter, authoritarian style coaching can often be masked under the term *tough love*; however, when the athlete's welfare is compromised, the coach is no longer displaying the two fundamental tenets of care: Engrossment and motivational displacement (Dohsten et al., 2018; Noddings, 1984).

**Category c: Lack of communication.** While earlier in this chapter the importance of athlete-coach dialogue was highlighted, five of the participants also expressed how they viewed a coach having a lack of communication as a lack of coach caring. They described a lack of communication as yelling instead of explaining and also as withholding communication. When coaches choose to use communication as a transactional exchange, withholding it becomes a form of punishment (Ehrmann et al., 2011). Brooke explained her experience with this stating, "They don't communicate with you. They don't encourage you. They like, they'll do the favoritism, focus on one player and not like anyone else. That's my experience". Communication is not the athlete's privilege, but rather the coach's responsibility, and by withholding it, coaches do a disservice to their athletes (Gano-Overway et al., 2018).

It is also crucial for coaches to provide clear and constructive communication. While feedback is important for an athlete, it is also necessary for the feedback to be given in the correct way at the appropriate time (Pill, 2018). Feedback that is given

unnecessarily or in a stressful time can become more of a distraction rather than an aid.

As J stated:

I would rather have a coach that is on the sidelines not yelling at us than a coach on the sidelines screaming at us because I can't handle that. I'm just like, there's nothing you can literally do right now. Just let me play. Yeah just chill out somewhere. Have a juice pack and sit down.

**Category d: Favoritism.** In the previous category, the concept of favoritism was introduced. However, favoritism goes far deeper than withholding communication; it has been described in previous research concerning coach caring (Knust & Fisher, 2015). In this study, a portion of the participants (4/11) spoke about their experiences with favoritism. Coaches who choose to create stronger relationships with athletes performing at a higher level are often placing conditions on their care; this can ultimately lead to issues within the team (Dohsten et al., 2018; Purdy et al., 2016). Jen spoke about her experiences with favoritism in high school saying, “I feel like definitely the basketball coach was more focused on um, making sure that the star players got people around them to support the star players”. When a coach shows favoritism, it is showing their athletes that they only care for certain people. Noah further explained this asserting:

My cross-country coach in high school, uh, seemed to only care about the top runners, top seven, as evidenced by the fact that our, uh, we got shirts every year and the shirts my senior year on the back, our top runner was, his name is [says runner's name] and uh, on the back of the shirts it said, I run with [runner's name] which implies that he only cares about [that runner], not anybody else on the team.

It appears from results in the current study, therefore, that athletes are aware of favoritism; they see it, they experience it, and it affects them. If it is the responsibility of the coach to develop their athletes, then the coach must ensure that they are developing all, not just some, of their athletes.

### **Domain V: How Christian University Athletes Described the Embodiment of Christian Coach Caring**

The context in which care takes place can inform the way that care is embodied and, to some extent, the motivation behind the care (Mayseless, 2016; Noddings, 1984). In the current study, the participants, who attend or attended a Christian University, spoke about the embodiment of Christian care and the ways in which it influenced their views on coach caring. The four categories which were constructed to represent this domain were: (a) teaching Christian values; (b) higher expectations for Christian coaches; (c) sport as a gift or form of worship; and (d) sportsmanship and role model.

**Category a: Teaching Christian values.** In the current study, all 11 participants reported their coaches taught them Christian values. This is consistent with literature that states that for some, the Christian ethic they hold compliments and pairs with the way they demonstrate caring (see Held, 2006, for example). Some participants stated that their coaches encouraged prayer and devotion time and invested in their spiritual growth. As noted in a previous chapter, coaches sometimes use their Christian ideologies and values to help strengthen relationships within their teams (Egli, et al., 2014). Ace Jackson spoke about his relationship with his coach saying, “I think that also it just a big difference coming to a Christian school and having a coach that wants to see growth in you spiritually and as a man, not just on the court”. Because, as stated before, care can be

lived out through one's values and informed by one's beliefs, the participants felt cared for through the enrichment of their spiritual lives.

Participants also recognized that this concept is unique to the context in which they were in. Roxas spoke about this when he avowed:

This is more on the personalized level because I wouldn't expect like, you know, like whenever I was going through public school, I didn't expect my coaches to like on a personal level, know what I'm, you got to kind of be biased with religion when through that kind of school. Whenever you privatize, like a Christian college, they know exactly like what you believe and how you prepare yourself mentally like, you know, like helping you grow and care about your spiritual life as well, not only from an athletics standpoint, from a personal standpoint they will help you to grow that way as well.

