

A Qualitative Exploration of UPSR

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## ABSTRACT

Person-Centered Theory (PCT, Rogers, 1959) provides the understanding of how growth-promoting relationships facilitate holistic well-being through the provision of unconditional positive regard (UPR), genuineness, and empathy. Through coaches' provision of UPR, athletes have reported experiencing an increase of motivation, enhanced performances, and greater trust in their coach (McHenry et al., 2022). Most intriguingly, athletes created a relationship with themselves (i.e., self-regard) that mirrored their coaches' treatment of them (McHenry et al., 2021). While UPR has just recently been studied in the coach-athlete relationship, little to no attention has been given to the relationship an athlete has with themselves (i.e., self-regard). According to PCT theorists, the provision or thwarting of UPR builds or destructs an individual's unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR; Iberg, 2001), an indicator of thriving (Brown et al., 2017). Using the lens of PCT, 11 former NCAA DI swimmers (8 females, 3 males) were interviewed about their experiences of UPSR and its influence on their well-being and performance success. Using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill & Knox, 2021) procedures, the following domains were constructed: I) Relationship with self (self-regard) while competing experienced as a "rollercoaster", II) Sport experiences shaped swimmer's relationship with themselves, III) 'Hitting rock bottom', IV) Perspective shift in the relationship between self and performance, V) Regarding self holistically increased performance and enjoyment, and VI) Important relationship influences on athlete self-regard. Participants discussed how their self-regard during their career was "like a rollercoaster". Early sport experiences had an impactful influence on participants development of their self-regard and they carried this self-regard into college. Findings of the current study revealed the importance of receiving UPR from several

relationship sources. Mental performance consultants should consider integrating UPR training with coaches at the competitive club level, as this was as a critical time for the formation of athletes self-regard.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2018, tennis player, Naomi Osaka, the youngest and highest paid female athlete beat the unstoppable Serena Williams in the Australian Grand Slam. Since then, Osaka has been open with the public about her battles with depression and the pressures she faces being the number one tennis player in the world. She was heavily criticized and fined after pulling out of the 2021 French Open due to her ongoing struggles with depression. The withdraw sparked much debate about her ‘mental toughness’ as an athlete. Because of the backlash, Osaka has made public statements about her being more than just a tennis player. With the rise of the Black Lives Matter marches in the summer of 2020, Osaka pulled out of the New-York Open in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and in recognition of her identity as a Black-Japanese woman. Her self-titled release of a three-part docuseries shows the battles she faced with her public image and her worth as a person (Bradley, 2021). She openly questions early in the film, “What am I if i’m not a good tennis player?” (Bradley, 2021, 0:35:45). The rest of the docuseries focuses on her finding her worth outside of tennis, and how her self-worth allows her to be a stronger competitor in sport.

At the 2021 Olympic Games, Simone Biles withdrew from the all-around, vault, and uneven bars, after a worrisome performance in her vault event (Axon, 2021). She stated she had the ‘twisties’. In other words, her mind and body were not in sync when performing her gymnast skills. Had she not pulled out, Biles would have potentially put her life in physical danger. After a few days, Biles returned to compete in the balance beam event. Instead of focusing on winning a medal, she focused on having a good balance beam, and to her surprise, she won a bronze

medal. While Simone withdrawing herself from her events was in the name of her mental and physical safety, once again, a mental health decision sparked controversy and opinions about her ‘mental toughness’ from athletes and non-athletes. However, she also gained support. In referring to her stepping back at the Olympics she stated: “I was expecting to feel like, a lot of backlash and embarrassment, but it’s the complete opposite. And that’s the first time I felt like, human. Like besides Simone Biles, I was Simone and people kind of respected that” (The Today Show, 2021).

In this statement, Simone calls for more discussion within the athletic community about mental health and to recognize that athletes are worth more than their ability. Further, within the last four years, Olympic medalist Michael Phelps, has been at the forefront of advocating for athlete’s worth and mental health. Arguably the best swimmer in the world and the most decorated Olympian of all time, Michael Phelps has been most public about his battles with mental health. After the 2021 London Olympic games, Phelps entered a deep battle with depression and contemplated suicide. As a result, he was admitted to a treatment center to help him recover. As he began to accept the help and lean on close friends and family for support, his close friend Ray Lewis stated, “Michael had to take a step back before he could move forward, to realize who he was out of the pool” (espn.com, 2020).

After Michael Phelps retired, his documentary release of the *Weight of Gold* (Rapkin, 2020), featuring Apollo Ono, Lolo Jones, and other former Olympians, publicly criticized the Olympic Committee, and made a call to recognize that athletes are worth more than the medals they win and their ability to perform or entertain. Because of elite athlete’s courage to be open about their mental well-being, many Olympians and professional athletes have since contributed to the discussion about their own struggles and questions of self-worth.

There are a few critical commonalities between Naomi, Simone, and Michael. The first being that when they stepped away from the spotlight to take care of their mental health, they realized their worth did not lie in what they did, but in who they are as humans. As a result, not only did they produce better performances, they had more fun competing as well. The second, is that in speaking of their self-worth, they mention their value as a human being. Perhaps the crux of the discussion on athlete well-being, is the serious impact of relying on successful performances to inform worth as a person. By taking a step back from the limelight to focus on their mental health (and seek professional help), elite athletes have demonstrated that such an action is a sign of strength, rather than a sign of weakness. Namely, such strength is to recognize that their worth is not determined by their ability to produce successful performance outcomes, but that their self-worth comes from who they are as a person. These real-life examples demonstrate the need for more investigation about self-worth and its impact in the athletic domain.

Person-Centered Theory (PCT; Rogers, 1959) offers a viable framework to understand self-worth and its impact on sport participation and performance through understanding how the relationship with the self is developed (i.e., self-regard). Rogers believed that in order for individuals to strive for well-being, they must enter a growth-promoting relationship. To be growth-promoting, a relationship must provide three core conditions: empathy, genuineness, and most importantly unconditional positive regard (UPR; Rogers, 1959). In line with athletes' advocacy with being 'more than an athlete', Rogers (1959) key core condition of UPR means to communicate that a person is "inherently worthy of love... constructive feedback, praise, and appreciation not on the basis of one's performance and behavior, but on the basis of one's existence" (Makri-Botsari, 2015, p. 51). According to Standal (1954) as a result of the provision

of UPR, individuals begin to treat themselves the way others treat them, known as self-regard (Standal, 1954). In this instance, if a person is treated with UPR, then a person will take on “rewarding characteristics” (e.g., positive self-regard; Standal, 1954, p. 59) However, if a person experiences a withdraw of UPR, then a person “will take on a punishing character” (e.g., conditional self-regard, Standal, 1954, p. 59).

This “punishing character” (Standal, 1954, p. 59) is a result of experiencing one or many of the four specific opposites of UPR. These four specific opposites of UPR are conditional positive regard, conditional negative regard, unconditional negative regard, and unconditional positive disregard (Wilkins, 2000; McHenry et al., 2021). Conditional positive regard communicates that a person is only worthy of receiving positive regard when they meet a certain expectation. Conditional negative regard communicates that a person is not worthy of positive regard because they did not meet a certain expectation. As a result, positive regard is withdrawn when the expectation is not met (Assor & Tal, 2012). Unconditional negative regard communicates to another that no matter what they do, they “will never be worthy of positive regard” (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 432; Wilkins, 2001). Lastly, unconditional positive disregard is the absolute refusal to acknowledge or enter a relationship with another person. Unconditional positive disregard “can be so powerful that receivers come to doubt their right to life” (Wilkins, 2001, p. 26). Because individuals eventually mirror regard from others (self-regard; Standal, 1954), it is concerning that an individual may mirror the opposites of UPR, such as unconditional positive disregard—as it may mean that an individual believes they are not worthy of life.

However, if the provision of UPR is unconditional, then an individual will develop unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR; Rogers, 1959). UPSR is a healthy way of “relating to all of one’s experiences, whether positive, or negative, with warmth and a positive non-

judgmental understanding (Patterson & Joseph, 2013, p. 95). This view of the self also “remains consistent through any circumstance” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 4) and is a critical characteristic of thriving (i.e., the joint experience of well-being and optimal performance; Brown et al., 2017). In fact, the power of UPSR is that it allows an individual to acknowledge their worth as a person “as a source of strength to live to their highest potential”, no matter what. (McHenry 2021, p. 21; Schmid, 2001). Thus, the provision of UPR provides a “protection and care” (Schmid, 2001, p. 157) that a person can rely on during difficult times. This is extremely interesting as Feeny and Collins (2015) describe how as a result of strong growth-promoting relationships, individuals experience an increased sense of acceptance and confidence in adversity. While being able to acknowledge self-worth as a source of strength has never been empirically explored, it would seem that because of its power individuals (coaches) would be prone to treat others with UPR. It seems that the provision of UPR produces a source of strength in the form of “care and protection” (Schmid, 2001, p. 157) in times of adversity, or, the “ability to be vulnerable or take risks” (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 432) in sport performances. In other words, the freedom to “try, fail, learn, and try again” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 13).

However, there seems to be a common misconception in caregiving relationships that the use of the opposites of UPR (namely conditional and negative regard) are best for the receivers’ development and motivation. Rather, the opposites of UPR seems to result in “fluctuations” in feelings of self-worth, and “shame and guilt after failure” (Bartholomew et al., 2009, p. 228). In fact, athlete self-worth has been found to be heavily impacted by caregiving relationships. A caregiving relationship is one “that has significant influence over an individual’s sense of safety, trust, and fulfillment of needs (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, p. 87). An example of a caregiving relationship, and perhaps the most impactful relationship for an athlete, is the coach-athlete

relationship (Côte & Gilbert, 2009). According to Stirling and Kerr (2013) “the coach may play the role of the caregiver, as he/she may be entrusted with ensuring the safety and fulfillment of many of the athlete’s physical and emotional needs” (p. 87). Because athletes may view their coaches as the gatekeeper to their athletic dreams, physical, verbal, and emotionally abusive coaching methods have traditionally been accepted as a means to an end to achieve performance excellence (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). However, controlling and emotionally abusive styles of coaching have been found to decrease athlete’s sense of control and feelings of self-worth, which also hinders the ability to try something new and take risks in sport performance (McHenry et al., 2021).

Coaches often use conditional regard as a controlling strategy to motivate athletes and “to impose a specific and preconceived way of thinking and behaving” (Bartholomew et al., 2009, p. 218). Negative regard is also commonly used by coaches after failures “in attempt to increase future effort and exhort higher performance” (Bartholomew et al., 2009, p. 228). However, instead of increasing effort and higher performance, coach conditional and negative regard make their attention contingent upon their athletes enacting desirable behaviors. Athletes then begin to view their own “thoughts and feelings as a threat to the emotional bond they have with their coach” (Bartholomew et al., 2009, p. 228) and suppress their own thoughts and autonomy in order to not cause conflict with their coach. Thus, “the repeated experience of conditional regard is likely to produce high levels of contingent self-worth as athletes learn that they are less worthy as a person if they fail, or do not perform the behaviors desired by their coach” (Bartholomew et al., 2009, p. 228). In other words, athletes become afraid to fail, as they feel their worth as a human is dependent on their performance, since they will only receive attention from their coach if they succeed.

In line with athletes suppressing thoughts and emotions to “maintain a satisfactory relationship with their coach” (Bartholomew et al., 2009, p. 228) scholars state that “the central theoretical issue bearing on UPR is the self-concept (how one perceives themselves) and how that can feel threatened by experiences inconsistent with conditions of worth” (Iberg, 2001, p. 156). Conditions of worth refer to when an individual avoids or seeks certain experiences in order to achieve positive regard from others (Rogers, 1959). Because receiving and giving positive regard is a fundamental basic need, to receive the opposites of UPR causes great psychological distress in humans, such as incongruence (Rogers, 1959). Incongruence refers to the disparity between “self-perception and the actual self-experience” (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 422; Rogers, 1959). Because the need for positive regard is so intense, people are willing to deny parts of themselves to receive positive regard (incongruence). Thus, incongruence is the reason, according to Rogers (1959), for psychological maladjustment and prohibits an individual’s innate ability to strive towards their fullest potential.

Emotional abuse has also been found to decrease feelings of self-worth, as athletes reported that their coach had made them feel as if “they were nothing” (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, p. 94) and not worth their coach’s time (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). In addition, the use of these controlling and emotionally abusive behaviors increase when the value of performance produced by the athlete is more important than the value of the individual (Bartholomew et al., 2010). Lastly, scholars suspect that when coaches dismiss, devalue, and judge their athletes, athletes have a difficult time recognizing their own self-worth (Bartholomew et al., 2010, p. 197). While this suspicion had only been supported by parent-child literature, this claim is now recently supported by McHenry et al., (2021, 2022) in the coach-athlete relationship. When coaches were perceived to offer unconditional positive regard, participants learned to acknowledge their self-

worth. However, when athletes perceived their coaches regarded them with conditions, it thwarted their ability to acknowledge their self-worth.

In the coach-athlete relationship, participants referred to their coaches' regard of them as "like a mirror"(McHenry et al., 2021, p. 432) to explain how their coaches' regard transferred to their self-regard. This in turn, influenced their feelings of self-worth. This finding reaffirms Standal's (1954) notion that as a result of the provision or withdraw of positive regard, individuals treat themselves (i.e., self-regard) the way they perceive they are treated by others. According to McHenry et al., (2021) mirrored regard seems to be the link and the "most powerful implication on participants' sport motivation and performance, particularly to where the development of participants' conditional self-regard, negative self-regard, or self-disregard in the sport domain lent to decreased motivation and diminished performance..." (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 434). Further, as conditions of worth gave rise to incongruence, athlete's experienced increased somatic anxiety symptoms during performance and increased fear of failure for future performances (McHenry et al., 2021). McHenry and colleagues (2021) speculated that it was this increased fear of failure that served as a "deep threat" to athletes "sense of self-worth" (p. 436). This deep threat to self-worth then manifested as stress and anxiety in performance related situations out of fear of losing positive regard from coaches. Thus, "positive regard contingent on performance was perceived as total self-worth contingent on performance" (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 436).

While the use of harmful coaching practices have been found to decrease motivation, enjoyment, and feelings of self-worth, coaches who utilize coaching methods that prioritize athlete's holistic development—and are growth-promoting—have been found to increase motivation, enjoyment, successful performances, and feelings of self-worth (Bartholomew et al.,

2010). These growth-promoting coaching styles “support self-initiated strivings and creates conditions for athletes to experience a sense of volition, choice, and self-endorsement” (Bartholomew et al., 2010, p. 194). Through the lens of PCT, McHenry et al., (2022) discovered that UPR meant more than just the provision of love, warmth, and acceptance from coaches. UPR in the coach-athlete relationship has been defined as the following: coaches accepted, respected, engaged with, believed in, and challenged athletes no matter what, without conditions (McHenry et al., 2022).

Through athletes perceived provision of coach UPR—unconditional acceptance, respect, engagement, belief in, and challenge—athletes experienced increased motivation, confidence, and enhanced performance (McHenry et al., 2022). More importantly, while participants described how harmful coaching behaviors led to low feelings of self-worth and they learned to conditionally regard/disregard themselves, experiences of UPR informed a positive relationship with the self (i.e., self-regard). For example, when their coaches’ believed in, accepted, and challenged athletes unconditionally, participants reported that they learned to believe in, accept, and challenge themselves, even in difficult situations (McHenry et al., 2022). Participants also felt like they were free to fail and keep trying, rather than when participants felt like they weren’t allowed to fail out of fear of losing UPR from their coach.

McHenry and colleagues (2021, 2022) findings are the first to confirm that the provision of UPR facilitates positive self-regard and the development of unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR). According to Iberg (2001) “the importance of UPR lies in its power to build up or restore the recipient’s unconditional positive self-regard” (p. 155). Characteristics of UPSR may be crucial for athlete performance as it includes “...enhanced self-awareness, enhanced autonomy and acceptance of self-responsibility, and a more accurate evaluation of self and

experience” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 4). Through the lens of PCT, by the provision of UPR from coaches, UPSR facilitates the “development of holistic well-being and the optimization of psychological characteristics that may benefit performance excellence” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 4). Since positive self-regard indicates less conditions of worth, McHenry et al., (2022) states that “without conditions of worth athletes’ performance—and the possibility of failing in a performance—would no longer be a threat to their fulfillment of positive regard or acknowledgement of self” (p. 15). Thus, a positive sense of self-regard and feelings of worth seem to be at the core of enjoyable and successful performances, increased motivation, and persistence through failures. Given these findings, “self-regard may be a critical factor to consider as a potential mediator to explain how coaching behaviors support or hinder athlete’s empowerment and thriving” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 14). Positive self-regard has been discussed in literature to be the most important outcome through the provision of UPR, however it has not been given the importance to be investigated as such. In light of athlete advocacy of being ‘more than an athlete’, it is crucial to understand athlete’s perceptions of UPSR as it relates to sport performance, as well as the ability to acknowledge their worth as a person.

To reiterate, the power of UPSR lies in that "no matter what an individual is experiencing or what is going on around them, UPSR allows a person to rely on their own self-acknowledgment of their worth and potential as a source of strength to live to their highest potential” (McHenry, 2021, p. 21; Schmid, 2001). Perhaps if UPR is provided, athletes may be able to rely on their UPSR during vulnerable competition experiences, so that no matter what happens, their worth as a person is not contingent on performance. Interestingly, an in-depth understanding of unconditional/positive self-regard has yet to be investigated within the sport domain. There are several questions regarding unconditional/positive self-regard through the lens

of PCT that are unanswered. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to extend person-centered theory by qualitatively exploring former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) swimmers' perceptions and experiences of the components of UPSR in sport.

### **Guiding Research Questions**

- A. How do former collegiate swimmers describe their perceptions of the components of unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR) in their sport experiences?
- B. How do former collegiate swimmers describe their experiences of self-worth as a source of strength (or not) in sport?
- C. How do former collegiate swimmers perceive UPSR influenced their enjoyment and performance (or not) in sport?

### **Limitations**

- 1. There is a lack of investigations about positive self-regard, UPSR, and PCT in the athletic domain. While the current study aims to expand PCT constructs in the athletic domain, this may present as a limitation to the data analysis.
- 2. The study explores perceptions and experiences of former NCAA DI swimmers. This means that this study will not provide information regarding swimmers in other contexts (e.g., NCAA DII, high school) or athletes in other sports (e.g., basketball players).

### **Delimitations**

- 1. Purposeful snowball sampling will be used. The sample is delimited to retired NCAA DI swimmers. Swimmers must be retired for a maximum of five years at the time of the current study.

## **Most Relevant Definitions**

### **Positive Regard:**

A human need that includes attitudes of “warmth, liking, respect, sympathy, and acceptance” (Rogers, 1959, p. 208; Standal, 1954).

### **Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR):**

Communicates to another that none of their experiences is more or less worthy of warmth, liking, respect, and acceptance (Rogers, 1959).

### **Self-Regard:**

Also known as the relationship a person develops with themselves that is learned from how others treat them (i.e. the provision or denial of UPR; Standal, 1954; Rogers, 1959).

### **Positive Self-Regard**

The acceptance, belief, challenge, and respect (McHenry et al., 2021, 2022) in oneself because they feel worthy as a human to do so.

### **Conditional Self-Regard**

When an individual feels worthy only when a certain condition is met. When this condition is met, only then will they accept, believe, challenge, and respect themselves.

### **Negative Self-Regard**

When an individual feels as if they are never worthy of positive regard. In turn, they never accept, challenge, believe, or respect themselves.

### **Absolute Self-Disregard**

When an individual feels as if their existence is not worthy of life. Never accepts, believes, challenges, or respects themselves.

**Unconditional Positive Self-Regard (UPSR):**

Develops through the provision of UPR and is a view of the self in which an “individual perceives [themselves] in such a way that no self-experience can be decimated as more or less worthy of positive regard than any other” (Rogers, 1959, p. 209).

**Conditional Positive Regard:**

To give conditional positive regard means to offer positive regard only when a person meets an expectation or requirement (Wilkins, 2001).

**Conditional Negative Regard:**

To give conditional negative regard is to withdraw positive regard from an individual when they do not fulfill an expectation or requirement (Assor & Roth, 2012).

**Unconditional Negative Regard:**

Communicates that no matter what a person does, the provider of unconditional negative regard will always hate or demean the receiver (Wilkins, 2000). Coaches who communicate unconditional negative regard consistently shame and do not accept their athletes as people or athletes (McHenry et al., 2021, 2022).

**Unconditional Positive Disregard:**

The refusal to enter a relationship with another. “It can be so powerful that receivers of [unconditional positive disregard] doubt their right to life” (Iberg, 2001, p. 26). It is also the gradual falling out with an athlete, or the refusal to acknowledge them after they stop producing successful results (McHenry et al., 2021, 2022)

**Conditions of Worth:**

A term that describes a condition for another to meet in order to receive love and acceptance. E.g., “I will show you love, only if you do something for me” or “I am only worthy if I meet this condition” (Rogers, 1959).

**Congruence:**

The realistic and accurate awareness of self-experiences and reality (Rogers, 1959)

**Incongruence:**

The discrepancy between an individual’s perceived self-perception and an their actual experience (Rogers, 1959).

**Caregiving Relationship:**

A relationship “that has significant influence over an individual’s sense of safety, trust, and fulfillment of needs (Sterling & Kerr, 2013, p. 87). The coach-athlete relationship is considered a ‘care-giving relationship’.

**More than an Athlete:**

A popular affirmation statement used by professional and elite athletes to communicate that they are more than just their ability to perform.

**Self-Actualization:**

An ongoing journey or process of “achieving one’s true potential” (Hoffman et al., 2013, p. 4)

**Self-Concept:**

How a person perceives themselves to be. Also known as self-perception (Rogers, 1959)

**Self-Worth:**

“One’s sense of value as a human being” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, 2022)

**Thriving:**

The joint experience of well-being and optimal performance (Brown et al., 2017)

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Brief Review of Person-Centered Theory**

Coined by Carl Rogers, Person-Centered Theory (PCT; Rogers, 1959), is a framework that provides the understanding of how important relationships facilitate or impede psychological well-being. Because humans depend on social connection for survival, Rogers (1959) believed that growth-promoting relationships were crucial for psychological well-being and growth. While the concept of a growth-promoting relationship had only been implemented as a framework for counseling relationships, PCT has “since become one of the most influential systems of thought in relation to the helping professions” (Patterson & Joseph, 2013, p. 94). Many of these helping professions, also known as growth-promoting relationships, include the parent-child, teacher-student, leader-group, and most recently, coach-athlete relationships.

Rogers (1959) believed that humans have the innate tendency and motivation to grow towards full potential (i.e., self-actualize) and believed that growth-promoting relationships facilitated this already existing capacity through the provision of the three core conditions of PCT. The first condition is empathy. Providing empathy means to be with the person and their emotions, and to “lay aside the views and values you hold for yourself to enter another’s world without prejudice” (Rogers, 1975, p. 4). The second condition is genuineness, which is also referred to as congruency or authenticity. Genuineness is when someone is “open to one’s own inner experience and being in a personal state of harmony (Wilkins, 2000, p. 33). The third and arguably the most important condition is unconditional positive regard. UPR is the provision of love, warmth, and acceptance in any circumstance (UPR; Rogers, 1959).

Through the provision or denial of UPR, individuals begin to treat themselves the way others have treated them, known as self-regard (Standal, 1954). When UPR is consistent, or

unconditional, individuals then develop unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR; Rogers, 1959). UPSR is when a person perceives that none of their self-experiences is more or less worthy of love than the other (Rogers, 1959). UPSR is considered a key “determinant of well-being” (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 261), as it is what facilitates an individual’s innate tendency to self-actualize. UPSR has received very little empirical attention in PCT research, as only two investigations about UPR has been conducted within the athletic domain (McHenry et al., 2021, 2022; McHenry, 2021). Within the context of sport and the coach-athlete relationship, coach provision of UPR was represented as the unconditional acceptance of, belief in, challenge, engagement with, and respect for athletes (McHenry et al., 2022). Athletes who experienced UPR from their coaches reported that it facilitated their own acceptance, belief, and challenge in themselves (i.e., positive self-regard). While UPSR was not specifically investigated, understanding the role of UPSR in the athletic domain may be critical, as the development of positive, conditional, negative self-regard, and self-disregard lead to either increased or decreased motivation and performance (McHenry et al., 2021, 2022).

In this chapter, I first review what UPR is, along with how and why UPR develops positive self-regard. Next, I review the literature about and related to unconditional positive self-regard. Then I discuss how UPSR is thwarted by reviewing conditions of worth and the opposites of UPR. From there, I discuss the real life examples of athlete self-worth, and address the literature about athlete self-worth. Lastly, I discuss what we know about PCT in the athletic domain as it relates to an athlete’s positive self-regard.

### **UPR and Positive Self-Regard as a Pervasive Human Need**

UPR communicates to another that “no experience can be discriminated as more or less worthy of positive regard than any other” (Rogers, 1959, p. 208). UPR is an attitude that is held

towards another and involves complete acceptance of one's feelings that are positive and negative, "even the parts [of the client] that may be uninterested in changing" (Wilkins, 2000, p. 27). UPR does not mean to agree with the other, however, it does mean to maintain a position of non-judgement, acceptance, and care for another's good and bad experiences. In addition, communicating UPR is to "seek to be beside their clients, not on their side. To be as close to the client's experience as possible, not allying with their thoughts and feelings" (Wilkins, 2000, p. 29). This attitude of UPR is what allows an individual to come to accept their own 'bad' experiences and want to change and grow from them. Finally, UPR communicates that someone is worthy of love, constructive feedback, and appreciation, not because of what they can do, "but on the basis of one's existence" (Makri-Botsari, 2015, p. 51).

Many people may mistake UPR to be unconditionally positive or 'soft'. Rather, it is an attitude towards someone that acknowledges and respects their presence. It is accepting someone for their abilities in the present and also challenging them towards their potential (Schmid, 2001). Positive in UPR merely means to non-possessively care for an individual in way that helps them grow in a positive way (Iberg, 2001). Further, many people may turn away from the idea of UPR, because unconditional is 'unattainable'. However, while unconditional may never be possible, it is rather the constant process of working to demonstrate unconditionality towards a person that makes UPR so powerful (Cochran & Cochran, 2021).

There has been debate about which of the three conditions (empathy, genuineness, and UPR) is the most important for growth or self-actualization. While the three core conditions are interrelated and inseparable, UPR has been identified as the driving force of PCT (Bozarth, 1998). Wilkins (2000) describes that is UPR the curative factor because accepting someone's inner world as they are, beautiful and ugly, "increases the likelihood of psychological contact

and...therapeutic change” (p. 31). Further, Wilkins (2000) states that “empathy and congruence provide a framework in which unconditional positive regard is believable” (p. 33).

Rogers’ (1951) early philosophy for PCT did not entail the use of the term UPR, but rather described that a therapist must “move in the direction of feeling deep respect for the significance and worth of each person” (p. 21) for therapy to be effective. However, Rogers noticed that if the client does not perceive that the therapist is displaying a ‘deep respect’ and feels as if their experiences are being judged, then the person is not moving out of psychological maladjustment. Rather, the therapist continues to make maladjustment worse. Thus, when the therapist perceivably provides a ‘deep respect’, it must also be perceived by the client as making a positive difference. This element that seemed to be a key factor in facilitating or thwarting well-being became the term UPR, when Rogers’ doctorate student Stanley Standal (1954) proposed the need for positive regard.

