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AN EXPLORATION OF ATHLETE THOUGHTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF COHESION IN COACTING SPORTS

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Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2023.114>

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AN EXPLORATION OF ATHLETE THOUGHTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF
COHESION IN COACTING SPORTS

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in the
College of Education
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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2023

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AN EXPLORATION OF ATHLETE THOUGHTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF COHESION IN COACTING SPORTS

Cohesion is a central element in group dynamics that contributes to a team's functioning and performance. Most of the cohesion research to date has focused on the dynamic within interacting sport teams (i.e., football, basketball, soccer) but has looked past coacting teams (i.e., golf, tennis, cross-country running). While interacting sports command worldwide popularity, a significant portion of student athletes compete in coacting sports and represent the bulk of NCAA affiliated participants on the world stage at the Olympics. Thus, with such status on the world stage of competition, the investigation of coacting sports is justified. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify and explain athlete experiences and perceptions of cohesion in a coacting sport such as golf. A case study design was used along with semi-structured open-ended interview format to investigate the topic with six Division I women's collegiate golfers. Results revealed two higher-order categories which were called *team development*, and *athlete experiences and perceptions*. Despite participants unique differences in sporting experience, there were several common themes that emerged, including players acknowledgement that cohesion was a necessary element of team performance, that the strength of interpersonal relationships and positive team dynamic made participants feel an improvement in performance potential, and that intrateam competition and a poorly regulated environment would deteriorate individual and team performance and wellbeing. Moreover, participants discussed their perception of the role team members and coaches fill in contributing to a positive or negative team atmosphere, and how this inevitably influences the prevailing dynamic of intrateam competition and its impact on performance outcomes. Findings from this study provide a greater understanding of the athlete interpretation of cohesion and expand the body of literature on coacting sports generally.

KEYWORDS: [Sport Psychology, Team Cohesion, Women's Sports, Coacting Sports,
Group Dynamics]

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4/5/2023

AN EXPLORATION OF ATHLETE THOUGHTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In appreciation for the support and guidance I've received throughout my time at UK and the work put into this thesis, I want to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Marc Cormier, Dr. Melinda Ickes, and Dr. Heather Erwin. Each has spent time and effort in making me a better student and professional not just in this process but in class and in my time at UK. Your patience and kindness meant a great deal.

For all their direct support, suggestions, and critiques I want to thank Myles Englis and Connor Gavigan. They gave up the time to help me along the way and assured me that my work was of high caliber.

And to all my other great friends both in and out of the SEP family who kept me sane and supported me as I found my way through this long road to completion. From your kind words, helpful feedback, and willingness to distract me when I needed it most, I appreciate you all a great deal. The community within the SEP program has been amazing.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Sport culture is a dominant factor in everyday life within the United States. Collegiate sports, in particular, draw millions of viewers per event across both men and women's competitions year-round. For instance, in 2021, the NCAA men's basketball championship drew in an average of 16.9 million viewers (statista.com) and the NCAA women's college softball world series averaged 1.86 million viewers. What's more, the 2022 NCAA college football final pulled 22.6 million viewers (forbes.com) while college football alone accounted for a total of 145 million unique viewers over the course of the 2019-2020 season, making it the second most popular sport, in terms of viewership, in the US (footballfoundation.org).

Despite these numbers, the collegiate athletic system consists of more than just mega-popular sports such as football, basketball, baseball, and hockey. Specifically, the NCAA recognizes 24 distinct men's and women's sports across its 3 divisions (<https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/16/overview.aspx>). These sports and their teams can be classified into two broad categories across competitive domains. First are *interacting* or *interactive* sports, which require their members to work directly with one another to achieve a common goal and rely on interdependence within the group (Eys, Evans, & Benson, 2020). Such athletes train and compete together, combining their skills to find mutual team success (e.g., basketball, hockey, volleyball; Eys, et al., 2020; Tannenbaum, 1992). Second, *coacting* or *coactive* sports are those where members also train, practice, travel, prepare, and often live together. However, coacting athletes compete simultaneously with *and* against one another for individual and team outcomes (e.g., golf, cross-country running, swimming and diving; Eys, Evans & Benson, 2020). Team

outcomes in coacting sports are therefore decided by a combination of individual performances for an overall team score total. For instance, a collegiate golf team scores represent the aggregate of all (or most) of its competing members. While there are still individual rankings and assessments of performance (e.g., top five finish), team outcomes are often the focus. Interacting teams, on the other hand, combine diverse skills in an interdependent pattern of teamwork to achieve team success (Carron, 2005).

Despite the worldwide popularity of interacting sports such as football, basketball, and soccer, a significant portion of student-athletes compete in coacting sports such as swimming, diving, track and field, shooting, cross-country running, tennis, and golf. While one may argue that these do not generate revenue or attendance, they represent the bulk of NCAA affiliated participants on the world stage at the Olympics. More specifically, there were 287 athletes with roots in the NCAA (current or alumni) participating in running sports alone (track and field, marathon, triathlon), representing 57 total countries and territories (NCAA.org). Thus, the importance of investigating non-revenue generating *coacting* sports is justified due to their importance on the world stage and overall number of participants. Further, understanding the unique nature of cohesion in coacting sports is critical for the increased likelihood of success and well-being of said athletes. Where no one sport is exactly like another, the assumptions drawn from research focused on interacting sports is not wholly generalizable. As researchers seek clarity in the cohesion-performance relationship, the unique nature of coacting sports specifically must be considered.

In this regard, much of the available research on cohesion focused heavily on its relationship to overall team success, or team performance or interacting groups/teams

(Carron & Eys, 2010; Carron & Chelladurai, 1981; Widmeyer & Williams, 1991; Martens and Peterson 1971). The history of this research has been catalogued in three significant meta-analyses (Evans & Dion, 1991; Mullen & Copper, 1994; Carron, Coleman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002) which resulted in mixed findings, though leaning towards a positive relationship between cohesion and performance. Interestingly, research focused on coaching sport teams was first introduced decades ago (McGrath, 1962; Fiedler, 1967) and focused primarily on how cohesion differed amongst coaching and interacting teams. Early investigations in the cohesion-performance relationship in sport settings led to inconclusive and inconsistent results (Martens & Peterson, 1971; Carron, 1980). For instance, Martens & Peterson (1971) revealed that “highly cohesive teams,” though not well defined, won significantly more games than “low cohesive teams.” However, they were unable to find systematic variance between high, moderate, and low cohesive teams in terms of team effectiveness. Ultimately, they concluded that cohesiveness could not be considered a primary factor in performance. Years later, researchers appeared to agree in concluding a positive correlation of cohesion and performance does exist, regardless of the sport type (Carron & Chelladurai, 1981; Carron, et al., 2002; Widmeyer & Williams, 1991). Overall, sport type does appear to mediate overall levels of cohesion within a team and the degree of its positive impact on performance (Carron et al., 2002).

It became apparent to the current researcher that while investigations regarding the impact of cohesion on coaching team performance often centers on athletes/team members, there has yet to be a proper exploration of the specific experiences, knowledge, and perceptions athletes have that can contribute to the understanding of cohesion in such

a context. Previous research has explored athlete personality differences in coaching and interacting sports, suggesting there may be personality differences between these kinds of athletes, where coaching athletes reported as less likely to seek friendships compared to interacting athletes (Eagleton, McKelvie, & De Man, 2007; O'Sullivan, Zukerman, Kraft, 1998). Specifically, results from Eagleton and colleagues (2007) revealed that coaching athletes from sports such as golf, gymnastics, and running were likely to have increased independence, lower extraversion, and decreased importance of interpersonal relationships. Further, O'Sullivan, Zukerman, and Kraft (1998), showed that coaching athletes also appear to have slightly lower measures of neuroticism-anxiety than interacting sport athletes, but similar rates of sociability. This line of research, and the related findings, indicates the potential for athletes in either setting to perceive potential differences in the value, importance, and impact that cohesion has in their experience of team culture and team and personal success.

Related to cohesion, one conceptual model was used for the framework of this study. Carron, Widmeyer, and Brawley's (1985) conceptual model for cohesion offers a multidimensional perspective of cohesion. In this structure, members of teams integrate information from multiple, diverse aspects of the social environment most relevant to the group. The model has four related dimensions: *group integration-task*, *group integration-social*, *individual attraction to the group-task*, and *individual attraction to the group-social*. A sense of cohesiveness is therefore created by the interaction of these four dimensions and a group's members. This framework is useful in establishing foundational knowledge on the development of athletes and teams and addresses multiple dimensions of cohesion.

More recently, research has expanded to understand the more particular aspects of cohesion within coaching teams. In other words, focusing on factors outside of the cohesion-performance relationship. One key example was a qualitative exploration of how coaches experience, recognize, and develop cohesion within cross-country running teams (Cormier, Bloom, & Harvey, 2015). This focused on coaches' perspectives of cohesion and introduced a more qualitative and personal exploration of a stakeholder's interpretation of the impact and influence of cohesion on their specific team. Cormier and colleagues noted, "gathering the knowledge and experience of expert cross-country running coaches helped current researchers further understand how coaching relates to the development of cohesion in different contexts such as coaching sport" (p. 4). This strategy of illuminating cohesion development through qualitative case study designs was a novel addition to the research literature. As a result, Cormier and colleagues identified an important gap of knowledge in cohesion research, particularly in sport settings. Where most of the research attempted to understand the cohesion-performance relationship, coaching experiences illuminated the perceived value of specific athlete physical attributes and personality characteristics that they felt contributed to team cohesion. While this effort has added value to practical understanding of coaching team cohesion, it becomes clear that elite athletes are equally capable of providing insightful information of their experiences and perceptions of cohesion as it presents and impacts their experience within a coaching sports team. Cormier et al. (2015) also offers the assumption, "if cohesion develops within a team, it begins with the behaviors of the coach" (p. 3). In this same line of logic, if cohesion develops within a team, it is not without the influence of the contributions and perceived value it offers to the members of

the team in seeking their own personal and collective goals. Further, Cormier and colleagues reported that coaches themselves recognize the critical influence of athlete leadership in developing team cohesion and ultimately team performance. Thus, coaching sport participants are faced with the unique challenge of contributing to the development of a cohesive team culture to deliver team success, while also balancing the importance of individual and team outcomes.

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Division 1 golfers as it relates to cohesion. Cormier and colleagues (2015) added foundational knowledge related to cohesion in coaching sports (cross-country running, in particular), through the perspectives of elite coaches. Yet, no research has been conducted related to this idea from the perspective of the athlete. Therefore, the current study seeks to continue to fill the research gap in understanding cohesion as it relates to elite golfers through the direct experiences of these elite athletes. This study also utilizes components of Carron and colleagues' conceptual model for cohesion to guide the central research question: What are the perceptions of elite athletes as it pertains to cohesion within collegiate golf teams?

1.2 Significance of Study

Previous research has shown the impact of cohesion in sport (Carron et. al., 1985; Widmeyer et. al., 1985). However, most of these studies involve a focus on performance related to coaching decisions (e.g., Bloom, et al., 2003; Murray, 2006; Ryska & Cooley, 1999; Turman, 2003) and the context of interacting sport teams (e.g., Carron et al., 2002;

Murray, 2006; Widmeyer & Williams, 1991). Investigating the experience of athletes in coacting sport settings allowed current researchers to further understand how athletes interpret and are affected by the development of cohesion in coacting sport contexts. Obviously, not all coacting sports are structured differently. But, to provide some level of consistency in the results, the current study will explore collegiate golfers only, realizing that findings may only be generalizable to collegiate golf programs, and not collegiate coacting sports as a whole. Additionally, the results may provide insight for collegiate golf coaches and sport psychology practitioners for how cohesion is recognized by athletes within the sport, providing deeper understanding of how collegiate golfers (and teams) function effectively. The current study expanded the overall body of literature on coacting team cohesion and athlete experience, as this has often been overlooked in empirical research.