Christina also said:

Um, well, like if I'm, since I attend a Christian university, I assume that like that should be part of like, like dialogue between like your players and stuff like that. Like I think it's important to be able to like be open and like being able to talk about spiritual things I guess like with your coach, and uhm like your coach should be like, I think it's really nice like if a coach like prays with the team or like we have like once a month we would do like worship nights and stuff that as like a community.

**Category b: Higher expectations for Christian coaches.** In the previous category, it was demonstrated that participants understood that the context matters when it comes to Christian care. It was also expressed by participants that, while they

understood that this type of care might only be displayed by a Christian coach, they also recognized that they have higher expectations for a coach who identifies as Christian. When asked questions such as, “How has your religion/spirituality shaped the way you understand and perceive care?,” participants explained that because their coaches understood what it meant to be a Christian and show care in that way, they expected that from their coaches. In fact, over half of the participants (6/11) stated that they expected their coach to care for them spiritually and have a better attitude because of the fact that they were Christian. As Cali stated:

I don't know how to word this, so I think yes, [Christianity] definitely affects my views, but for someone who is, I guess I have higher standards for my coaches that are Christians because I think that they should care about those things, but I also have to understand that people who don't believe in God, there's, why would they care about my spiritual life if they don't believe in God themselves? Um, so I guess I, my standards are raised for my Christian coaches and what I think them caring for me looks like just because I know as a Christian what it means to love others and care for others. But I can't put those same expectations on someone who doesn't believe in that.

Ace Jackson also explained this idea declaring:

Yeah, I do. I think that, I think that as a Christian, um, it does change the way that I look at a leader and kind of the, a coach and I think that as someone that I expect to have, um, I expect to have someone that cares, for someone to have higher standards for us, and to really to push us to the best of our abilities and to the mold us into becoming a better man and especially here at [my school] to be a

better follower of Christ. And so, I expect as a Christian and being here at a Christian school them to kind of, um, to push us to, to further our, not only our education and our skills and on the basketball court, but to, to further our growth in our relationship with Christ.

As noted in a previous chapter, while caring is not exclusive to the Christian faith (Held, 2006), for the participants in the current study, it appears that they see it as a bar that must be raised for those who profess Christianity; this is, perhaps, due in part to their embedded theology (Stone & Duke, 2013).

**Category c: Sport as a gift or form of worship.** Some participants (5/11) conveyed that they felt their play had greater meaning. Christian sport organizations such as Athletes in Action and Fellowship of Christian Athletes have endorsed the concept of playing for an audience of One or using your athletic talent to worship and give glory to God (Fellowship of Christian Athletes, 2006; White & White, 2006). Five of the 11 participants expressed how they felt that their talent came from Christ and that they should play for Him. Noah said,

I recognize that, or I started to recognize, that the ability for me to run isn't a gift that, that I developed on my own. It is a gift that God gave me, and as a, as a result of that realization, I see, I see running as an act of worship.

Another participant, Ace Jackson, used references from the Bible to express his point :

Um, I think that being Christian and being an athlete, I think it just teaches me to have the best effort I can and be the best, the best leader I can. I think that one of my biggest verses that I look at is Colossians 3:23, 'Do everything as if working for the Lord'. And so, I take that as if God were kind of out there watching me, I'd

want to go as hard as I can all the time. And I think that as a Christian I just want to put in as much effort as possible. I think that that's also, that goes along with leadership, I want to lead by example and lead by working the hardest out on the court and just, um, and pushing my teammates to be the best that they can be. I think that that also kind of goes into accountability in making sure that your teammates are accountable for the work that they put in and a lot of it starts by how, how hard you worked and they'll want to work as hard as that, that and then you just kind of keep them accountable, for what, how they're working.

It is important to note that while these beliefs are specific to the context, for the athletes in the current study they are part of the fundamentals of their sport identity. It is also important to acknowledge that the idea of religious convictions influencing athlete ideologies concerning athletics is consistent with previous studies which found that coaches have also expressed convictions to impact their coaching behavior (Egli, et al., 2014).

**Category d: Sportsmanship and role model.** While the participants in the current study had raised expectations for their coaches, they also had higher expectations for themselves. Five of 11 participants spoke about how they viewed themselves as a role model or someone who needs to embody Christ. Jen, when talking about the need to show sportsmanship and set an example, also spoke about the tension between that and the sport environment attesting:

...as Christians, like we want to show like the love of Christ and um, be that for people so, and I think that would be hard to like, especially in a sports setting because like you are competitive, like you want to win but to be able to let your

faith like influence that more than like your worldly desires, if that makes sense to like, yeah, to not just focus on the sport I guess. So, it kind of has to be a balance of both of where you stand with that.