Standal (1954) proposed four factors to account for why the need for positive regard is such an important element for facilitating or thwarting well-being. The first factor involves the number of social interactions, or encounters, that humans engage in. Because humans are dependent on social connection to survive, they experience a very high number of encounters. The second factor focuses on the patterns of these encounters, which become more salient as individuals come to associate certain self-experiences with the provision or thwarting of positive regard. For example, in interactions that an individual receives positive regard, the individual comes to associate positive regard with well-being, because they are left feeling satisfied. However, experiences that entail the withdraw of positive regard become associated with sadness and psychological disfunction (Standal, 1954). As a result, people will begin to avoid or seek certain behaviors in order to receive UPR and the satisfaction that comes with it. The third factor

that contributes to the pervasive need of positive regard is the desire to receive UPR from a variety of people. Meaning, humans have the desire to receive UPR from people in multiple domains in their lives (family, friends, spouses, co-workers, coaches, teammates, etc.). Again, because humans depend on social connection to survive, the number, pattern, and variety of positive regard encounters are constantly reinforced throughout life, making positive regard “a persistent and pervasive human need” (McHenry, 2017, p. 23; Standal, 1954). Lastly the fourth factor that contributes to the pervasive need of positive regard, is that in the absence of a human source of positive regard, pets may “serve as sources of positive regard” (Standal, 1954, p. 34).

Because of the salience of the countless interactions with the provision or withdraw of UPR, an individual learns to treat themselves the same way that others have treated them, known as self-regard (Standal, 1954). In other words, if a set of self-experiences is associated with the provision of UPR, an individual may take on “rewarding characteristics” (Standal, 1954, p. 59) or treat themselves with *positive* self-regard.

Positive self-regard is learned as it must be experienced from the provision of UPR from others first. Positive self-regard means to have an attitude of “warmth, liking, respect, and acceptance” toward yourself (Rogers, 1959, p. 208). Standal (1954) also proposed that the need for self-regard does not replace the need for UPR. Rather, the older an individual gets, “the need for self-regard is operationally more potent than the need for positive regard” (Standal, 1954, p. 61). Meaning, psychologically adjusted adults don’t necessarily need to meet the conditions of others to experience self-regard. Thus, their self-regard may be more situated and not extremely dependent on receiving positive regard from others, even if they experience a dissatisfaction of the withdraw of positive regard (Standal, 1954). Furthermore, when a set of self-experiences

associated with UPR is unconditional, an individual develops unconditional positive self-regard that remains consistent throughout life (UPSR; McHenry et al., 2022; Patterson & Joseph, 2006).

### **Unconditional Positive Self-Regard**

While unconditional positive self-regard is an ultimate outcome of a growth-promoting relationship, UPSR itself within the person-centered domain has received less empirical attention than the core conditions that produce UPSR. UPSR has also been likened to self-acceptance, which has become popular in humanistic psychological studies.

Before the rise of humanistic psychology, behaviorism and psychoanalysis were the most popular forms of psychology. Both “behaviorism and psychoanalysis had a pessimistic view of human nature” (Hoffman et al., 2013, p. 4) as opposed to the optimistic view of humans humanistic psychology maintains. Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, believed that human potential was being ignored in the previous two psychological schools of thought and termed this missing human potential to be self-actualization— “which is the broader, but inclusive of, self-acceptance and self-worth” (Hoffman et al., 2013, p. 4). Further, a person who is self-actualizing or fully-functioning, is someone who is in the journey or process of “achieving one’s true potential” (Hoffman et al., 2013, p. 4). It must be noted that while the term self-actualization is used in a way as something to be achieved, it is rather an ongoing process to maximize an individual’s potential— “which is best expressed in the acceptance of one’s helplessness or limitations” (Hoffman et al., 2013, p. 6).

Maslow believed that self-acceptance results through actualizing the self, which is the result of satisfying the lower levels of needs. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs include basic needs such physiological needs (food & water) and safety needs (safety). The next level is psychological needs that include belongingness needs (relationships) and esteem needs

(accomplishments). Lastly, at the top of the hierarchy is self-actualization needs (achieving full-potential; McLeod, 2018).

This differs from Rogers (1959) PCT, in that self-acceptance, or UPSR, is achieved through a growth-promoting relationship which then leads to an individual actualizing the self. Rogers (1959) notes that self-actualizing also includes the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but self-actualization *is the* product of UPSR. This is reaffirmed in the debate about UPR being the curative factor in growth-promoting relationships. If UPSR is the gateway to self-actualization by way of UPR, when UPR is withdrawn, UPSR is diminished. This means the natural tendency to self-actualize was thwarted (Bozarth, 1998). Thus, through the provision of UPR, an individual may reconnect with the ability to self-actualize through UPSR. In other words, the "importance of UPR lies in its power to build up or restore the recipient's unconditional positive self-regard" (Iberg, 2001, 156) to strive towards self-actualization. Further, Rogers believed that someone who has developed a strong sense of positive self-regard demonstrates congruency. To be congruent means to have a realistic and accurate perception of self and their experiences (Rogers, 1959). Simply put, the individual can fully be themselves without fear of losing positive regard, instead of denying parts of themselves in order to receive positive regard.

Rogers (1961) also noticed that through the therapeutic process, individuals can come to genuinely like and appreciate themselves. He states of the therapeutic process that it,

"...works in the direction of permitting the person to experience fully, and in awareness, all of [their] reactions including thoughts and feelings and emotions. As this occurs, the individual feels a positive liking for [themselves], a genuine appreciation of [themselves] as a total functioning unit, which is one of the important end points of therapy" (p. 90).

## **Research Evidence of UPSR**

Little tangible evidence is actually known about UPSR as an outcome of UPR. Previously, Barrett-Lennard (1986) created the Barrett-Lennard Relational Inventory (BLRI) that evaluated the effectiveness of client-centered therapy by measuring the level of which clients perceived their therapist to provide empathy, genuineness, and UPR. However, it did not measure the outcome of UPSR in the client.

Because UPSR is a psychological experience as an outcome of therapy, scholars sought to develop a scale that measured client therapeutic change (UPSR scale; Patterson & Joseph, 2006). To do this, scholars created an operational definition that characterized both unconditionality and positive self-regard—“UPSR attempts to capture an attitude, which is characterized by the individual’s self-regard being positive while at the same time being non-contingently accepting (Patterson & Joseph, 2013, p. 97). This operational definition allowed scholars to create sub-scales to measure UPSR—unconditional and positive self-regard.

To create items for the scale, Patterson and Joseph (2006) used items from the BLRI, as it also contained separate sub-scales to measure the level of which a therapist conveyed positive regard and unconditionality of the positive regard. These subscales were created because of the “operationally awkward concept of unconditional positive regard” (Patterson & Joseph, 2006, p. 561). Since the scale offered a viable way to measure UPSR, scholars decided to use the two sub-scales of the BLRI and turn them into reflexive statements. For example, the BLRI contained items that measure unconditionality, such as “s/he likes certain things about me and there are other things s/he does not like.” (Patterson & Joseph, 2006, p. 561). In order to reflect UPSR, this item was revised to “there are certain things I like about myself and there are other things I don’t like” (Patterson & Joseph, 2006, p. 561). Scholars rewrote many of the statements in the

BLRI in more than one way, and created 44 items for the scale, 32 of which were from the original BLRI scale. The new UPSR scale included 21 items that measured positive self-regard and 23 items that measured the level of unconditionality. The total scale was then rated and some of the items were discarded because they were repetitive or did not relate to the definition created for UPSR. Then, scholars constructed the final scale, which contained 20 items. 13 of the items on the scale were positively worded and 7 items on the scale were negatively worded. Each response to the items on the scale were “scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, so that higher scores reflect more UPSR” (Patterson & Joseph, 2006, p. 561).

Sample items on the scale include; “my opinion of myself changes depending on my behavior”, “I truly like myself”, “whether other people criticize me or praise me makes no real difference to the way I feel about myself”, and “how I feel towards myself is not dependent on how others feel towards me” (Patterson & Joseph, 2006, p. 564).

The UPSR scale (Patterson & Joseph, 2006) was tested for test convergent, discriminant, and construct validity of the scale. For discriminant validity the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale was used (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). To measure construct validity the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker et al., 2003) were used. Lastly, to test convergent validity the the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1972); and the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (Zigmond & Snaith, 1983) were used (Patterson & Joseph, 2006).

Scholars first conducted a pilot study that surveyed 26 graduate psychologists (Patterson & Joseph, 2006). After the pilot study proved reliable, scholars surveyed 211 university students. Participants consisted of White, Asian Indian, Asian Pakistani, Black African, and Chinese

ethnic origins (Patterson & Joseph, 2006). Of the 210 participants, 174 were women and 37 were men. The convergent and construct validity measures supported the two sub-scales independently (unconditionality and positive self-regard). In all, scholars reported that the simplicity of the scale provided “encouraging” (Patterson & Joseph, 2006, p. 567) evidence that the UPSR scale may be useful to measure therapeutic change (UPSR is a result of receiving UPR) for person-centered therapists. Further, the UPSR scale provided a good assessment of an individual’s mental health and self-esteem (Patterson & Joseph, 2006).

Since the creation of the UPSR scale and its associated findings, there have been only six other studies examining the relationship between UPSR and optimal well-being. Flanagan et al. (2015) conducted the first investigation, and investigated the association of UPSR and posttraumatic growth. Posttraumatic growth offers an understanding how trauma survivors “may develop new perspectives on the self and the world that move them beyond their previous levels of functioning” (Flanagan et al., 2015, p. 193). Thus, scholars used UPSR to investigate posttraumatic growth because person-centered theorists believe that UPSR facilitates posttraumatic growth (Flanagan et al., 2015). Further, scholars believe that “individuals who are more open to and accepting of internal experience would be expected to engage in successful affective-cognitive processing of traumatic material following a traumatic event” (Flanagan et al., 2015, p. 194). Meaning, those that have a higher level of UPSR are more likely to grow and recover after a traumatic event. The investigation was a longitudinal study that involved 143 participants at time one and assessed participants experiences “of traumatic life events, posttraumatic stress, well-being, and UPSR” (Flanagan et al., 2015, p. 191).

At time one, participants completed the Checklist of life events (CLE; Blake et al., 1995), the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R; Weiss & Marmar, 1997), the UPSR scale (Patterson

& Joseph, 2006), the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS; Tennant et al., 2007), the Changes in Outlook Questionnaire (CiOQ; Joseph et al., 1993), and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). At time 2, three months later, 76 participants participated and were assessed for “well-being and perceived posttraumatic growth” (Flanagan et al., 2015, p. 191). For time 2 they completed the WEMWBS (Tennant et al., 2006) as well as the CiOQ (Joseph et al., 1993) and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The participants who participated in the investigation reported experiencing a “transport accident (49%) closely followed by sudden unexpected death of someone close (46%)” (Flanagan et al., 2015, p. 197).

First, scholars found that the relationship between perception of growth and actual growth was statistically significant for the difference in time 1 and time 2 for the WEMWBS and the CIOP at time 2 ( $r=.263$ ,  $p < .05$ ; Flanagan et al., 2015) and a significant relation with PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) at time 2 ( $r = .185$ ,  $p < .06$ ; Flanagan et al., 2015). Indicating that individuals’ perceived belief of growth and actual growth are related but not equivalent (Flanagan et al., 2015).

In the same study, scholars found that the higher the individuals scored at time 1 on the UPSR scale (Patterson & Joseph, 2006) that individuals also scored high at time 2 on the CiOP ( $r = .363$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; Flanagan et al., 2015) and posttraumatic growth ( $r = .305$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Lastly, the UPSR scale (Patterson & Joseph, 2006) was tested with the WEMWBS difference score and was found to be related to posttraumatic growth (Flanagan et al., 2015). Thus, the higher participants scored in the UPSR scale at time 1, participants were likely to score higher on the WEMWBS difference score ( $r = .216$ ,  $p < .05$ ; Flanagan et al., 2015) as well. In sum Flanagan et al., (2015) found that individuals who had higher score on the UPSR scale were more likely to have positive

“changes in perceived posttraumatic growth and an increase in well-being” (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 261).

The second study (Murphy et al., 2015) explored the relationship between UPSR, posttraumatic growth, and if intrinsic aspirations mediated UPSR and posttraumatic growth. Intrinsic aspirations are behaviors that are linked to growth-oriented behaviors. Growth-oriented behaviors include “seeking out new challenges, pursuing one’s interests and exercising skills” (Murphy et al., 2015, p. 206). Scholars investigated intrinsic aspirations in relation to UPSR because according to Rogers (1959) self-actualization (to constantly grow) is an individual’s “main source of motivation” (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 206), which may be related to intrinsic aspirations.

The investigation surveyed 99 participants who were living in Cyprus, 44 of which were male and 55 were female. Participants identified as White, Black, and other (Murphy et al., 2015). Participants identified traumatic events in their life which included, death, health problems, relationship problems, mental distress, accidents, war, and bankruptcy (Murphy et al., 2015). Then participants completed measures using the UPSR scale (Patterson & Joseph, 2006) and The Aspiration Index (AI: Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Scholars found that while there is a relationship between UPSR and posttraumatic growth, intrinsic aspirations partially mediated this relationship (Murphy et al., 2015). This evidence further supports the use of person-centered therapies by facilitating UPSR in trauma survivors. Thus, scholars suggest based on the results, that person-centered therapists should focus on steering clients toward intrinsic aspirations rather than focusing on symptom reduction as it may thwart “the potential for client growth” (Murphy et al., 2015, p. 210).

The third study (Murphy et al., 2020) sought to confirm the UPSR scale's validity by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis investigation by administering the UPSR scale (Patterson & Joseph, 2006) to 239 participants. Participants consisted of 109 men and 130 women who identified as Caucasian, Asian, mixed ethnicity, and Black African/African Caribbean (Murphy et al., 2020). The two sub-scales of the UPSR scale was tested and were confirmed through using the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the chi-square difference tests (Murphy et al., 2020).

The fourth and fifth investigation involved examining UPSR, a humanistic characteristic of well-being. These characteristics of well-being in positive psychology, which included intrinsic aspirations and authenticity. As intrinsic aspirations indicate growth-oriented behaviors that are indicative of well-being, scholars describe that being one's true self (synonymous with congruence) is a "state of balance" and "equilibrium" (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 269). They also claim that authenticity "sits at the intersection of person-centered, psychodynamic, positive psychology, and social psychological perspectives" (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 270) which made authenticity ideal to link with UPSR. In the fourth investigation, Murphy et al. (2020) examined the correlation between UPSR and intrinsic aspirations by administering the UPSR scale (Patterson & Joseph, 2006) and The Aspirations Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1993) to 199 master's degree students. Positive self-regard was found to have a significant positive relationship with three of the Aspirations Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1993) sub-scales; intrinsic aspirations-total scale, intrinsic aspirations-importance subscale, and intrinsic aspirations-chance subscale (Murphy et al., 2020). However, unconditionality negatively correlated to one of the Aspirations Index subscales (Kasser & Ryan, 1993); intrinsic aspirations-importance subscale. Unconditionality of regard also did not significantly relate to two of the Aspiration Index subscales; the intrinsic

aspirations-chance scales or the aspirations-total scale (Murphy et al., 2020). Scholars suggest that intrinsic aspirations are a contradictor to UPSR after finding that there is not a correlation between *unconditionality* of self-regard and the Aspirations Index (Murphy et al., 2020). Scholars speculate that those with a higher unconditionality of self-regard may find intrinsic aspirations to be less important. Scholars also suggest that a reason for this is because intrinsic aspirations may involve participants thinking about the future, where UPSR requires the person to think about where they currently are in the moment (Murphy et al., 2020). However, Murphy and colleagues (2020) seem hone in on the importance of instrinsic aspirations. This is interesting because, intrinsic aspirations is a partial mediator, meaning that it doesn't actually fully support the entirety of UPSR. Further, while Rogers (1959) states that the tendency to self-actualize (to continually grow) is the motivation for humans, the person-centered therapeutic process indicates that one must accept who they are, good and bad, before being able to positively change (Rogers, 1959; Cochran & Cochran, 2021). Instead, other reasons individuals with UPSR may not consider intrinsic aspirations to be as important is because individuals might already be happy as is, already are participating in activities that make them happy, are not ready for growth and change.

In the fifth study, Murphy and colleagues (2020) examined the association between UPSR, intrinsic aspirations, and authenticity by administering the UPSR scale (Patterson & Joseph, 2006), the Aspirations Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) and the Authenticity scale (Wood et al., 2008) to 100 university students. Unconditionality of regard had a strong positive relationship with the authenticity scale (Murphy et al., 2020). In addition, scholars found that “only intrinsic aspirations-chance scores showed a statisically significant positive correlation with authenticity” (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 259). Unconditionality of regard having a strong

positive correlation to authenticity (i.e., genuineness) supports the notion that higher levels of UPSR mean that an individual is more congruent in their experiencing (Rogers, 1959).

Finally, the sixth study, also the only investigation to assess UPSR in the athletic domain—sought to introduce UPR into coaching practices through creating a professional development program, *Thriving Through Being* (McHenry, 2021). The program was implemented with 17 different NCAA Women’s Basketball professional coaches and their support staff (McHenry, 2021). Simply put, the program was designed for coaches to learn how to communicate UPR to their athletes, recognize their actions with each player and how they align with UPR (or not), accept their limits, and communicate their boundaries with athletes (McHenry, 2021). Throughout the program, coaches completed surveys at three different points. Participants completed the pre-program survey at the start of the program (time one), time two was completed a month later, and time three was completed when the program ended (McHenry, 2021). Participants in the study completed the UPSR scale (Patterson & Joseph, 2006), along with the thriving at work scale (Porath et al., 2012), and the perceived stress scale (Cohen et al., 1983). Most notably, the coaches and support staff who completed all three surveys reported an increase in self-reported UPSR (McHenry, 2021). The finding that UPSR increased for individuals who participated throughout the program is impactful because when a person demonstrates “consistent levels of self-regard” (McHenry, 2021, p. 242) they are better able to communicate UPR to their players. In addition, the increase in UPSR indicated that individuals are more likely to demonstrate characteristics of thriving, which includes being able to better manage stress.

Considering the findings of the six studies above, UPSR appears to be a valid construct that is not only a notable outcome of person-centered therapy/professional development, but also

related to psychological well-being in individuals. While these findings are encouraging, they are limited in number and; therefore, our understanding of UPSR is also limited. Overall, these studies are quantitative in nature and may not be capturing the full benefits of UPSR. Quantitative studies only capture momentary experiences and do not capture all of the interactions that take place in a person's life, that may effect UPSR. In addition, reducing UPSR to numbers may not capture the full strength of facilitating UPSR. While many of the studies were focused on confirming that the construct of UPSR is important to focus on facilitating in therapy, the first five studies do not take into account the influence of different social relationships. Standal (1954) postulates that humans have a need to receive UPR from a variety of people. Thus, the investigations may only account for momentary change in only therapy. And since self-actualization is a constant process (Hoffman et al., 2013) quantitative studies do not account for the personal work it may take to maintain a consistent sense of positive self-regard. In addition, intrinsic aspirations may partially mediate UPSR and posttraumatic growth, but it is possible that UPSR has much more strength for healing than seeking out future activities—as UPSR might provide strength in present moments.

While UPSR is the hopeful ideal, unfortunately, when an experience “repeatedly leads to withdrawal of positive regard, the stimuli giving rise to that self-experience will take on a punishing character” (Standal, 1954, p. 59). As a result, the attitude held towards the self “is no longer directly dependent on the attitudes of others” (Rogers, 1959, p. 209). Meaning once a person learns to treat themselves with positive or conditional self-regard, regardless of if they are receiving UPR, they will still treat themselves with the same positive or conditional regard they believe they deserve. These negative characteristics are a result of the opposites of conditions of worth and receiving the opposites of UPR.

## **Conditions of Worth and the Opposites of UPR**

Scholars have identified four specific opposites of UPR (conditional positive regard, conditional negative regard, unconditional negative regard, and unconditional positive disregard (Wilkins, 2000; Assor & Tal, 2012). Where UPR is unconditional, conditional positive regard implies the provision of love, only if a certain condition is met (Wilkins, 2000). Under consistent conditional regard, an individual will form their self-concept—how a person views themselves (Rogers, 1959)—accordingly. The individual will only then deem themselves worthy of positive regard when they meet certain conditions (i.e., conditions of worth; Rogers, 1959) that are congruent with their self-concept (Rogers, 1959). Thus, individuals will seek or avoid certain experiences to maintain their self-concept out of fear of losing positive regard, and treat themselves in the same manner that they believe they deserve based on how they view themselves (Rogers, 1959; Cochran & Cochran, 2021). Further, individuals who act in accordance to conditions of worth do so because of “the desire for feelings of generalized social approval and self-worth” (Assor et al., 2004, p. 52).

Often, these forms of conditional regard are used in relationships to attempt to get receivers of conditional regard to produce desired results (Assor & Tal, 2012). For example, parents who use conditional regard, do so because they believe it may lead their children to enact behaviors that parents believe are in their “children’s best interests” (Assor et al., 2004, p. 48). However, use of conditional regard may interfere with children’s personal growth, induce anxiety, lessen optimal functioning and lead to feelings of ambivalence towards their parents (Assor et al., 2004).

Conditional negative regard is the withdraw of positive regard when an individual does not meet a certain expectation (Assor & Tal, 2012). Unconditional negative regard “is the complete

neglect of one or more aspects of a person” (Wilkins, 2000, p. 26) and in its worst form, it is the root of racism, homophobia, and sexism” (Wilkins, 2000, p. 26). Unconditional negative regard communicates to another that “whatever you say or do... I will hate, despise, demean, or denigrate you” (Wilkins, 2000, p. 26). It is possible that a person might not realize they are completely ignoring an aspect of another person, in which they may believe that they themselves are being warm and accepting, but the receiver is not perceiving warmth and acceptance. Finally, unconditional positive disregard is when:

one refuses to enter a relationship of any kind with another. It is paying no attention to and being neglectful of another whatever they so or do, or however the act. In an extreme form, it is the complete negation of the existence of one person by another” (Wilkins, 2000, p. 26).

Unconditional positive disregard “can be so powerful that receivers come to doubt their right to life” (Wilkins, 2000, p. 26). If the opposites of UPR lead an individual to “take on a punishing character” (Standal, 1954, p. 59) towards themselves, then in turn, an individual may treat or have an attitude towards themselves that is conditional in which they hate, demean, or completely neglect themselves (McHenry et al., 2021).

When conditions of worth are developed, a person is said to become incongruent. To be incongruent is when there is a “discrepancy between self-perception and actual self-experience” (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 422; Rogers, 1959). In other words, what the person is perceiving does not match their actual experience. According to Rogers (1959) people who are incongruent are often defensive, may distort their awareness, or deny certain experiences in order to preserve their self-concept, which has been firmly developed through conditions of worth. This means that a person will distort reality to make it fit to their self-concept that is heavily informed by conditions

of worth. Or an individual may be in complete denial of an experience to protect their self-concept from threat of change. Incongruence can be so strong that people may reject parts of themselves or their experience to receive positive regard from important relationships. Incongruence, as a result of conditions of worth, is the reason for “anxiety, self-inhibition, lack of personal volition, and a block in people’s innate tendencies to grow towards their full potential” (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 422). Rogers (1959) believes that the only way an individual can grow out of conditions of worth and incongruence, is if a person enters a relationship that communicates their undoubted UPR.

While UPR and its opposites have thoroughly been investigated in the therapist-client, parent-child, and teacher-student relationship, the coach-athlete relationship has only recently been explored. Athletes are not immune to the influence of the provision, withdraw, or denial of UPR on self-regard. In fact, the coach-athlete relationship is perhaps the most influential relationship in an athlete’s life, and is often viewed as a helping relationship, or caregiving relationship to the athlete (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). A caregiving relationship is one “that has significant influence over an individual’s sense of safety, trust, and fulfillment of needs (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, p. 87). According to Stirling and Kerr (2013) “the coach may play the role of the caregiver, as he/she may be entrusted with ensuring the safety and fulfillment of many of the athlete’s physical and emotional needs” (p. 87). As coaches play a vital role and carry the sacred trust that the athlete gives them, coaches may be considered the gatekeeper to athlete’s athletic dreams. Unfortunately, physical, verbal, and emotionally abusive coaching methods have traditionally been accepted as a means to an end to achieve performance excellence (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). This may be a common conditions of worth for athletes, thus subjecting them to accept coaching behaviors that are negative and abusive to attain coach acceptance and support.

In the last section of the literature review, I discuss the rise in athlete's call for acknowledging that every athlete is more than what they do by illustrating real life examples of athletes who have shared their battles with self-worth. From there, I further describe how the coach-athlete relationship has significantly affected athlete's feelings of self-worth. Lastly, I review what we know about UPR and positive self-regard and where this investigation is headed.

## **SPORT CONTEXT**

### **More than an Athlete**

Ellis (2013) suggests that the reason individuals do not think they are worthy as humans is because individuals associate the activities they do with their being. In turn, if a person succeeds or does not succeed at that activity, they tend to rate their worth as a human accordingly. If you are to ask a competitive athlete, or a young athlete who they are, they tend to answer with 'I'm a swimmer!', 'I'm a football player!', or 'I'm a tennis player!'. Instead, to answer the question many athletes struggle with, 'who am I?', Ellis (2013) suggests asking instead, "what do I do? What are my traits? What is the value of this performance of mine?" (p. 67). These questions instead separate the worthiness of existence and the activity a person does. Therefore, a tennis player should not say 'I am a tennis player'. But rather, "I am a person, an individual, who among other things, sometimes play tennis" (Ellis, 2013, p. 67). Lastly, when a person does rate themselves according to their performance, individuals struggle with depression and anxiety, and tend to view themselves as worthless. If a person believes that they are worthless, Ellis (2013) postulates that "it seems almost impossible to help [them] with basic emotional problems" (p. 72). It is this struggle that Ellis believes getting a person to believe that they are worthy because they exist helps them move out of psychological distress by rating their actions and not their person. Rogers (1959) deems that a growth-promoting relationship has the

power to help an individual truly believe and accept the thought that they are worthy because they exist.

Previously, Patterson and Joseph (2006) suggested that UPSR may contribute to self-esteem research, as the UPSR scale had a strong statistical correlation with global self-esteem—using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)—and claimed that it was “conceptually similar to self-esteem” (Patterson & Joseph, 2006, p 559). Then Patterson and Joseph (2013) later suggested that UPSR should not be associated with self-esteem research. Rather scholars posit that UPSR should instead be connected to third wave therapies, such as self-compassion, as it may facilitate UPSR. However, with the rise in athlete’s call to be recognized as ‘more than an athlete’ they use the term self-worth, to refer to their ‘humanness’.