1.3 Operational Definitions

Coacting sport: A sport where teammates independently perform the same task in competition with one another, and team success is determined by the sum of individual performance of some or all team members (Widmeyer and Williams, 1991). Examples of coacting sports include golf, swimming, cross country running, track and field, and wrestling.

Interacting Sport: A Sport where teammates combine their diverse skills in an interdependent pattern of teamwork (Carron et al., 2005). Examples of interacting sports include football, basketball, soccer, and hockey.

Cohesion: Cohesion has been defined as “a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its

instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member active needs” (Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998, p.213). Within this conceptualization, dimensions of social and task cohesion, representing social desirability of remaining in the group, and the role of the group in achieving performance goals are all included.

Social Cohesion: The general orientation toward developing and maintaining social relationships within the group.

Task Cohesion: The general orientation toward achieving the group’s goals and objectives.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will seek to explain key ideas related to cohesion. The first will be explaining group dynamics through the conceptual model for cohesion introduced by Carron, Widmeyer, and Brawley (1985). This section will also include defining groups, existing research related to cohesion in groups, and research related to coacting groups specifically as it differs from interacting groups.

Definition of Groups

Groups can be viewed from a myriad of differing perspectives. This presents a unique challenge in defining what a group is. One can identify through existing literature several important reference points to consider its meaning. McGrath (1984) points out two of these keys. First, groups are not simply defined by a collection of two or more people. Several individuals attending the same event would not necessarily be considered members of the same group, though a group could develop within this setting. Second, we can consider a group's essence through its members behaving together, "in some recognized relation to one another" (McGrath 1984). Sherif and Sherif (1956) offer a similar key, where members form "a social unit which consists of a number of individuals who stand in (*more or less*) definite status and role relationships to one another and which possess a set of values or norms of its own regulating the behaviors of individual members, at least in matters of consequence to the group" (p. 144). It quickly becomes evident that group definitions rely on a number of varying factors such as size, social role, or the associated environment in which the group exists (Carron et. al., 2005).

When considering these variables relating to group definitions, it's important to note that these also factor into group member experience and ultimately, group cohesion. Considering group size, researchers have investigated and identified its effect on participation levels (Bales & Borgatta, 1966; Diehl & Strobe, 1987). From these studies it appears conclusive that as size increases, communication initiated by members decreases. Increase in group size has also been found to increase members reporting feelings of threat and inhibition (Gibb 1951). This has led to differing opinions on optimal group size. Hare (1981) reviewed group research from 1898 and 1974 and concluded that optimal group size was five members. Conversely, Steiner (1972) furthered the idea that optimal group size was dependent on situational factors, such as group purpose. From a review of historical group dynamics research, it can be concluded that intimacy, cohesion, member satisfaction, participation, and group conflict are all affected by increased group size (Wheelan, 2009).

Sport teams are a particular category of group that are impacted by these concepts. A sport team can be defined as “a collection of two or more individuals who possess a common identity, have common goals and objectives, share a common fate, exhibit structured patterns of communication and modes of communication, hold common perceptions about group structure, are personally and mentally interdependent, reciprocate interpersonal attraction, and consider themselves to be a group” (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998, p. 13-14). The shared purpose of sport teams is most centrally to win. However, the sport a team participates in can complicate this. In the case of coaching sports each member will share this common goal in addition to goals of their own individual success. These additional goals complicate mutual purpose, or the team's

definition and pursuit of success. Therefore, it is critical to understand the specific nature of coaching sport teams.

Coaching Sport Groups

No two sports are truly the same. In terms of group classifications, sports differ in their number of team members, coordination, and member interaction. Each sport has a unique potential to be influenced by group dynamics and cohesion. In interacting sports, success depends on appropriately combining the diverse skills of each player in interdependent patterns of teamwork (Carron et al., 2005). In coaching sports, athletes are often independently performing the same task in competition with one another, with their team success determined by the sum of these individual task performances by some or all the team members. In competition, high performance by one team member may reduce the potential gains and performance by another member. Rewards in these competitive settings are provided based on each athlete's relative contribution to success (Carron et al., 2005). These rewards are shared unequally among members of the team and can influence the state of social cohesion within a team (Widmeyer & Williams, 1991).

Coaching sport groups as a focus of research originated from this idea that the relationship between cohesion and performance could not be generalized across all sports. Landers and Lüschen (1974) sought to test this and introduced coaction and interaction as a continuum of team member interaction. Landers and Lüschen investigated the performance-cohesion relationship of competitive coaching groups using intramural bowling teams and produced results suggesting a negative relationship. This was in concordance with results of similar studies from McGrath (1962) and Lenk (1969), who sought investigated this relationship in competitive rifle teams and Olympic

rowing teams. With more focused research, Widmeyer & Williams (1991) would later find evidence that cohesion relates positively to performance in coacting sports. This difference in conclusions was suggested to be due to previous works (Landers and Lüschen, 1974; McGrath, 1962; Lenk, 1969) focused on interpersonal attraction measures as opposed to direct assessment of group task cohesion. Widmeyer and Williams utilized the conceptual model of cohesion introduced by Carron et al., (1985) as foundation for considering cohesions impact on performance on multiple dimensions, as opposed to solely an expression of interpersonal attraction.

One aspect of cohesion that remains unclear is the role a teammate coactor serves as a motivator on performance. Previous research endeavors have investigated the impacts of the presence of another individual on motivation and performance during task completion. Such research suggests that performing a task in the presence of others results in rivalry and competition, serving as motivation for increased individual performance (Sambolec et al., 2007). Sambolec and colleagues used a physical persistence task to identify the performance of individuals in settings with or without confederate participants. Individuals had improved performances in the presence of coactors, even without explicitly identifying them as competitors to the measured individual. From this, it was assumed that performance increases originated from fear of being outperformed by a peer. This assumption of a fear response is not the only form of potential coactor motivation effects. In team settings, coactors can still introduce elements of social support and encouragement just as is expected in interacting team settings. Ungerleider and Golding (1991) examined Olympic level track and field athletes, underscoring through their research that such social support contributed to

necessary motivation in completing rigorous trainings, thus leading to increased performance. Such findings in combination with the assumptions of Widmeyer & Williams (1991) further push back against the early suggestions of a negative relationship between cohesion and team performance (Landers & Lüschen, 1976; McGrath, 1962).

Research on coaching sport groups has also reached into considerations of individual personality differences in comparison to interacting sport groups. Differing psychological attributes of sport participants has drawn the attention of several researchers (Eagleton, McKelvie, & De Man, 2007; O’Sullivan, Zukerman, & Kraft, 1998). For instance, Eagleton and colleagues found that interacting sport athletes scored higher on measures of extraversion and lower on measures of neuroticism than coaching sport participants. This research suggested that coaching sport athletes were more independent and less-group oriented in comparison to interacting sport participants.

While each of these lines of research into differences in coaching and interacting sport athletes is a critical piece to understanding the role of cohesion in sport, they each fail to engage with athlete perceptions on these key issues. Personality, competitiveness, group behaviors and cohesion all appear to differ across coaching and interacting sport settings. The type of sport setting appears to mediate athlete behavior and ultimately success. But in these mediating relationships, it remains unclear how athletes actively experience this impact. Such a gap is an oversight in the current literature.

Cohesion in Sport and Performance

Cohesion is a force active in group dynamics, commonly defined as a unifier. Festinger (1963) defined cohesion as a causal force for member retention in groups.

Similarly, Gross and Martin (1952) recognized cohesion as a quality of groups to resist potential disruption. Though initially introduced by Lewin (1935), cohesion was one described as one aspect of group dynamics, interconnected with a second force known as locomotion. Cohesion describes activity concerned with the development and maintenance of the group, and locomotion describes the activity of the group in relation to achievement of its objectives. While these aspects of group dynamics are different, they've since been investigated under the assumption of this interconnectedness, being sequential and interrelated (Carron and Chelladurai, 1981). As a basis for continued research, the common assumption became: the more cohesive a team becomes, the more effective it will be in terms of performance. This relation of cohesion and performance has been investigated with either aspect serving as the independent or dependent variable for the other. This research strategy has shown over the years that cohesion is a complex construct with its effects impacting group dynamics in variation. Such complexity showcased a gap in knowledge related to cohesion in specific performance settings, namely among athletes on sport teams (Carron and Chelladurai, 1981).

The role of cohesion as a critical component of group success has been identified in several settings, including counseling psychology (Marziali, Munroe-Blum, & McCleary, 1997), organizational psychology (Greene, 1989), and military psychology (Mael & Alderks, 1993). Due to its similarity, sport psychology settings have been an additional setting for investigating the impacts of cohesion related to group success and performance. Though historically, findings have been unclear in terms of the cohesion and performance relationship. Martens and Peterson (1971) found contradictory results

regarding the cohesion and task performance relationship. Ten years later, Carron (1980) found similarly that there were inconsistent results related to this dynamic.

Years later, Mullen and Copper (1994) would perform a comprehensive meta-analysis observing the cohesion-performance relationship. Utilizing 49 studies from industrial, military, social, and sport settings, they would conclude that there indeed is a small positive relationship between cohesion and performance, most notably present in the sport groups. While these findings proved useful to the broader discussion of cohesion-performance assumptions, the applicability to specifically the sports domain was questioned. Carron and colleagues (2002) pointed out that the focus on a wide variety of groups aside from sports teams in this meta-analysis, such as military groups or business teams, may render the findings invalid in specifically the sport domain. Additionally, Mullen and Copper (1994) chose not to utilize any unpublished studies in sport science (e.g. dissertations and theses) and seemingly included only one third of all sports studies publications that were available to them at the time.

Carron and colleagues (2002) sought to rectify this limitation by conducting their own meta-analytic investigation of the cohesion-performance relationship in only sport settings. Utilizing 46 conducted studies in this domain, a significant moderate to large cohesion-performance relationship was found present in sports teams. It was also noted that there appears to be no difference in the direction of affect in the relationship, cohesion-to-performance, or performance-to-cohesion. When investigating potential specific moderating variables (e.g., sport type, skill level, gender, etc.), sport type was not found to be a moderator for the cohesion-performance relationship. Improved performance was present in both coactive sports and interactive sports, though it

appeared that the relationship effect is stronger in coactive sports. Whether this small difference in effect strength is truly present was less important compared to the recognition that cohesion is reliably associated with performance in coactive sports, alluding to important implications for applied sport psychology and the use of team-building interventions in coacting sports. Though it was found that the absolute level of group cohesion present in coactive sports teams is significantly less than in interactive teams (Carron et. al., 1985; Widmeyer et. al., 1985).