Along with those expectations, participants also expressed a certain pressure knowing that people were watching them and expecting them to set the example. Brooke explained this idea saying:

I feel like if you're a Christian you're just, not put on pedestal but like, people are more willing to watch you and how you react to situations like on the court and off the court. So, you're always like, they always say you're being a role model for people, and I think that is exactly is what it is.

#### **Domain VI: How Christian University Athletes Described the Relationship Between Coach Caring and Athlete Performance**

In this domain, participants described how they viewed the relationship between coach caring and their athletic performance. Two categories were constructed to represent this domain: (a) reciprocal; and (b) team cohesion. Although previous studies have been conducted concerning coach caring (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015), the current study allows for insight into what *athletes* view as the benefits of coach caring. While whole-person development has already been highlighted as a benefit, the significance of coach caring in relation to athletic performance is also worth noting for athletes.

**Category a: Reciprocal care.** A caring relationship has the ability to serve both self and other, or coach and athlete; however, the wishes of self should not supersede the needs of the cared-for (Noddings, 1984). As previously stated, a coach-athlete

relationship that is caring should be an interpersonal connection which has been cultivated over time and can become reciprocal (Fisher et al., 2019; Held, 2006).

Participants (9/11) in the current study described this reciprocal care process as the coach removing the pressure and encouraging them to work hard; then, in return, the athlete had the desire to play and felt the freedom to play well for the coach. Ace Jackson described this process saying:

And I think that I, at my freshman year, I was kind of down because I, my first semester, I wasn't shooting very good and I was just really just kinda like down in the dumps, and he, he had kind of a conversation with me and then the whole team as well that it's like, basketball is kind of a game of failure, you're only going to hit maybe 40 percent of your shots and 60 percent of your shots aren't going to go in, and so he just kind of let me know that it's okay to fail. It's okay to mess up. Like that's not what's important. It's just how hard you work and what you put into it. And I think that that, that was a way of caring that I never really knew in high school.

In the coach care-athlete performance relationship heuristic (Fisher et al., 2019), it is suggested that when athletes perceive that they are being cared for holistically by their coach, they give more effort, and, in turn, their performance increases. This is congruent with participants' experience in the current study; they suggested that they feel as though they would not perform as well for a coach that did not care for them holistically and that they were motivated to have better performance because of the way their coach cared. Jen explained this saying:

I guess from my experience, like I wouldn't want to perform as well in anything if I didn't think that like the people around me believed in me or were encouraging me. Because yes, my performance is a choice and it doesn't have to be impacted by what other people say, but it is kind of, we're human and like if I know that like a professor or a coach is like, 'hey, good job' after I do something, like I'm obviously gonna want to like, keep doing that and like get praise for my performance.

**Category b: Team cohesion.** Team cohesion is an important element that is needed for a team to thrive (Pflugger, 2005). The participants (9/11) in the current study reported feeling part of a family and having a sense of togetherness. The ability for a group to come together for a common goal is important in helping athletes feel connected and as though they belong (Light, 2017). In a Christian context, this cohesion might resemble that of Koinonia, which has been defined as a group of individuals sharing in fellowship, community, or joint participation (Mbaya, 2012). When talking about the way he believed others on the team felt about the way his coach cared, Ace Jackson stated this:

I think we have a lot of like team conversations where we just sit down and talk about things, especially when things aren't going well and like what, like just what's going on and, but a lot of times they'd bring up how much they feel cared about and how much they feel like they're a part of a family here. And so, I think that that's a big thing is they just feel really part of the family.

Consequently, it is important to point out that when coach caring is lacking, negative results such as a decrease in team cohesion could occur (Knust & Fisher, 2015). Roxas

stated that he had seen the effects of this firsthand during his high school years. He described a situation where the lack of coach caring ultimately led to a breakdown of team cohesion:

But um, it was to say, we will say the bad coach, the football coach, [the team] fought all the time. Like I mean literally fistfights at practice and stuff. And they couldn't stop us from doing it just because we were so, like they put, they basically were pining us, us against them, offense versus defense. And like half the coaches liked the head coach and half didn't. So, we're sitting there just fighting all the time just because they're just everywhere. The coaches are fighting and stuff.

#### **Domain VII: Additional Influences**

The final domain was constructed to address additional influence that arose in participant interviews. This domain is separated into three categories: (a) metaphor of team as “family”; (b) gender differences; and (c) questionable coach behavior.