Perhaps listening and understanding to elite athletes advocacy as ‘more than an athlete’, and their desire to be treated as such, will facilitate the connection to how and why individuals mirror regard from others (Standal, 1954). Perhaps feelings of ‘humanness’ or self-worth, facilitate UPSR or, consistent positive self-regard. In turn, this connection may help athletes to thrive in and outside of sport.

Aside from Naomi Osaka, Simone Biles, and Michael Phelps, as mentioned in chapter 1, several other elite and professional athletes have also spoken about their humanity. Below, I have illustrated the advocacy of few of many athletes’ experiences. Each of them seem to be in line with Ellis (2013) separating the rating person from their sport in expressing their humanity, while also advocating to be treated as a human. This seems to be the need to receive UPR from social relationships, as well as the public (Rogers, 1959).

For example, Ryan Hall, who has the fastest marathon and half marathon in US history, retired from marathon running when his body was no longer able to work for him in the

demanding training that marathon running required. He was suffering from “chronically low testosterone levels and fatigue so extreme...that he could barely log 12 easy miles a week” (Crouse, 2016). After exploring options to get his body back to previous racing fitness, he realized his body was not responding and decided to retire from marathon running. However, while Hall faced a difficult decision to retire and turn to weightlifting, it seems at the core, he did not solely identify himself as a runner. Ryan states in an Instagram post:

“...When I retired from pro running it was critical that I found a way to continue to manifest who I am but through a different medium as my body was no longer able to hold up the demand’s pro running demanded. This is why I gravitated to lifting. This became my way to stay true to who I am: a guy who needs physical challenges, loves to see growth and progression, and craves going after big goals. The medium in which I express who I am will change. But who I am will never change” (Hall, 2021)

It seems as though Hall’s view of himself was not solely attached to running, and that it was merely an expression of who he is and what he likes to do. His worth as a *human* did not change with or without the sport of running in his life. This is in line with Ellis’ (2013) philosophy of separating the rating of the activity and the rating of his worth. In a similar fashion, LeBron James is another example of an athlete that *knows* that he is ‘more than an athlete’ and advocates accordingly. LeBron often publicly uses his platform to advocate for social justice issues, including being ‘more than an athlete’. LeBron’s advocacy for ‘more than an athlete’ kickstarted during the Presidential campaign in 2016, when he campaigned for Hillary Clinton. Fox News host Laura Ingraham criticized him about his advocacy and publicly said of him to “shut up and dribble” (Young, 2021), exposing a potentially unspoken opinion of many non-athletes in the United States. This sparked controversy across the nation, especially in the

sport domain, that athletes should be nothing else except for athletes. In response, LeBron posted on Instagram a sign that says “I am more than an athlete” with the hashtag #WeWillNotShutUpAndDribble— thrusting him into a larger social advocacy platform. With LeBron’s advocacy of being more than an athlete and a vote, it seems these terms are used to imply that humans, especially Black Americans, deserve to be seen and treated as worth more than someone who can play a game—which seems to be in line to receive UPR from social others and the public (Rogers, 1959).

Unfortunately, many athletes depend on their sport to inform their sense of worth as a human. Former LSU indoor and beach volleyball player, Cati Leak, writes in her blog how she too, made her worth directly dependent on how she performed on the court (avca.org, 2020). Caught in this trap, she writes that because of the accumulation of the belief that her value is directly tied to her sport, left her mind in a battlefield, that is still in the process of healing. She writes “the only thing that has changed from then to now is the understanding that my worth comes from who I am, not what I do” (avca.org, 2020). Now an assistant coach for LSU, she calls for coaches to understand that sport does not define their athletes and treating them as human first would increase their performance significantly. She states, “true freedom, joy, and optimal performance come through proper understanding of self-worth and value” (avca.org, 2020). Here Cati’s call also demonstrates the link between rating the activity instead of her person, and her advocacy in wanting to be treated with UPR.

Hayden Hurst, a former pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates, now turned tight end with the Cincinnati Bengals, shares his story about struggling with depression and anxiety. Hurst believes that he started struggling with his mental health when he experienced the ‘yips’ as a pitcher, which can be categorized into two types. Type I refers to “a form of task specific focal dystonia

that is heightened by anxiety” (Siegel, 2019). Type II refers to the term baseball players use to describe choking.

Hurst describes that his mental health began with the ‘yips’ because the ‘yips’ was the first time he had experienced some sort of failure. In turn, he felt that for the first time, he wasn’t better than everyone else. He began drinking to try to cope with failure and describes the tipping point when he hit a Baltimore Orioles player and knocked him unconscious, feeling mortified and embarrassed. Leaving baseball behind, he walked on to the University of South Carolina to be a tight end, but still struggled with drinking. It was during this time in 2016, that Hurst attempted suicide. Luckily, Hurst was given a second chance at life, and in doing so has become a huge advocate in athlete mental health by sharing his story and equipping young athletes with the tools to cope with failure (McClure, 2020).

Hurst too, advocates for the ‘humanness’ of athletes, that they are more than someone who has an incredible ability to play a game. He states, “I think with the more athletes who come out and tell their stories, people will realize, yeah, they’re athletes on primetime TV, but they’re humans too; and they go through the same things we all go through” (Parker, 2022).

Each of these athletes, including Osaka, Biles, and Phelps, discuss how they are worth more than something that they can do. In their call, they describe their humanness and that even the fact that while they are at the forefront of television, they are just like everyone else. In elite athletes desire to be treated as a human, and the dire effects it has on their feelings of worth, it may be crucial to understand athlete’s perceptions of UPSR and how it may facilitate the strength to rely on their self-worth as a source of strength—as UPR (and in turn UPSR) has the power to create love for common humanity, not because someone can perform extremely well.

## **Coach-Athlete Self-Worth Research**

From the real-life examples I have provided above, it seems as if there is more than just a coach that influences how an athlete treats themselves. However, I will focus on the coach-athlete relationship, since it seems that a coach has the power to have a critical influence on athlete's sense of self-worth and self-regard (Bartholomew et al., 2009, Stirling & Kerr, 2013; McHenry et al., 2021, 2022). At elite athletic levels, athletes spend most of their time with their coaches, sometimes more than their own family, which further reinforces the predominant role that coaches play during critical times of human development for young athletes. According to Rogers (1959) as soon as a person develops awareness of themselves, conditions of worth can start to arise. Through the lens of PCT (Rogers, 1959) it is possible that young athletes are already learning that the provision of UPR is only given following successful performances and perceived bad performances come with a withdraw of positive regard. During these critical times of development, coaches may enact controlling and abusive coaching behaviors out of hopes to motivate athletes to behave in a particular way or to impose certain ways of thinking to produce successful results (Bartholomew et al., 2010). Coaches may also employ controlling or abusive behaviors because they believe it will make athletes more mentally tough and resilient, making athletes "better able to perform" (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, p. 98). However, scholars indicate that such methods of control and emotional abuse actually harm athlete's well-being, performances, and self-worth (Bartholomew et al., 2010; Stirling & Kerr, 2013; McHenry et al., 2021, 2022).

Commonly used controlling behaviors include the use of shame, blame, and guilt inducing statements. Controlling coaching styles have been found to decrease athletes' sense of personal control, sense of self-determination, and feelings of self-worth (Bartholomew et al., 2010). Another destructive coaching strategy is emotional abuse, which is defined as "a pattern of non-

contact behaviors by a person within a critical relationship role that have the potential to be harmful to an individual's emotional well-being" (Stirling, 2013, p. 626). Emotional abuse can be experienced through "physical behaviors, verbal behaviors, and the denial of attention and support" (Stirling, 2013, p. 626). Due to the intense mental and physical demands placed upon young athletes in the sport context, many athletes can develop damaged self-worth, develop anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Bartholomew et al., 2010). In fact, athletes who experienced emotional abuse from their coaches reported feelings of low self-worth, "low mood, anger, low self-efficacy, poor body image, and anxiety" (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, p. 96). In describing feelings of low self-worth, athletes stated, "you start to believe that you're not good enough...you're not worth their time [coach]" and "[coach] had the immaculate ability to make you feel like you were nothing" (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, p. 94). While self-worth was not intricately explored, it seems that each of the reported outcomes of emotional abuse by athletes indicated that coaches attacked them as humans, degrading their worth, and making them feel incapable as a human being. Further, low mood was associated with the coach saying things about their personal lives that they had no idea about and, as a result, started to "feel like s-t all the time" (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, p. 93). These psychological effects were experienced in conjunction with decreased motivation, reduced enjoyment, impaired focus, decreased performances, and difficulties with skill acquisition (Stirling & Kerr, 2013).

Further, the use of controlling and emotionally abusive coaching "training methods increases when the value of the performance replaces the value of the individual" (Bartholomew et al., 2010, p. 196). This contradicts the core tenet of PCT (i.e., UPR). As a result, in extremely pressurized environments, athlete's feel as if their whole life revolves around their sport, even

feeling like they must prioritize their sport over time with family and friends (Bartholomew et al., 2010).

In examining the use of controlling and abusive coaching methods scholars discovered that these coaching techniques are linked to PCT terms such as conditional regard and negative regard. While conditional regard had not been empirically studied at the time of the investigation (Bartholomew et al., 2010), examples of conditional positive regard included when coaches focused more on athletes when they were performing well but focused on them less when they were not performing well. Negative regard was also displayed when a coach makes statements that makes an athlete feels guilty when they do not perform well (Bartholomew et al., 2010). With the use of negative regard, scholars found that coaches may also use negative and “guilt inducing statements to express their disappointment” (Bartholomew et al., 2010, p. 228) and withdraw positive regard when athletes do not achieve certain behaviors (D’Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998; Bartholomew et al., 2010). Moreover, because conditional regard makes regard contingent on ‘successful’ performances, athletes may deny their own thoughts and feelings. This is because athletes may feel that their own thoughts and emotions are a threat to the relationship they have with their coach. However, the repeated use of conditional regard is likely to make athletes feel as “if they are less worthy as a *person* if they fail, or do not perform the behaviors desired by their coach” (Bartholomew et al., 2010, p. 228).

While the use of harmful coaching practices has been found to decrease motivation, enjoyment and feelings of self-worth, coaches who utilize coaching methods that prioritize athlete’s holistic development (and are growth-promoting) have been found to increase motivation, enjoyment, successful performances, and feelings of self-worth (Bartholomew et al., 2010). These growth-promoting coaching styles “support self-initiated strivings and creates

conditions for athletes to experience a sense of volition, choice, and self-endorsement” (Bartholomew et al., 2010, p. 194).

In sum, the way self-worth is reported and discussed by athletes is used in a way that describes that their value or worth lies in the fact that they are a human being. In other words, athletes are human, they are worthy, they have value, and should be treated as such, without additional reasons to meet to be worthy. However, it seems that when coaches enact controlling and abusive coaching behaviors, that athlete’s come to doubt their worthiness of existence.

### **Person-Centered Theory in Sport**

Through the lens of PCT, McHenry et al., (2022) discovered that UPR meant more than just the provision of love, warmth, and acceptance from coaches. UPR in the coach-athlete relationship has been defined as the following: coaches accepted, respected, engaged with, believed in, and challenged athletes no matter what, without conditions (McHenry et al., 2022). For example, athletes reported that their coaches unconditionally accepted them, meaning that coaches remained present and supportive of them despite their perceived failed and/or successful performances. Coaches were nonjudgmental and rather than being disappointed *at* the athletes for their performances, coaches were disappointed *with* them (McHenry et al., 2022).

Participants in McHenry and colleagues (2022) also reported their coaches respected them and engaged with them without conditions. This meant that coaches cared about what was going on in the athlete’s life outside of athletics, rather than only being concerned about athletics. Athletes reported that their coaches actually took the time to understand them as people so they could better help them. Such unconditional respect let the athletes know that they were worthy of their coach’s time, and “let them know they were appreciated as independent, autonomous individuals” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 10). Unconditional engagement referred to

the provision of quality focused attention. Coaches took the time to listen, and athletes described them as someone who was “just constantly there...[coach] was with me during those nervous times, anxious times, those very extreme emotional times” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 11).

Further, unconditional engagement “points to coaches’ way of being (present and engaged) in interaction with athletes as an important enabler of thriving” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 11).

Finally, participants felt unconditionally believed in and challenged by their coaches. Participants described that during successes and even failures, coaches continued to communicate their belief in their athletes. Participants indicated that “their coaches continued belief in their potential and persisting with them during failure or adversity was most important” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 11). Participants also discussed how their coaches’ unconditional challenge of them made them feel like their coach was “truly supportive of their goals and invested in helping them reach those goals” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 12). In other words, participants indicated that through their coaches challenging them, they knew their coaches believed that they were “worth something... like I had it in me [to succeed]” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 11).

Unfortunately, elite figure skaters’ experiences did not only include their experiences with coach UPR, but also the opposites of UPR. Former elite figure skaters discussed how their coaches communicated conditional positive and negative regard with them when they did not perform well. Instead coaches accepted, respected, believed in, challenged and engaged with their athletes if they met a certain condition. Often, the conditions to meet were successful performances, placing skating as their top priority, staying in a lean body shape, and unrealistic expectations of their coach (McHenry et al., 2021). Further, conditional positive and negative regard were experienced together. Meaning, skaters received positive regard if they met a

condition, and lost positive regard when they didn't meet a condition. When participants didn't meet expectations, they felt "rejected, devalued, or disrespected" (p. 427) when their coaches did not show empathy and purposefully shamed them. Lastly, coaches only engaged with their skaters when they performed up to their high expectations. More specifically, coaches engaged with the more successful athletes.

Participants also discussed their coaches' treatment of unconditional negative regard. Former elite skaters perceived that their coaches were intentionally trying to make them feel less than. For some skaters, this occurred the entire relationship, and for others, during certain points in the relationship. Unconditional negative regard through consistent shaming and non-acceptance. Participants felt like their former coaches would consistently, "shame, criticize, personally insult, or threaten them", (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 428). In addition to having an overall negative mood around them, no matter what they athletes did (McHenry et al., 2021). Coaches also consistently demonstrated non-acceptance toward their athletes through playing favorites and using aggressive and negative body language. In addition, use of unconditional negative regard made former skaters feel as if their coach would never accepted them as a skater or as a person (McHenry et al., 2021).

Lastly, unconditional positive disregard was experienced to be when former skaters felt their coaches "ceased to acknowledge them at all" (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 429). In addition, this type of regard meant that coaches disregarded athletes' autonomy. In other words, their coach nearly controlled every aspect of their lives such as how former athletes trained, their food diets, and even their personal relationships (McHenry et al., 2021). Eventually, conditional positive and negative regard from coaches became absolute disregard. This seemed to occur when their coaches did not want to work with a less skilled athlete, or experienced athletes

experienced a decrease in performance during a time of adversity. One of the former skaters' stated that instead, her coach would disregard them and "they'll just move on to the next one [younger athlete]" (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 430).

While participants who described coaches perceived provision of UPR—unconditional acceptance, respect, engagement, belief in, and challenge—athletes experienced increased motivation, confidence, and enhanced performance (McHenry et al., 2022). However, participants who described coaches perceived provision of the opposites of UPR, experienced a loss of trust in their coach, and experienced a decline in motivation and performance (McHenry et al., 2021).

### **Athlete Self-Regard**

Through the provision of UPR or its opposites, participants described their coaches regard of them "like a mirror" (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 432). In essence, participants learned to treat themselves with positive self-regard, conditional self-regard, negative self-regard, or even self-disregard. According to McHenry et al., (2022) coaches unconditional engagement informed an athlete's positive and accurate self-perception of themselves. For example, one of the participants states that, "I'm self-critical when I need to be, but also I praise myself when I think I deserve it" (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 14). This quote helps to illustrate that freedom from conditions of worth allowed participants to view themselves in a way that was accurate. In addition, it reinforces PCT because when there is a decrease in conditions of worth, individuals are more congruent in their awareness (Rogers, 1959). Further, coaches' unconditional acceptance, belief, and challenge influenced skaters to accept, believe, and challenge themselves (McHenry et al., 2022). In turn, when participants felt that they could "fail, learn, and try again"

(McHenry et al., 2022, p. 13) with their coaches, and it “ultimately transferred to their relationships with themselves” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 13).

Unfortunately, when participants experienced the opposites of UPR, participants relationship with themselves ebbed and flowed with coaches’ approval or disapproval —along with their performance. In turn, participants became more upset with themselves when their coach was upset *at* them for their performance. Because of this, participants described how since their identity was intimately tied with how they performed, their success in “figure skating often served as evaluations of their worth as a person” (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 432). Lastly, receiving the opposites of UPR decreased participants feelings of confidence, hindered their ability to fail and learn, and felt less than to their coaches. Thus, leading “them to question or doubt their abilities and self-worth” (McHenry et al., 2021, p. 432).

McHenry and colleagues (2021) postulate that the most important finding in the investigation is that participants learned to regard themselves positively, negatively, conditionally, or not at all. These findings reinforce Standal (1954) theory about developing self-regard, that it is a learned relationship to the self , based on how caregiving relationships have treated them throughout different life experiences (typically involving successes and failures).

To date, this is the most scholars know about self-regard as a relationship to the self in the athletic domain, nonetheless, in any domain. As positive self-regard is the preceding outcome of UPR, it must be investigated with the importance as such. McHenry and colleagues (2021) postulate that “athlete self-regard may be a critical factor...as a potential mediator to explain how coaching behaviors support or hinder athletic empowerment and thriving” (p. 14). Since an increase in positive self-regard indicates a decrease of conditions of worth, McHenry et al.,

(2022) states that “without conditions of worth athletes’ performance—and the possibility of failing in a performance—would no longer be a threat to their fulfillment of positive regard or acknowledgement of self” (p. 15). Thus, it may be crucial to understand through an athlete’s perceptions of self-regard, how reducing conditions of worth in the coach-athlete relationship by way of UPR may facilitate positive regard, acknowledgement of self-worth, and thriving.

Further, understanding unconditional positive self-regard may also give rise to understanding that it is more nuanced than *just* an accepting and positive view of the self. Since positive self-regard was found to be a mirror of coaches’ acceptance, belief, and challenge, and respect, it is possible that UPSR (positive self-regard) means that an athlete has an unconditional relationship with themselves in which they accept, believe, challenge and respect themselves.

Lastly, it may be critical to understand UPSR in the athletic domain, as UPSR is not only an indicator of self-actualization, but of thriving—a term commonly used in the athletic domain that represents the joint experience of well-being and performance (Brown et al., 2017). Most notably, the power of UPSR lies in that “no matter what an individual is experiencing or what is going on around them, UPSR allows a person to rely on their own self-acknowledgment of their worth as a source of strength to live to their highest potential” (McHenry, 2021, p. 21; Schmid, 2001). In essence, if a coach provides UPR with an athlete, the “protection and care” (Schmid, 2001, p. 157) allows the athlete to be able to rely on the knowledge that their worth as a person will not be threatened or dictated by performance. As a result they have a positive relationship with themselves that may allow them to compete to their highest potential.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Purpose**

This study was conducted through the lens of Person-Centered Theory (PCT, Rogers, 1959) using consensual qualitative research methods (CQR, Hill & Knox, 2021).

The purpose of this study was to extend person-centered theory by qualitatively exploring former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) swimmers' perceptions and experiences of the components of UPSR in sport.

#### **Guiding Research Questions**

- A. How do former NCAA DI swimmers describe their perceptions of the components of unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR) in their sport experiences.
- B. How do former NCAA DI swimmers describe their experiences of self-worth as a source of strength (or not) in sport?
- C. How do former NCAA DI swimmers perceive UPSR influenced their enjoyment and performance in sport?

#### **Participants**

A total of 11 former NCAA DI swimmers participated in this study. Participants were retired from NCAA DI swimming for no longer than five years. The five-year retirement requirement eliminated the likelihood that participants fill in the gaps and are less likely to remember the experience clearly (Hill & Knox, 2021). Of the 11 participants, three self-identified as male, and eight self-identified as female. Ten of the participants identified as White and one identified as mixed with White and Native American (see Appendix A, table 1). Ages ranged from the youngest being 22 to the oldest being 25 years old, averaging 23.36 years. Nine of the participants identified as heterosexual, while one identified as bi-sexual and one preferred

not to say. Total years swam ranged from 9 years to 17 years, averaging about 13.63 years of experience in swimming. Number of years retired ranged from less than a year to four years. Of the 11 participants, four of them reported having experiences working with a therapist and five of them reported having experience working with a mental performance consultant (MPC). Of the nine who reported working with a therapist or MPC, seven participants described working with both.

## **Procedures**

Through the lens of PCT, Standal (1954) and Rogers (1959) held the belief that there is a basic and universal truth that humans deserve and have a persistent need to receive positive regard. This basic truth constitutes that the “world is at least approximately knowable” (Glesne, 2016, p. 8), thus a post-positivist view is held. However, while I believe that everyone deserves love and belonging, I also believe that reality is constructed and that meaning is made according to the individual (constructivist). Thus, consensual qualitative research (CQR, Hill & Knox, 2021) procedures were adopted to explore NCAA DI swimmers’ perceptions and experiences with positive self-regard during their athletic career. CQR is grounded mainly in constructivist ideas with influences of post-positivist ideology. The ontology for CQR is constructivist (constructivist ontology) in that researchers “acknowledge the existence of multiple, equally valid, socially constructive versions of the truth” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 15). The epistemology in this study is also constructivist (constructivist epistemology) in that researchers acknowledge the influence of both researcher and participant. Because Hill et al., (1997) recognize that biases can never truly be eliminated, they maintain that CQR has a constructivist ontology and epistemology while using aspects of post-positivism.

### *Semi-Structured Interview Guide*

According to Hill and Knox (2021) the semi-structured interview guide is influenced by “the need to develop rapport with participants and the need to gather in-depth, consistent information across participants” (p. 36). Thus, the semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix B) were created after a thorough review of the literature regarding person-centered theory, the coach-athlete relationship and coach influence on student-athletes sense of self-worth and positive self-regard. To attempt to discover commonalities across data, participants were asked the same set of questions to “gather a consistent body of data” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 36). The interviewer also utilized probes to explore each participants’ unique experience with positive self-regard and self-worth. The use of probes allowed for the PI to explore participants’ experiences in-depth and allowed for a consistent data collection across individuals (Hill & Knox, 2021).

Scholars recommend that semi-structured interviews consist of three sections (Hill & Knox, 2021). The first section of interview questions pertained to broader questions to ‘warm up’ participants (e.g., “What were your primary/conference events?”; “How many years did you compete?”). The second section of the interview guide focused on the main topic of interest (Hill & Knox, 2021), positive self-regard, or the relationship that they had with themselves during their career (“e.g., how would you describe the relationship you had with yourself during your athletic career?”). The final set of questions asked the participants to “reflect on broader issues” (Hill and Knox, 2021, p. 36) related to UPSR and self-worth (e.g., “knowing what you know now, what would have helped you develop your self-acknowledgement of your self-worth?”).

### ***Bracketing Interview, Pilot Interviews, and Memos***

Biases refer to “personal issues that make it difficult for researchers to respond objectively to the data” (Hill et al., 1997, p. 539). Expectations refer to “beliefs that researchers have formed based on reading the literature and thinking and developing the research questions” (Hill et al., 1997, p. 539). Hill and Knox (2021) acknowledge that biases and expectations are inevitable during the research process. To mitigate biases and expectations, I (the interviewer) engaged in a bracketing interview to identify biases, expectations, and assumptions regarding my relationship with myself and my self-worth during my swimming career. After completing the bracketing interview, the main bias that I held was that having a relationship with myself was something that I figured out how to do on my own with very little social support. I also expected participants to mention their teammates as a potential influence to the relationship they had with themselves. After the bracketing interview, I engaged in two pilot interviews with two former NCAA DII swimmers. One identified as male, one identified as female. These two individuals were not included in the actual sample. Conducting pilot interviews allowed the research team to determine whether the questions yielded relevant data and if the questions asked are in a logical order (Hill & Knox, 2021). After the bracketing interview and pilot interviews were conducted, I made changes to the interview guide for clarity and consistency. For example, the phrases “at what times” were revised to “tell me about a time”. And the question “tell me how the relationship you had with yourself influenced your acknowledgement of self-worth?” was added for clarity. Finally, Hill and colleagues (1997) suggest that the researcher record memos in order to become aware of how new understandings of participants’ perceptions and experiences are being interpreted and how meanings are being made. Thus, I recorded memos (located in Appendix C) via a researcher journal in word to continually monitor my biases, reflect on my

impressions about the flow of the interviews, and record new insights I gained (Hill et al., 1997). In my journal, I repeatedly noticed that there was something about the ‘essence’ of being a swimmer, the environment or nature of swimming, and something about discovering their ‘humanness’. I continued to monitor this, because I did not want to sway the participants to answer questions I was interested in, rather than answering the ones I had made in the interview guide. The largest bias I had to monitor was my own bias about not having a strong team and a strong sense of social support during my senior year. Examples of these memos are located in Appendix C.

### ***Main Study Interviews***

Following IRB approval (located in Appendix D), participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling is when the investigator wants to “discover, understand, and gain insight” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61) by selecting a sample in which the most can be learned. Snowball sampling is used when “people who know people meet research interests” (Glesne, 2016. p. 51). While my own personal experiences with positive self-regard and swimming has influenced me to research swimming, my interests and rationale for the recruitment of swimmers lie in the culture of swimming. Often, “attaining the ideal swimmer body” (McMahon et al., 2017, p. 547) does not come without harsh body practices such as developing eating disorders or the emphasis placed on being lean throughout the swimming athletic career (McMahon et al., 2017). Further, the identity of ‘being a swimmer’ may start at adolescence and is reinforced throughout a swimmers’ athletic career. Elite club and collegiate swimmers have at least three practices a day (two swim practices and a lift) leaving hardly any time to focus on other activities, except to get better for swimming. This constant reinforcement of the swimming identity (by coaches who influence the culture of swimming) may serve as a

cause to how and where swimmers place their positive self-regard, thereby effecting their sense of self-regard. Further, the culture of swimming is “virtually impenetrable to outsiders” (McMahon et al., 2017, p. 547). In other words, the culture of swimming is not as publicly advertised as compared to other popular sports (e.g., football, baseball) which may leave swimmers to feel that ‘no one else gets it’, thus, creating their own bubble of a world. This may make the world of swimming difficult to investigate if not already a part of the community without an understanding of the ‘swimming language’ (i.e., swimming jargon). Thus, investigating the phenomena of positive self-regard in swimming made the investigation more intriguing. Lastly, while swimming is a very Euro-centric sport, the primary investigator purposefully asked my contacts to recruit former NCAA DI swimmers of different races and ethnicities to bolster the diversity of the investigation.

Seven participants were recruited through my list of contacts via cell phone and email (see Appendix E, recruitment letter). The purpose of the study and confidentiality was explained, and I asked for their voluntary participation. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, participants were sent an informed consent form via email (see Appendix F). A date and time were agreed upon at the convenience of the participant to complete the semi-structured interview. Prior to the semi-structured interview, participants gave a confirmation of verbal consent and were given the opportunity to ask any questions and address any concerns they had about the study. Participants were able to choose a pseudonym to protect their identity prior to the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It was made clear in the consent form, as well as any contact made with the participants, that they could withdraw at any time, and their confidentiality was protected. In effort to bolster the diversity of the investigation, each participant was asked if they knew or could recruit swimmers who identified as Black, Asian, or Hispanic. Only one

mixed ethnicity (White and Native American) participated in the investigation. In addition, one participant forwarded participants my email/phone number along with the study information, who met the investigation criteria and was interested in the study. Two participants were recruited and emailed, but never followed up with a scheduled interview time. Lastly, one of my contacts (did not participate in the study) forwarded the study information along with my email/phone to four participants. All four participants recruited scheduled interview dates and times and were involved in the study. Therefore, the total sample included the seven participants that were my own contacts and four participants recruited through snowball sampling.