Carron and colleagues (2005) also identified investigated differences in cohesion type and performance effect in comparison to Mullen and Copper (1994) analysis. Mullen and Copper (1994) separated cohesion into three categories: commitment to task, interpersonal attraction, and group pride. Their findings indicated that only commitment to task was significantly related to performance across the evaluation of multiple groups. However, Carron and colleagues (2005) focus on sports groups indicated that both task and social cohesion are associated with performance. As both dimensions are observed to impact performance, this may contribute to explaining the higher strength effect of cohesion in coactive sports groups. As indicated earlier, there is a lower absolute level of cohesion in coactive teams compared to interactive teams. This stems from fewer opportunities of groupness to naturally develop. Consequently, team building interventions may then have a greater impact on both team cohesion and performance. While important and useful, these findings are not indicative of final or definitive answers to the “why” or “when” of the cohesion-performance relationship.

Conceptual Model for Cohesion

Cohesion was first conceptualized by Fiedler (1967) as a bidimensional construct with two processes in groups. The first for achieving group objectives and the second for developing social relationships. Carron and colleagues (1985) added to this concept by introducing the assumption that individual and group aspects of cohesion are represented on both processes of Fiedler's cohesion model. While other conceptual frameworks have explored group dynamics in various social settings, such as counseling and therapy (McGrath 1984), Carron and colleagues examined groups in sport contexts. They did so by involving athletes as active participants in identifying meaning associated with group cohesion in sport.

The conceptual model proposed by Carron and colleagues (1985) introduces a multidimensional understanding of cohesion. Group members under this model integrate information from diverse aspects of the social world relevant to the group. From these aspects, members develop different perceptions and beliefs, which can be categorized into two domains: *group integration* (GI) and *individual attraction to the group* (ATG). Group integration contains perceptions and beliefs that individual members hold about the group or team. Individual attraction to the group considers each member's personal beliefs and perceptions of what attracted them to the group initially. Both domains, GI and ATG, can be further conceptualized into task and social orientations. Task orientations refer to achieving group goals and objectives, while social orientations can be viewed as development and maintenance of social relationships within the group or team. In all, this model introduced four distinct dimensions (*GI-Task*, *GI-Social*, *ATG-Task*, *ATG-Social*) that are proposed to act together in developing cohesion among the group and its individual members.

Each dimension from this chosen model is hypothesized to vary in its contribution to cohesion dependent of moderating variables related to cohesion. For example, sport type may have an influence on development of cohesion (Paskevich, Estabrooks, Brawley, & Carron, 2001; Carron and Chelladurai, 1981). Other examples of moderating variables related to cohesion are group development stages (duration of time a team has been together; time of year), which may influence the degree to which a particular dimension contributes to overall cohesion (Paskevich et. al., 2001). The nature of the group (more task or social focus related to motivation) or gender may also moderate the contributions of each dimension (Eagly and Johnson 1990; Carron et. al., 2002). For reasons such as this, prior emphasis has been placed on coaches' awareness related to such elements to adjust the development of cohesion within their team (Cormier et. al., 2011).

The conceptual model from Carron and colleagues has received general acceptance and praise in both sport and social psychology literature. In example, Dion and Evans (1992) showed praise for this model for its applicability to wide varieties in groups and teams. Their commentary notes the model as a good theory-driven approach to conceptualizing and measuring cohesiveness that has yielded impressive evidence of construct validity. This allows the researcher to make assumptions about influential factors of group behaviors such as motivation, interaction, and goals (Paskevich et al., 2001). This model is an asset for researchers seeking to establish a more complete picture of team cohesion in sport (Slater and Sewell, 1994).

CHAPTER 3. METHOD

To gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of golf athletes relating to cohesion, a collective instrumental case study design was adopted in exploration of the following research question: What are athletes experiences and interpretations of cohesion within collegiate golf teams? A case study research design builds an in-depth, contextual understanding of an issue explored through multiple data sources within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). A qualitative approach in gathering data is beneficial in this context for its ability to explore complex attitudes, beliefs, and experiences thoroughly (Biggerstaff, 2012). Biggerstaff discusses that one of the main strengths of qualitative research approach allows researchers to explore the meanings people give to their experiences, providing us more insightful information and quality data on how people think about their world. Additionally, qualitative methods offer more in-depth understanding of participant behaviors, feelings, and emotions. Patton (2002) argues similarly that qualitative methods facilitate the study of issues in depth and detail by providing concise findings. This section will describe the qualitative methodology used for this study in each of the following categories: research design, participants, interview technique, data analysis, trustworthiness, and assumptions.

3.1 Research Design and Data Analysis

Methodologically, a case study design best suits the exploration of the central research question in the present study. Case studies are often presented as an inquiry strategy, methodology, or comprehensive research strategy (Creswell ,2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). Focusing on an analytical approach,

researchers present detailed case descriptions within contextual conditions (Yin, 2003). The collective instrumental design is comprised of in-depth and detailed data collection from multiple bound systems, using multiple sources of information, with additions of case descriptions and case-based themes. This design choice allows for data collection from multiple coaching teams that introduce different perspectives while maintaining generalizability.

Qualitative methods were utilized for this research study, guided using semi-structured qualitative interviews (see Appendix F). To study the collected data, thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was implemented. Thematic analyses are used widely in methodology to offer rich, detailed, and complex account of data. This methodological strategy also offers the ability to identify and display significant meaning within a data set (Guest et al., 2012), while developing an account of the data from the researcher's perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun & Clark (2006) introduce a six phase, recursive process to analysis categorized by: familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (p. 87). To define and name the themes in the data collected, the researcher executed the six steps. First familiarizing the data was achieved during the manual transcribing process of the audio and having reread for any mistakes followed by a line-by-line analysis. Initial codes were generated by labeling meaningful or substantive statements and quotes with initial thoughts by the researcher to draw comparisons to various other statements made in the other interviews. These meaningful quotes or statements are considered meaning units, or a segment of text that conveys the same idea related to the same topic (Tesch 1990). Meaning units are then given a tag

relevant to its content. The remaining phases three through five, finding, defining, and naming themes, were then conducted by grouping related tags into a larger classification called properties (Côté et al., 1995). Each property is again tagged with a label based on the common features of the content from the included meaning units. These properties are then once more grouped into similar categories of higher-order themes in a comparable manner to the creation of properties. This study included a total of two higher order categories with an even number of properties divided amongst the categories.

3.2 Participants

Participants were six collegiate golfers from two Division 1 NCAA teams. Participants were identified through convenience sampling, due to geographical convenience for the researchers. The sport of golf was chosen due to its coaching environment, where athletes compete for both team and individual honors, and college golfers often compete against their teammates, throughout the season, to be promoted to the travel roster. This qualification process is often instrumental in allowing coaches to make informed decisions about player choice for each event. It also introduces a de facto hierarchy of athletes on the team. Such consistent inter-team comparisons make golf a strong sport to investigate athlete perception and interpretation of teammate relationships and team cohesion. The two cases, or teams, selected for the case study examination are from a mid-level, women's Division 1 Midwest University, and premier women's Division 1 University. Women's golf teams were selected via the convenience sampling and the willingness to participate.

A demographics survey was collected via a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). The purpose of this demographic survey was to ensure participants met the

desired sample and to understand the diversity in the participant perspectives (i.e., experience in team golf and variety of team sport experiences). Participants had at least one season of experience on a golf team at the NCAA Division 1 level. A recruitment letter was sent to coaches of golf teams that met the criteria to gain permission from coaches to communicate with team members (Appendix C). The researcher then sent communication to the athletes (Appendix D). By indicating interest to participate via response, researchers would then provide the demographics survey (Appendix B), the informed consent information document (Appendix E), and times to schedule the interview. Prior to beginning the interview, information related to informed consent, included in the information document, was reiterated and any questions were answered.

The researcher's home university granted ethical approval and participants read and gave consent prior to any and all data collection. The consent form, recruitment letter, and demographic survey were submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that language is acceptable for use, with no deceiving or ambiguous language.

3.3 Interview Technique

In the present study, interviews were conducted with the intention of obtaining athlete interpretations and understanding of the world they live, work, and ultimately compete in. Interviews assisted in gaining a more complex understanding of the issues of cohesion by gaining information about the lived experience of athletes (Creswell, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with participants. Such interviews allow researchers to introduce specific questions with all participants, while affording opportunities to probe for additional information explore more dimensions of

the topic than were considered within the structured question list (Fielding, 1994). Interviewees are also given freedom to answer openly and with little restriction (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Utilizing an open-ended format, interviewers avoid directive questions and reduce the potential of significantly influencing participant responses (Zull, 2016). Ensuring that open-ended questions are an appropriate design choice within a methodology is critical. Doing so requires researcher's consideration of respondents' capabilities of answering the designed questions and if question topics are relevant and of interest (Geer, 1988; Geer 1991). Such an interview design is best suited for the selected participants, as elite athletes are well versed in various team compositions and are competent in describing their viewpoints and opinions related to their sporting experiences.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and were audio recorded with the Zoom recording feature. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Recordings were maintained on a password protected account and device that only the researchers had access to. Semi-structured interview guides, submitted to and approved by the IRB, contained eleven open-ended questions. Once interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the audio from each interview verbatim with minor edits. Names of participants were replaced by pseudonyms (A1-A6) and the researcher removed any other names, schools, and locations to assure confidentiality of the participants. These recordings and transcriptions were stored on a password-protected encrypted machine and will be destroyed at the culmination of the retention period as dictated by the IRB.

3.4 Interview Guide

An interview guide (Appendix F) was developed for the present study by the research and faculty members with knowledge and expertise in interview-based research. This guide was used for each interview to ensure consistency. Having this framework allowed the researcher to maintain an interview on course while still affording flexibility for exploring participants' perspectives. The primary questions were preplanned to direct discussion. The interview guide has three segments, an introduction, focus, and conclusion. Section one contains opening statements to introduce the topic of study and to initiate discussion. The intention is to cover information related to background and experience within this sport context. Section two introduces questions related to Carron, and colleagues' (1985) conceptual model for cohesion, exploring each branch of cohesion. Section three contains concluding questions, providing opportunities to add any comments a participant feels are relevant to the study. The interview contains three types of questions: main questions, probes, and follow-ups (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Patton, 2002). Main questions target responses related to specific areas of the study. Probes are used to prompt deeper responses by giving participants cues of the desired depth of response. Follow-up questions were used to clarify areas of participant experience or knowledge that may have been overlooked.

3.5 Bias, Validity, Trustworthiness

Researchers utilized trustworthy methods to limit potential misunderstandings or misinterpreted data (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Various research techniques, including pilot testing, member checking, reflexivity, and critical dialog from peer review were utilized in this study and are detailed within this section.

Pilot interviews were conducted under supervision of an experienced interviewer. This supervision led to feedback focused on interview technique and use of the interview guide. Pilot interviews utilized the participation of two collegiate athletes to closely approximate the experience of the outlined study method. These pilot interviews gave the researcher an opportunity to practice interviewing skills and assess the prepared interview guide.

Member checking was also used as a critical technique to ensure trustworthiness of data, and overall credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Member checks occur when the findings are further tested with the members of the group from whom the data was originally collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During these checks, participants can correct any errors (i.e., from transcription) or challenge perceived errors in interpretations of data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In the present study, member checks occurred three total times. Once immediately after interviews concluded. There participants could correct, add, or modify their responses. Second, after interviews were fully transcribed, they were sent to each corresponding participant via email. Participants could once again modify and clarify interview comments, including any desired additions or retractions of comments. Third, the researcher shared a summary of results to each participant, allowing them to share any questions, comments, or concerns related to any findings. In all cases, the participants of the present study either indicated that they were comfortable with the data, asking for no additions, amendments, or redactions, or did not respond to requests for review.