**Category a: Metaphor of team as “family”.** As stated in a previous chapter, it is important to understand in what way an individual is defining family due to family being a socially constructed concept as well as the fact that people experience the construct of family in different ways. “Family” was described by participants in the current study in the heteronormative sense of the word (e.g., in a heterosexual definition of relationships and family). For example, participants used familial roles to describe their coaches such as the head coach “being like a father” and the assistant coach representing the “mother.” Seven of the 11 participants eluded to family using terms such as: The coach as a parent;

their team as a family; or the idea of brotherhood. One participant, Brooke, stated this about her relationship with her coach:

She literally treats us like her own kid. She has three kids, like we're about the same age as her daughter. So, she'll joke with us and she'll tell us what looks good like if we're taking pictures and say hand on the hip. But she just jokes around with us.

The idea of a coach being referred to as a parent is consistent with previous research where coaches also viewed themselves as a parent (Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015). As both Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) have pointed out, previously stated, the concept of coach as parent and team as family imitates maternal care, where the parent or coach feels an instinctive demand to care for the child or athlete.

**Category b: Gender differences.** Five out of the 11 participants referenced gender differences in coach caring. These included having a closer connection to a coach of the same sex, a willingness to open up to a coach of the same sex, and assumptions about care based on gender. This is important to note because, while the participants were not asked about coach gender differences, they still brought it up during the interviews. For example, when asked if there was anything else she felt we missed in our questions about coach caring, Lindsey said:

Oh, maybe how much more caring, encouragement is found maybe in coaches of the same sex, meaning like our coach was a man and I think our relationships with him obviously are different. For myself I viewed him more of a father figure. Um, whereas I think maybe if we had a female coach, relationships would have been different or cultivated differently. And maybe be more open, you know, obviously

with a woman you can talk to her about more things maybe that we wouldn't talk to with a man. So, I think that links also. So, whether you're coached by same sex or by the opposite would change how coaches care for their team.

Another point mentioned by Cali related to physical closeness. Cali said she thought that it was more appropriate for a coach who is the same sex as their players to have physical contact with the athletes such as a hug. She spoke about the difference in having a coach of the same sex in high school and a coach of the opposite sex now, saying:

Yeah, I had that girl coach all of high school, um, and then switched to now male coaches. Um, so it's definitely, it's definitely different and I don't, I expect differences. Um, so I don't feel less cared for because I know that the way, especially today, like you're not going to see a male coach being like hugging his girls all the time. Like that's not really going to happen nor do I think it necessarily should or is like safe to happen kind of thing. Like it's just not, I don't know, that could lead to bad things. So, I like under, I guess I expect those differences in how they're going to show care. Like my female coaches, like my female coaches in high school, yeah, they would, if I was feeling frustrated and, like needed a hug, they would like, come over and give me a hug. And I think they knew how to deal with like, if I would be really frustrated to the point of tears, like they knew how to deal with that better. But I don't get mad at my male coaches for not knowing how to deal with that, I guess.

Gender differences within coach caring have also been brought up by coaches themselves in previous studies (Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015).

**Category c: Questionable coach behavior.** A portion of the sample (4/11) referenced coaching behaviors that could be deemed questionable. When one considers questionable coaching behaviors such as boundary crossings, boundary violations, and using tokens of appreciation (Gutheil, 2008; Gutheil & Gabbard 1998), the ethical line between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate is often blurred and may look differently depending upon context. For example, when one of the participants, J, was asked in the interview about a time when her coach cared for her, she described a situation where a male coach at Christian U gave every girl on their team flowers in order to show them “how a man should treat them.” The type of love referenced here emulates that of eros (romantic) love which was discussed in the literature review chapter. Romantic love has no place in the coach-athlete relationship. In fact, this type of unethical coach behavior needs to be addressed and corrected.

Actions such as this raise the question of context (e.g., what does this mean in a Christian versus public school context?). They also raise attention toward the need for coach education. These questions are briefly tackled in the last chapter as well as in a future paper.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine NCCAA DII athletes' perceptions of coach caring. The hope was that we may better understand how athletes perceive how their coaches do and do not care for them. A secondary purpose of the study was to explore whether an Evangelical Christian context makes a difference in athletes' perceptions of coach caring. In this chapter, I review the major findings in light of previous work, discuss limitations and practical implications, and also suggest future directions for research.