The primary method of data collection was through the use of semi-structured interviews that were conducted over zoom. Interviews ranged from 49 minutes and 27 seconds to 2 hours 16 minutes and 17 seconds, averaging 97.35 minutes. In CQR, through the constructivist lens, interviewers learn about the phenomenon from the participants while also helping them explore that phenomenon deeply (Hill & Knox, 2021). The postpositivist lens of CQR utilizes semi-structured interviews that ensure the use of the same foundational questions across all participants. In addition, probing was used not only to clarify, but was used to help gain a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of each participant (Hill & Knox, 2021). Due to the phenomena being investigated, there were points in the interview where interviewees felt “vulnerable, sad, and embarrassed” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 48). Therefore, it was important that as the interviewer, I established trust, rapport, and demonstrated empathy.

Immediately after the interviews have been finished, the zoom recordings were automatically downloaded to my computer. When the recording was downloaded, I entitled the recording with the participant’s pseudonym (chosen by the participant) and saved it to a password protected file. The audio recording was then transcribed verbatim, de-identified, and

pseudonyms were used to refer to participants, which included ‘participant’ or gender-neutral pronouns (Hill & Knox, 2021)

Because it was important that the participants’ experience be exactly as they describe it, participants were emailed their de-identified transcript via email. Participants then had the chance to review their transcript, make changes, or take out any information that they wished to not be included in the study. One participant (Marina) added a clarifying detail after reviewing her transcript. In addition I asked five participants clarifying questions about their club experience as a swimmer, as it was context that helped make sense of the development of self-regard. I also asked one participant to clarify an experience with a college coach and a teammate to understand how they supported his self-regard. If further clarification was needed throughout the data analysis process, I reached out via email to ask participants if they were willing to clarify information to ensure accuracy. While the current investigation is considered backyard research, meaning an area familiar to the PI, it was important to note my influence in this investigation (Glesne, 2016). The risk of backyard research includes the assumption that I understood what a participant is talking about, or the risk of a participant not giving detailed answers because “I know what it’s like” (Glesne, 2016, p. 48). It was crucial that before the interview started, I told the participants that ‘while I may perceivably understand what you are talking about referring to sport, I may ask you to clarify in order to clearly capture your full experience of your unique story’. According to Glesne (2016), characteristics of a good qualitative researcher include being a learner, giving reassurance to the participant, and gratitude. Gratitude is perhaps the most important characteristic as participants experiences are the reason why investigations and findings occur. To attend to each participant carefully and mindfully in

this way, I recorded any thoughts and feelings in a research journal (e.g., memos) before and after interviewing (Hill et al.,1997).

### **Data Analysis**

Several procedures were employed to bolster the trustworthiness of the data and rigor of the study. First, a research team was chosen that has “familiarity with the subject being studied, prior to involvement” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 27). In line with Hill and Knox (2021), and prior to discussing participant interviews, the five members of the research team (three master’s students, one doctoral student, and one faculty member) were asked to discuss their experiences, biases, and expectations regarding their athletic background and positive self-regard (self-worth). Hill and Knox (2021) recommend that biases and assumptions be openly discussed and monitored throughout the research to be sure they are not impacting the study.

The research team was compiled of different levels of academic achievement, different races, ethnicities/nationalities, and athletic ability. Hill and Knox (2021) suggest that when selecting team members, to consider the importance of level of experience with the subject of interest, CQR experience, experience with research in general, and prior affiliation (e.g., as students or colleagues). Research teams typically include a combination of graduate students, professors, and practitioners (Hill & Knox, 2021). The current research team consisted of one PhD student, three master’s students, and a faculty member. The first team member, (PI), self-identifies as a Caucasian female, is a second-year master’s student in sport psychology and motor behavior, and is a former NCAA DI, DIII, and NAIA swimmer. The second team member is a Black female, a second-year master’s student in sport psychology and motor behavior and has experience as a NCAA DI track and field athlete. The third research team member self-identifies as a African American male and is a first-year master’s student in sport psychology

and motor behavior. He is also a licensed social worker and life coach. The fourth research team member is a Caucasian male from the United Kingdom, a first year PhD student in sport psychology and motor behavior, has qualitative research experience, and has an athletic background. The fifth research team member is a faculty member (the PI's thesis chair), identifies as a Caucasian female, is a certified mental performance consultant (CMPC), a former NCAA DIII swimmer, and is well experienced in CQR.

According to Hill and Knox (2021), it is important to acknowledge the potential influence of power dynamics on the research team. It was possible that research members might have been “reluctant to voice their opinions due to concerns about alienating their advisors or mentors because of difference of authority” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 28). To mitigate the power and racial influence, team members worked together to create an open and nonthreatening environment, so all members of the research team felt comfortable to voice their thoughts, challenge members in the research team, and advocate for their ideas. The diversity (academic level, race, culture, athletic background) of the team was purposefully sought out to create “constructive conflict...to foster multiple viewpoints and add depth to discussions” (Knox & Hill, 2021, p. 31). To further mitigate power imbalances and reduce groupthink, it was important to acknowledge the power influence members (e.g., faculty member) may have upfront in each team meeting. In addition, those with power invited research members to challenge thoughts and encouraged team members to rotate who spoke first about the data (Hill & Knox, 2021). In addition, Hill and Knox (2021) encourage CQR researchers to become aware of their biases and expectations by recording and openly discussing biases in research team meetings so “team members can monitor their own and others' biases and expectations throughout data collection and analysis to minimize undue influence on the findings” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 40).

The research team members independently read the participant transcripts several times and identified preliminary domains (i.e., themes) before the first team meeting. The domains are described as “broad subject areas” (Hill and Knox, 2021, p. 54), including topics interviewees discuss. This labeling was accomplished by chunking, reading the data line by line, and creating a domain for which they see each sentence or paragraph fit. Next, the research team met multiple times and discussed their impressions of the interview data until the research team came to a consensus on the domains list, which is an “unforced unanimous decision” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 21).

Once consensus was reached about the initial domains list, a new document was made so that a consensus version is made for each case. This document in word was listed as such: the domain at the top, followed by the data that fits the domain, with a space to write core ideas (i.e., raw data). Core ideas are “summaries that capture the essence of the interview’s statements in fewer and clearer words” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 64) and are developed from the domains list. Constructing core ideas allows the researchers to simplify the domains a participant may discuss as well as compare the core ideas to other participant cases. In line with Hill and Knox (2021) the research team worked together to create core ideas, as well as provide feedback to avoid inferring data that is not directly verbalized by the participant.

After domains and core ideas were applied to each case members, two research team members engaged in cross-analysis. Cross-analysis “involves identifying common themes within domains across cases” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p.71). To maintain simplicity, cross-analysis was completed one domain at a time (Hill & Knox, 2021). All core ideas for each domain from all the cases were then compiled into a word document. The research team members then worked with the core ideas to identify categories (i.e. subthemes) within each domain. In other words, the goal

with cross-analyzation was to “create a category structure that best captures the data within the domain” (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 71).

Categories were labeled ‘general’, ‘typical’, ‘variant’, or ‘rare’ (located in Appendix G, table 2). If one category was mentioned multiple times within a single case, the participant was still counted once in the label list. A category was named ‘general’ if the theme was reported by all or all but one participant. If themes arose from more than half of the participants, the theme was labeled ‘typical’. Categories were labeled ‘variant’ if it was reported by up to half of the participants. Categories that were reported by two or three participants were labeled ‘rare’ and any single case reporting was labeled ‘other’ (Hill & Knox, 2021).

The preliminary thematic structure (i.e., domains, categories, and core ideas) and transcripts were sent to an external auditor for feedback. The auditor is considered essential for CQR’s trustworthiness and quality related to the research team members analysis process. According to Hill and Knox (2021), auditors affirm, expand, challenge, and give feedback on the research team’s findings. The use of an auditor ensured that the research team was being honest, making categories directly from the data, and attended to anything that might be missing or needs clarification. One auditor (Hill & Knox, 2021) was assigned to bolster the trustworthiness of the data collection. The auditor is a Caucasian female who holds her PhD in sport psychology and motor behavior, is a CMPC, and has a private practice. She is an expert in PCT (in both professional practice and research), and was a former elite figure skater and coach. Her perspectives as an expert in PCT, and as a CMPC, researcher, and former athlete and coach added richness and depth to the data analysis discussions. She was asked to provide feedback about the clarity of domains, the title of domains, level of specificity (domains should not be too specific or too broad), the overlap of domains, and the ordering of domains (Hill & Knox, 2021).

Once the auditor provided her feedback, the research team revisited the list and incorporated the feedback (Hill & Knox, 2021). Minor edits were applied to the thematic structure and one category was added to the sixth domain.

### **Positionality**

In line with CQR methods, Hill and colleagues recommend bracketing experiences and recording biases by all team members ensures awareness of biases. However, to facilitate further trustworthiness as the primary instrument of research, I must provide transparency in my position as an investigator in this qualitative research (Anfara et al., 2002). By addressing my positionality below, I am enhancing validity by being transparent about my influence in the study, how the study data was interpreted, and how consensus was made.

I am a 23-year-old, European-American, who identifies as a heterosexual, cis-gendered female. I am a graduate student at the University of Tennessee, seeking my master's degree in Kinesiology focusing on Sport Psychology. I currently hold a bachelor's degree in Exercise science with a minor in Psychology. Most important to the study, my identity as an athlete has been vital to me, as the experience of swimming has led to countless opportunities. Swimming has been my greatest source of stress, my strongest source of hope, and my greatest sense of worth and purpose. While swimming had primarily been my sense of worth, by the end of my career, I was able to rely on my own strengths and values as my source of self-worth, rather than waiting on very rare perfect performances to dictate the way I felt about myself. I found once I started to really believe in myself and recognize that swimming was not all or who I was, I started to perform at a level I never thought I would reach in my life. Even though my circumstances were not ideal, I had a lot more fun competing and found that I had a new type of 'inner strength' to push my limits in each practice and competition. Not a lot of people (that I

know) can say that they were able to separate their worth as a human and their sense of worth in sport while they were competing. While for a long time I believed that I found this awareness by myself, I've come to find that my upbringing and belief system has heavily influenced how I approached life when my self-worth was tested.

I grew up in a middle-class, nuclear family in the mid-west. I was the middle child of three, with a younger and older brother. My mom is the primary income holder, and my dad is a 100% disabled veteran. Growing up, my family was very close together. We have a saying in our family that is on the Ferrante family headstone (mom's side) that says "Profundus amor, honor, et dedicato pro familia", which means, "profound love, honor, and dedication to family". This saying has been the corner stone for the way I grew up in that family was/is before everything else. When I started swimming, my parents and brothers never missed any of my major meets (until we got older, and occasions were more difficult to meet). And even though my mom worked all the time, she still did everything in her power to always be at nearly all of my swim meets and all of me and my brother's life events, small or grand scale.

As a swimmer, I was highly privileged, living in a town that had a strong team and produced great swimmers. Swimming consisted of a lot of travel across the U.S. and costly gear that my little brother and I needed (every year) to be considered competitive and blend in with the 'established' swimmers. While my brothers and I also all attended private schooling for the betterment of our education, the expenses on top of swimming were extremely costly. Gratefully, my maternal grandmother and maternal aunt supported our expenses every year. There are several privileges I noticed I had compared to many of my teammates. Namely that most of the swim parents worked and couldn't take their kids to meets (and school or practices), usually having to leave them with another parent or take the bus. While I don't consider these

experiences my friends had to be a judgmental stance I take, I did notice that at swim meets, some of my teammates would long for their family to be there with them. For me, at least one of my family members being at my swim meets or life events was something I never had to question or long for. While many of my teammates had a higher SES status than I did growing up, I consider the closeness of my family to be more of a privilege than a high SES. At times I was jealous of some of my teammates getting to go to a hotel and sleep in-between prelims and finals while I had to stay behind and watch my little brother swim at our YMCA championship meets (little kids swim incredibly slow and take forever). But there is nothing that I would change about it now, as I can say I have been there to watch my brother grow up. While SES was difficult for my family when I was younger, I had many privileges that allowed me to keep swimming. I often faced trials and tribulations but experiencing racism in a predominately European-American sport, was never one of them.

My roots of my family culture has played a major role in my life as it pertains to how I make meaning of my experiences and has heavily influenced my value system. I consider my values to be, courageousness, determination, dedication, hard work ethic, resilience, and optimism. I consider these values to be heavily influenced by my maternal grandparents. My maternal grandfather died before I could ever meet him, but it is clear his legacy lives on in his children and is instilled in me and my brothers. I heard many stories from my mom growing up about the life lessons he would tell her through stories and poems. And any time I faced any sort of adversity, the main message of these stories was to never give up. The most influential story that has gotten me through the hardest of times was a poem called "Don't Quit". It was a poem my grandfather carried around in his pocket that only my mom knew about. The essence of this

poem was to learn to rest but never quit, because you never know how close you are to a victory. It was stories like these that influenced my resilience and optimism in difficult times.

Small notes my family has written to me has also influenced the way I approached life. Before my maternal grandmother had passed, she wrote me a card that said “Dream on, you are my very special dream”. These words inspired me to dream bigger than I had ever imagined. Ever since then, everything I ever dreamed of, I had worked hard for. My maternal Aunt once wrote to me “You have to work hard to be happy”. At first, I was confused, because working hard to be happy sounded exhausting. But I soon learned how right she was. Taking care of myself, achieving my goals, dreaming big, is all hard work. I felt my senior year of college, I turned these small words into actions, as it influenced me to accomplish and achieve many things. Another experience that I think has contributed to my meaning making of life is that, within the last five years, I have developed a deep relationship with God. This belief in a higher power has allowed me to find strength in love, kindness, and forgiveness. More importantly, when I felt my life was uncertain, my trust in God allowed me to believe there was a greater purpose to my pain. This belief paired with my values, stories and notes written to me by my family, has led to be significant influences in the way that I make meaning with life’s challenges. Further, my values and my meaning making has heavily influenced my sense of worth, especially after I discovered my worth did not lie in my ability to swim. Once I discovered this, I found a new type of strength that I hope to share with others.

My swim journey has been the most joyous yet painful journey I have ever taken in my life. Yet I wouldn’t take a second of that journey back. This journey contributed to testing my sense of self-worth, and often. The first time I started to question my worth, I was a junior in high school. Unbeknownst to my coaches and my parents, I had been struggling with my mental

health badly, and it showed in my practices, attitudes, and performances. One day during practice I was swimming a difficult set that I thought I was doing relatively decent at. But I overheard one of the assistant coaches say something to the effect of “you’re a waste of talent” in between rounds of the set. As my coaches usually encouraged us in between swims of difficult sets and shouted them as each swimmer finished to the wall, I believed that comment was for me. To whom this statement was about, there is debate about today among my former teammates. But those are the words I carried with me for nearly the rest of my career. And I truly believed those words. That comment on top of the accumulation of events that happened my junior year of high school led me to feel I was wasted potential. As a result, I felt I didn’t deserve anything I worked for. I didn’t think I was worthy of winning races, and no matter what happened I just felt inferior. When I had committed to a D1 University for swim, his words were still deeply engrained in my mind. Every time I walked on the pool deck, every time I had a bad race, I thought to myself that I wasn’t worthy of being a D1 swimmer, I was a waste of talent, and I wasn’t worthy of any opportunities. I struggled with my relationship with my first college coach, especially when he would ignore me if I didn’t perform the way he wanted me to or hit the goals he made for me (not goals that I made for myself). My relationship with him ended when he almost kicked me off the team for not performing my freshman year.

To prove him wrong about me, I went back home that summer and trained with my club team, and with a coach I felt valued by. Although, this wasn’t easy to do because the practices were difficult and I didn’t really have a relationship with any of the other swimmers in the group. Later that summer, my college team was cut. Luckily, we were able to raise money and bring it back for one more year. However, my freshman year coach had abruptly left before my team was cut, which thrust the assistant coach to the role of the new head coach. I was nervous about

him, but remembered the look of curiosity on his face in the meeting where my freshman year coach gave me an ultimatum about my swim career. That year my new coach quickly cemented my trust in him when he treated me like I was worthy of his time. He collaborated with me, cared about my life outside of swimming, and believed in me. That year, I didn't have nearly as many thoughts of unworthiness as I did before and had much more successful performances.

When I had to leave my first University after the first one was cut a second time for good, I felt my life was in shambles. Everything was changing and it felt like I had lost nearly everything. I transferred to a lower division university for my junior year of college, and the way that coach had recruited me, matched what I believed my worth to be at the time. In recruiting me, he criticized my skill set as a swimmer and told me I wouldn't contribute much to another division 1 school. And I believed he was right. Once again, I felt unworthy, like a waste of talent, and perhaps, this is where I deserved to be. Important to the context, the school I had transferred to was starting a new team. It seemed like a good opportunity, since one door had closed and another door just opened. We had a small number of 14 total swimmers on the team, all mixed with different levels of ability. It seemed like a major downgrade, but I remained hopeful. While I didn't know if I really wanted to swim again, I was simultaneously happy that I was still swimming and I showed up to every practice and worked hard.

Most of my life, I had been a distance swimmer. My main events were the 500 freestyle, the mile (1650 freestyle), and the 200 backstroke and freestyle. After my team was cut and I swam my last D1 conference, I didn't want to do distance anymore. I had swam the mile since I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and I didn't love it anymore. With the stress off to perform at a lower division, I was able to make a switch to sprint events at the new university. My entire life, whether it was light heartedly joked about, or seriously meant, I was told I would never be a sprinter and

criticized by teammates because I couldn't move my arms fast enough. But by the end of my junior year, I went times faster than I could have ever imagined, and were enough to be competitive at D1 universities. While my relationship with my new coach was complicated, for a short period of time, I felt believed in, and for the first time in a long time, I believed in myself. I did something everyone had told me I couldn't do, I felt worthy of being a swimmer for once, and I wasn't a waste of talent. That moment was enough for me to recognize that I was more, I deserved more, and I deserved more from myself.

Not long after my conference meet my junior year, I moved back home and starting training with my club team again. I was the fastest I ever was that summer, I was healthy, I was happy, and I felt worthy. I went from feeling inferior, to wanting to prove others wrong about me, to wanting to prove myself right about my worth. While I had a great summer for my swim career, the next year was not how I had planned at all. In my perspective, the coach at the new university did not properly do his job for recruiting swimmers to the school. I had asked multiple times who he recruited, who was coming back, and how many we were going to have. I was met with a consistent "I don't know". I was fed up with this answer and reached out to my former teammates myself. With every text, I received "sorry, I'm not coming back" and the more I received, the more I felt a deeper feeling in my chest. My senior year, we had in total six swimmers, and by the end, it was just me.

It seemed every summer of my undergrad years I cried at the local club pool I was working at, and this was yet again one of those times. When my parents came to work to bring me dinner, I broke down in front of my mom. She wiped my tears and told me that it was my senior year and I needed to stay positive. But I felt so angry. There was absolutely nothing positive about this experience. I had worked so hard for what? The team I wanted to be on was

taken from me, and then I finally feel worth something at swim and the coach doesn't take his own responsibility to do his job? I knew I needed to feel and grieve this realization of being alone and the possibility of my senior year being the hardest of my life. I had kept my head down and kept going, rerouting, finding solutions, ever since I was first about to be individually cut from the sport. But I had had enough. I was worthy of more. I deserved more.

I approached my senior year with a head held high and an attitude that nothing was going to get in my way. But not long after my senior year began, I began to feel the loneliness and pain of practicing most days by myself. I knew I couldn't survive being physically exhausted and emotionally miserable, so I decided to help myself. I found a book called "Inside the Swimmer's Mind: Mastering the Mental Side of Swimming" by Will Jonathan. Reading that book was like talking to a friend. It was as if for once, I felt understood, and like someone else understood how difficult things were. One thing that seemed to change my entire perspective the most, was for the first time, I read that I was worth more than a swimmer. I don't think I had ever heard or read those words in my entire life. From there on out I repeated affirmations to myself every morning, every practice, every set, every meet. Sometimes I felt like I had to force myself to say them, but when I look back on that year, these affirmations felt like the one thing that buffered many of the difficult experiences I was going through. I would tell myself over and over again—"I am worthy, I am fast, I deserve to be here, I owe it to myself to work as hard as I can, I am worthy, I deserve to be here". I stopped believing I was a waste of talent and starting believing I was worth and capable of more. And for most of the year, I truly believed it.

For some reason, I had the ability to be able to acknowledge my self-worth, my feelings, and be able to work through and out of my pain, rather than sitting in it. This acknowledgement allowed me to accept the circumstances in which I was going to face that year. This pivotal

moment for me inspired my curiosity of self-worth as a source of strength. I had goals I wanted to achieve, and I was incredibly determined to finish out my swim career. And there was absolutely nothing that was going to get in my way of doing just that. Unfortunately, there were a lot of really difficult circumstances I had to face that year. My new coach had helped me achieve a new level of ability and belief in myself the year before. But when I had gained a strong sense of self and showed it, he used every moment possible to tear me down. It seemed like when I didn't have low self-worth or give him praise for helping me get faster, that he desperately craved me to be miserable and look to him as my provider. I felt unseen, unheard, and constantly emotionally manipulated. However, in unlikely circumstances, I was still able to acknowledge my self-worth for a period of time. My unshakeable belief in God allowed me to believe there was a greater plan for me and allowed me to make meaning out of the hard circumstances I was going through. My family's lessons of strength and stubbornness, combined with my value system, allowed me to be able to acknowledge who I know myself to be, and not go down without a fight for my worth, even though I felt extremely alone. This acknowledgement allowed me to pursue and achieve more. I knew I owed it to myself because I deserved it. Unfortunately, at the same time I just so happened to be in undesirable circumstances.

Through the lens of PCT, perhaps my value system, my family lessons of meaning making, my belief in God, my book, and even my last college coach for a short period of time, acted as a source of UPR. All of these sources may have influenced my acknowledgement of self-worth. According to PCT, no matter what is going on around you, self-acknowledgment of self-worth can act "as a source of strength" (McHenry, 2021, p. 21). When I look back on my career, I truly believe there was no way realistically I should have finished out my career semi-

successfully. I wonder if acknowledgment of my own self-worth is what led me to be resilient through those circumstances. However, this resilience did not last forever, because by the end of my career, I felt broken, burnt out, and incredibly sad.

While I need to address my potential biases or critical assumptions, I truly believe this experience has led to viewing other's experiences, no matter big or small, with much more UPR. In the past, I tended to have a strong 'sport bias', as I did a sport that people tended to make fun of and are not able to recognize how truly difficult it is. These circumstances led me to criticize more team-like sports and have a strong sense of pride in swimming being 'the toughest sport'. However, the more I got to know other people at my new university that played other sports, and listened to some of their experiences, the more judgement of other sports softened. I also must acknowledge that the purpose of this study is to not look for people who found worth in despite of circumstances. I believe the situation I was in with my previous coach, was extremely unfortunate and relying on my self-worth allowed me to survive. This experience is not to say that authority figures can still treat people the way that they want, despite some athletes able to still be 'okay' in the end. In fact, I believe this investigation may further give light to why coaches need professional coaching education.

Because of my experiences and classes taken in graduate school, I am also able to understand in a much more critical light, multiple layers of intersectionality (race, sex, gender, SES, religious affiliation, ability) that would allow someone to recognize their self-worth as a source of strength (or prohibit this acknowledgement, as the world tells marginalized people they are not worthy). Cultural, racial, and other multifaceted layers would also indicate that forms of self-worth may look different for each person. It is important that I understand these contextual factors, although I may be slow to catch them in an interview. During my experience, there were

many unfortunate circumstances in which I had to operate under. I often experienced sexism, body shaming comments, and ageism in the environment that I was in. However, in my journey there were a lot of ways I was able to attempt to stand my ground and perhaps get away with sneaking around authority because of my privilege of being White. This is incredibly important to recognize, because while my self-worth was constantly being challenged, I didn't have the entire world telling me that I am not worthy because of the way I look.

Lastly, because this study is very much rooted in my own experiences as an athlete, I am at the center of this research. Because I am at the center, there will be many ways in which my experiences might impact the research process. However, the procedure of this study is designed to constantly challenge my interpretations of interviews and analysis to represent the stories and data as accurately as possible.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

The purpose of the current study was to explore former NCAA DI swimmers' perceptions and experiences of the components of UPSR in sport. After interviewing 11 former NCAA DI swimmers and following CQR procedures (Hill & Knox, 2021) six domains and 22 categories (see Appendix G, Table 2) were constructed: I) Relationship with self (self-regard) while competing was experienced as a “rollercoaster”, II) Sport experiences shaped swimmers relationship with themselves, III) Hitting ‘rock bottom’, IV) Perspective shift in the relationship between the self and performance, V) Regarding self holistically increased performance and enjoyment, and VI) Important relationship influences on athlete self-regard (see Appendix H for figure 3, visual of domains). Participants described moments when they did and did not accept, believe in, challenge, or respect themselves during their swimming career (Domain I). Participants described how their early sport experiences leading up to their freshman year of college influenced their self-regard (Domain II). Because of these early experiences, participants faced on going battles with conditional and/or negative regard, which led them to struggle with their mental performance and/or health and resulted in a low point in their career (Domain III). Participants encountered a forced break which lead them to seek social support. This served as a critical reflective period that facilitated putting themselves before their performance (Domain IV). Participants described that when they started putting their humanity before their performance, their enjoyment and performance increased (Domain V). Lastly, participants discussed the major relationships in their lives that influenced their self-regard (Domain VI). Each domain is described below with using participants own words.

## **Domain I: Relationship with self (self-regard) while competing was experienced as a “rollercoaster”**

In this first domain, former NCAA DI swimmers described the relationship they had with themselves (self-regard) during their entire career as a “rollercoaster” (Jane & Regina), and “up and down” (Robert & Sally). Even if participants did not directly use the word “rollercoaster” or “up and down”, they described their self-regard with high points and low points throughout their career. Importantly, their self-regard was described as conditional and was influenced by performance outcomes. For example, Regina stated that her self-regard throughout her career was “a rollercoaster...if you do well, you ride high, if you do bad you regard yourself very low...effort doesn’t matter, it’s all about performance”. Thus, if they performed well, their self-regard was experienced as positive self-regard (i.e., “high highs”, Jane & Regina) and if they did not perform well, their self-regard was experienced as negative self-regard (i.e., “low lows”, (Robert, Jane, Sally, Regina, Ben, & ‘B’). The majority of participants “rollercoaster” involved primarily conditional and negative self-regard with moments of positive self-regard. There were some participants (Ben, Marina, and Luisa) whose “rollercoaster” was more stable, in which they experienced positive self-regard more consistently with moments of conditional and negative self-regard. For example, Ben perhaps had one of the most stable sense of positive self-regard during his swimming career, yet he even described one moment where he hit “the lowest low out of swimming” for him. Finally, there were two participants who were exceptions to the “rollercoaster”. While they experienced highs and lows, one participant experienced consistent positive self-regard and the other participant experienced consistent negative self-regard. For example, Marina, had the most consistent positive self-regard throughout her career, and Lily, had the most consistent negative self-regard. It wasn’t until Lily’s last year in swimming that her

self-regard became more positive, in which she states her self-regard was “pretty poor until the last year.” Four categories were constructed in this domain that reflect participants experiences of self-regard and include a) self-acceptance, b) self-belief, c) self-challenge, and d) self-respect. In each category, the “rollercoaster” is reflected with descriptions of times participants accepted, believed in, challenged, and respected themselves and times they did not.