Reflexivity refers to the understanding of how one's own experiences and background affect what one understands and acts in the world. This includes how one

approaches acts of inquiry (Patton, 2002). A practice of reflexivity in research involves questioning and understanding of the self, participants, and audience. Researchers pay close attention to cultural, political, and social origins of values and perspectives of both themselves and those interviewed. These values play a significant role in inquiry and should be considered to assist in insulating studies from biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researchers also utilized a process of dialog using ‘critical friends.’ As a contrast to typical inter-rater reliability processes, the critical friend model utilizes a process of critical dialogue in which researchers give voice to their interpretations while those in the critical friend role offer feedback, not seeking to achieve consensus but to rather achieve greater reflexivity by challenging each other’s; construction of knowledge (Cowan & Taylor, 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2018). This model increases the development of a coherent and theoretically sound argument to construct, support, and defend the case they are making in relation to data generated through the study’s development (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In the present study, the critical friends utilized were two fellow graduate students in sport psychology familiar with literature of team cohesion and qualitative research method practices. Amidst this process, the dialog from the critical friends challenged the researcher to adjust the granularity of some meaning units and lead to the amending of how some meaning units were labeled, though no higher order categories or groupings of properties were changed.

This peer review process helped reduce researcher biases to allow an accurate representation of the athlete experiences gathered during the interview process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Nowell et. al., 2017; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Feedback from the peer reviewers indicated that the researcher's analysis was defensible and was appropriately representative of the qualitative data that they had analyzed.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The following section presents the findings of the inductive qualitative analysis from this study. First, this section will outline the nature of the data collected, including a description of the findings that emerged. Then, a review will address the three higher order categories that emerged from the data, *team development*, *athlete experiences and perception*. Quotes from the interviews conducted will be introduced to illustrate the various thoughts and opinions regarding these topics, and will be labeled (e.g., A1 – A6) to credit the athlete who gave the quotation.

4.1 Nature of the Data

The six interviews conducted in this study resulted in a total of 286 meaning units, corresponding to 29 tags. The number of meaning units discussed by each athlete ranged from 27 (A2) to 66 (A3). As a result of the study design utilizing semi-structured, open-ended interviews, the variety in topic range and depth represented in meaning units is not surprising. The disparities could be credited to several factors, such as difference in sport experience, tenure on the roster, comfort in interview settings, or various team sport experiences outside of golf. For example, A2 is in her first year on her current team roster, while A5 has 4 years of experience in her collegiate golf program. A1 also has 7 years of competition in her sport, while A5 has 16 years of experience. Due to these discrepancies in experience and background, it is understandable that A5 may share more during her interview in comparison. While volume may differ, this does not reflect greater importance related to their statements, as some participants may have expressed their thoughts more concisely, with more precision, or offered fewer examples in their

responses. In example, A1 discussed *coach leadership* nearly twice as frequently as the other interviewees, while A4 addressed *supporting teammates* at a higher rate than the other athletes. Variation in tag ranges may reflect the overall importance of each topic to the interviewed athletes. Athletes discussed *interpersonal relationships* frequently (n=25). This may be due to the nature of collegiate golf teams' interactions, or it may also stem from specific interview prompts (e.g., how does your relationship with your teammates influence the training environment?). In contrast, some tags were hardly represented, such as *athlete leadership* which was mentioned by only two athletes (A1 and A4). These discrepancies may showcase the impact of different sporting experiences, as A1 frequently reflected on her experience transferring away from a collegiate golf team that dealt with poor cohesion and a lack of athlete leadership.

Table 1 (see appendix G) organizes the list of topics discussed by each athlete alphabetically. Tags were organized based on similarity of content into properties, represented in Table 2.

Table 2 Properties and tags with frequencies as expressed by each participant.

Properties and Tags	n	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6
Goals	33	8	3	12	2	4	4
Individual Goals	11	3	1	3	1	1	1
Shared/Congruent Goals	10	4	1	3	1	1	1
Goal Incongruence	4	0	1	1	0	2	0
Goal/Performance Monitoring	8	1	0	5	0	0	2
Developing the Team Environment	53	12	6	10	8	10	7
Team conflict	9	5	2	1	0	0	1
Team member differences	4	0	0	4	0	0	0
Team atmosphere	18	2	3	5	0	6	2
Interpersonal Conflict	2	2	0	0	0	0	0
Intrateam Competition	20	3	1	0	8	4	4
Building Teammate Relationships	80	11	8	18	18	16	9
Interpersonal relationships	25	3	4	4	6	6	2
Supporting teammates	30	1	2	7	8	9	3
Social events	7	3	1	0	2	1	0
Building friendships	18	4	1	7	2	0	4
Cohesion - Importance	12	0	3	3	2	1	3
Coach Characteristics	22	5	0	4	6	4	3
Coach leadership	18	5	0	4	3	3	3
Coach thoughts/beliefs – cohesion	4	0	0	0	3	1	0
Athlete Experience	28	2	2	6	8	2	8
Enjoyment	5	1	0	2	0	0	2
Life balance	6	0	0	2	1	0	3
Prioritizing self	3	0	0	1	2	0	0
Mental strain	8	0	2	1	4	1	0
Personal growth	6	1	0	0	1	1	3
Previous sport/team experience	8	1	0	2	2	2	1
Motivation	17	0	4	5	1	4	3
Athlete Characteristics	30	5	1	6	7	4	7
Athlete identity	3	0	0	0	1	0	2
Athlete leadership	3	1	0	0	1	0	1
Athlete thoughts/beliefs – cohesion	12	2	1	2	3	3	1
Athlete values	7	2	0	1	2	0	2
Athlete talent	5	0	0	3	0	1	1
Athlete attitude	3	1	0	0	0	0	2
Total	286	45	27	66	54	47	47

Tags grouped into properties were then organized into two higher order categories through the same inductive procedure used during the tagging process. The categories are

labeled *team development* and *athlete experiences and perceptions*. These six properties are shown regrouped by their higher order category below in Table 3.

Table 3. Categories and properties with frequencies as expressed by each participant.

Categories and Properties	n	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6
Team Development	<i>178</i>	31	20	43	30	31	23
Building Teammate Relationships	92	11	11	21	20	17	12
Developing the Team Environment	53	12	6	10	8	10	7
Goals	33	8	3	12	2	4	4
Athlete Experiences and Perceptions	<i>108</i>	14	7	23	24	16	24
Coach Characteristics	22	5	0	4	6	4	3
Athlete experience	53	3	6	13	11	8	12
Athlete characteristics	33	6	1	6	7	4	9
Total	286	45	27	66	54	47	47

4.2 Team Development

The higher-order category of *Team Development* included 62.2% of the total data analyzed, amounting to 178 total meaning units across its three properties. This category contains information reflecting on athlete interpretation of influences on the team building process, the nature of the team and its environment. Last, it includes reflections on goals and desires influencing team experiences.

4.2.1 Building Teammate Relationships

This property included information from athletes regarding the relationships and attitudes toward relationships with individuals in the team and their team as a whole. Athletes discussed their current relationships, their preferences for interpersonal relationships, and what it takes to achieve those optimal relational states. This property related closely to interview questions at the midpoint of the interview guide: how does your relationship with your teammates influence the training environment, how does your

relationship with your teammates influence the competitive environment, how important are social relationships with your teammates.

Athletes spent a large portion of interviews reflecting on how they experience different relationships with teammates, such as their closeness to one another, how they spend time with one another, and how they value positive relationships with one another.

I mean most golf teams are like super small so you have an opportunity to get close to every single girl on your team, because for example there's nine of us. So I feel like developing a relationship with each individual person on the team- you know you care about them as a person. (A6)

It's extremely common for us to end up living together just because we're around each other all the time anyways and it's like- you know like I said we're family and it's not like-'oh we're besties we're best friends' like that but then we'll- no, we are like 'oh like these girls are my sisters'. (A4)

Well as mentioned earlier, like you know- if everybody's getting along it's easier to accomplish things whereas if you have a situation like [former team] it's kind of just dreadful to try at that point just because it's- you know there's a lot of stress and drama that's just not worth it. (A1)

Some athletes not only seek healthy and close relationships with one another but emphasize the importance of building genuine friendships with one another. Here, athletes discussed whether friendships are desired, how building friendships impacts their wellness and sporting experience, and how those friendships are built.

It's very beneficial because you spend so much time with these people and you don't really have much time to spend with anyone else you don't have time to develop relationships with anyone outside of golf. So, it's important knowing that you can communicate and that those people are there can really help. Especially when you're finding yourself in a tough time. Or like even in great times, it makes you want to celebrate with them even more. (A3)

It really- you start to just see the people on your team because that's who you're around constantly and they really like- they become your best friends and then like they're your family. (A4)

I think they're absolutely crucial because we spend so many hours with each other between lift and practice and qualifying and competing everything that we do we're always together. (A6)

Really put an emphasis on the fact that like I said you guys don't have to be best friends but you're there for each other and your team at the end of the day. (A1)

While athletes' opinions on the necessity of friendships may differ, those who desire depth of relationships and genuine connections expressed the want and need for experiences outside of golf and practice. These reflections center on social events and efforts to connect beyond a shared athletic identity.

I wish that we had more of that interaction where everybody was free on one night and we could go do something together I just wish that we did that a little bit more. (A4)

So basically I wish that we did more team dinners and stuff because we see each other so much a practice but outside of that it's like I'm going to dinner with my boyfriend or I'm going to see my parents. (A4).

Really important I mean we don't have to do everything together because we're together a lot but you know going out to like random dinners or something. (A1)

She [coach] takes us out for dinners we're doing stuff other than golf, its then we can let go of the competitive part a little bit and just hang out as friends as normal people. (A5)

Regardless of the depth of friendship or relationship, all athletes consider support from teammates a critical factor in their positive experience and success as a competitor. Their reflections indicated that support is instrumental and mostly a product of their investment in strong relationships with their teammates, despite the competitive nature of collegiate team golf. Support relates both the social and task related circumstances. Athletes explained their efforts to support teammates, teammates supporting them, and the impact support has on success.

When I have a bad round or I feel like I've been doing such and such wrong and I'm only focused on that and not really seeing anything else, the ones that I'm

closest with sometimes help you put it into perspective and they're like “well okay you've obviously been doing this wrong but I mean goodness look at these other stats or like these other things that you've been doing well and I get that you're not performing good overall but try to take the good things out of the bad take the good little things and then just keep focusing on what you need to work on and keep taking it day-by-day” and it kind of helps when you are like in that slump. (A3)

I played one of my best rounds I ever played in tournament my second round and I had one teammate that wasn't traveling with the team- she hadn't played good enough- but she still wrote to me and was so happy for me that I played good and told me that I deserved it etc. and that's something that a real teammate does. (A5)

I felt very supported both in my successes and what I consider my failures and I think that that's been super beneficial because at the end of the day we are a team and we do all want each other to play our best because if we can drop an even-par score then that's a great day at the golf course. (A6).

Athletes reflected not only on specific aspects of their relationships with teammates, but holistically on the importance or necessity of cohesion within collegiate golf teams. Respondents suggested that lack of cohesion would be detrimental to their own performance as well as team success.