### **Major Findings**

In the current study, there were two major findings that were consistent with previous research. Related to the first guiding research question (i.e., In what ways do athletes feel that their coach demonstrates care?), athletes defined coach caring using many of the same words to describe this phenomenon as coaches did in previous studies (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015). For example, athletes defined coach caring as holistic and athlete-centered; in addition, through this type of care, athletes felt that their personal development and player development needs were being met. This was because coaches took the time to get to know them outside of sport, communicated with them about things that were going on in their lives, gave them individualized care, built relationships, cared for them holistically, and developed them as individuals and athletes. In addition, the second major finding consistent with previous research was that athletes felt as though there was a relationship between coach caring and athlete performance. Similarly to coaches in Fisher and colleagues' previous studies, athletes believed that when coaches cared for them – and

they felt it – they expended more effort while at the same time developing holistically; this, in turn, resulted in improved athlete performance. In the coach caring-athlete performance heuristic proposed by Fisher and colleagues (Fisher et al., 2019), the coach would then feel successful and the cycle would continue back to the coach demonstrating holistic care again. To summarize, while this heuristic was not tested directly, it appears that athletes in the current study did indeed feel as though their development as a person and athlete was heightened by coach caring; in addition, participants made mention of the reciprocal nature of coach caring and spoke about how when their coach cares, they want to perform and be better.

An additional unique contribution from the current study not previously discussed in the coach caring literature (Fisher et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2017) was related to the ways that the Christian context impacted athletes' understandings of coach caring (e.g., the second major research question). For example, all 11 participants reported that their coaches were a part of teaching them Christian values. The athletes also expressed how they had higher standards for their Christian coaches and expected better behavior from them. In a future paper, we intend to discuss in greater detail the implications directly related to the impact of the Christian context as well as athletes' raised standards for Christian coaches.

The participants from the current study showed that their embedded theology (Bain-Selbo & Sapp, 2016) was an explicit reason as to why they viewed, and perceived, care in the ways that they did. Additionally, because of the context in which they were in, they used language common among the Christian faith to describe their relationships with their coaches (e.g. love, family, and brotherhood) and their ideas about actualizations of

care (e.g. spiritual growth, team devotions, and being an example of Christ). One of the core concepts here is the notion of love as a description, or even synonym, of care. Love in the Christian faith often takes on the meaning of care (see 1 Corinthians 13:4–7), and is a term freely exchanged among those in that faith community (Brand et al., 2015; Hoexter, 2016; Lewis, 1960).

While the word “love” is commonly used, it is important for me to note that any context, including religious contexts, can contain inappropriate uses and forms of love which can lead to questionable behavior. As I have previously stated, I believe it would be valuable to have further discussion concerning the use of the word “love” in a Christian school context, and how to remain ethical while using common language among a faith tradition. Myself and my advisor will be expanding upon this topic in further detail in a future paper.

### **Limitations**

While the findings of this study support as well as extend the findings from existing literature, there are a few limitations. All athletes interviewed were from a single private Christian University in the Southeastern United States. In addition, they all self-identified as Christian. Subsequently, it cannot be confirmed that these results would be consistent amongst athletes at other Christian institutions or at any other collegiate institution.

Also, all 11 participants self-identified as Caucasian and heterosexual. This is not surprising, given the demographics of those attending the institution. In fact, 82% of the student body self-identify as Caucasian; in addition, they must sign a moral pledge to

uphold Christian values regarding lifestyle (e.g. drinking, personal relationships, and vulgar language) while attending the University.

### **Practical Implications for Sport Psychology Professionals and Others**

From results found in this study, several practical implications can be offered for coaches, athletes, administrators, and sport psychology professionals. First is the need for coaches to create an open dialogue with their athletes so that they can build relationships and care for the athletes in an individualized way. It has been shown that both coaching and caring are relational in nature, and, therefore, those caring relationships must be nurtured in a way that allows athletes to reach their fullest potential (Gearity, 2009; Noddings, 1984). It appears that the coaching environment and care climate are correlated with how an individual perceives they develop as an athlete and as a person. While many factors go into creating an environment of holistic care, I would argue that coaches should seek coach education concerning the best practices for meeting athletes' needs. In addition, coaches who identify as Christian are encouraged to undergo training that relates specifically to their context and can help shed light on managing the expectations set for a Christian coach. This training should include the appropriate use of the word *love* and discussions about behaviors deemed acceptable in a Christian context that may be viewed as questionable in ethical coaching.

It is also advised that student-athletes ought to do their due diligence concerning the organizations and coaches for whom they intend to play. Knust and Fisher (2017) made the argument that it is important for athletes to determine if a team they are being recruited by has values concerning athlete treatment that align with their own. Student-

athletes should feel empowered that the choice is theirs and be aware of the implications concerning their development when choosing an athletic program.