### ***Domain Ia: Self-acceptance***

Former swimmers described ways in which they accepted themselves in moments during their career and described their relationship with themselves as “happy” (Hannah), “confident” (Luisa), and “excited” (Marina & Sally). Some of the participants even described the moment where they accepted themselves for the “first time” (Robert & Jane). Participants discussed their “high high” moments of acceptance when they gave their best effort during practice or at a meet. Even if they didn’t accomplish what they wanted, they were able to “accept what happened” and accept that they gave it their “all” (Alexandria). For example, Ben described a time he accepted himself when he lost a race he was “really sure” he could win:

That kind of put me back a little bit. I took a step back and I was able to look at myself, even immediately after the race. Uhm, he deserved it. And you know he tried really hard, and that was his win and I’m just another person trying to do the same thing.

Participants also described that they knew they accepted themselves when they accomplished an important goal. Robert described his moment of self-acceptance when he accomplished his ultimate goal of making the conference team for the first time his junior year of college. Achieving this goal for Robert also allowed him to accept his place on the team in relation to his teammates:

Junior year I made the conference team, for the first time.... and I think that was a big moment for myself mentally. Where I realized that I had made it to my ultimate goal of getting onto the conference team, maybe I wasn't at the very top, I wasn't on the scoring team, I was just, but I was there, so I had made it in that regard. And I started to really accept my position on the team in relation to all the other athletes and accepted who I was as an athlete.

Another important goal participants discussed when they accepted themselves was when they committed to a NCAA DI university to swim. Jane described a feeling of "making it" when she committed, while Hannah described accepting herself because she made a decision that was different than the "vision" she had for herself as kid:

Having wanted to essentially, like, be my mother my entire childhood I was like "I'm gonna grow up and I'm going to swim at [university]".... but choosing to go to [another university] I really accepted, like who I was as an individual...

On the other hand, Sally described how she accepted herself even when she didn't meet a goal. For example, she didn't let her goals "control" her, instead, she "controlled the goals". Allowing herself to be flexible with her goals instead of feeling intense disappointment, helped her to "shake it off and be perfectly fine the next day".

Participants also described accepting themselves when they completed their college careers. Marina described the overall feeling of "looking back at myself and seeing how I started something and then like finished it completely".

Participants also described times that they did not accept themselves. In these moments, they described feeling "angry" and "devastated" (Sally), "disappointment" (Robert & Sally), "sad" (Jane & Luisa), "discontent" (Hannah), and even "emotionally shutting down" (Ben). Jane

described how “one little thing” would make her sad and she didn’t understand why. She stated, “why am I crying? Like why do I feel so sad? Like I couldn’t pinpoint it”. Two of the participants even described that they did not accept themselves “most of the career” (Hannah) or their “whole career” (Lily). When participants described times they did not accept themselves, they talked about how they didn’t accept themselves as a *person* because of how intimately tied their worth was to sport performance. For instance, Hannah described how she struggled with accepting her need to take a break from competition:

I was really struggling with the fact that I didn’t want to compete, but I like felt like a terrible person about it. And just letting that narrative of me not being good enough and like, my desire to take the summer off of competition like just not being important...I like wouldn’t accept my needs to do that.

Many of the participants discussed not being able to accept themselves when they didn’t see progress in their performance. For instance, Robert described not being able to drop time in his favorite event at the end of his freshman year in college, which caused him not to accept himself:

I loved the 100 breast. I loved it so much, and it was really hard to go the whole season and not drop any time in [it] at the end of the year. So, finishing that race at the end of freshman year is really tough to not see any time drops. I wasn’t happy with where I was at all.

In a similar fashion, Sally described achieving a lot of success in swimming her sophomore year of college and *expected* that she would improve in an “upward trend”. However, she was not able to top the success she had her sophomore year in college, causing her to struggle with self-acceptance,

My last two years was a time where I really struggled.... with accepting myself and it was kind of coming off that really successful year and the two years following that it was really hard to come back—come out of that and still achieve success because I started to compare myself a lot to the person I thought I was.

Participants also described not accepting themselves during an injury. Luisa described having a difficult time accepting herself after acquiring a back injury and a concussion in the same year. She would even question if her injuries were real,

I remember having a hard time kind of questioning “am I even really feeling this?... is this even a real thing?”....But then also experiencing hard symptoms and like not wanting to communicate that to anyone, because I just wanted to like keep training. Um...and yeah I think that’s the time where I just wasn’t really like accepting the reality of the situation, myself.

Lastly, Regina described not accepting herself when she struggled to perform and keep up with the other swimmers at practice, while simultaneously struggling with her academic major in college. For Regina this led her to feel “not good enough” with every aspect with her life, “I just felt like I would never be good enough for swimming, felt like I would never be good enough for [academic major]”.

### ***Domain Ib: Self-belief***

Swimmers discussed moments they believed in themselves as feeling “confident” (Regina & Alexandria), “ecstatic” (Robert), “excited” (Marina & Sally), “powerful” (Jane), and “no stress” (Ben). Most often, participants discussed how they believed in themselves when they had a realistic goal to achieve, which also helped former swimmers to feel confident and trust themselves to swim. For example, Sally stated, “I remember having a specific time goal, and it

was like soooo realistic in my head, I was like so excited by it, but I was like there's no way I'm not doing this...". In similar vein, Regina described how she felt confident achieving a realistic time standard:

I was ready to go out swinging, like out of the gates, I was like let's get this thing. And in those moments, you feel like you're riding so high....and then I touched the wall and I got it...I just remember being in such an awesome mindset like 'let's do this, let's get this, we got this' and like going for it and getting it.

Former swimmers also believed in themselves when they put in "good work" ('B') at practice and had an "intention" about their training (Sally). For example, 'B' stated "...I really believed in what I had been doing and I knew that I had been doing it....and I trusted in that".

Lastly, overcoming mental barriers helped former swimmers to believe in themselves. For instance, Regina, described "getting out of her own way" mentally, when she raced. And Robert described how he believed in himself when he dropped time for the first time in three years: "I think I went over [to] the coach afterwards and said something along the lines of, you know, 'now that I've broken through that mental barrier, who knows how fast I could go'".

On the other hand, participants described knowing they didn't believe in themselves when they were "comparing" (Marina), not being able to "trust" (Sally) themselves, not feeling "comfortable" (Ben), and had negative self-talk accompanied with the feeling of being "afraid to fail" (Lily, Hannah, Luisa). These feelings were experienced in the moments when they didn't drop time, had high expectations instead of achievable goals, or did not feel confident that they would swim well. Sally spoke about "my... lack of belief was aired out like laundry on the day of the race because of how mentally I was. I did not trust myself". And instead of trusting herself

to swim, she thought “maybe it will just happen...hoping somebody would wave a magic wand and I would like get lucky or something”.

### ***Domain Ic: Self-Challenge***

Swimmers described knowing they challenged themselves when they felt “successful exhausted” (Regina), “proud” (Marina), “excited and happy” (Sally), that it was “hard” (Lily & Luisa), and that they could “just know” or “feel it” (Luisa & Hannah). Participants described moments of self-challenge when they overcame difficult sets, injury, self-doubt, and chose to push themselves outside their “comfort zone” (Jane & Alexandria). For example, Alexandria stated, “I was just really out of my comfort zone...But I didn’t really let my uncomfortableness impact me that much. I didn’t let it get to me. I just prepared like I normally do and then I swam”. Further, five swimmers described physical pain that was associated with challenging themselves outside of their comfort zone. Jane described feel liking “Jell-O” after a race and Luisa described pushing through mental pain too,

Also pushing through like pain, too, like physical pain. But like also mental pain too, just like recognizing you feel a certain way in the moment but choosing to kind of, not ignore it, but kind of embrace it and be like ‘okay, like, I’m going crazy, [but] it is going to allow me to kind of reach my potential or reach where I want to go’.

Former swimmers also described challenging themselves with daily hassles, such as getting through difficult practices, waking up at five am to go to morning practice, and learning how to schedule school in a way that prioritized swimming. For example, Jane talked about her daily life as a collegiate swimmer:

I feel like swimming is a challenging sport for so many reasons, mental hurdles...jumping into a cold pool at five o’clock in the morning is challenging.... even

with school. Like [when] am I going to find time to study? That's a challenge. I'm tired. When am I gonna take a nap like? When am I going to make food for myself? That's a challenge.

Finally, participants also described challenging themselves during injury. Marina discussed how after she broke her arms, she became a better kicker. She stated of her injury, "that limiting factor it opened up a new, a new side to like explore and challenge myself with".

Swimmers did not challenge themselves when they were 'just getting by' and not bettering themselves. During the times that participants did not challenge themselves, swimmers described losing motivation, feeling burned out, or that swimming became a "hassle". Regina sums the overall experience of participants not challenging themselves the best as she stated:

But at that moment, swimming was just like in the way. It was a hassle, and I just needed to get through it so I could go back to what else I was doing...it wasn't like I... 'ooh I'm going to get better today...I'm going to push myself today, I want to try to reach this time'. It was okay 'what's the slowest time I can go and my coach not yell at me? Okay, what's the slowest time I can go and have enough break at the wall, before I go again?' Trying to make those intervals, but not like making them extravagantly. Um, just like not really pushing myself, just the bare minimum, making it... and then checking the clock and being like alright 20 minutes gone, we'll have at least 10-minute warm down, so like unless coach wants to be a meanie butt today...just you know, counting down the minutes and just getting through it.

***Domain Id: Self-respect***

Swimmers described feeling "excited" (Regina & Marina), "proud" (Sally), and was accompanied with "positive self-talk" (Jane) or thinking "more positively" about themselves

(Alexandria) when they respected themselves. These feelings of respect were accompanied in moments when they accomplished major goals. For example, Ben felt self-respect during his last conference meet of his collegiate career, feeling

Pretty good with how it all had turned out and I was kind of impressed with myself, I guess, because there were times, where I wanted to quit.... I was able to, sit there and reflect and I respected the work I put in and what I had accomplished.

Interestingly, both Robert and Ben connected self-respect with self-acceptance. Robert sums this up by stating:

It's coming to terms with who you are, I think you have to, you have to accept who you are, truthfully. Because you also can't say I'm better than I am, but you can't say you're worse than you are, you really have to come to accept who you are as an individual, flaws, accomplishments and all.

Participants also respected themselves when they honored their body by asking for what they needed or made decisions that prioritized their personhood, including their mental and physical health. For example, Marina knew that she respected herself when she chose to do the sprint set over the distance set that the coaches had written, she, "went forward with that decision and did the sprint practice, and I saw how it helped me. That like gave me reassurance...just seeing how that decision affected me positively". In similar vein, Luisa respected herself when she learned to listen and honor her body after sustaining an injury,

Just like recognizing, like, where I could push things and where I needed to kind of like modify, make modifications so that I could complete practice and do it well, and not...end up having to be in the training room for another two weeks, like just kind of

like really taking ownership of my own, like health journey with swimming and how to apply that to training.

Participants also respected themselves when, as Marina stated, you “put yourself first” and by collaborating with their coaches about their needs. For instance, when Luisa was injured, she had discussed with her coaches:

what it looks like to respect my body and, like, what that can look like in training, and then like with an athletic trainer just, um, they’re kind of reiterating like...just making healthy decisions....not just for like this moment, but like for my life.

Similarly, Lily respected herself not only when she continued “to swim...despite wanting to quit” but by knowing “how my body worked in specific relation to training”.

Lastly, former swimmers described feeling “icky” (Hannah), “sad” (Jane & Hannah), “embarrassed” (Regina) and as if they “didn’t care”(Alexandria) when they didn’t respect themselves. These feelings occurred when they did not perform well, or as Jane said, she didn’t respect herself “after a bad race”. For others, not-respecting themselves meant that they did not act in accordance with their values. For example, Lily did not feel she could stand up for herself out of fear of her coaches kicking her off the team, and in doing so she stated, “in not standing up for myself and not actually pushing forward with what I believed in. Then I let myself down...”.

Ben described not respecting himself when he wasn’t being the person he wanted to be,

Every time they [competitors] would win a heat or event, they would smack the water real hard...so right after I won, I wanted to you know, shove it in their face. So I tried...smacking the water...but immediately after I did it, I was like man I look like an asshole. So in that moment. I did not respect myself, because I looked like the people I did not want to be.

Further, participants described not respecting themselves when they were “doing things that I know negatively impacted my mental health and just not...changing anything about it” (Alexandria). For example, Luisa described wanting to keep training in her own “stubbornness” or “willpower” during her concussion,

I finally got to the point where I could go back into the water and I was probably not being very honest about what I was experiencing. I remember doing this one underwater set.... I love underwaters. I like wanted to do it, it was kind of fun, but, um...my head just sort of really hurt and pounded like towards the end of it and I should have stopped because, like, clearly something wasn't right.... but I finished it and I ended up not being able to swim for like two or three days after.

## **Domain II: Sport experiences shaped swimmer's relationship with themselves**

With the “rollercoaster” (the “high highs” and the “low lows”) of self-regard, the way participants treated themselves was largely developed during their early competitive swimming experiences, whether it was positive, conditional, negative, or disregarding. Further, those who described their self-regard as a “rollercoaster” seemed to put the importance of their swimming performance before taking care of themselves. This is not to say that those who had a consistent positive self-regard did not hold swimming of high importance or experience struggles with conditional and negative self-regard. However, they experienced less conditions of worth in their early swimming experiences and had a sense of worth outside of their identity as a swimmer. Categories in this domain reflect the experiences that shaped participants relationship with themselves: a) culture of club swimming, b) performance as evidence of worth, c) internalized expectations, and d) transition to NCAA DI swimming.

### *Domain IIa: Culture of club swimming*

When asked how participants viewed themselves as a swimmer during their career, their stories began with age group (i.e., club) swimming. Many participants described training with a competitive club at an early age and recognized that it shaped their identity as swimmers. Those who experienced more of a “rollercoaster” with their self-regard seemed to identify heavily with the “I am a swimmer” (Regina, Lily, Hannah) identity. For example, Luisa stated, “I think when I was younger I...held onto that, like my ‘I’m a swimmer!’”.

Overall, participants described how swimming was something they enjoyed or did for fun until they experienced a pressurized turning point in club swimming, usually at the high school age. For example, Sally stated, “growing up I viewed it [swimming] as it was kind of just a fun thing I did until it started to get more serious”.

The pressurized turning point in club swimming at the high school age was accompanied by the perception that former swimmers’ only focus should be on swimming. For example, the seriousness of swimming was accompanied by an increase in the intensity and demands of practice, such as starting doubles (i.e., two practices a day). In addition, this was also about the same time swimmers started to gain success or began thinking about swimming at the collegiate level. Lily described her club experience as a “circle of toxicity”, as coaches of club swimming had the ability to foster an unconditional negative regarding environment:

You’re in this environment where...it can either be a really positive or very negative environment and, I’m going to keep going back to high school because I feel like that’s where you really develop. Uhm, and the environment I swam in was not positive...people are treated differently if they’re good or they’re bad or like anything in between....

competitive swimming, like any competitive sport, because I guess you're trying to go to college is...brutal.

Part of the seriousness of the culture of club swimming, and perception that the only focus should be on swimming, was the expectation to never miss a practice. For example, Jane described how one of the coaches on her team would "scream and yell [and] he broke a clipboard in half." She went on to say, "I was taught early on that I wasn't allowed to miss practice, and I would be yelled at if I... I did". Regina also described how "you can't put the sport on pause, because if you miss a day, it takes three days to make up how good you are" and that it was "drilled into our head". Lastly, many of the participants emphasized that if they didn't perform well, they felt like they were worthless (see Domain IIb, performance as evidence of worth) because of how intense the club environment was.

However, it is important to recognize that two participants described their early club swimming experience as positive. These participants seemed to have a more stable sense of self-regard and while they saw themselves as swimmers at a younger age, they also believed, as Ben stated, "I was more than just swimmer Ben". The difference seemed to be that their club experience was not as pressured. For instance, Ben described how the club team was "super laid back and like... every-everyone was like yeah, supportive you do, you know 'you're awesome, just do your best, we'll help you get there'". Marina also didn't feel pressured to only focus on swimming at a young age, especially when she didn't know she was "district champion in three events" when she was 12. She described how her parents:

They didn't really know what that meant because they were new to like swimming so, district champion, like I don't know what that means...um...like after an event I'd just go home and there would be awards afterwards and like I missed that.

Further, Marina also described how her parents did not pressure her about swimming, which seemed to influence her consistent positive self-regard, “they weren’t forceful at all, it was mostly to just have fun and like see where you could get with it and see how you could challenge yourself but they didn’t really have any expectations for me”.

Importantly, participants self-regard formed at the club level seemed to be carried with them as they transitioned to the NCAA DI level (see Domain IId, Transition to NCAA DI swimming). For example, if swimmers learned during their early sport experience that doing “your best” (Ben) and having fun was most important, then they had positive self-regard as they transitioned to college. However, if swimmers learned that being a fast and successful swimmer served as their most important value (or their worth), then self-regard was experienced more as a “rollercoaster”, which was carried with them as they transitioned to college.

#### ***Domain IIb: Performance as evidence of worth***

In line with the culture of club swimming, when participants were taught that swimming should be their highest (or only) priority, they began to believe their worth was directly tied to their sport performance. This led participants to believe that their sport performance was not just evidence of their worth as a good swimmer, but their worth as a *person*. Sally described that during club swimming, “it was you succeed or you’re worthless”. Regina stated, “I had this whole mentality like ‘you only deserve love if you’re able to do something like productive. Or like perform well at swimming...you only deserve love if you’re successful’”. While Hannah discussed how she learned to connect performance to her worth, “I swam well, and so it was just kind of reinforcing like ‘oh I swim well and that means I’m a good person’”.

Even swimmers that seemed to have a more positive sense of self-regard found themselves occasionally struggling with feeling as if performance was an indicator of their worth. For example, after getting injured Luisa described:

I think just kind of going down that road of my worth and value is in the sport, rather than like...I had so much more than that.... kind of believing that ...performance is where like my worth [lies] or...even just like my body's ability to function appropriately, like gives me somehow greater worth.

Coach or parent regard received after a swimming performance impacted how participants used performance as evidence of self-worth. For instance, Lily described the conditional regard her mom gave her in response to her performance at the high school state meet,

Like I'd be compared, like to someone else [teammate], for example, won state. Why couldn't I have won state? Quote from my mom. Like she didn't say it, but she said it.

Uhm...and I don't know if that would have happened if I had done another sport.

This quote from Lily implied that the type of regard met by her mom after a performance was likely conditional and she didn't value her daughters' swim as hers alone. Rather, the comparison to her teammates led Lily to constantly struggle with comparing herself to others.

However, in contrast, some participants described how their early performances as swimmers were met with unconditional positive regard by their parents. For example, Ben described how his mom was also his coach during his early years of swimming and how she focused on "what I'm doing right, what I could improve upon. Not necessarily what I'm doing wrong, which I thought was important not to focus on". In addition, Marina described how her parents were always "encouraging" and "they put pressure on...like reaching a certain point....

they would just say you know do your best and have fun and like that's all we can ask for". And if she didn't swim the "time [she] wanted" she stated that her parents:

They wouldn't be upset, they would just say you know "it's okay, it happens.... we know that you can do better, but it's not that big of a deal. We know that you ca-know that you're capable of it so it's not that important".

These contrasting examples demonstrate how regard from coaches and parents reinforced or protected against conditions of worth (i.e., performance outcomes) at an early age. It is important to note however, that even if swimmers came into college with a sense of positive self-regard, it did not mean that they didn't struggle with conditional and negative self-regard during college performances. However, for those who entered college with conditional or negative self-regard, the college environment seemed to only amplify it.

#### ***Domain IIc: Internalized expectations***

Participants described that expectations from others, or even unspoken expectations, about being "good enough" (e.g., time drops, going to certain meets) became internalized and led them to put more pressure upon themselves to meet these expectations. In turn, these internalized expectations seemed to become internalized conditions of self-worth. Regina describes placing the expectation on herself that she felt like she was "*supposed*" to be one of the swimmers on her team to be going to a high-profile meet and that doing so was "now or never":

You need to go to this meet, like you got to make this, like you got to be good enough for this. It was just kind of me being like I feel like I'm supposed to be good enough for this. I feel like I'm supposed to make it...

Importantly, if she didn't perform well, she felt like a "poser" and didn't feel as if she deserved to be swimming. She described internalizing these expectations thinking "I need to work harder.... why aren't I working hard enough?".

'B' began to internalize expectations from his coach about his role on the team, which caused him to put a lot of extra pressure on himself. He recalled,

I had a really lackluster meet, um, my sophomore year [of college] and I just remember feeling really bad about that, and I remember my coach sat me down like after my last event and said like "we need you to like do a lot of stuff for our team next year". Uh, cause we had a huge senior class leaving, and I think I just got like way too in my head about it, so there's just a lot of unnecessary pressure that I put on myself.

Swimmers also seemed to internalize the expectation that their performance *should be* progressing in a linear fashion, or at least in an "upward trend" (Sally). For most, progressing in a linear fashion meant time drops and getting faster. This is shown when some participants discussed how swimming was fun when they experienced large time drops but experienced more difficulties with enjoying the sport and dropping time as they got older. The increase of intense training as swimmers progressed in the sport seemed to be an indicator that they *should be* getting faster in a linear fashion. For example, participants subtly reiterate that the nature of swimming is to constantly try top themselves as they progressed through the sport. As Robert stated, "I think it's just the nature of the sport...we always want to do really well and if it's not trying to beat other people it's trying to beat ourselves and get our own best time...". In turn, the *expectation* of swimming faster became an internalized expectation, thus becoming an internalized condition of self-worth. In other words, participants only deemed themselves worthy if they met the *expectation* to drop time. For example, Sally described the extreme pressure that

she put on herself the last two years of collegiate swimming because she had experienced success her sophomore year and felt the pressure to feel as if she *had to* get faster:

It was like okay here's what I did that year, and now I have to be hitting that or be better like throughout the season. Uhm, and that added a lot of pressure and external or, that was more like internal pressure on myself uhm coming off that successful year, uhm, and you know spiraled me into the feeling like...just the intense disappointment with myself, because I was, you know, not hitting those milestones even though those are milestones I just had in my head that I made up for myself, you know, based off of the previous year...

In turn, Sally described how performance results while training began to dictate how she felt about herself, due to the internalized pressure and conditions of self-worth to top the success she had experienced the year before:

Results began to like dictate my entire life...and just like all sorts of like different measurements and numbers and, you know, whether it was the amount of pull ups I could do in the weight room or how much I could squat like all these...quantitative measurements of like physical...you know, success, or you know, doing well physically in the sport started to like dictate how I felt about myself every single day when I went to bed...

### ***Domain IIId: Transition to NCAA DI swimming***

Swimmers self-regard—whether positive, conditional, negative, or disregarding—that was developed during their early sport experiences was brought with them during their transition into college swimming. Their early experiences also seemed to shape their expectations of success in collegiate swimming. As a result, some of the swimmers struggled entering the NCAA

DI level from club swimming and described it as a “reality check” (Alexandria) or a “rude awakening” (Robert). Robert also described how he had high expectations for his success but struggled after he didn’t improve like he expected to, “...I had really high expectations that with college training, I would just rocket forward and have a fantastic time. And I just didn’t. I never dropped any time my freshman year”.

In addition, many of the participants struggled their freshman year of college because they weren’t swimming as fast as they did during club and high school or felt that they weren’t as good as their NCAA DI teammates. This led many of the swimmers to question their role and worth on and to the team. For example, when Alexandria experienced swimming on a college team with fast swimmers, she felt as if she “... wasn’t worth a lot to the team” and that she “couldn’t really see how I fit in”. Sally reiterates this by discussing how she struggled being in a new environment with high expectations and how she wasn’t swimming as fast as she did in high school, “my freshman year I also struggled with not feeling of value...because I wasn’t swimming well, I was like ‘I am, you know, not supposed to be here’... you know I’m not valuable to this team’...”. Because Sally didn’t feel worthy or valuable to the team, she stated her self-regard followed suit,

Because I started to act in ways that, it was like I believed that so then my actions kind of followed, like I didn’t think I was supposed to be there, so I started to act like I wasn’t supposed to be there....and then also I think because I didn’t feel like I didn’t value myself, I started to treat my athletic training and swimming training like I didn’t value myself.

Interestingly, even though some of the participants felt their collegiate team environment helped them feel accepted, their internalized conditions of worth led them to believe that if they weren’t

performing well (or how they thought they should) they felt as if they didn't have value. For instance, participants discussed how even though none of their teammates ever said anything to them about being "worthless" (Sally) on the team, they still felt as though that's what their teammates were saying or believing about them. Sally summed this experience by stating:

Nobody else was like "oh you're worthless you shouldn't be on this team" it was like the way I perceived, like the team around me and everyone doing, like being successful and my coaches having high, you know, wanting the best for me...and it was how I filter that through my head.

These examples demonstrate the power of early sport experiences and how conditions of worth fostered incongruence to create an inaccurate perception of reality—which continued to reinforce their conditional/negative self-regard. For some, this reinforcement led to absolute self-disregard.

Because many participants experienced the condition of worth that swimming should be the highest priority in their lives, "the pressure to definitely put...my needs second was very real" (Hannah). However, Marina, who perhaps had the most consistent positive self-regard of all participants was the exception. Marina's early swimming experiences were in an environment that did not strictly reinforce the culture of club swimming (e.g., swimming as the top priority). Thus, she put school over swimming. She also described a time when she slept through practice because she had prioritized school over swimming.

I was like I'm gonna be up all day like I have to be on it, I have three finals today and people were like baffled that I slept in and skipped practice...and I was like "like you really don't think that I should, like you really think it's that important that like I go to this one practice today?" Like it's not all about swimming. Like school comes first, like I need to be ready for all these finals I have, so there were people [teammates] that came

out and said like “that was wrong like you should have gone to practice”. Uhm the coaches didn’t say that, but my teammates did.

It seemed that her teammates might have internalized conditions of worth in the swimming culture, which led them to judge Marina for not prioritizing swimming. However, even though Marina encountered conditions of worth from her teammates, her consistent positive self-regard did not seem to waver.