It's really important to have a good team dynamic and to feel comfortable in my team because if I'm not feeling well or I'm not comfortable I'll have issues with performing. (A5)

If the team Dynamic wasn't good I probably wouldn't feel as good outside of golf and then that may have a negative consequence on how I'm performing because I'm feeling like the team is like- we're not hanging out, why are these people not being not open about certain things or why are they keeping to themselves like what's going on here. (A3).

They also share that the idea of performing for a greater purpose than self is a motivator and a powerful influence on individual performance.

It makes me work harder be more motivated because I know I'm not just playing for myself I'm playing for my team I'm playing for my coach I'm playing for my school it's bigger than just myself. (A2)

I feel like one thing- It's like not only how important it is to be a part of the team atmosphere but also being able to represent your school and represent something so much bigger than you and be such a good reflection of your school. (A6)

4.2.2 Developing the Team Environment

This property contains reflections that consider team interactions beyond individual relationships, including the team atmosphere, conflict, how the team handles internal competition, and how differences in athletes contribute to the team's development. Athletes opened up about the environment the collection of individuals create together.

Participants openly discussed how they experience and contribute to the team environment. In all teams, conflict may naturally arise. Here, athletes considered instances of conflict, where it typically occurs, and how it has influenced their experience competing and developing as a golfer.

So, during qualifying I qualified for the first tournament and knocked some of these higher up individuals out of the lineup which I figured would eventually end up being a problem you know because of girls being ridiculous. (A1)

There's so many rankings and statistics associated with golf and so many numerical values that you can put on yourself that when you're not playing your best golf, you're not happy with yourself. so sometimes it can be hard to be happy for the whole team even if those relationships are really good just because at the end of the day it is an individual sport. (A6).

Well I eventually ended up being secluded from other things you know and rumors started to spread and just a lot of hazing activities you know. (A1)

For some, specific conflicts lead to undesirable consequences, like separating oneself from the team in practice environments, and decisions to leave a team entirely:

Individually I think it was more like I don't want to be around these girls anymore you know, like just go out there whenever they're not out there to get it done. (A1)

I never expected to transfer after my very first semester there just because I was playing better golf you know. (A1)

I've seen it with some of my friends that I've met through Junior Golf that have just now started college- you know I've talked to a few of them asking how it's been going and stuff and they're already talking about getting into the transfer portal because of a similar situation. (A1).

Conflict can also manifest from differences in one golfer's perspectives, needs, or attitudes. Though these differences don't always amount to conflict, athletes are still adept at recognizing some incompatibilities or differing natures that influence the team atmosphere. Athletes reflected on which aspects of differences they recognized as most meaningful.

I feel like it's different all over the place especially with different cultures and different people that you are on a team with. (A3)

I think it could be like personalities because in golf you have so many, well any sport, you have so many differences, different personalities. Some people are more quiet and keep to themselves and I like to be more like out there and then you have kind of the more reserved and laid-back. (A3)

Generally, participants were keen to describe their experience of team golf. They described how they experience team environments, aspects they found prohibitive of performance and those that enhanced their sport experience. Similar reflections were shared from all athletes that a positive team atmosphere was important to team success performance on the golf course.

The more comfortable you are and the better you can perform I would say that most of us feel very comfortable around each other and that just helps our development and we can push each other and we can take help from each other. (A5)

To be able to joke around or be serious and well if I beat you or you beat me then you owe me such-and-such or you better not beat me in this and that kind of creates that more competitive environment and I feel like that adds to even greater performance. (A3).

On the other hand, there's the team atmosphere during practice and lift in the gym. It's just like the closeness of the team, and with every team that's super important. (A6)

Athletes also expressed that specific interventions were important to regulate the team environment, otherwise unchecked behaviors would detract from or negatively impact team performances:

One of the things with the team that we really had to work on last year is that when we go to a tournament we're not allowed to say anything negative because of how much negativity can really impact the team. (A6)

Unhealthy team environments may impact all members of the team, though one athlete reflected that some problems, such as the existence of cliques, would disproportionately impact and harm some athletes more than others:

The team- I think like it involves a clique thing. That circle that was like causing all the issues would be okay because they were all- like they all had something in common to go on talking about and stuff like that, so they were all together 24/7. So that was fine but then you'd have like me for example or others that I've seen. Just like "what am I doing wrong" you know. So, it can go both ways. (A1)

Among these responses, athletes alluded to the existence of competition between teammates influencing the environment or atmosphere. More specific mention of the interplay of intrateam competition was a frequent point of reflection. In some instances, participants described how golf teams naturally create and deal with this competition on a regular basis.

During practices coach will have little competitions for us to compete against one another you know what also help us improve on a certain aspect of our game so it's instilling like how to compete under pressure a little bit because you know you're wanting to beat your teammates. (A1)

So, when they establish the lineup there's typically five spots and in our past like three of the spots have been secured and spots for the 5 or sometimes the individual spot number 6 we call that the dogfight. So, there's three or four girls who have to play a separate qualifier for that spot. I think I can get really awkward and it can get really uncomfortable cuz you want to go out there and you want to beat them because you want to play your best, but I don't think that you're rooting on their downfall. (A6)

Not only does the existence and the leveraging of this competition by coaches put athletes into potentially awkward circumstances, it also introduces opportunity for social comparison and challenges to confidence. Here some report conflicting feelings regarding whether athletes should root for one another's success.

This is something that I've been struggling with recently like you're a part of a team and you want your team to do really well and this far team has found a lot of success but individually I haven't been playing my best golf. (A6)

You want your teammates to be playing well, but it's also kind of hard because during qualifying you want yourself to beat your teammate but when you're playing in tournaments that's not always the case it's kind of the opposite. (A2)

I struggle with the competitiveness sometimes because I always want to be that cheerful teammate and lift people up and help everybody be okay and the next thing I know I'm helping them to the point where I'm getting left in the dust because I'm not putting up my competitive nature. (A4)

While some feel conflicted, other athletes are unbothered by the prospect of battling their teammates or friends, only to beat them out for a position in the active roster.

It didn't really bother me knowing that I was probably going to end up traveling and knocking others out. (A1)

Though potential for disruption exists with the presence of intrateam competition, most participants recognized its power as a motivator, a measure of progress, and a chance to make one another better athletes. Additionally, athletes recognize that there are

important aspects of the team atmosphere that can protect from competition leading to conflict.

During qualifying it's definitely higher tension and people don't talk as much so it's very competitive but not in a bad way. (A5)

I want to be like [teammate name] I want to be a 3 time or 4 time all American or whatever it was and being on a super competitive team makes you want to keep competing and keep getting better and better and I think that's been really eye-opening that being on a competitive team can really help your development as a player. (A6)

Basically, what I think makes a golf team successful is just trust in each other and the competitive nature that just makes you want to be better. (A4)

But it helps it helps us get motivated to go to tournaments you know because whoever wins that competition is always looking to feel pretty good about that part of their game you know and I just feel like all the practice that we do plus the competition's that instill preparedness and stuff for pressure situations really build up my confidence to go to a tournament succeed in it. (A1)

I know the competitive nature of qualifying and if you have a lot of respect for your team and your teammates at the end of the day if they beat you if they played while you're going to be happy for them. (A6)

4.2.3 Goals

This property included discussion of golfers' individual and collective team goals, their potential incongruence, and the process of monitoring these goals. Athletes discussed how shared goals unify the group and improve cohesion, while some individual goals can be at odds with these shared goals.

While athletes in the previous properties recognized considerable value from team unity, here athletes recognized that player differences, whether in ability or characteristics, will be represented in their goals. And while teams will share goals, these golfers frequently reported that their sport is made up of individual competition and their individual performances are ultimately at the forefront of their mind.

Well, I always want to do really well, and I think instilling that drive in myself to play well individually will also help the team you know. (A1)

I feel like, if at the end of the day even if our score counts for the team but also for me it's very important my score individually is good for what I want to do after college. (A3)

Once you get out on that tee it's just you against the course if it is 18 holes or 36 holes some days it's really you, the ball, and the course and you're just doing the best that you can for your score and if you do the best for yourself that will hopefully contribute in a positive way to the team. (A3)

For some, individual goals were elevated by being in the presence of other highly successful golfers:

I feel like at least this team for me when I got to [current program] I wasn't the highest recruit, I was- I wasn't expected to make the lineup and seeing all these great players these All-Americans that I was suddenly teammates with really kind of raised my expectations for myself because all the sudden I had these new aspirations. (A6)

For many successful teams, the composition of likeminded athletes increases the likelihood of paralleling or shared goals from one player to another. Participants also discussed the presence of these shared goals as beneficial to individual and team performance.

If the team succeeds at the conference then that means we've all played pretty well and we're going to meet that goal which also is meeting a goal of mine. (A1)

I want to see our team make it to the NCAA regionals and even the championship so that goal is like that's a goal for the team but it's also a goal for me at the same time because I would like to go to the NCAAs so I feel like they kind of meet in the middle. (A1)

I think that if every individual has a good attitude about it then collectively that whole team feels that energy of mutual goals that they all want to achieve so I think that is pretty important. (A6)

Alluded to in previous properties such as conflict or intrateam competition, goals are not always congruent or naturally compatible. Some athletes took time to discuss the

challenges of having different desires than their teammates or rather goals that cannot be attained by everyone, where the success of some athletes may come at the expense of another player not achieving their own goals.

Definitely qualifying. I think everybody wants to do well; everybody wants everybody else to do well but you don't really want them to do better than you. So that's the tough part you want your teammates to succeed but you want to succeed above them so that's the hardest part. (A2)

I want- I also want my closest teammates to go to tournaments too because I know that we're going to have a lot of fun so generally hope that everyone plays at a good level, like a high level. But I'm not going to lie of course I want to play the best, everyone wants to. It's kind of hard. (A5)

Lastly, athletes consider how regularly they compare their goal progress and performance related to others they compete with and against. Athletes often had different experiences to share regarding their achievement related to their goals. Some participants described that they were not concerned with the performance of others when monitoring their own performance.

I'm not really worried about what the others are doing out on the golf course because I'm trying to put my best round out there you know and we'll see what the other scores are when they come in. (A1)

I don't really tend to compare myself with my other teammates and their scores because I'm more focused on the scores of my team as a whole and my score against the field as a whole. (A6)

For others, goal and performance monitoring is highly dependent on their standing within the team structure, if they are outperforming their peers, or if they feel they are not contributing to collective team goals. This comparison was reported only as a negative influence on athletes.

One kind of competitive factor is like everyone has standards for themselves. And our number one player her standard is going to be a lot higher than our number five standard. so when number one isn't happy with her performance and she

thinks she's underperformed and she is still beating our number 5 and she's really disappointed and talking very negatively. (A6)

But emotionally I'm way more affected when I play bad because I feel bad for all the hard work that I put in. And I feel bad because it's like, how did this happen, when I put all this work in, and then I feel bad because I'm contributing to the team, but my score isn't doing anything, it isn't really helping and so it's like "what the hell?". You feel bad because you haven't done your job. (A3)

Though the presence of teammates outperforming an athlete may present as a challenge, athletes also discussed that the presence of teammates affords the opportunity for teammates to provide feedback in one's individual goal pursuit that is beneficial, whether or not they share the same goals:

Sometimes they put it in perspective and give you that feedback. The people that don't have those goals, sometimes they can give you insight too. (A3)

4.3 Athlete Experiences and Perception

While athletes spent most of the interview discussing aspects related to team development in consideration of cohesion, they offered insightful reflections regarding specific perceptions of their own experience within collegiate golf that was separate from team composition. In this category, participants spoke specifically about their experience with coaches, their own sporting history, aspects of their own identity, their personal beliefs of cohesion, and how their experiences of team golf impacted themselves holistically. This second higher-order category represents 108 meaning units and 37.7% of the data analyzed.