Athletic organizations and administration should be aware of the responsibility of selecting coaches who display caring behaviors. They need to create an environment conducive to the development of each student-athlete. The athletic administration should also ensure that they are providing and requiring regular quality coach education so that each coach can be in congruence with what research has proven to be best practices. It is not enough for an organization to simply choose a coach who is good at the sport.

As John Amaechi (Association for Applied Sport Psychology Conference Keynote Speaker, 2018), a licensed psychologist and retired professional basketball player, stated:

Sport is a space where some of our least qualified men, and they are mostly men, are given unfettered access to some of our most vulnerable young people. Quite literally, in the space of sport, your entire qualification for unfettered access to a young person can be ‘I used to be good at this’.

Athletic organizations must do more to ensure that the well-being of student-athletes is always the first priority.

Lastly, sport psychology professionals should understand that it is crucial that we advocate on behalf of the athletes we work with and for. Our ethical responsibility lies with the athletes, and we must make a commitment to hold true to those obligations, regardless of their unpopularity (Fisher & Anders, 2010, 2019). Sport psychology professionals must also have an awareness that the athletes’ perceptions of caring can play a vital role in performance. Having this awareness will allow for better performance

skills and strategies to be implemented during consulting sessions (Egli & Fisher, 2017; Fisher, Butryn, & Roper, 2009).

### **Future Directions for Research**

As previously mentioned, due to the lack of demographic diversity of participants in the current study, it would be important to learn how athletes who self-identify from additional sexual and racial categories, regions of the country, etc., perceive and experience coach caring. In addition, it would be helpful to examine how athletes from a variety of spiritual backgrounds perceive coach caring. This would help flesh out how the ideology as well as context in which the athlete and/or coach is a part of determines the way in which care is given and perceived.

With almost half of this studies sample (5/11) referencing gender differences in coach caring, it would be beneficial to conduct further research into the influence that gender has on coach caring. As previously mention, the participants in the current study were not asked questions related to gender differences in coach caring; however, the topic was still mentioned by participants during the interviews.

It would also be useful to explore how the athletic organization and administration as a whole factor into coach caring. Because the hiring of coaches and enforcing of rules is established and implemented by the athletic administration, it would be important to examine if an organization's care orientation dictates the care a coach displays (Knust & Fisher, 2017).

Lastly, as I previously eluded to, it is of vital importance for a coach education curriculum to be developed which explains the need for coach caring and trains coaches in the appropriate ways to administer coach caring (Fisher et al., 2019). A curriculum

designed specifically for Christian coaches working in both secular and private athletic organization would also be beneficial to ensure an understanding of the appropriate ways to attend to the spiritual, athletic, and personal development of the athlete while maintaining ethical boundaries.

### **Final Thoughts**

I believe that the information gained from this study will be vital in ensuring movement towards sustainable coach caring within athletics (Dohsten, et al., 2018). Sustainable coach caring has been defined as “a caring approach, based on a coach’s commitment to caring for athletes, [that] has the potential to create such a balance and sustainability” (Dohsten, et al., 2018, p. 1). It is hoped that this research is a beneficial contribution to the newly researched topic of coach caring and the ways in which it relates to athlete development. However, as one of the participants accurately stated, “It’s more than just a game.” Athletes look to their coaches for player and personal development and it is the responsibility of the coach to create and foster a caring climate in order for athletes to flourish. It is my aim to inform university administration, coaches, and athletes of the importance of coach caring and shed light on the lack of coach caring which participants referred to as the norm in coaching at the Christian institution I end up working in. Ultimately, my identity as a Christian informs the way in which I view and understand care; I realize Christ as the ultimate example of care, and, in turn, I strive to emulate that care for others in my work within the sporting world.

It was my honor to interview each of these participants, and I am thankful for their contribution to this study. They shared valuable experiences and were willing to be vulnerable and honest in order to be a voice that will help further this research. We must

continue to strive to enhance the experience of student-athletes as they are the heart of an institution's athletic organization and they deserve to be advocated for in terms of experiencing coach caring.