To reiterate, early experiences in club swimming seemed to form conditions of worth, especially as related to performance outcomes as evidence of worth, which lead to internalized expectations, which then lead to internalized conditions of self-worth, which informed the type of self-regard swimmers took with them as they transitioned into college. Participants early experiences informed swimmers’ perceptions of coach and teammate regard at the collegiate level (whether positive or negative). Participants continued to battle with internalized conditions of self-worth and conditional/negative self-regard during their collegiate career. For two participants, their consistent battle with negative self-regard eventually led to a battle with absolute self-disregard.

### **Domain III: Hitting ‘rock bottom’**

Early sport experiences shaped swimmer’s internalized conditions of worth followed by conditional self-regard. This led some participants to experience an intense buildup of “high highs” and “low lows” until they described hitting an overall “low” (Robert, Jane, Sally, Regina, Ben, & ‘B’) in their career. Participants described how their experience of self-regard as a “roller-coaster” impacted their mental performance and their mental health, especially during times that their self-regard was conditional/negative (e.g., based on performance) or self-disregarding.

Overall, ‘hitting rock bottom’ was representative of how performance outcomes controlled self-regard so much that it drove participants to “not enjoy” (Robert & Alexandria) swimming, which “affected my mental state” (Robert), and led participants to experience plateaus in performance. Many of these “low lows” coincided with mental health battles that participants described and represented the lowest point of their “rollercoaster” career, and self-regard. For many participants, ‘hitting rock bottom’ served as the catalyst to gain the courage to seek social support (e.g., mental performance and/or mental health services, teammates) which helped them put their self-regard before swimming (see next domain IV). The categories in this domain reflect the outcomes that participants discussed as a result of their self-regard being conditional, negative, and/or self-disregarding a) mental performance, b) mental health.

### ***Domain IIIa: Mental performance***

When performance outcomes dictated self-regard, swimmers described experiencing impaired mental performance. In particular, participants discussed focusing on things outside of their control, engaging in negative self-talk and making comparisons to others (e.g., teammates). Overall, this created a fear of failure, performance anxiety, mental barriers, and burnout. For example, Jane described beating herself up with negative self-talk after a race she didn’t perform well in, “I didn’t really focus on that at practice [like] I should have” which then translated to negative self-talk in a future swim meet, “I didn’t swim well at the last meet, what makes me think I’m going to swim well at this one?”. Similarly, Regina described “counting myself out of the race before I even tried”. She stated,

It’s not the only time it's ever happened where I’m actively swimming and thinking “crap, this is not good”. Uh, and just like such negative self-talk and a lot of times I feel unfortunately with distance swimming, you have more time to talk [to yourself].

Participants also discussed their fear of failure, whether that was not hitting a time standard they wanted, not performing well, losing a race, or letting their team down. For example, when participants self-regard was contingent on their performance they experienced performance anxiety, some to the point of panic attacks. Ben described the intense “need to do well” when he had the chance to win his last conference race for his team. He stated, “I began to have slight panic attacks leading all the way up to finals of the day, and then like 30 minutes before I had a full-blown anxiety attack”.

For some participants the fear of failure led them to not give their full effort. For example, Hannah discussed feeling that if she tried and failed that she feared her coaches wouldn’t accept her,

Because it’s easier for them to be like [name] “why didn’t you try that?” and be like “because I thought it was dumb” than to like try [and] not do well, and then maybe have them be like “that wasn’t good enough”.

Participants also discussed how, over time, their self-worth being contingent on their performance led them to struggle with mental barriers and burnout. Robert described how he struggled with his conditional/negative self-regard because he hadn’t been able to drop time in his event for “3 years”. As he struggled to “see the time slow down” it led him to “put that time up as a mental barrier”. In addition, Alexandria described self-disregard when she felt burnout of swimming as she struggled to find her worth on the team,

I just didn’t care how I do what I do. And I was just there swimming. I was...wasn’t really sticking to my race plan, wasn’t really sticking to my warmups, or cool downs. I was just mentally checked out...I wasn’t nervous or anything, I just didn’t care. I didn’t

really talk to the coaches most about my races, I didn't really talk to anybody [laughs]. I was just like, in my own little world of not caring.

Finally, participants discussed that when they were experiencing conditional self-regard that they were also continually comparing themselves to other teammates. For example, Jane described her negative self-regard when she didn't perform well. She punished herself by focusing on things she couldn't control, such as what she did wrong or comparing her performances to her teammates', "what did they do that.... I totally missed? Or like how was their diet, were they eating better than I was? Were they working harder than I was?"

### ***Domain IIIb: Mental health***

Conditional self-regard (conditions of worth being dependent on performance outcomes) led participants to compare themselves to teammates and competitors, be hyper aware of their body shape in relation to others, and question their sense of value to the team. Over time their conditional self-regard led to battles with mental health, such as struggles with body image, depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation and suicide attempt.

While participants mentioned the importance of proper nutrition to swim well, three of the participants specifically discussed body image issues. Lily mentioned how she not only struggled with her body, but also described hating her "hair and face". Jane described how the condition of worth to have a lean body shape was emphasized in her high school team environment as her coach mandated weigh-ins for her teammates,

"I think body image was definitely something that affected me the most if I had to pinpoint one thing...I just felt down like I was like 'I'm never going to swim fast because I'm not skinny like them [teammates and competitors]'".

Alexandria however, discussed struggling with body image issues that lead to her very restrictive eating and described eating only a “can of peas for dinner” after a long day of “four total hours of practice”. Her body image issues affected not only her performance, but her body functioning,

I would go to bed hungry all the time, I’d wake up starving, I- and in the morning, like I’d eat a bar at the pool. But it was just...I was so hungry, and I felt like I couldn’t do things I used to be able to do, and I just felt really weak. And I was always tired, I was always freezing.

Moreover, over half of the participants described struggling with depression or depressive tendencies during their career as a result of intense conditions of (self) worth. For instance, Lily had the most consistent negative self-regard during her swimming career, mostly brought on by her home life (described more in depth in Domain VI). As a result, she struggled with negative self-talk and depression almost the entirety of her swimming career and even described how she hated herself in high school,

I’d get out sometimes and talk to [coach] at practice and I’m like, “I hate- I hate myself. I’m so slow” and...he’d be like ”no you’re not. Like I don’t know why you think that”. I’d really be crying and be like “[coach] I’m so slow”.

Participants also discussed feeling depressed when it felt like all they were doing was “swimming, eating, sleeping” (Jane), and repeating. ‘B’ struggled with the pressure of swimming as the highest (or only) priority on top of not knowing what his role was on his college team. He discussed that he did not value himself “as a swimmer or a person” which lead him to experience “depressive tendencies”. ‘B’ went on to say,

My routine was really bad, but I wasn't doing anything for myself...outside of, uh, like swimming, eating, sleeping literally, so it was just going through the motions, and I didn't know what the hell I was doing, so it was probably that summer, but ironically, it was like, one of my worst performances like consistently through the season.

Likewise, Jane described being in a "low low" in high school where she felt like she was only "swimming, eating, and sleeping", she stated,

Like my body was really tired. And I didn't feel valued. I did feel very tired in college, but like I feel like this tiredness was more of like...all I did was sleep, swim, eat, sleep, repeat...I wasn't a person.

Further, a consistent lack of self-regard (i.e., self-disregard, consistent negative self-regard) worsened mental health outcomes. Sally described that the conditions of worth perceived from her club coach lead to having extreme anxiety and an intense fear of failure:

I had intense anxiety all the time...just up and down throughout high school. ...it was kind of like my self-regard was...just an extreme anxiety provoked reaction to failure. Any thought of failure for what I perceived as failure. Which was basically like, not hitting my goals, not being here at the certain meet, not being like a certain time at a certain meet at a point in the season. I started to have very intense anxiety reaction(s), and I think ...it ended up being more of a subconscious reaction and like just my body...I remember my sophomore year of high school, I had a really bad year, where I experienced like panic attacks out of nowhere...I didn't know a lot about mental health, I didn't know how it affected my body, and you know.... I experienced a lot of like there's a lot of agony with that because it was you know, it was very terrifying experience....I was extremely stressed out from the pressure that I normally put on myself, uhm, to you

know not fail, but also the extra pressure, external pressure from my coach who was very aggressive and also created an environment where it was you succeed or you know, you're worthless.

Hannah also described struggling with anxiety, as she was not diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and ADHD until after her career was over. However, she described the difficulties of working through that anxiety in a pressurized collegiate environment,

I remember while I was competing still...I'd go see therapists through the athletic department and...my self-regard was definitely adding to my anxiety and I was feeling very weak and broke and like I was messed up, which didn't help my performance so it was just kind of like an entire downward spiral that just...like just kept making me feel bad about myself, and compounded other issues that I was dealing with.

It is clear that some participants believed that mental health was a major sign of "weakness" (Hannah) during their collegiate career. Further, two of the participants described such harsh battles with internalized conditions of worth that it led to absolute self-disregard and to the point of experiencing suicide ideation or attempt. Robert described that as a result of struggling with not being able to drop time and getting older "it started to lead towards uhm, some suicidal feelings...".

One participant, Regina, attempted suicide (absolute self-disregard) and stated, "It was all becoming too much; um to the point where I was ready to take my own life". Regina had described that her internalized conditions of self-worth lead her to believe that "you only deserve love if you're successful" and because she perceivably consistently,

Wasn't being successful because of not performing well and having bad practices, where I wasn't able to keep up with other people. Or like in [academic major] I wasn't doing

well in one of my classes and I thought I might fail the class, and that just seemed like the end all be all that's the worst possible thing that could occur.

She described spiraling "to where I was ready to do it".

#### **Domain IV: Perspective shift in the relationship between self and performance**

When swimmers hit a 'rock' bottom or a "low point" in their career, they discussed that it coincided with a desire to take a break from swimming. For some participants' their "low point" was met with a forced break, which served as a catalyst to seek social support. In doing so, participants experienced some sort of perspective shift in realizing that their worth as a human is not tied to the sport. Regardless of if participants had a break from swimming, seeking social support during their "low lows" often facilitated the perspective shift that separated their worth in sport and their worth as a human. The perspective shift led to climbing out of the "low lows" of the "rollercoaster" with a steady increase in mental health, feelings of self-worth, and positive self-regard. Participants also reflected that their self-worth isn't "stemming from anything that I do, it just comes from the fact that I am" (Hannah) and that "being present is enough" (Regina). The categories in this domain represent the process of this perspective shift and the perspective shift itself: a) forced break and seeking social support, c) having a 'worthy' role on the team.

#### ***Domain IVa: Forced break and seeking social support***

Many of the participants expressed a desire during their career to take a break from swimming. Luisa stated how her "body chose" to take a 'forced break' as she sustained an injury. While, for some, this desire to take a break coincided with COVID-19. Alexandria expressed,

I got a little burned out after sophomore year, but then I got help. But I still kind of felt that way, like it didn't completely go away. So by the time I guess [championship meet]

my junior year.... I was just kind of like starting to check out again. And I was like, I don't know what to do, and then I got told what to do, take three months off [because of COVID-19].

Whether swimmers experienced a forced break or not, many of them described taking ownership of their mental performance and health by seeking social support. Social support that participants sought out included working with a mental performance consultants (MPC) or a mental health provider (i.e., therapists/counselors), turning to God and or a religious group, and reaching out to teammates, family, and even coaches.

While four participants described having experience with an MPC, three of the participants described working with an MPC one on one. For example, 'B' described how he started meeting with an MPC during his forced break during COVID, "a lot during quarantine through zoom and he [the MPC] really.... just helped me, like keep grounded". Alexandria discussed how both her coaches and the MPC helped her in realizing that her confidence and self-worth was low,

He [coach] just kind of showed me all the things that he saw, which kind of made me realize that I...wasn't keeping it as close as I thought, and that I was projecting it more.

And then he [the MPC] had me go back to times when I felt confident, and then try to just get that same feeling, and then visualize feeling that in the future races.

Sally described taking ownership of her mental performance by wanting to come "in with a clean slate" after a difficult freshman year,

I remember going through that summer, of being like, "I'm coming in with a clean slate. Like I am cleaning out my mind. Like no more of this. Like I'm tired of it". Like it was kind of I was so done with not doing well you know because it made me feel worthless, like I wasn't supposed to be there.... I felt like I just need to clean my slate and

reconstruct everything I knew about training, competing, everything...everyway I approached it I kind of just had to like start fresh...

And as a result, she started working with an MPC as it helped shift her perspective

I started meeting with the sport psych- our sport psych team member who like, you know, would help us with performance and visualization. Uhm, and I just tuning into like he would work with the whole team.... he would do visualization and uhm, just like meditation before practice, after practice. And I really started to take it more seriously and really ...channel my mind in those moments, and that really helped that process as well [coming in with a clean slate]”.

In addition, five of the participants discussed how they sought the help of a therapist. ‘B’ discussed how he started going to therapy as “vent sessions” because he had “beef” with one of his coaches but ended up learning how to “appreciate myself and learned a lot.... I learned literally about [‘B’], not just like a swimmer...like a guy even, but just about myself and then that’s when I really started getting comfortable, more confident”. Robert described when he struggled with suicide ideation and sought the help of the team therapist after he went “three or four really rough months before I decided, you know.... It’s [suicide ideation] probably not normal, I probably need to get some help, uhm, in this situation” He stated that the therapist, “really helped me with a lot of things and helped me get into the right mindset of just everything”.

Two of the participants described how having a strong relationship with God and their faith allowed them to have a strong source of social support. Jane described how when she “started living more faithfully” her relationship with herself “changed” and her faith helped her realize that “no matter what [performances] didn’t matter”. In addition, (positive) coaches and

teammates played a predominant social support role for former swimmers. Alexandria reflected how she “started to realize, like, I knew what I was doing to myself, but then it was kind of like, why am I doing this to my-like, it’s me. Like ‘I don’t hate myself I love myself, why am I punishing myself by not getting enough calories?’”. Alexandria also discussed that it wasn’t until her teammates showed her that she was valuable to the team that she was able to seek social support, “I don’t know why, but I was under the impression that no one really cared, and realizing people cared, and they wanted to help me, and then I got the help”.

***Domain IVb: Having a ‘worthy’ role on the team***

For some the perspective shift allowed them to see their value; for some, feeling valued helped them shift their own perception of value as a person. Overall, in turn, they saw themselves as humans first, and athletes second. They discussed how it was then that they were able to find themselves as having a ‘worthy’ role on their team and that their contribution makes a positive difference. For example, Alexandria stated “I do have like...I am valuable to both the team and myself”.

Lastly, participants described that their team culture allowed them to take on roles that were valued within their team whether they were related to performance or not. For example, Regina discussed how after she attempted suicide her coach gave her the role of “student coach” on her team. She stated her coach said:

You can come back and swim if you’d like, or you can just not swim but that doesn’t mean you’re not a part of the team. You’re still apart of the team, you’re going to be on deck every meet, but you don’t have to worry about practices, but you can kind of be like...a student coach.

Sally also described how her team had a culture that made sure everyone on their team had a ‘worthy’ role to play,

The team itself had every good like accountability within the swimmers.... we had captains, who really like instilled this and we set these for ourselves, and we would have really high expectations for each other and share our goals, and I think all of that really helped me to uhm, feel like I had worth on the team, even if it wasn’t you know beyond just my swimming results. You had, everyone had worth. Everyone had a place, whether it was you know the personality that they bring every day to practice like, and how that influences others everyone had like a place and a purpose on the team...

#### **Domain V: Regarding self holistically increased performance and enjoyment**

When participants experienced a perspective shift from their worth as a swimmer to knowing their worth as a human, participants began to have a more positive relationship with themselves (self-regard), which was accompanied by treating themselves as a human first and swimmer second. In turn, participants described that their enjoyment of swimming increased and they experienced better performances. Categories in this domain represent the psychosocial strategies and techniques of *how* former swimmers demonstrated positive self-regard. Further, the domain and accompanied categories that were constructed allude to outcomes of unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR). However, UPSR may never be possible as participants described experiencing positive self-regard in moments. But UPSR could be something to strive for as some participants demonstrated consistent positive self-regard. Thus, the domain constructed is representative of the outcomes of consistent positive self-regard, including participants treating themselves as human first, swimmer second. Categories in this

domain include, a) self-care, b) healthy coping and positive self-talk, c) practicing boundaries, d) freedom from comparisons, e) controlled the controllables.

### ***Domain Va: Self-care***

As a result of a perspective shift, participants learned to honor their mind and body by prioritizing proper nutrition and rest. For example, Alexandria discussed how she realized she wasn't valuing herself by what she was doing to her body when she wasn't eating full meals. She respected herself by putting her "health before my own image" and eating full meals. She stated that in turn, this increased her performance at practice, "I started to value myself more, my health, and then I started to eat better, and then consequently I got faster". She also described how her teammates would meal prep with her to "make sure" she was eating. In addition, she stated that this "was around the time when....of getting the break I needed" (referring to COVID-19). Luisa also described how she learned to "honor" her body when she got injured, by seeking the help she needed from athletic trainers and communicating what she could and could not do with her coaches. 'B' also described how he was respecting himself by "giving back to [his] body" by focusing on nutrition, sleep, and yoga. Participants also discussed that self-care involved finding "stimulation outside of the sport" ('B'). For instance, Marina talked about how she would participate in activities outside of swimming,

What we [friends] did together outside of that was not swimming related. So like traveling or doing like a little day trip or just any other thing outside of school or swimming kind of like help[ed] me [feel] connected to the outside world...the real world.

While some of the participants described having a forced break due to the COVID-19 pandemic, injury, or mental health, some of the participants expressed taking breaks from swimming as a form of self-care. These breaks allowed participants to take time to be "human" (Luisa). In

addition, those who took more breaks were the participants who described having the most consistent positive self-regard. For example, Marina took breaks during the summer seasons while swimming in college which allowed her to “stay hungry” for swimming and enjoy swimming more,

I would lose that motivation to you know, get in the water and keep that um, momentum going into next season. I would ignore it and let it kind of fall away. Like I’ll pick it up later when the season starts again. Um, give myself a break, but it’s always, I’m glad I did that, so I didn’t burnout easily because I kind of like once all that motivation fell away over the summer, then I was like ready to start it again the next season.

***Domain Vb: Healthy coping and positive self-talk***

Healthy coping and positive self-talk were very common outcomes of positive self-regard. For example, Alexandria, who described having positive self-regard after she sought help, used healthy coping skills during a moment that she normally would have blamed herself for losing a race,

I think in the past, if that would have happened, I would have gotten down on me and been like, “it’s my fault we lost”...but instead, I was like “I gave it my all”, and what happened, happened, and I didn’t let it impact my meet.

Many of the participants used positive self-talk to shut down the negative self-talk at practice. Hannah described how affirmations as positive self-talk allowed her to “combat [her] anxiety around swimming” especially during conference and NCAA’s. She stated,

You know I’d have to keep reminding myself like “I swam fast enough to be here, I deserve to be here”...like as someone who wasn’t scoring individually like that really can

...it can be hard and scary and I'm "oh my god", like, "I'm really not that good", but then I had to remind myself that, no, this meet has cuts, like I swim fast enough to be here. Many participants also discussed how when they would slip into self-doubt that they would reassure themselves that "I've done this before I can do it again" (Robert & Marina), and even relied on that as a source of strength to compete:

I had a lot of self-worth going into senior year and boy in that you're kind of wondering. You know, at that point things started to hurt everything, you know, practice gets a lot harder, as your progressively [getting] older. And I was really doubting you know, can I drop anytime? Is the season going to be okay? But then I was able to lean on that self-worth and value fight, you know I've done this before I can do it again (Robert).

Lastly, participants discussed how instead of being negative and hard on themselves, which caused them to have "not an enjoyable experience" (Robert), when they put themselves before the sport, they "started to like swimming again" (Alexandria).

#### ***Domain Vc: Practiced boundaries***

Many of the swimmers who discussed practicing boundaries with their coaches and teammates also experienced more consistent positive self-regard. For instance, two of the participants described how they wouldn't live with other swimmers as their boundary,

It wasn't because I didn't love my teammates.... they were very fun, but I just needed that boundary of like leaving the pool at the pool and not having every conversation and drama moment, like never ending...I just did not want to have these conversations to be conveyed...every ounce of my life.

Many of the participants described setting boundaries by "being able to know who is good for you and who is not so important" (Ben). Or, as Jane said, being okay with separating "yourself

from people who are negative and people who are not good for you and your own mental health”.

Some participants discussed how they would have conversations with their coaches about their specific training needs because “no one else is going to know me better than me” (Marina).

For example, Alexandria stated,

...truthfully....but like actually reaching out to them [coaches] when I'm tired and...knowing myself...and knowing what I can handle and then having a relationship with them [coaches] in the trust between both of us that they know that I know what I'm talking about, and I'm not just trying to get out of something hard.

Lastly, Marina's boundary was how she:

Never really let [coaches] get too close, never gave them a lot of control over what I did.... they don't control me or they have their own flaws like they're not perfect either.... not seeing them as responsible but see myself as responsible for my decisions.

This boundary Marina placed between herself and her coaches allowed her to make decisions that were best for her, like choosing practice sets that she knew would benefit her the most.

#### ***Domain Vd: Freedom from comparisons***

When participants focused less on comparing themselves to other swimmers, teammates, and performance times, they found themselves enjoying swimming and that their performance increased. Overall, participants seemed to value themselves and their own performance, regardless of outcomes. For example, 'B' talked about how he didn't compare himself to any of his other competitors “seed times” and “just wanted to see, like, for myself what I could do” and how “clear-headed” and “excited to race” he was. Lily also discussed how when she “stopped focusing on comparing myself or like what other people wanted I did the best”.

*Domain Ve: Controlled the controllables*

Lastly, when participants focused on putting purposeful effort in practice and for mental preparation, rather than focusing on things beyond their control, they felt more confident in and trusted themselves to swim well. In turn, this helped them to enjoy the moment and “stop worrying about things” (Robert). For example, Ben stated that he tends to trust himself in the sense that:

I know all of the training I had done was for my betterment and, I did everything right, you know all of it will work [out]. Like it’s fine, whatever happens happens.... you gotta trust that you’re ready for the race at that moment. And not get so hung up on what the outcome is.

Participants discussed that being intentional about finding something purposeful to work on and controlling what they could control helped them trust and feel confident in themselves because:

At the [end] of the day when you’re stepping up to the blocks, like you have to trust yourself, you know, cause that’s the only option....no one else is going to do the swimming for you....it gave me a lot of confidence as well, and that I could achieve really cool goals and be excited about it and not scared (Sally).

In addition, Robert explained how he was able to break down a very difficult set “into incrementally smaller parts” for him to “stay, just focused, [and] not get discouraged”. He described:

I got to the point where I was counting my strokes, on every single lap....it became less intimidating as a whole. So when you really focus on “all right, on this 25 I’m going to do seven strokes”. You do the seven strokes alright you’re at the end of the 25. “Alright

on this next one I've got to do eight strokes"...and by the end of it you look up and you're like 'wow I've just done 24 100 IM's'.

### **Domain VI: Important relationship influences on athlete self-regard**

Participants learned how to treat themselves with positive, conditional, negative self-regard, or self-disregard from major social support sources (e.g., family, coaches, teammates, God). When UPR was communicated by sources of social support, participants learned that their being/presence matters, thus treating themselves with consistent positive self-regard. However, if participants were treated with the opposites of UPR, they learned that their being as a human only matters if they are able to meet a certain condition. Thus conditional self-regard, negative self-regard, or self-disregard was formed. In addition, family regard and club coach regard were the first and strongest social support influences in shaping and developing self-regard, of which participants carried with them to the collegiate level.

Those who received consistent positive regard from more than one source (e.g., family and coach; club coach and college coach) fared better in their self-regard than those who only had it from one source. For instance, Ben reports such strong regard from family, coaches, and teammates, that he isn't able to name a time he didn't feel valued, even when he experienced moments of conditional self-regard. When these sources of regard interacted positively, it was so strong that it allowed participants to rely on their self-worth to compete to their highest potential, even if they still were struggling with conditional self-regard. However, when these sources of regard interacted with participants negatively, it reinforced conditions of worth, thus reinforcing conditional and/or negative self-regard. The categories that were constructed in this domain reflect the sources that were critical in participants development of self regard: a) family regard,

b) club coach regard, c) college coach regard, d) teammate regard, and e) regard from a higher power.

***Domain VIa: Family regard***

Family members served the most critical role that shaped participants baseline self-concept, feelings of self-worth, and self-regard—whether positive, conditional, or negative. For some participants, family regard was a major positive influence in their lives and even influenced how they viewed swimming as a priority. For example, Marina, who had the most consistent positive regard from her parents discussed how their constant reassurance allowed her to keep a ‘grounded perspective’ of swimming and helped her not put all of her identity in swimming,

They’re like yeah of course I know you can do that, like you can do anything. Uhm...like congratulating me and I like showing me that they you know are proud. Uhm, but also, you know, like not putting all of my identity towards swimming, that’s kind of difficult to do like you want to make someone feel like they did a good job and you also don’t want to make them feel like that’s the only thing they’re good for. You know? It’s like how do you do that? Um, but I think they did a good job of like...staying in the middle there.

In turn, Marina demonstrated the strongest sense of positive self-regard among the participants that mirrored her parents’ acceptance, belief, challenge, respect, and value of her.

In contrast, Lily described how her home environment was a source of unconditional negative regard and was constantly compared to others, “my parents, though they may have had good intentions, like they...especially my mother was like not very positively reinforcing anything I was doing. It was a very toxic relationship”. She also stated how she felt “nothing was ever good enough” and she “didn’t get positive reinforcement ever”. This consistent negative regard from her parents eventually mirrored how she valued and treated herself as a result, “I

know that my self-worth, specifically when I was younger...I did not view myself as very like worthy of anything, which led to low self-confidence....negative self-talk”. Her mirrored negative regard followed her when she went to practice, “I would go into, like high school practices or club swim team practices and even if I was the fastest one there I would think I was so bad”.

Lastly, one of the participants discussed how seeing her siblings succeed at swimming affected how she viewed her parents’ regard and her own conditional self-regard. It wasn’t that her parents or sister treated her with conditional or negative regard, but because she felt as if “you only deserve love if you’re successful”, it distorted how she perceived her parents regard of her. She even stated that she viewed herself as “slightly above average” and “never really thought too highly of herself in swimming” because she saw her “sisters and thought, like my- one of my older sisters, like she’s like a true DI is like how I see her”. While she saw herself as “barely on the cusp of DI”. She reflected how:

I saw how my sisters were performing, and I was like I need to be at that level or my parents won’t think as highly of me, because they’ve seen my sisters perform higher, so I should be at that level to be liked as much, as they are. Um, which I know is like not related at all, like they love me unconditionally, I love my parents, but that’s how my perspective was-was if I’m not performing as well as them, then I won’t be as liked, I won’t be as loved (Regina).

### ***Domain VIb: Club coach regard***

Club coach regard also shaped swimmers’ sense of worth and self-regard. Club coach regard also interacted with parent regard. Some participants experienced very positive early coaching experiences. For instance, ‘B’ described how his club high school coach helped him be

able to “juggle so many things and still really enjoy the sport”. And Marina discussed how her club middle school coach was “pretty encouraging” and gave her “reassurance”.