4.3.1 Coach Characteristics

Though athletes chose to speak most often about themselves or their teammates, some did share insight about the impact and importance of their coaches. This property concerns coaching and more specifically the importance of strong coach leadership and the influence of coaches on cohesion. Most responses were prompted by key questions asked in the interview guide (e.g., how does your coach impact the team environment, is there anything you would change about your team environment/culture right now?).

Athletes frequently identified how their coach was instrumental in influencing aspects of the team atmosphere:

[Coach] is great here at Eastern she really knuckles down on stuff that can potentially cause a situation to arise, you know and really establishes at the beginning of the year that stuff like that is not tolerated. (A1)

Having that as a leading figure helps in the cohesion of the team it motivates us to be like “okay coach is really trying to make us perform like be at our best and give our so give it our all” (A3)

They also encourage us to hang out as a team as much as we can or even give us or have Team dinners that they pay for you know through the program, so they really encourage that team atmosphere. (A6)

She's really instilled the competitiveness of between us you know but she's also very firm on you know we're all friends you know like we're all there for each other and no need for drama to arise. (A1)

Strong coach leadership was discussed specifically when it comes to reinforcing specific behaviors, and dictating rules or norms that participants believed impacted the likelihood of success or improved play.

And like another one of my coaches rules is that when you see your teammate on the course, especially at like a backup, there's no golf talk. You're not allowed to talk about golf, do not talk about what's going on, because it will- if you're playing bad you don't want to tell your teammate ‘I'm playing terrible’ and if you're playing super great you don't want to rub it in if they're playing bad. it's

just like leave it in the back of your mind and just talk about something else and it distracts everybody and it has distracted me in the best way even if I am playing good. (A4)

Coach pushes a lot for that- to take care of each other. (A5)

So, our coaches like they're very adamant about body language and attitude and your discipline in the little things like setting standards in setting examples for the underclassmen and stuff like that. (A6)

While most shared how their current coach was a key component of the team's success and existing cohesion within the team, some athletes also shared how a lack of strong leadership can be detrimental to both player experience and team performance, with the potential of alienating or losing athletes to other teams via transfer as one of the most extreme consequences.

And obviously with the leadership it's a very big factor, like having a good coach because I've seen that with the guy's team and I've gotten a lot of mates on different teams, on different Unis like in the SEC or the Big Ten and it's interesting hearing all different perspectives or thoughts on their coaches and how sometimes you see what they think and how the team is performing. So that's why I think having good coaches is really important. (A3)

But the situation at Western was I felt like it could have been handled if the coach intervened more and was willing to help more but there were very little actions taken to cease the things that were happening you know. But I do firmly believe that like if he took better action about it that it would have been resolved and I probably would be at Western considering other things and stuff. (A1)

I mean I'd change the whole thing at western, just every part of it. How the situation was handled and how to stop it immediately and potentially not lose players in the future because of it you know. (A1)

Last, in terms of leadership some athletes remarked that their coach was a parental like figure and that this closeness or relationship from player to coach was also an important aspect of their collegiate golf experience.

I mean coach is like my extra mother to be honest we're so close and like everything that she does I mean I can't even describe with words how good she is to me. (A5)

Also within the property of coach characteristics are data points where athletes considered their coaches' beliefs or thoughts specific to cohesion. This includes reference to how a coach views the value of cohesion or how athletes see their coaches' unique beliefs about developing a cohesive team.

Yeah, so one thing that I really, really love that my coach does is that she it she's a female so she gets girls. One thing that she doesn't allow that like is her big rule once you get here is that when you're living in the dorm you're not allowed to live with a teammate. (A4)

She [coach] doesn't let you share a dorm room cuz she says if you're fighting in the dorm and they're going to bring it to the course, fighting and like tension on the course you're going to go back and it's going to go back to the dorm and you don't have your own space. (A4)

It feels like coach really cares about the Team Dynamics and she asks us to other things outside of golf too to really connect to each other and I think that that's the biggest thing the coach does for us. (A5)

I think it's more so the environment I don't think the coach sits down and puts in a journal 'I'm going to make these girls more emotionally mature'. (A6)

4.3.2 Athlete Experience

This property pertained to athlete's more personal experience related to their sporting life. College golfers endure challenge and benefit unique to their sporting experience and participants reflected on these more intimate personal experiences, and shared how team golf was enjoyable or strenuous, motivating, led to growth, and affected their life beyond their performance on the course. Of this higher-order theme, 53 meaning units were labeled in analysis, the most of the three properties identified.

Athletes recognized that enjoyment was an important component for why they chose to pursue golf as their primary sport. Golf teams are not common during youth competition but are the model as a collegiate sport. This introduces a layer to the game and experience that most athletes identified as meaningful and something that contributed to their enjoyment of the sport.

But I also want to go to practice because I wanna hang out my friends I'm going to be there with them and I'm going to have a good time. So that also kind of adds to the motivation and I feel like the importance of having a good friendship there and a good team environment there. (A3)

I think actually in collegiate golf because golf is such an individual sport and it's rare to be in a team environment, I think it's something that a lot of golfers really look forward to and cherish while they're on that team. (A6)

While the team component of golf was enhancing for most participants, one player did recognize that being in a poor team environment removed her enjoyment of the sport. This lack of enjoyment being one reason she ultimately left the team, seeking to transfer to a new program.

It doesn't have like a secluded vibe like everybody is talking to each other and everybody's practicing together you know like we're getting things done but we're also having fun at the same time. and then like at Western, practice was just miserable like you just want to get it over with. (A1)

Participants also explored how they maintain balance as golf consumes time, energy, and effort. Life as a student-athlete presents unique challenges, and participants reported that golf challenges their ability to balance a healthy life.

But I'm a nursing major at Eastern and so life is a little hectic in that department, including trying to maneuver playing a sport and especially when your sport is this competitive and your team is- is this competitive it's a lot. (A4)

My boyfriend is on the cross country team and so don't get me wrong I'm not saying that our support is any easier than his but he goes on his runs for an hour and a half every day and then he's done and he has the whole day to do whatever he wants but as a golfer is your practice as long you go out you have the course for 6 hours plus your lift. 7 hours it's a lot of time plus the commute to the golf course and our tournaments are like five days long it's just a big time commitment and trying to juggle that with school. (A6)

With this sentiment expressed similarly across participants, a healthy team environment that supports productive relationships and friendships can be a defense for athletes, reflected in their comments:

If you have that good friendship, then you're able to do more stuff I feel like you're more happy overall in your general life. (A3)

While support for fellow teammates appears significantly in the data analyzed, some participants also reflected that there is a limit to the support they can offer before prioritizing their own wellness. Two athletes discussed how they grapple with the desire to support others and their prioritization of self.

It's a lot to kind of look out for yourself because you- and it's very heavily harped on in the athletic department- that you've got to take care of yourself and you can't run on an empty tank you have to take care of yourself you can't drink from an empty cup. if you don't have anything you can't keep giving out other people you're going to be empty you've got to take care of yourself and give yourself some too because you're going to give everything out and it's not going to benefit you in any way. (A4)

It sounds terrible but I am way more affected when I play bad. I love when my team performs well and when we all perform well, but at the end of the day sometimes I put it in perspective and say well I'm here for 4 years and I want to do the best that I can and it's not going to affect me so much if the whole team plays bad more so than if I'm playing bad. (A3)

Closely related to the limit of support is the personal mental strain that each player endures. Most participants considered the mental challenge golf presents as a

sport. One athlete characterized the game as lonely, recognizing that the individual element can separate teammates experiences:

Golf is such a lonely sport that sometimes you feel like it's so lonely that you feel like you can't share stuff, or why should you share this stuff when it's your stuff and it's not their stuff. (A3)

Others felt that the nature of competition within the group and balancing of friendships was uniquely challenging and mentally taxing as well:

When you watch your best friend leave for 4 days and do what you want to do with them and realize you're just at home trying to find a spot to get back into the next weekend obviously it's pretty mentally challenging. (A4)

Beyond the team environment, the nature of the sport was also a target for reflection. The lack of control over the outcome and balance of preparation and bad breaks contributed to the strain.

Golf in general is just extremely mentally draining especially because you can do everything right. like I read this article the other day that our coach sent us and it was about an LPGA Tour player she said you can do absolutely everything right and you can prepare the way that you want and you can play your very best game you can hit a perfect drive right down the middle of the Fairway you get up there and you're still in a divot. (A4)

Loneliness and the mental strain of the game was considered by most participants. While many endure this experience, one athlete recognized the benefit to the team component of collegiate golf for this mental strain:

Golf is tough enough you don't have to be alone in the process my dad always tells me to take support in don't be afraid of asking because it is tough enough if we can do small things that help us get through it to perform better, we should do it. (A6)

Despite the unique challenges these athletes report battling, another shared reflection across most participants pertained to experiencing personal growth in their experience with their golf team. Some found life lessons from shared adversity and support they received from teammates:

It's difficult but the difficulties make you better and I know that we will all be better for it not just in our support but better humans because we're facing the adversity (A4)

It helped me in a lot of ways to like introduce myself to the real world and as well as just how athletic teams works in general you know. Just a lot of lessons from it. (A1)

So I came to college at 17 years old and I was very young for my grade and then we have a girl on our team right now who's 24 turning 25 and so I think being in this atmosphere at 17, 18, 19 years old surrounding yourself by people who have been in college for 3 for 5 years who are 25 you just learn a lot from them. (A6)

Another athlete credited their coach specifically with their personal growth over the time they had spent on the team:

I mean I can't even describe with words how good she is to me and when she is done I like the team itself but also for my personal development (A5)

While the team can promote this growth, one athlete spoke specifically that an outlet outside of the team and sport was necessary to find growth rather than only engaging with teammates.

I've kind of always liked not being with golf because I do think it's important to get out of your shell. (A6)

So I lived with other athletes I've met a ton of people that way and I feel like I have an outlet where I can get outside of golf. (A6)

Lastly, the most discussed topic within this property was motivation. Motivation accounted for 17 meaning units and 32% of the total data from this property. Athletes

similarly and consistently recognized that the presence of teammates contributed to consistent sources of motivation that participants felt elevated their own effort, commitment, and play. Athletes also remarked that they wanted to serve as motivation to their teammates as well.

Also from a competitive point of view I would say that it's great having like eight other girls that constantly want to become better because that makes me better too (A5)

We motivate each other. We push one another. (A6)

Constantly having someone to practice with like one day another girl plays better than me and I'm trying to keep up with her and then the other day I'm the one that plays better and I'm helping her. (A5)

All of our teammates, we all push each other to work hard and be the best because in any circumstance. You could be one stroke back and you're going to need your teammate to help get that stroke and so we all push each other to be the best and work hard and keep each other accountable. (A2)

Some noted that the relationship between teammates was an important moderator of motivation gained and influence on performance. Friendships enhanced motivation, while negative relationships were considered potentially detracting from motivation.