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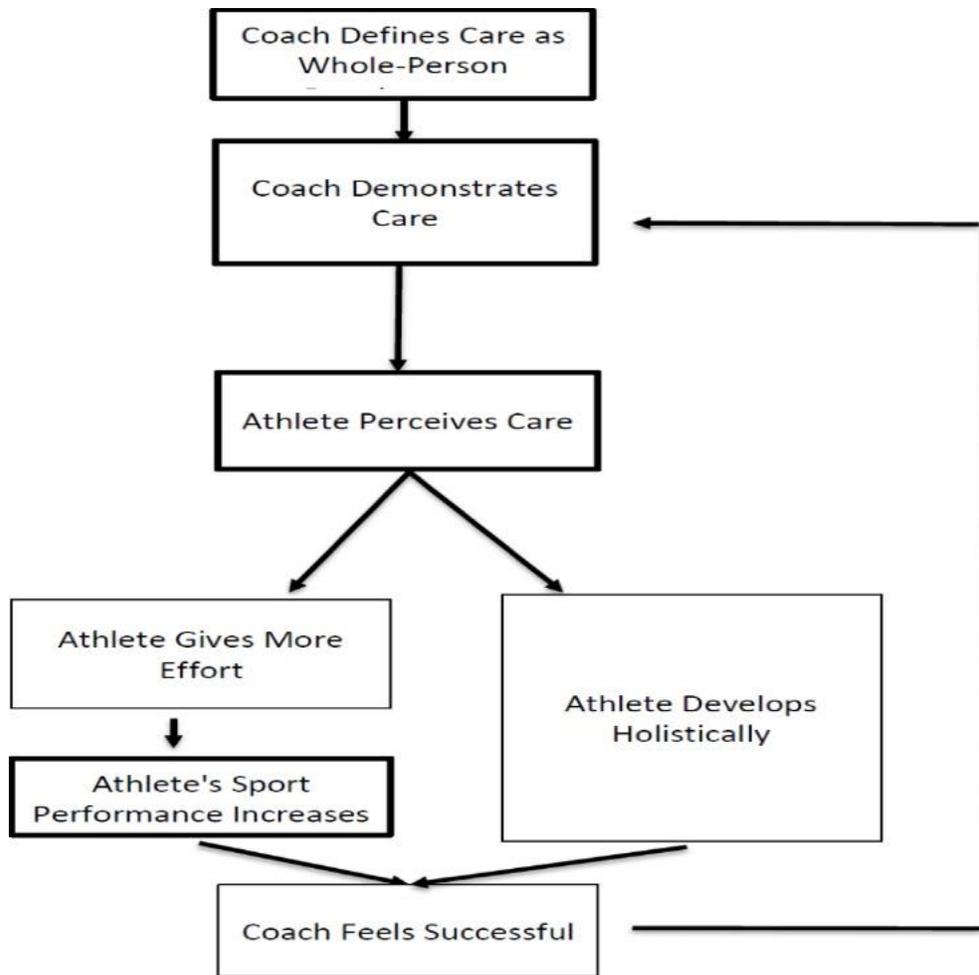
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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A

A heuristic for the relationship between caring coaching and elite athlete performance (Fisher, Larsen, Bejar, & Shigeno, 2019)



Appendix B  
**Consent Form – Student (18 years or older)**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**  
**Athletes’ Perceptions of Their Coaches’ Caring**

**INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the experiences of elite-level athletes and their perceptions of their coaches’ caring. This study is the thesis project of Jordan Schools and her advisor, Dr. Leslee A. Fisher, at the University of Tennessee. While coaches are assumed to be caring at all levels of sport participation, more research is needed on the actual perceptions of elite-level athletes.

**INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY**

Your participation will be in the form of an interview that will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. The process will consist of a semi-structured, audio-recorded interview. During the interview, Jordan will ask you about your perceptions of how your coach defines and implements caring or non-caring. Should you agree to participate in the interview, Jordan will contact you to schedule either a one-on-one Skype or in-person distance interview covering this topic.

**RISKS**

There is no risk to participation greater than that of everyday life. All answers to questions and information shared will be kept confidential. At any point, if you are uncomfortable you may choose to skip a question or leave the interview at any time at no penalty to you.

**BENEFITS**

Benefits of your participation in this project include: the potential for your responses to drive further research, aiding Jordan’s development as a scholar, and potentially impacting the programs and development of elite-level sport as a system. You may also find enjoyment in the process of sharing your experiences with someone outside of your sport participation.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

The information discussed in the interview will be kept confidential. Only the researchers will have access to your information and data will be stored in a secure, password protected computer owned by Jordan Schools, the co-principle investigator. There will be no specific identifiers left in the data upon its collection. All data will be kept for at least four years before being destroyed.

**PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate without penalty. If you agree to participate, you may withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before the data collection is completed or after the conclusion of the interview, your data will only be destroyed upon request.