While Lily did not have very positive experiences with parental regard, she described a time where she had the “best year of positive thinking” when she was 13 because of her club coach. Specifically, her club coach gave her “positive reinforcement” and told her she “works hard every day”. As a result, it helped her to say “oh I am challenging myself”. She described that because her internal dialogue wasn’t good, that “hearing it from other people really helped me set it in place for myself at that time”. This demonstrates how her baseline self-regard formed from parental unconditional negative regard interacted with the positive regard she received from her coach at the time. In other words, coach regard had a positive influence and because of coach’s positive regard, she mirrored his challenge of her, “he had such expectations.... I also respected him. So it’s like I wanted to do well, because I liked the sport and I liked him...and hearing that [I] was doing well from him just reinforced that.”

In addition, participants discussed how impactful their coaches’ conditional regard or negative regard was on them, making them feel unworthy or not valued. In turn, they eventually began to mirror their coaches’ regard with conditional or negative self-regard. For example, Sally described how her club coach fostered a very intense environment and that she started to “experience some burnout from that kind of coaching style”. She stated of her club coach,

The external pressure from my coach who was very aggressive and also create[d] an environment where it was you succeed or you know, you’re worthless, kind of thing so. And that’s how I was treated and that’s how I began to think of myself, I think, was you know. “If I fail I’m worthless. I’m never going to be good, I’m not a good swimmer. I-

you know, might as well quit”. It was very black and white in that way in high school.

And so that really affected like how I viewed myself.

She also described how in high school, her club coaches would blame her for not performing well, but took the credit if she did perform well, “my high school coach always kind of took credibility when the swimmers did good and then blame it on [the] swimmers when they didn’t do what he thought was good”. This treatment in turn, heavily influenced Sally’s conditional and negative self-regard when she succeeded and failed in her swimming performances.

Luisa also described a time that she didn’t feel valued by her club coach when he kicked her out of practice because he didn’t think she was trying hard enough,

I had a coach that was just honestly probably a little bit abusive.... verbally, and I remember this one practice, like, getting kicked out of practice because he didn’t think I was trying hard enough. I remember...I was not like a...disobedient athlete or like, I was very driven. Just like trying to be better, giving more effort. And I was probably honestly just having a bad day, like maybe not feeling that great in the water or something, but, I remember that feeling of not a good feeling. I didn’t value myself in that moment, I felt like probably a little bit like...I’m giving best effort that I can give in this moment, but like.... it’s not good enough kind of thing.

Similarly, Jane described her high school coaches’ unconditional negative regard, “I’ve had coaches in my life, who were straight up critical. They would never praise you for anything”.

Which led her to not value herself when she had a “bad race”. So if:

One little thing got messed up, I was...like a super low low, like a tower has tumbled down.... I just never felt like the validation from a coach, or my teammates were all just

working... there was, I mean, at times, I guess, like if we were winning a state championship cool, but there was never a sense of value I guess.

Lastly, club coaches had the power to influence positive swim culture norms that helped guard against conditions of worth for former swimmers. For example, Ben's early swimming environment involved a "do your best" mentality in tandem with his mom focusing on his strengths and what he "could improve upon" rather than what he did wrong. This seemed to help Ben have a strength-based mindset and consistent positive self-regard. Coaches also had the power to influence very negative swim culture norms, such as putting swimming before other life priorities, which made them feel not accepted or they weren't valued. Jane described how in high school she couldn't miss practice "for anything"—especially because her team "won the state championship every year" there was a lot of "pressure by the coach [and the team itself]" which made her feel there "was never a sense of value". Interestingly, Lily described her coaches' disregard of her team's "circle of toxicity", and conditional regard for swimming performances, which influenced how she didn't feel valued:

I think they couldn't have cared less. Like if you're swimming well, what does it matter to them, you know? Maybe they cared a little bit, but also at the same time they're looking at us like...as they see us, which is 15 year old's or whatever, and like they know that we're gonna be immature [so] what [do] they really do? As long as we're putting out the times or doing the practices, or whatever.

Lastly, club coaches had the power to influence athletes' self-regard related to the eat-swim-sleep-repeat culture of swimming. Jane described how in her "low lows" she felt "depressed" and how she it was difficult for her to climb out of it—a very clear indicator of needing rest. But stated, "I was just 'I'll just go to practice again tomorrow'. Cause there's nothing like- what else

was I going to do?”. Regina also stated how her club coaches enforced not missing practice which reinforced how she saw productivity as her worth.

***Domain VIc: College coach regard***

By the time participants got to the collegiate level, their self-regard was already shaped by the interaction of parent regard and club coach regard. At times their self-regard at entry point to college overshadowed positive college coach regard. For example, some of the participants spoke about how even though their college coach accepted and believed in them, they still were not able to accept or believe in themselves because of how intense their conditions of worth were. For example, Robert discussed how he didn’t accept himself when he wasn’t able to drop time in his favorite event. This performance time as a condition of worth, in tandem with not making the conference team his freshman and sophomore years, seemed to outweigh the regard his coach was giving him,

I think that was all brought on myself, I really do. I think that I had put a lot of pressure on myself. Uhm, I had a really good breaststroke coach my freshman year and, she was very very supportive of me when I wasn’t supportive of myself.

In addition, participants described having the resources to believe in themselves, but still did not believe in themselves:

In college, I had every opportunity to, you know, believe in myself. I had you know the resources they have, the supportive team, the coaching, like supportive coaches and positive coaches, I had every opportunity to believe in myself and to make the most of it in that way, so I definitely think that one would just be me because, when it came down to it....it was hard to find a reason to believe in myself (Sally).

At times, swimmer self-regard mirrored college coach regard. For instance, Hannah described how she asked her coaches to take the summer off of competition and was met with non-acceptance (disregard) from her coaches. Her coaches disregard of her plea influenced her to feel “like a terrible person” and not to accept herself,

I was like “can I have this summer to figure out my life and like kind of what I want to do so that I can then, like focus on swimming?” they were like, “oh so you don’t care”. Like literally said that and I was like, “okay, I am a terrible person, you’re correct”.

Sally also described an interaction where she perceived her coach (and teammate) regard as they didn’t care about her:

I think sometimes their approach like just made us feel more like alienated from the team. Uhm and like worthless almost like even though what they’re saying was very valid and like trying to like get us to wake up, you know but...that like also just let it like, kind of caused us to spiral more and more cause we were like, and we really like alienated ourselves [from] the team, because we knew like we’re like we felt like everyone didn’t like yes, you know?

In turn, she did not challenge or respect herself, “I didn’t feel like what I was doing was respectable, you know and like not feeling like I am worthy of respect, [and] in turn don’t feel respect for myself.”

Participants reported times where they mirrored their coach’s acceptance, belief, challenge, and respect of them. For example, Robert described how his coach helped him believe in himself (after seeking social support) and how he often went into his office to just talk,

He really helped, helped me believe in myself. He was all very encouraging. Uhm, knew what it took to get me going [in] practice, you know, knew what I had to do, helped me

stay focused, while also just being a good person.... I always came in early and his office was always open, you know sit down and “how was your day?”.

Lastly, Regina described how her coach wrote difficult practices and how her coach being “just as hyped” of her when she did them. She stated how his belief in her to do difficult practices, helped her “believe in myself, which helped me, be able to reach a new potential I didn’t know I was able to reach”.

### ***Domain VIId: Teammate regard***

In tandem with the category “having a ‘worthy’ role on the team in Domain V, teammate regard played a crucial role in support and influencing swimmers’ self-regard. In fact, 10 out of 11 participants spoke about how they felt their teammates made them feel like their presence on the team was worthy and made a positive contribution. For example, Ben described how he felt valued on his team because he felt “being depended on, was-was [a pretty nice feeling]” and how his teammates “were very good because they depended on me and even if I didn’t do well, they were okay with it, and they were supportive regardless”. Sally also discussed how direct communication from her teammates made her feel valuable,

We talked a lot on our team about, like what we thought we brought and there would be team meetings where we would all go around and say.... [what] they thought that person brought to the team. And it would be really [a] positive and cool experience.... the direct communication in that way too, definitely made me feel like valuable.

Participants also discussed how they felt valued by their team after a race with “high fives” and “hugs” which spoke to how they felt “loved” (Luisa)—

After all the hard work you put in at practice, and then you race really well and you get out of the pool and go up to your coach and they give you a hug or they like give you a

pat on the back and your teammates come up to you and you're like they know that was a good race for you....they know your times, they know like what was good for you....they're cheering for you and they like hug you and they're like 'oh my goodness, you did so well'. That like makes you feel really good. And that makes you feel valued like, a part of your team, like they care (Jane).

Interestingly, two participants stated how they didn't really feel valued when they swam for their club and high school teams. But when they got to college, they felt valued by their teammates. In fact, Jane specifically mentioned that because of the intense environment she experienced in high school, it was important that she picked a team with a coach who she could "relate to".

When teammate and coach regard positively interacted, it was so strong that it allowed participants to rely on their worth as a human to compete. For example, Sally described getting injured so badly she could not move her head hours before swimming a conference race that would potentially help her team win:

I felt like my team was fully acknowledging me for the root of, uhm, what makes a great competitor. Uhm and that's not you know.... your results don't make you a good competitor, it's the effort you put in and I felt like in that moment, I was being fully acknowledged just for that, for the effort. And it felt very validating like, you know, because it was just that's all I could do, in the moment was just giving my effort....it kind of stripped it down to the bones, you know of like the heart of competing and, and using those things to feel worthy....[coaches and teammates] where they're with me every step of the way because you know, they, they knew I needed that strength in the moment and then, and I knew that I owed it to them to give my best effort and that's all I could do.

In turn, because teammates acknowledged participants' presence as a valuable contribution, participants described mirroring their acceptance, belief, challenge, and respect. Robert summed up the collective mirrored regard of his teammates, "teammates helping push myself in practice. Uhm lift you up when you're having a bad practice. Celebrate you when you've done very well. It's who will kind of heckle and lighten the mood in a tough practice". He also added when it came to challenging sets, "having someone next to you to you, who is fighting for survival, just like you are.... people who know the struggle [and] are with you in the moment that's huge. I couldn't have done that set alone it wouldn't have been possible". Jane adds that her teammates "always had my back. They knew if I was having a bad day they knew if I was having a good day. They knew what I needed to hear during a hard set.... they knew how to help me and achieve my goals. Ben also described when he was injured and his coach had him "do the bike.... while everyone else was practicing" he described not challenging himself because he felt like it was "just something to do" and there "was no one next to me to train against". However, there were times that teammate regard mirrored participants negatively. Sally described the "herd mentality" of her freshman cohort that mirrored how she didn't challenge or respect herself:

We all fed off each other's energy. Like more negative energy and we feed off each other's decisions which were like sometimes bad decisions, with like you know, aspects of training outside of the pool like rest, recovery, you know uhm, drinking, and the way we ate.

Lastly, Lily discussed how the regard of her club teammates interacted and reinforced her already negative self-regard:

Everyone's making fun of everyone. There were like trash accounts [on social media] .... I mean we're all 15 years old and...figuring out ourselves and then also having to put on this suit that bears everything and I'm 15 years old, and I think I'm fat... you're basically naked around all these people and, you're around them more than you are anyone else, for your day, your week...and then no one wanted to go to the school dance with me or like...I was always the one who was like never a possibility...that's got to hurt a little bit as a 15 year old girl.

***Domain VIe: Regard from a higher power***

Lastly, two participants described how unconditional regard from a higher power made them feel worthy/valued. Thus, their strong faith influenced the relationship they had with themselves—self-acceptance, belief, challenge, and respect (in addition to the teammate and coach regard they received). For example, Jane described how her “faith held a really big part in like my transition to uhm self-awareness and self-love”. She described how she struggled with her self-regard in high school, how it “fluctuated” like a “rollercoaster”, and she felt like she had “limited self-love”. When she found her faith, she stated she was able to distinguish her self-worth in sport and as a human being. She stated, “I am always seen as worthy in the eyes of God”.

Jane also described how her transition to her faith allowed her to not focus on what other people were saying, especially on social media, where she struggled with comparison. Jane stated that she “doesn't need to hear it [affirmation] from other people. I need to hear it from one person and the, the only person that matters is God...and my parents who support me”. In addition, she discussed how sometimes instead of hearing affirmations from her family and friends, listening to the voice of God is “much stronger and much more powerful”.

Both participants still seemed to struggle with self-worth at times, but their belief that “I’m always seen as worthy in the eyes of God” (Jane) warranted positive self-regard. It also seemed that belief or “worldview” (Luisa) as a Christian warranted self-regard because they are a part of larger creation, rather than having conditional self-regard based on Christian doctrine. This facilitated viewing others with different beliefs as also worthy of creation—thus deserving of positive self-regard. Luisa exemplifies this by stating:

I think life has value, um. Like people matter, like people’s lives matter...as a former swimmer, I believe that like life has value outside of sports events like even at the biggest events...my worth stems from my creator, and so like because God has called me valuable helps me feel valuable. And that life is valuable. I think that’s where my self-worth comes from like I have been wonderfully made. Worthy, beloved, valuable. Like those things are just true of life... I think that God has placed value on...life. And because of that we have worth.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to extend person-centered theory by qualitatively exploring former NCAA DI swimmers' perceptions and experiences of the components of UPSR in sport. To my knowledge, this is the first study to qualitatively explore self-regard in the athletic domain. The results of the current study support and enhance knowledge from prior literature regarding self-regard (Standal, 1954; Rogers, 1959; McHenry et al., 2021, 2022). The current study offers new insights into how self-regard is developed and the ways in which different sources (e.g., coach, parent, teammate) impact the formation of self-regard. The current study's findings also offer new insights into self-regard as a potential mediator between coach UPR and athlete thriving. In this chapter I summarize the major findings and connect the findings to important person-centered theory and sport psychology literature. I have organized the major findings into five sections that represent the domains and categories in the results: a) Relationship with self while competing was experienced as a “rollercoaster”, b) Sport experiences shaped swimmers' relationship with themselves c) Transition to NCAA DI swimming, c) Hitting ‘rock bottom’, and e) Human first, swimmer second. Lastly, I closed this chapter with a discussion of limitations to the current study and future directions for research and practice.

#### **Relationship with Self While Competing Experienced as a “Rollercoaster”**

The current study helps with the understanding of how self-regard is developed and experienced throughout participants swimming careers. First, participants emphasized that, overall, their self-regard was experienced as a “rollercoaster”. Meaning, when they performed well, they described experiencing “high highs”. But when they didn't perform well, or not how

they thought they were expected to, they described experiencing “low lows”. Standal (1954) posits that as a result of UPR individuals will take on “rewarding characteristics” (p. 59). However, when individuals experienced the opposites of UPR from others, they begin to take on “punishing characteristics” (Standal, 1954, p. 59). The rewarding and punishing characteristics seem to align with what participants described “high highs” and “low lows” of their self-regard “rollercoaster”. Overall, participants experienced conditional and negative self-regard more consistently with moments of positive self-regard during their swimming careers. However, three of the participants described experiencing more of a consistent positive self-regard with moments of conditional and negative self-regard. This finding gives rise to the understanding the UPSR may never be truly attainable. Patterson & Joseph (2013) describe that individuals who truly show UPSR “are likely to be a rarity” (p. 101). However, while UPSR is likely rare, consistent positive self-regard must at least be strived for.

The finding of the current study reaffirms McHenry and colleagues (2022) findings that positive self-regard includes accepting, believing, challenging, and respecting oneself. In fact, participants in the current study discussed moments they accepted, believed in, challenged, and respected themselves (positive self-regard). Rogers (1959) posits that outcomes of consistent positive self-regard include a decrease in conditions of worth, and an increase in self-awareness, autonomy, and responsibility taking. These outcomes of consistent positive self-regard have also been linked to behaviors of thriving, which is the joint experience of well-being and enhanced performance (see Brown et al., 2017). This is because UPSR by way of UPR, may be a gateway to unlocking optimal performance abilities for high pressure performance situations. These abilities include decreased stress responses, and increased decision making and ability to take on

challenges (McHenry et al., 2022; Lux, 2010). In the current study, when participants were experiencing their moments of positive self-regard, it coincided with their ability to persist through challenges, focus on their own performances, trust themselves to swim and accomplish their goals, feel confident in themselves, and take responsibility to take care of their minds and bodies.

However, participants in the current study described times that they did not accept, believe in, challenge, or respect themselves (negative self-regard, self-disregard). Participants even discussed how they would use punishing self-talk as a form of negative self-regard. When participants were experiencing negative self-regard or self-disregard, they also described the pressures of trying to achieve impossible expectations, giving up, not being able to trust themselves to swim, comparing themselves to others, not feeling confident in themselves, and not taking care of their minds or bodies. This resulted in declines in performance, motivation, and some even reported “hating” swimming because of it. Rogers (1959) indicates that as a result of conditions of worth, individuals become incongruent, which leads to an inaccurate perception of reality. In turn, individuals experience increased anxiety and threat. Participants in the current study described experiencing a lot of anxiety as well as a deep threat to their self-worth. As I discuss in the next domain, as a result of reinforced conditional and negative self-regard, participants described believing that their entire worth as a person was directly tied to swimming and their performance.

### **Sport experiences shaped swimmer’s relationship with themselves**

The second major finding of the current study is that participants learned how to regard themselves through their relationships with coaches and parents. This finding reaffirms Roger’s

(1959) and Standal's (1954) theory that self-regard is learned from important relationships in an individual's life. It also reaffirms McHenry and colleagues (2021) findings of how elite figure skaters self-regard mirrored their coaches and parents regard toward them. In the current study, the two strongest influences on athlete self-regard before college were parents and club coaches. For current participants, parent regard served as the first influence on self-regard. Club coaches then served as the second influence on participants self-regard. Interestingly, most participants described how club coach regard had the most influence on their self-regard. First this finding is important because it reaffirms McHenry and colleagues (2021, 2022) findings that coaches were a powerful influence in athletes' self-regard, as their regard mirrored their coaches-acceptance, respect, engagement, belief in, and challenge of them (McHenry et al., 2022). These findings are also important because athletes at the club level are in a critical developmental period, physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially (see Erikson, 1950, Piaget, 1967). As young athletes are learning about their own thoughts and emotions, there is also a greater desire to belong and please coaches. And it is during this time that young athletes are learning from coaches that their existence as a person is worthy of receiving UPR, only worthy of UPR if an expectation is met, not worthy of UPR, or their existence does not even matter.

For instance, for a coach to give UPR to an athlete means that coaches unconditionally acknowledge athletes for who they are as a person outside of sport, understand and work with individual athlete's needs, respect athletes time and boundaries, engage with athletes even through adversity, and challenge athletes to reach their potential (McHenry et al., 2022). When this regard is mirrored, athletes in the current study reported that they felt that their existence was worthy. In turn, athletes accepted, believed in, challenged, and respected themselves. In addition,

when coaches offered UPR, it seemed to “buffer” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 16) the unconditional negative regard of parents.

However, when opposites of UPR are communicated by a coach, such as conditional and negative regard, that means that coaches only acknowledged athletes if they performed well or met certain expectations (conditional positive regard; McHenry et al., 2021). In addition, when athletes did not perform well or did not meet expectations, coaches did not acknowledge their athletes, or withdrew UPR (conditional negative regard; McHenry et al., 2021).

When participants in the current study experienced conditional and negative regard, athletes in turn learned that their *existence* was only worthy if they fulfilled some sort of expectation their coaches (and swimming culture) had set for them to make. Athletes in the current study reported that they felt as if their ability to perform became their evidence of worth as a *person*. In turn, their self-regard “ebbed and flowed” with performances, leading participants to experience “high highs” and “low lows”.

According to Rogers (1959) conditions of worth is when individuals seek or avoid certain self-experiences to gain UPR from others and is developed as a response to the opposites of UPR (conditional and negative regard, unconditional negative regard, and unconditional positive disregard; Assor & Tal, 2012, Wilkins, 2000). In the current study, conditions of worth seemed to be perpetually reinforced through club coaches use of the opposites of UPR. Participants also believed that these conditions of worth were part of the culture of club swimming. Because participants in the current study began to believe that their good performances were evidence of their worth as a person, the perceived means to perform (e.g., lean body) also became evidence of worth. Participants also described that the performance as evidence of worth occurred when

they felt as though they should be improving in an “upward trend” as they progressed through their careers. Because they described this being the “nature of the sport” in tandem with club coaches fostering an environment that communicated “if you fail you’re worthless”, what should have been exciting goals became crippling expectations. For instance, time drops, going to certain high profile meets, or making certain time standards became internalized expectations that participants felt they *needed* to or were “*supposed*” to meet. If they did not meet these expectations, which became internalized conditions of self-worth, they felt as if their humanity was not worthy. In turn, this warranted negative self-regard.

What is most alarming about coach and parent regard transferring to athlete self-regard is that if unconditional negative regard or unconditional positive disregard is communicated consistently, then a young athlete risks the possibility of mirroring consistent negative self-regard or self-disregard. For example, McHenry et al., (2021) states that when coaches communicate unconditional negative regard, they do so in the form of consistent shaming or non-acceptance of an athlete by criticizing them even if they had a good performance or when coaches played favorites. If this regard is mirrored, athletes are at risk of feeling that their existence as a person is never worthy of positive regard no matter what they do. In turn, they will not give themselves self-regard. Even more critically, coaches are in danger of communicating unconditional positive disregard. Meaning, that a coach disregards athletes lives outside of sport, or even worse, absolute disregard (which can mean the total lack of attention; McHenry et al., 2021). If unconditional positive disregard is mirrored, then athletes are in danger of not only believing that their existence is not worthy, but not worthy of life at all—which warrants absolute self-disregard.

In the current study, two athletes reported intense battles with conditional and negative regard after plateauing in performance. Because they continued to not meet their own internalized expectations, and thereby their own internalized conditions of self-worth, they continuously treated themselves with negative self-regard. In turn, the continuous battles with negative self-regard eventually led to these two participants to absolute self-disregard—with one participant experiencing suicide ideation, and the other attempting suicide. It is important to remember that their internalized expectations and conditions of worth were learned from the regard they perceived from others (e.g., coach, parent).

### **Transition to NCAA DI Swimming**

The third major finding is that, as participants entered the NCAA DI collegiate level, their already developed conditions of worth and very conditional and negative self-regard shaped their expectations of collegiate swimming. Their intense conditions of worth also created a difficult experience transitioning to the collegiate scene. For example, some of the participants in the current study described how they had a difficult time entering college, as they were the best swimmer in their high school area. When they got to college, they described it as a “rude awakening” being with swimmers that were just as good, if not faster, than they were. Some of the swimmers also discussed how they had a difficult time performing as fast as they did in high school. In turn, this led some of the swimmers to question their self-worth and value to the team. This seemed to only further reinforce their very conditional and negative self-regard that was developed during club swimming, which reinforced their internalized conditions of self-worth.

Participants also described that even if their collegiate environment was better than their competitive club environment, they continued to struggle with their self-regard as their

internalized conditions of self-worth were so powerful. Thus, by the time participants entered college, their very conditional and negative self-regard nearly overshadowed any positive regard they received from teammates and coaches. Meaning, while participants did mirror their coaches regard of them (and teammates), participants still seemed to revert to their previous beliefs about conditions of worth, which was conditional and negative self-regard if they didn't perform well.

According to Rogers (1959) when individuals become incongruent, they may distort or deny certain experiences. This incongruence causes individuals anxiety and discomfort, so much so that they do not accurately perceive their experiences. Meaning, if a self-experience is incongruent with their self-concept—which is developed by receiving UPR or it's opposites—individuals will try to reduce their anxiety by denying or distorting an their experience. As a result, if someone is offering UPR, because conditions of worth are so intense, they may not accept it. According to Rogers (1959) the power of UPR is only effective when it is effectively communicated and accepted by the other person. Perhaps UPR by teammates and coaches were communicated. But because participants' self-regard seemed to clash with their previous beliefs about conditions of worth, they were not able to accept it. For example, some of the participants described how even if their coaches offered UPR, participants still believed that their coaches did not actually care about them if they weren't performing well. One of the participants even stated, "I told myself, the coaches don't care, which they did. They cared a lot, actually, and after the meet, they sat down with me and they're like, what is going on? But it was just all me" (Alexandria).

## **Hitting ‘Rock Bottom’**

The fourth major finding of the current study is that participants battles with their conditional and negative self-regard were so intense that it eventually led participants to hit a ‘low point’ in their career. For some, battles with conditional and negative self-regard, led to impaired mental performance and a decrease in physical performance. This included fear of failure, performance anxiety, mental barriers, and burnout.

McHenry et al., (2021) postulate that incongruence may cause decreased mental and physical performance because, “the potential for failure during a performance became a deep threat to their sense of self-worth” (p. 436). Participants in the current study affirm this suspicion, as their worth was so tied to their performance that the very thought of not achieving a performance outcome became a deep threat to who they were.

To deepen the understanding of incongruence in the athletic domain, continuous agonizing battles with conditional and negative self-regard not only affected mental performance, but led many participants to struggle with mental illness. These mental health issues even affected participants outside of the athletic domain; these extreme battles with conditional and negative self-regard led to struggles with body image, depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation and attempt (absolute self-disregard). In fact, two of the participants described that when all they were doing was “swimming, eating, sleeping” and “repeat”, they “didn’t feel like a person” (Jane & ‘B’). Both of them stated that experiencing mental health issues were their “low lows”, and that they didn’t feel “valued” or “value” themselves. This finding is critical as “swim, eat, sleep, repeat” is a popular jargon for young swimmers. However, many swimmers

indicated that doing nothing but swimming left them feeling burnt out, experienced a decrease in their performance, enjoyment, and lead to depressive tendencies.

### **Human First, Swimmer Second**

The fifth major finding of the current study is that for many swimmers, their ‘rock bottom’ or ‘low point’ in their career served as the catalyst to seek social support (e.g., mental performance and/or mental health services, teammates, and coaches). For some participants, this “low point” was met with a forced break, usually due to COVID-19. Social support then acted as the catalyst to experiencing a critical reflective period that allowed participants to realize that they were a human first, swimmer second. Participants were then able to believe that their worth was not dependent on performance and; thus, were deserving of positive self-regard. The perspective shift between self and performance seemed to align with Ellis’ (2013) notion that individuals should value themselves “in relation to being or existence” (p. 66) rather than rating their self-worth based on an activity that they can do.

The perspective shift also allowed participants to see that they were worthy to themselves and to their team. Feeling valued and having a ‘worthy’ role on a team aligns with self-determinant theory and the basic psychological need of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness is the need to have a secure sense of belonging and connection. This sense of belonging allowed participants to feel valued and loved by their team. In addition, team members played a critical role in UPR during participants’ collegiate careers. In fact, Raabe et al., (2016) found that for NCAA DI swimmers, “teammate interactions that cultivated groupness simultaneously nurtured psychological basic needs” (p. 43). This was because swimmers were knowledgeable about each other’s goals and supported each other, (Raabe et al., 2016).

Participants in the current study reaffirm how important the feeling of relatedness is for motivation and to also feel like their presence as a human is worthy on their team. When participants presence felt worthy and they felt like they belonged, this also seemed to warrant positive self-regard. Lastly, the findings reaffirm that in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) that a secure relational base is crucial for thriving because it is through secure relationships that others experience thriving (McHenry et al., 2022). Overall, when participants saw that their worth and value to themselves and to the team, they began to climb out of the “low lows” of the “rollercoaster”. This led to a steady increase in mental health, freedom from internalized conditions of self-worth, which then led to a positive increase in self-regard.