If it were on the negative side like I didn't get along with them that it would probably be more so, like I'd probably go to like team practice with a bit more of a laid-back sense and not really be as motivated and I probably look for a additional time to do that practice on my own where I can be really in focus without that negative environment. so I'd still try to work on my stuff but given that there would be a negative environment I would probably try to then look for more time than I already do outside of that to get out of that vibe and refocus and try to work on my stuff. (A3)

Another participant acknowledged that representing something more than herself, the program and school she is a part of, was another powerful motivator:

I feel like that's something that really kind of motivates you to get better as well because you want to be a good face for your school. (A6)

4.3.3 Athlete Characteristics

The final property from this higher-order category pertains to the specific attributes that athletes feel contribute to the experience of team golf. Athletes' values, aspects of identity, and attributes that make an individual unique were reported as important contributors to participants. This is who these athletes are. Athletes felt these characteristics were most notable when considering the impact on team cohesion in their experience. This property was second largest in this higher-order category, representing 33 meaning units and 30% of total responses.

While coach leadership was a more regularly cited influence on team cohesion, half of participants recognized athlete leadership as another important moderator of the team experience. More specifically participants identified that athlete leadership was necessary as their coach was unable to support every player as frequently as they may need, and teammates may cover for this:

You kind of have to look out for your other teammates because you know that your coach isn't going to be able to see everything at the same time so I kind of have to watch and see what's going on and kind of interact. (A4)

Another athlete commented more specifically that athlete leadership emerged as a model for younger, less experienced athletes to shape themselves based around as they learned through adversity:

You follow by example, you develop that emotional maturity just by being put in uncomfortable situations and learning how to handle them. like they're definitely some situations and some qualifiers looking back on my freshman year that I

didn't handle the way that I would handle now so I definitely think that it's something you just kind of learn. (A6)

Leadership is just one intangible characteristic that participants discussed.

Participants also noted specific values they felt were important for their team to thrive and were qualities that they desired from their teammates. Specifically, athletes wanted their teammates to be as driven, hard-working, or motivated as themselves.

I mean I feel like if every individual on the team has the desire to get it better themselves and it all comes together. (A6)

It's important to have teammates that you can sense are hard-working. (A3)

Participants also discussed how their own values were most vital to their individual success or the way they developed relationships with their teammates:

it's always been a serious thing for me because I knew that it would help with paying for school and getting like my goals accomplished stuff like that but really when I was viewing that I've wanted a full athletic scholarship I was like okay I need to buckle down on this and work for it. (A1)

I as a nursing major and as somebody who wants to be in the healthcare industry- I just constantly want to help people and make everything okay like I never want somebody to be upset I want everything to be okay. (A4)

Another quality participants desired from teammates was a good attitude. To handle the high degree of internal competition, athletes desired teammates who could handle adversity, bring positivity to the team, and were mature enough to handle their emotions appropriately.

Going out there with a good attitude and just being able to accept anything the golf course gives you that day is really key. (A6)

When I was really young when I was in 5th and 6th grade playing High School tournaments I met a lot of girls that were very rude because I was a lot younger

you know and playing a lot better you know. So I met a lot of people that were pretty rude and like just sore losers you know and stuff like that. (A1)

One participant in particular was especially wary of the potential for one bad apple to spoil the team environment and sabotage the teams cohesion and unity.

I do think that one super negative player can affect the team because you can go out and shoot the best round your life and they're sitting across the table complaining about how poorly they played. And it's just like you know to me a lot of negativity can kind of snowball. (A6)

These intangible elements that contribute to team and individual performance were noted by most participants. While important, some athletes were keen to note that there was still a need for quality golfers with high degrees of skill or talent when considering what makes a team successful.

That's a hard one because I mean a successful golf team of course they have good individual players (A5)

So I feel like it's a mix of not always having the best players but having a good percentage of good players that motivate and that everyone puts in hard work and then maybe with that hard work and makes those less good players get better, better, better and then somehow creates a great team overall. (A3)

Though team cohesion and tight knit relationships between teammates have been widely recognized in this data set as desirable, participants also noted that players need to spend time to develop their identity outside of the confines of the team. Alongside the recognition of how important their personal experiences of growth are to their success; two participants reported the importance of finding identity beyond themselves as golfers or members of their team. This well-rounded identity was discussed was not just important for contributing positively to one's own experience, but also to the team's development as well:

Trying to be a person outside of being a student and athlete I would say is one of the main challenges. (A6)

Freshman year you're like 'I have no idea what I'm doing, this is completely out of my element, I'm the baby of the team like I just got here I just walked in everybody else is so much older than me', and you're kind of just trying to adjust to your new lifestyle and what your life is going to be. And so I think it's good that you like have your own space to kind of figure out who you are and what you're doing in college outside of your team and then later on your kind of like-you can gravitate towards your team. (A4)

At the end of the day I'm a person before just a golfer. (A6)

Lastly, in response to a key question from the interview guide, participants were asked to consider their personal beliefs regarding cohesions value in the context of golf teams. Responses accounted for 12 meaning units, the most of this property, and all athletes shared insight related to this topic. Participants reflected on how cohesion influences successful performances:

I think it's a pretty big deal judging off the experience I've had here at Eastern where we have such a good team. and last year we won 5 out of 11 events and it was and it was just I feel like the less drama you know like the less things are going to be on everybody's shoulders the less they're going to focus on golf and stuff. (A1)

It is extremely important, mainly because- where it is a team sport, but individually I mean you've gotta do your own thing but you also have to trust that your teammates are going to step up to the plate and play well as well. so you got to focus on you, but you also have to have that trust with your teammates to know that at the end of the day all your scores are going to come together. (A4)

I feel like you have to have your supporters around you that help you become successful and the team with good personalities and good individuals will lead to good results. (A5)

So I think that's how a golf team stays at a high level- is that we're constantly challenging each other and trusting each other. (A4)

I feel like if it's not going well outside or with the people that you're spending the most time with then it's probably going to affect my game regardless of whether I

am more focused on- more motivated by how the team is performing as a collective compared to myself as an individual. (A3)

Others recognized the social value cohesion contributes to the experience of athletes within the group and commented on how they believed a functioning team ought to behave to embody unity and demonstrate cohesion:

Your teammates see that someone's not happy with the way they played I don't think that they should just ignore it. I think that they should let them know that they care about them and try to lift them up. (A2)

You don't have to be best friends but you know your teammates so you want to you want do you want to help each other out and stuff and you're there for each other on and off the golf course you know even though you might not be buddy-buddy you know. (A1)

Lastly, one athlete recognized the challenge golf teams and players often face in college, and underscored the unique nature of golf as a coacting team sport:

Golf is originally an individual sport so bringing it as a team sport can make it hard because most people think of themselves as an individual when it comes to playing golf, as do I sometimes. (A5)

4.4 Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Division 1 golfers as it relates to cohesion. Golfers with experience of participating on a collegiate team were targeted purposefully for their ability to contribute meaningful and insightful knowledge related to the experiences of high-level athletes in coacting sport settings. A total of six collegiate golfers were interviewed and researchers used inductive analysis to relate meaning to their responses. During data analysis, two higher order categories emerged from the data: *team development* and *athlete experiences and perceptions*.

Team development included information related to participants' understanding and perception of the team building process, how they relate to teammates, and how existing within a team influences their own sporting experience within golf. Participants explained their preferences for creating relationships with teammates, their opinions on the usefulness and necessity for strong teammate connections, and how they interpret and experience the dynamics of intrateam competition and rivalry that emerge in coaching sport environments. For most, having teammates to rely on for social support was highly valuable. Participants spoke frequently about the desire to build relationships that extended outside of sport, given their limited ability to create friendships outside of their sport. As a result of this strong social cohesion, all participants discussed conflict from intrateam competition was limited or a nonissue but were clear that a lack of connectedness with teammates would lead to increased conflict and an unhealthy level of intrateam competition, which would inhibit performance and damage their general wellness. Participants reported feeling individual performance for each teammate would benefit if team atmosphere and social cohesion were addressed, regardless of differences in individual goals.

The higher order category of *athlete experiences and perceptions* pertained to athlete qualities that were reported as meaningful to participation in Division 1 team golf, as well as content related to how athlete's described important elements that shaped their sporting experience in this coaching sport dynamic. Participants reflected on topics like their enjoyment in the sport, balancing sport and life, personal growth, and handling the unique mental strain that golf incurs. Also included were perceptions of the qualities that teammates may possess and how those attributes influence the team experience. The

attitude, leadership, and values that athletes bring into the team environment were considered particularly influential on team and individual performance outcomes. For example, several participants noted experiences where one teammate with a poor attitude could serve to disrupt the entirety of the team experience and damage multiple aspects of their teammates sport experience, including their enjoyment and could exacerbate the mental strain they feel from the performance environment elsewhere. To this end, participants wanted those with similar values of their own to join the team and were especially considerate of how personalities would influence their team's cohesion, weighing good team cohesion higher as a priority as opposed to a team composition of primarily highly talented players. Lastly, participants reflected on how their coach's leadership and beliefs influenced the formation of their team and the team atmosphere. From these perspectives, it is clear that participants desired a coach who cares for team atmosphere and can appropriately monitor the dynamic throughout the season, particularly as conflict may often arise from the elements of intrateam competition.

These two higher order categories spotlight the insights of high-level golfers pertaining to team cohesion. *Team development* provides insight into how participants invested time and effort into their team and relationships with teammates, including the potential for conflict and handling the realities of intrateam competition and conflicting goals. And *athlete experiences and perceptions* give clarity into how participants viewed the influence of their team on their own performance and experience, including the influence of coach leadership and how particular attributes teammates may or may not possess are especially influential or desirable. Despite all participants giving their unique views, commonalities in perspective were found throughout the analysis. Perhaps most

clearly of all, perspectives were connected in their common recognition of the value and importance of cohesion within this coaching sport.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Division 1 golfers as it relates to cohesion. Two higher order categories emerged from the data: *team development* and *athlete experiences and perceptions*. The following section will discuss these categories as they pertain to the previous literature on team cohesion in coactive sports and development of cohesion.

5.1 Athlete Experiences and Perceptions

The higher order category of *athlete experiences and perceptions* pertained to athlete qualities that were reported as meaningful to participation in Division 1 team golf, as well as content related to how athlete's described important elements that shaped their sporting experience in this coaching sport dynamic. Additionally, this section pertained to athlete's perceptions on how coaches impact the team dynamic, specifically cohesion. This section will explain these athletes' sporting history and will act as an extension to previous findings related to athlete and coaches' characteristics and their impact on cohesion in coaching sports by introducing perceptions directly from coaching team sport athletes.

Golfers within the present study were from a mix of sporting backgrounds. For some, golf was the only sport they found interest in or were encouraged to participate in by their parents. Others had broader engagement similar coaching sports, such as gymnastics, and others still had years of experience on traditionally interacting sport teams, such as basketball or soccer but ultimately chose to focus on golf as their specialization. With a variety of team sport experiences, participants had varying

attitudes toward team golf. Some participants felt a deep desire to play team golf at the collegiate level, while others recognized it was an enjoyable experience but was just a feature of the game at that level. Regardless, all participants recognized that being surrounded by teammates impacted their golf game in several key regards.