\_\_\_\_\_ Participant's initials

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions about the interview, or you experience adverse effects as a result of your participation you may contact the following researchers:

Jordan A. Schools (Co-Principal Investigator): \_\_\_\_\_

Leslee A. Fisher, PhD (Co-Principal Investigator): \_\_\_\_\_

IRB Compliance Office – (865) 974-7697

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**CONSENT**

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C  
**Interview Guide**  
Athletes' Perceptions of Coach Caring

Introduction: Thank you for meeting with me today! Before we get started, I need to read to you a consent form and then have you verbally agree to participate in this study (read consent form, get consent).

Okay, let's get started with some background questions. Can you tell me about:

University you attend \_\_\_\_\_

Division I sport that you participate in \_\_\_\_\_

Total years playing [your sport] \_\_\_\_\_

Any injuries or body issues that make it difficult to play? \_\_\_\_\_

How did you get into [your sport]? \_\_\_\_\_

Year in school (e.g., 1<sup>st</sup> year/Freshman, 2<sup>nd</sup> year/Sophomore, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Major \_\_\_\_\_

Professional goal after graduation \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic/Background Information Questions (ADDRESSING)**

Age and generation \_\_\_\_\_

Developmental disabilities \_\_\_\_\_

Disability acquired later in life \_\_\_\_\_

Religious and spiritual identity \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnic and Racial identity \_\_\_\_\_

Socioeconomic status growing up \_\_\_\_\_

Indigenous heritage \_\_\_\_\_

Gender identity \_\_\_\_\_

Anything else you think is important for me to know about your background? \_\_\_\_\_

Okay, now we're moving to the meat of the interview where will focus on coach caring.

**Questions**

Tell me about a time when your coach cared for you.

What does coach "caring" mean to you, as an athlete? How would you define it?

How does your current coach demonstrate that s/he cares for you? What does s/he do? (e.g., behaviors, philosophy)

How would you describe really "good" coach caring? How do you know when your coach "really" cares about you?

How does your current coach "really" demonstrate caring for you?

How has your religion/spirituality shaped the way you understand and perceive care?

Are there times when you know that a coach doesn't care about you? How would you describe "bad" coach caring or lack of caring?

How does your current coach demonstrate that s/he doesn't care about you? What does s/he do? (e.g., behaviors, philosophy)

Where did you learn about what “good” and “bad” coach caring is? (previous coaches? parents?)

In your opinion, how do other athletes on your team know that they are “cared” for by their coach? Is it the same for everyone or different? Why/how?

How do your assistant coaches demonstrate care toward you? In what ways is it the same or different from your head coach?

How do administrators (e.g., ADs) demonstrate care toward you? In what ways is it the same or different from your head coach?

How do parents demonstrate care toward you? In what ways is it the same or different from your head coach?

What does it mean to be a “good” or “successful” coach in [your sport]? Is being a “good” or a “successful” coach the same as being a “caring” coach? In what ways? When do these things mesh/integrate well and when do they conflict?

What is the relationship between being cared for by a coach and your athletic performance?

What institutional structures (e.g., at your university) are in place that either encourage or prohibit coaches from caring more for you (e.g., academics, practice times, pressure to perform well, donors, interactions outside of practice and games, resource allocation, private vs. public school, etc.)?

How does the NCCAA figure into – or not – coach caring for athletes, in your opinion?

Is there another word for “care” that you would use that better describes this part of coaching?

Is there anything else you think we need to discuss related to coaches who care or don’t care about athletes?

**Thank you so much for participating! I will send you a copy of your transcript as well as the themes our research team comes up with after we talk with a lot of athletes in a lot of sports.**

(adapted from Fisher et al., 2018)

Appendix D

**Research Team Member's Pledge of Confidentiality**

**PLEDGE OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

**Athletes' Perceptions of Their Coaches' Caring**

**Jordan A. Schools, Leslee A. Fisher, Matt Moore, Sierra Morris, Trevor Egli,  
Susannah Knust, & Jessica Simmons**

As a member of this project's research team, I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews. The information in these transcripts has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information in these transcriptions with anyone except the primary researcher of this project, his/her master's thesis chair, or other members of this research team. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research Team Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## VITA

Jordan A. Schools was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, to the parents of Rusty and Audrey Swafford. She was homeschooled under the umbrella of Gateway Christian School, based out of Memphis, Tennessee and graduated in June 2007. She married her husband, Joey, in 2008 and a year later their daughter, Kylee, was born. Jordan attended Johnson University in Knoxville, Tennessee where she received her B.S. in Bible and Theology with a minor in Sport Ministry in May 2015. She then decided to pursue a master's degree in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She received a graduate assistantship with the Honors and Scholars Programs working with the Honors Leadership Program. Jordan graduated with a Master of Science degree in Kinesiology with a concentration in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior in May 2019.

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