In addition, when participants treated themselves as a human first and swimmer second, amazingly, their performance and enjoyment increased. Participants in the current study reported putting their “health before my own image”(Alexandria) by taking breaks from swimming when they could, making sure they ate the proper amount of food, and doing activities outside of only swimming. Participants also reported utilizing positive self-talk to help them persist through challenges and accept performance outcomes that they were not hoping for. Lastly, participants reported focusing less on comparing themselves to teammates’ performance times, to “what the clock says”, and started controlling what they could control. In turn, participants described having an increased sense of confidence and being able to trust themselves to swim well. These findings seem to be outcomes of consistent positive self-regard, such as increased acceptance and self-responsibility, and a freedom of conditions of worth (Rogers, 1959). Lastly, Schmid (2001) states that consistent positive self-regard, by way of UPR, allows individuals to rely on their self-acknowledgement of self-worth to compete to their highest potential. In essence, when

teammates and coaches offer UPR, they provide a source of “protection and care” (Schmid, 2001, p. 157) for individuals to rely on in the face of adversity. According to McHenry et al., (2021) when coaches communicated UPR, their sense of care and protection allowed athletes to “be vulnerable or take risks” (p. 432) and the freedom to “try, fail, learn, and try again” (McHenry et al., 2022, p. 13). When participants described an increased sense of confidence and trust, it is possible that they were able to rely on their self-worth to perform to their highest potential. Because participants experienced an increase in positive self-regard and thereby free from conditions of worth, their worth as a person may have no longer been a threat dependent on performance.

It is important to note however, that the participants who were able to experience a perspective shift, were in environments where coaches seemed to utilize autonomy-supportive behaviors (Bartholomew et al., 2009). This seemed to allow participants to have the freedom to break free from conditions of worth, even after seeking social support. In addition, some of the participants reported how mental performance and mental health were normalized as their head coaches made it known to the team that mental performance and mental health services were available to them. For example, one participant described their coach bringing in the team psychologist to show that it was a resource for them. While other participants described how their coaches were always encouraging about mental health resources as well as having an MPC to work with.

Lastly, McHenry and colleagues (2022) postulate that “self-regard may be a critical factor to consider as a potential mediator to explain how coaching behaviors support or hinder athlete’s empowerment and thriving” (p. 14). The current study offers a deeper understanding as

to why self-regard may be a potential mediator between coach behaviors and athletic thriving. This is because coaches have the power to influence swimming culture norms, that often, become conditions of worth. In addition, coaches' provision of UPR or its opposites have the power to make athletes feel that their existence is worthy of life (in tandem with family regard and other influences). If athletes feel worthy of life, not only is positive self-regard warranted, but enjoyment and performance increase. However, coaches have the power to also make athletes feel conditionally worthy, negatively worthy, and not worthy at all. This not only decreases motivation, enjoyment, and performance, but has the potential to impact their mental health so severely, it can lead to absolute self-disregard.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The current investigation is not without limitations, as limitations may guide the future direction of PCT research. The first limitation is that 10 out of 11 swimmers identified as White. The second is that only three of the participants identified as men. The third is that the study aimed to exclusively explore collegiate NCAA DI swimmers and were required to be retired for a maximum of five years. Therefore, it would be more impactful to gain more insight about self-regard from different sports; races/ethnic groups; genders; amount of years swam in college; DII, DIII, NAIA, and club/high school athletes. PCT has proven to be a viable framework in understanding how coaching behaviors (and other) influences impact self-regard, therefore it would be helpful to understand the insight of various participants.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The current investigation serves as a wakeup call to parents, coaches, MPC's (and even administrators) that they have the power to make their child/athlete feel worthy of life, or unworthy of life. Young athletes are learning at a young age that they only are worthy if they are

able to achieve a performance outcome, which led the participants in the current study to struggle with long battles with conditional and negative self-regard. If they experienced a plateau in performance, this resulted in consistent negative regard. For some, this turned into absolute self-disregard, leading one of the 11 participants to experience suicide ideation, and one out of 11 to attempt suicide. It wasn't until participants spiraled to 'rock bottom' that they gained the courage to seek social support and realize that they are human before they are an athlete. Thus, major future implications include that the competitive club level is a critical place for MPC's to begin UPR training for coaches. It may even be critical that MPC's begin UPR training for athletes transitioning into the collegiate swimming environment to help 1) ease the transition into collegiate swimming and 2) increase at least consistent positive self-regard and help decrease conditions of worth as much as possible to prevent athletes from hitting 'rock bottom'. Another implication is that NCAA DI collegiate teams are another critical place to start UPR training for coaches in tandem with athletes receiving UPSR personal development. While 'unconditional' positive regard/self-regard is rather difficult to offer or to facilitate, it is the *consistency* that MPC's, coaches, teammates, and athletes, must strive for. Growth-promoting *relationships* is what facilitates consistent self-regard and thriving. Thus, it may be important that athletes and coaches learn to work together to facilitate mutual thriving, in addition to preventing absolute self-disregard from ever happening. Lastly, as elite athletes have spoken about their own perspective shift in being 'human first, athlete second', the elite and/or Olympic level is another critical place for UPR training to begin.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the current study is the first, to my knowledge, to qualitatively explore UPSR in depth in the athletic domain and in person-centered studies. Former NCAA DI swimmers described their experiences with self-regard as a “rollercoaster” which resulted in a “rollercoaster” journey during their collegiate careers. The results provide new insights into how swimmer’s self-regard was shaped throughout their career, how important relationships influences impacted it, and how it contributed to performance and enjoyment. In all, consistent positive self-regard is crucial for thriving. When participants accepted, believed in, challenged, and respected themselves—they were able to attain goals, push through challenges and adversity, take care of their mind and body, and were confident and trusting in themselves. Most importantly, they enjoyed swimming, performed better, and *valued themselves*.

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## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

*Table 1*  
*Description of swimmers*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>	<b>Years Swam</b>	<b>Years Retired</b>	<b>Previous experience with MPC's</b>	<b>Previous experience with Therapist</b>
<b>Robert Jackson</b>	Male	23	Caucasian	Hetero- sexual	13 years	1 year		Yes
<b>Jane</b>	Female	25	Caucasian	Hetero- sexual	15 years	4 years		
<b>Marina Foster</b>	Female	23	Caucasian	Prefer not to say	9 years	2 years		
<b>Sally</b>	Female	22	Caucasian	Hetero- sexual	17 years	<1 year	Yes	Yes
<b>Lily</b>	Female	23	Caucasian/ Native American	Hetero- sexual	12 years	1 year		
<b>Ben D</b>	Male	23	Caucasian	Hetero- sexual	16 years	2 years		
<b>Regina</b>	Female	24	Caucasian	Hetero- sexual	17 years	2 years		Yes
<b>Alexandria</b>	Female	22	Caucasian	Hetero- sexual	12 years	<1 year	Yes	
<b>B</b>	Male	22	Caucasian	Hetero- sexual	12 years	<1 year	Yes	Yes
<b>Hannah</b>	Female	25	Caucasian	Bi- sexual	16 years	Almost 4 years	Yes	Yes
<b>Luisa</b>	Female	25	Caucasian	Hetero- sexual	10-11 years	Almost 2 years	Yes	

*\*All participants swam four years of college*

## APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Athletes' experiences of UPSR

#### A. Introduction

- a. What were your primary/conference events (e.g., sprint/distance and type of stroke)
- b. How many years did you compete?
- c. How many years have you been retired from NCAA DI swimming?
- d. Are you still involved in the sport in any way?

#### B. Main Questions

1. Tell me how you viewed yourself as a swimmer during your career.
  - a. Who or what influenced this?
2. Tell me how the way your self-regard (the attitude you held toward yourself/way you treated yourself) was significant to you during your swimming career (e.g., while you were competing), if at all.
3. How would you describe the relationship you had with yourself during your athletic career?
  - a. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you fully accepted yourself as a person during your athletic career?
    - i. How did you know you fully accepted yourself?
    - ii. What helped you accept yourself in swimming? (who/what?)
  - b. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you did not fully accept yourself as a person during your athletic career?
    - i. How did you know you didn't fully accepted yourself?
    - ii. What influenced you to not accept yourself ? (who/what?)
  - c. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you valued yourself during your athletic career?
    - i. How did you know you valued yourself?
    - ii. What helped you value yourself in swimming? (who/what?)
  - d. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you did not value yourself during your athletic career?
    - i. How did you know you weren't valuing yourself?
    - ii. What influenced you to not value yourself? (who/what?)
  - e. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you believed in yourself during your athletic career?
    - i. How did you know you believed in yourself?
    - ii. What helped you believe in yourself in swimming? (who/what?)
  - f. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you did not believe in yourself during your athletic career?
    - i. How did you know that you didn't believe in yourself?
    - ii. What influenced you to not believe in yourself? (who/what?)
  - g. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you were able to challenge yourself towards your potential?
    - i. How did you know you were challenging yourself?
    - ii. What helped you challenge yourself in swimming? (who/what?)

- h. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you weren't challenging yourself towards your potential?
    - i. How did you know you weren't challenging yourself?
    - ii. What influenced you to not challenge yourself? (who/what?)
  - i. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you respected yourself during your athletic career?
    - i. How did you know you were respecting yourself?
    - ii. What helped you respect yourself in swimming? (who/what)
  - j. Tell me about a time (in what ways) you did not respect yourself during your athletic career?
    - i. How did you know you weren't respecting yourself?
    - ii. What influenced you to not respect yourself? (who/what?)
4. Thinking about what we just discussed —acceptance, belief in, value challenge, and respect...
    - a. How did this relationship with yourself contribute to your enjoyment of swimming, or not?
    - b. How did this relationship influence your sport performance, or not?
  5. Do you feel there were times that you accepted, valued, believed in, challenged, and/or respected yourself no matter what? (please describe)
  6. Webster's dictionary defines self-worth as "a sense of one's own value as a human being" – tell me how does this definition resonate with you as a former swimmer
    - a. Is there anything you would like to add to this definition?
    - b. Tell me how the relationship you had with yourself influenced your acknowledgement of self-worth?
  7. Thinking about your sport experiences, tell me about a time that you relied on your self-worth as a source of strength?
    - a. Tell me how you were able to acknowledge your self-worth as a source of strength to compete to your highest potential?
    - b. In what ways was this (self-worth) a source of strength?
    - c. What/who influenced you to feel this way?
    - d. How do you feel this influenced your enjoyment and performance in swimming?
  8. Knowing what you know now...what would have helped you develop your self-acknowledgement of self-worth?
    - a. How do you believe that would have impacted your sport experience (enjoyment, performance)?
    - b. What do you think would help athletes develop self-acknowledgement of self-worth?
    - c. What do you think would help athletes maintain a sense of self-acceptance, self-belief, self-challenge, self-respect, and a sense of value no matter the circumstance (successes/failures?)
    - d. Research indicates that those with the healthiest forms of self-worth have healthy boundaries.
      - i. What would have those boundaries looked like for you? (or what did they look like?)

- ii. Boundaries with your coach?
  - e. Lastly, as we have seen great athletes take a step back to take care of their mental health – they have talked about how they recognize their worth is more than just the sport that they compete in. Tell me if you feel like there was a time in your life where you feel like you could have taken a step back to recognize that your total worth is not contingent on your sport?
    - i. How do you think this would have influenced your performance? career enjoyment...?
9. Finally, is there anything else you think might be important to know about self-worth and sport performance and enjoyment?

**C. Demographic questions**

- a. Name
- b. Age
- c. Race/ethnicity
- d. Gender – and Sexual-Identity?

## APPENDIX C: MEMO SAMPLES

January 22, 2022

Participant 2

Memo

Notes immediately after interviewing –

I thought it was a great interview! I felt I didn't need to probe as much in the beginning, but I felt I needed to a little bit by the end. She has been retired for four years, and I definitely think that showed a little bit because a lot of things she discussed I think she had a kinder view of swimming. But overall, I think there was great information that was discussed in the interview and I was really happy with it.

There was also a lot of points where she talked about how important her team was to her. That was very hard for me because at the end of my career, I didn't have a team. That was something I always longed for, especially at the end of my career, to just have a team. So there was a lot of moments in our interview where she would just describe her team as something so beautiful and I teared up a lot because that's all I ever longed for. I was so lonely and I did so many things by myself. That was something participant 1 talked about too – was the comradery of his team and discussing how he didn't think he would be able to do a very difficult set alone. In his interview, I was reminded that I really went through some really hard times and how proud I should be of myself that I made it out and survived, and even found a way to get better through it. In this interview, I was reminded how much I longed for a team, a group of people that supported me in my challenges. And I really felt it because I teared up a lot in the interview and had to mentally bring myself back.

January 25, 2022  
Participant 4  
Memo

I really enjoyed this interview (as I do for all of them) and felt I stayed focused on the questions, specifically the enjoyment part question of the study. I myself a note to focus on the questions and I didn't find myself probing unnecessary questions. All of my probes were to understand further what it was about the participant's support that helped them accept, challenge, believe, value, and respect themselves.

Something else I noticed was how self-worth/value, and respect seem to be intertwined but also influence each other. Participants spoke of their self-worth as feeling needed, worthy, valued, and apart of something much bigger than themselves. I think that is really interesting to note and I really enjoyed the interview.

I have also been noticing the theme with club and college swimming. For some participants high school swimming had a very large impact on them and continued to effect them in college. Even if they had a better experience in college, their relationship with the sport was damaged and their mentality took a lot to fix or manage.

## APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
TENNESSEE  
KNOXVILLE

January 13, 2022  
Shelby Rose Miller  
UTK - University Wide - Thornton Center

Re: UTK IRB-21-06692-XM  
Study Title: Exploring Athlete's Experiences of Unconditional Positive Self-Regard

Dear Shelby Rose Miller:

The Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) reviewed your application for the above referenced project and determined that your application is eligible for **exempt** review under 45 CFR 46.101, Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Your application has been determined to comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval of your application (version 1.4) as submitted, including the following documents that have been dated and stamped IRB approved:

- Exploring UPSR Consent Form 11.23.2021 v 1.2
- UPSR I-Guide\_11.23.2021 v 1.1
- Recruitment Email 11.11.2021 v 1.0

You are approved to enroll a maximum of 15 participants. Approval of this study will be valid from 01/13/2022.

Any revisions in the approved application, consent forms, instruments, recruitment materials, etc., must be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Approval of this study is valid for three years. If a Study Update Form is not submitted in iMedRIS and approved by the IRB prior to 01/12/2025, the study will be automatically closed by the IRB and no further study activity will be permitted until a Study Update Form is received. Please be sure to also submit a Study Closure Request (Form 7) when all research activity, including data analysis, has been completed.

Sincerely,

Lora Beebe, Ph.D., PMHNP-BC, FAAN  
Chair

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement  
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529  
865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax irb.utk.edu

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Flagship Campus of the University of Tennessee System

## APPENDIX E: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear former NCAA DI swimmer,

As you may have seen, athletes like Michael Phelps are heavily advocating for athlete mental health awareness, especially as it pertains to self-worth. With the rise of athlete mental health awareness, we feel that it is crucial to explore and understand how self-regard (the way you treat yourself; one's sense of self-worth) may contribute to enjoyable and successful performances.

Currently, there is very little research pertaining to self-regard within athletics, especially within swimming. In order to understand the potential influence/impact of self-regard on performance, we are inviting you to participate in an approximately 60–90-minute interview. Participation is completely voluntary and interview responses will remain confidential.

Any publications or presentations resulting from this project will report summary information only. Please review the attached consent document for more information regarding this research project.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please reply back to me at [smill134@vols.utk.edu](mailto:smill134@vols.utk.edu) or text me at 513-526-8024 and we will schedule a day and time for the first interview via zoom.

If you have any questions about this project, please email Shelby Miller, Master's student of Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior, University of Tennessee ([smill134@vols.utk.edu](mailto:smill134@vols.utk.edu)). Or you can contact my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Zakrajsek ([raz@utk.edu](mailto:raz@utk.edu)).

Thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of this request.

Best wishes,  
*Shelby Miller*  
*Rebecca A. Zakrajsek*

## APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT

### Consent for Research Participation

**Research Study Title:** Exploring Athlete's Experiences of Unconditional Positive Self-Regard

**Researcher(s):** Shelby Miller, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Dr. Rebecca Zakrajsek, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a retired NCAA DI collegiate swimmer and have been retired for, at most, five years. You must be age 18 or older to participate in the study. The information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact the researcher(s) to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

#### *Why is the research being done?*

The purpose of the research study is to explore NCAA DI swimmer's experiences of their self-regard (the way you treat yourself; sense of self-worth) and how they perceived their self-regard to be significant during their athletic career.

#### *What will I do in this study?*

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in a 60–90-minute interview about your experiences with self-regard during your athletic career. We will schedule a convenient time to conduct an interview via email.

We will also ask you to choose a pseudonym (fake name) to protect your confidentiality. You can complete these interviews over the phone or through the web-conference program Zoom. Interviews will be recorded (audio and video if occurring over zoom). After approximately a week following the interview, we will ask you to review your transcript to add or take out any information you do or do not wish to be in data analysis.

You can skip any questions that you do not want to answer or exit the interview at any time.

#### **How long will I be in the research study?**

If you agree to participate in the study, we will schedule a convenient time to conduct an interview. We anticipate the interview to last approximately 60-90 minutes (one hour and thirty minutes total).

#### *Can I say "No"?*

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

#### **What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?**

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to stop before the study is completed, simply inform the interviewer that you would not like to continue.

#### *Are there any risks to me?*

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

*Are there any benefits to me?*

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about NCAA DI swimmer's experiences of self-regard (the way you treat yourself; sense of self-worth), how they perceived self-regard to be significant in their career, and aid sport psychology research. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

*What will happen with the information collected for this study?*

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by keeping all interview recordings and transcriptions on password protected computers. We will also ask you to choose a pseudonym (fake name) that will be put into the interview transcriptions. Additionally, identifying information (e.g., university name) will be removed from transcripts.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information, we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

**What will happen to my information after this study is over?**

We will not keep your information to use for future research or other purpose. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study.

We will not share your research data with other researchers.

*Who can answer my questions about this research study?*

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers:

Shelby Miller (Principal Investigator): [Smill134@vols.utk.edu](mailto:Smill134@vols.utk.edu)

Dr. Rebecca Zakrajsek (PI's advisor): [raz@utk.edu](mailto:raz@utk.edu)

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

1534 White Avenue

Blount Hall, Room 408

Knoxville, TN 37996-1529

Phone: 865-974-7697

Email: [utkirb@utk.edu](mailto:utkirb@utk.edu)

*Statement of Consent*

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. I understand that I am agreeing to be in this study. I can keep a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I do not need to do anything else.

## APPENDIX G: DOMAINS, CATEGORIES, CORE IDEAS

*Table 2*

Domains/Categories	Illustrative Core Idea	Frequency
<i>Domain I: Relationship with self (self-regard) while competing experienced as a “rollercoaster”</i>		
a) self-acceptance	Swimmers accepted themselves in moments where they did their best, reached an important goal, accepted their role on the team. Did not accept themselves when performances were not improving or acquired an injury.	General
b) self-belief	Swimmers believed in themselves in moments when they felt confident, trusted themselves to swim, achieved realistic goals, and overcome mental barriers. Did not believe in themselves when they didn’t drop time, had high expectations, did not trust and of feel confident to swim well.	General
c) self-challenge	Swimmers challenged themselves in moments when they overcame difficult sets, injury, self-doubt, and chose to push themselves outside their comfort zone for performance. Did not challenge themselves when they were ‘just getting by’ and not bettering themselves.	General
d) self-respect	Swimmers respected themselves in moments when they accomplished a goal, overcame difficulties, and honored their body (i.e., asking/making decisions for physical and mental needs) Did not respect themselves when they had ‘poor’ performances and did not uphold values in their actions.	General
<i>Domain II: Sport experiences shaped swimmer’s relationship with themselves</i>		
a) culture of club swimming	Described club swimming as pressurized when it became more serious following success and looking to swim at the college level. Swimmers carried self-regard shaped at the club level into college.	Typical
b) performance as evidence of worth	Swimmers relied on performances and means to performance (i.e., body shape, coach regard) as evidence that they were a good person.	Typical
c) Internalized expectations	Swimmers discussed expectations to perform well, that they ‘should’ be getting faster, ‘should’ be going to high profile meets, and it was ‘now or never’ to swim a certain time. Expectations became internalized pressures.	Variant
d) Transition to D1 swimming	Swimmers struggled entering the D1 level from club swimming. Went from being the best in high school to not improving the way they expected, which shaped view of self and place/value to the team. Self-regard shaped by early experiences influenced how swimmers perceived coach and teammate regard.	Variant
<i>Domain III: Hitting ‘rock bottom’</i>		

Table 2 Continued

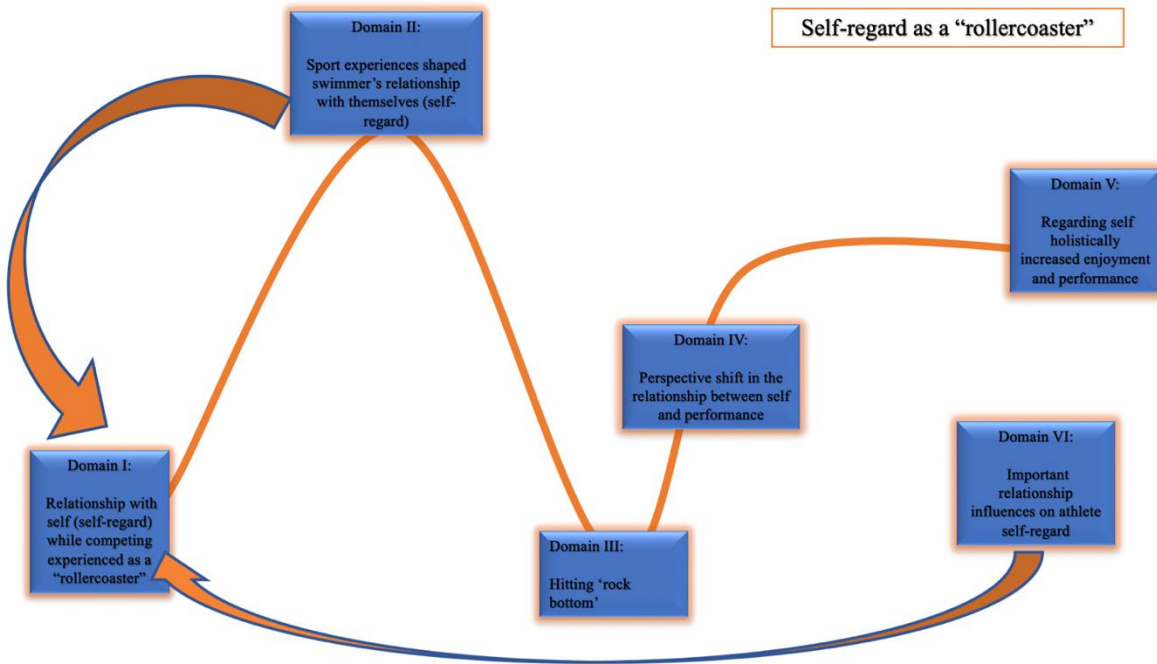
a) mental performance	When performance outcomes dictated self-regard, swimmers discussed focusing on things they cannot	General
b) mental health	control, negative self-talk, fear of failure, performance anxiety, mental barriers, and burnout. Conditional self-regard controlled by performance outcomes and other external measures of worth (i.e., body shape, sense of value on team) led to battles with body image, depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation. A consistent lack of self-regard worsened mental health outcomes.	Typical
<i>Domain IV: Perspective shift in the relationship between self and performance</i>		
a) forced break & seeking social support	Swimmers expressed a desire to take a break because of burnout and/or mental health. If a break from swimming was not freely met, a forced break occurred either because of severe mental health concerns, injury or COVID. Forced break served as the catalyst to seeking social support (e.g., mental performance and/or mental health, coaches, teammates, God). Seeking social support served as a critical reflective period, swimmers realized they are worthy as a human, not just a swimmer, led positive self-regard to increase.	Variant
b) having a 'worthy' role on the team	Swimmers realized their value/place on team, realized their presence and contribution to the team makes a positive difference, felt wanted and valued by team and coaches.	Variant
<i>Domain V: Regarding self holistically increased performance and enjoyment</i>		
a) self-care	Swimmers honored their body, prioritized proper nutrition and rest, engaged in activities outside of swimming and swim culture.	Variant
b) healthy coping and positive self-talk	Swimmers did not punish themselves after imperfect races, used "I can", "I am" phrases to push through and overcome challenges.	Typical
c) practiced boundaries	Not living with other swimmers, tuning out negative teammates and coaches, communicating with coaches about their strengths and weaknesses.	Variant
d) freedom from comparisons	Focused less on other swimmers, teammates, swim times, and past performances from themselves.	Variant
e) controlled the controllables	Focused on putting purposeful effort in at practice and for mental preparation, helped them feel more confident and trusting in their ability to swim well.	Variant
<i>Domain VI: Important relationship influences on athlete self-regard</i>		

*Table 2 Continued*

a) family regard	Family members served a critical role shaping swimmers view of self, positive or negative self-regard and feelings of self-worth (e.g., unconditional support, praise, reassurance, body image issues, no positive reinforcement)	General
b) club coach regard	Club coach influenced a positive or negative environment (e.g., positive reinforcements, emotionally abusive, individual focused atmosphere), that shaped swimmers self-regard and influenced swim culture norms (e.g., swim first, school second, not having a day off)	General
c) college coach regard	Swimmer self-regard at entry point to college was the foundation to how they perceived coach regard. Ultimately mirrored coach regard whether that was positively, negatively, or not at all. Encouraged or discouraged the normalization of mental well-being and prioritizing life events (e.g., school, mental health services, taking a break from swim, activities outside of swim)	General
d) teammate regard	Teammates played a crucial role for support and influencing swimmer self-regard (e.g., having someone to race, challenge, encourage, celebrate, and support them, and lighten the mood during tough times).	General
e) regard from a higher power	Faith in God served as an extremely powerful influence as social support and influencing swimmer self-regard. Seeing themselves as worthy in the eyes of God helped swimmers separate their worth from swimming.	Rare

*\*Note. General (all or all but one of the cases); Typical (more than half the cases); Variant (two cases up to half); Rare (two or three participants)*

## APPENDIX H: VISUAL REPRESENTATIVE OF DOMAINS



*Figure 3*  
*Visual representative of domains*

## VITA

Shelby R. Miller was born on June 25, 1998 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Prior to attending the University of Tennessee, she attended Wright State University (Dayton, Ohio) before her collegiate swim team was cut in 2018. She then went to Thomas More University (Crestview Hills, Kentucky) to continue swimming and completed her Bachelor of Electd Studies, with a concentration in Exercise Science and a minor in Psychology. In August 2022 she received her Masters of Science degree in Kinesiology with a concentration in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior. She was accepted to and will continue on to pursue her Doctor of Philosphy degree in Kinesiology and Sport studies with a Specialization in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior at the University of Tennessee.