First, nearly all participants spoke about dealing with significant mental strain from golf. This sport, often labelled as an individual sport, contributed to feelings of loneliness and isolation throughout their development. To that end, participants noted that to find success, one should have the mental fortitude to endure the challenges of the game and battle to best handle this dynamic. For this reason, several studies have used golf as a sample to investigate topics of mental toughness, resilience, and phenomena such as choking (Gucciardi, Longotom, Jackson & Dimmock, 2010; Hill, Hanton, Matthews & Flemming, 2010; Schaefer, Vella, Allen & Magee, 2016). For example, Gucciardi and colleagues indicated golf as a sport containing high levels of competitive anxiety, choking, and emotional distress. Thus, it came as no surprise that participants in the current study emphasized the mental game of golf and further highlighted the collegiate's "team golf" role in buffering feelings of loneliness and isolation that often accompany elite golfers. Specifically, participants looked to fellow teammates for both task and social support. While the intrateam competitive dynamic can complicate task support, participants still reported having a high degree of trust for teammates to deliver productive task support (e.g., technical feedback). Despite this, participants revealed that, in most cases, social support was far more common (giving and receiving) than task support. This is likely explained by the positive relationships between a psychological needs supporting environment and athlete mental toughness (Gucciardi et al., 2010).

Social support contributes to fulfilling a psychological needs supporting environment which fortifies an athlete's ability to accept future task support through the increase in mental toughness they've gained from this relationship. In other words, the athlete has coping support to engage with more direct critical feedback and task support from teammates.

While task cohesion (and support) was discussed, participants reported the strength of social cohesion as a significant contributor to their enjoyment of their sporting experience. Team members felt that to develop a socially cohesive team, it was important that athletes have shared values that would connect one another regardless of how keen everyone was at creating deep friendships. Examples of important values are being hard-working, mentally tough, emotionally mature, and having the desire to improve oneself. Existing literature also identifies values like work ethic as instrumental in creating a cohesive team, significantly more than teams who are not unified in a collective work ethic (Gammage, Carron, & Estabrooks, 2001). Additionally, participants found their alignment in values to be powerfully motivating, such as being surrounded by others with a strong work ethic and desire to grow personally. Utilizing teammates to improve motivation can be a useful tool to improve self-reported levels of mental toughness, as Schaefer and colleagues (2016) indicated the qualities to be positively related in their observation of elite level golfers. Similarly, a study from Mahoney, Gucciardi, Ntoumanis & Mallett (2014) found that a psychological needs supporting environment is also positively related to athlete mental toughness. This also parallels the benefit participants from the present study reported receiving from a positive team atmosphere that features teammate support. More experienced participants also believed that athlete

leadership was important in ensuring these values are widely adopted by team members, especially as new members joined the group.

Previous research recognized the impact of athlete leaders to provide social support, integrate new team members, organize social events, and resolving teammate conflicts (e.g., Cormier et al., 2015), even going so far as to recognize that team leaders may be better equipped to develop and monitor the social aspects of the team atmosphere rather than coaches (Carron, Hausenblas, & Eys, 2005; Loughead & Hardy, 2005). Interestingly, athletes in the present study felt that coaches set the tone for what was acceptable within golf teams, and that bad attitudes and teammate conflicts needed to be monitored by coaches as team members may not have the ability to properly reign in behavior that falls outside of team norms. In this regard, it seems participants underestimated, and perhaps undervalued, the influence they had in resolving conflict and reinforcing team norms. Research on athlete leadership has identified two different roles of leaders in team sports fulfilling task and social oriented issues: instrumental (task) and expressive leadership (social) (Rees, 1983). Eys, Loughead and Hardy (2007) found that athletes in interacting teams report high cohesion when they perceive balanced leadership across both domains. Balanced leadership has been suggested to prevent disproportionate focus on either task or social elements of the team (Hardy, Eys, & Caron, 2005). Though coaching sports exist in a space where athletes are not task interdependent. In this way, it may be the case that athletes are more likely to be exposed to an imbalance of focus on social issues regularly. In such a situation, coaching teams that lack strong expressive leaders may desire a more socially hands-on coaching approach to support team cohesion. Additionally, it may be the case that athletes in such small team environments

as in golf feel that they need the reinforcement of a coach to uphold team standards if they don't feel the support of fellow teammates when seeking to check other athletes' behaviors. This conflicts with previous perspectives shared by cross country coaches, believing that athletes are better suited to fill the role of creating social stability while coaches focus more on training and instruction (Cormier et al., 2015). While golf coaches may not share this same perspective, it is valuable to note that coaches may also not recognize the connection their athletes want them to have to the social development of the team.

In addition to athlete-led leadership, participants recognized that their coach's leadership plays an important role in shaping their athletic experience. Participants also had a desire for coaches to utilize their role to assist actively in team building. The lack of task interdependence in team golf has the potential to create practice environments in which athletes are getting inconsistent amounts of time together and can operate on different schedules entirely. To this end, golf teams may spend far less time enhancing cohesion compared to teams within other sport settings. Incorporating team-building activities into the practice and training programs for athletes has been found to be an important element of enhancing team effectiveness (Yukelson, 1997). In agreement with this, participants found great enjoyment in working out with their teammates during their strength and conditioning sessions as it is one form of consistent time spent together. Coacting coaches can continue to influence team building positively by seeking additional opportunities to increase the consistency with which members interact with one another, such as beginning and ending practice with a team activity.

While activities structured into practice can be a useful team building strategy, participants in the present study had a stronger desire for structured team activities outside of practice or training to get to know one another beyond their athletic identities. They recognized that their ability to strike a balance of their athletic self and who they are outside of sport improves with opportunities to socialize with teammates in non-sport contexts. Findings from Hill and colleagues (2010) indicate that athletes with lower mental toughness and higher levels of self-consciousness relate to a failed balance in sport/life perspective. Team building outside of sport related activities then not only has the potential to improve social relationships but may also assist in fortifying an athlete's mental toughness. While participants can organize social events on their own, they felt that coaches can also be influential by organizing more formal events for the entire team to attend, such as movie nights, holiday events, or dinners together. Research indicates that coaching coaches feel similarly regarding the importance of implementing socially oriented team-building activities (Cormier et al., 2015). Despite these paralleling beliefs, differences may still lie in who ought to take a stronger lead in organizing such events.

Coaches are also critical in introducing them to the culture and norms of a team upon the start of their collegiate career. Strong coaches were recognized for their ability to set and emphasize team norms and rules clearly to both incoming and returning players to ensure members are on the same page. This is particularly important as new athletes are introduced to the team and will begin experiencing intrateam competition rapidly. Though coaches also impact how well their athletes adhere to team norms and culture before the season even begins through their recruiting decisions. Participants felt their coach should recruit athletes with notable talent but recognized that the overall team

dynamic and atmosphere was more critical to care for to have a successful golf team than just a collection of talented individuals. Coaches of coaching teams appear to agree and seek those who fit into the existing program and are willing to buy-in to the team's philosophy (Yukelson, 1997). Cormier and colleagues (2015) reported that cross country coaches first sought strong runners that had the ability to fit in or held other important qualities like good work ethic or strong leadership capabilities. And recruiting the wrong player has the potential to destroy team chemistry. Seeing these parallels, coaches of coaching teams should remain mindful of recruiting athletes that share values that their current team members identify strongly with. Lastly, participants reported that coaches' leadership quality influenced how the group bought into team culture, followed their example, and accepted team decisions.

5.2 Team Development

The higher-order category of *team development* pertains to how these participants considered their relationships and time spent with teammates as well as their desired team composition. Specifically, results indicated that all participants identified cohesion in some capacity as a critical component to a positive team experience and is regarded highly for its importance toward each participants satisfaction with their team conditions. Previous research has been mixed regarding the impact of cohesion among coaching sport athletes and teams, though generally identifying cohesion as positively related performance with varying degree compared to cohesion among interacting teams (Carron et al., 2002). Participants reflected that positive relationships between teammates, and a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, were valuable not only for performance on the course, but also for their general wellbeing. Lack of cohesion or poorly formed

relationships with teammates were reported as performance inhibitors across participants. Thus, participants felt cohesion had a broad and meaningful impact regarding team functioning and their own sporting experience. This reflects similar findings from the meta-analysis of cohesion presented by Carron, Colman, Wheeler, and Steven's (2002). Though important to distinguish, athletes from the current study participate in a coaching sport, differing from the interacting sports that the meta-analysis predominantly discussed. Research by Cormier and colleagues (2015) revealed that coaches recognize the overall importance of cohesion and have the specific intention to build relationships among teammates (i.e., social cohesion) even though performances are interdependent during competition. Participants of the current study mirror this attitude. They highly value building relationships with teammates, identified team cohesion as an important component for success, and reported that a positive team atmosphere had a significant impact on their individual performance.

Carron and colleagues' conceptual model of cohesion (1985) portrayed cohesion as a multidimensional construct with two aspects of cohesion: Individual Attraction to the Group and Group Integration. From these two aspects, both can be divided subsequently in their relation to social or task elements of cohesion. Social cohesion refers to the general orientation toward developing and maintaining social relationships, whereas task cohesion refers to a general orientation toward achieving the group's goals (Carron et al., 1985). Athletes interviewed in the present study considered cohesion primarily in terms of its social aspect, paralleling the perspective shared by coaches of coaching sports from Cormier and colleagues (2015). Further, participants often discussed their relationships with teammates, their conscious efforts to develop and maintain those relationships, as

well as their impact on the overall team atmosphere. Despite the lack of task interdependence in the sport, athletes are interconnected in their sporting experience and find their performances and individual goal pursuit shaped and influenced by teammates. With this being the case, athletes have incentive to engage in team building efforts and are poised to benefit from an environment in which the presence of other competitors brought into the team building process will positively influence the experience of each athlete. In collegiate golf, athletes share little task interdependence and thus often focus less of their own efforts on improving or maintaining elements of task cohesion.

Participants interviewed in the present study discussed their own contributions to team building and relationship building, both of which they identified as complimentary in improving cohesion. Participants were concerned with developing organic friendships and relationships that allowed for consistent support for one another throughout their sporting careers. This often took the form of social events outside of golf (dinners, parties, etc.), but also were a byproduct of spending time together in their team setting at practices, workouts, and competitions. Importantly, participants desired a team atmosphere free of conflict or disagreement. To this end, they report that they found it challenging to make time for one another outside of sport, and widely reported a desire for more opportunity to connect beyond their sport identity. With such emphasis on social elements of cohesion, it may benefit teams if coaches were to place greater emphasis on building social cohesion in coaching sports. Reflected from Cormier and colleagues (2015), coaching coaches may have already learned this lesson as their interest appears more directed toward team building rather than task-related functioning. It may still be

that coaches are underestimating their athletes' desire for improved social cohesion and relatedness to teammates.

The impact of social cohesion has been determined in several instances to slightly outweigh task cohesion in predicting team success (Carron et al., 1985; Carron, Bray, & Eys, 2002; Carron et al., 2002). Current athletes revealed that team atmosphere was critical to maintain their own performance, primarily as a disruptive team atmosphere serves to damage their own individual performance outcomes. This comes as no surprise, as golf is a coaching sport that necessitates intrateam competition. These golfers consistently noted that the potential for intrateam competition was ever present and had the potential to erode a positive team atmosphere and lead to conflict, lack of confidence, and ultimately deteriorated performance and mirror existing research related to consequences of intrateam competition (Brouwer, 2016; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Edmonson, Kramer & Cook, 2004). Current participants noted that each player contributes to the team atmosphere and should monitor themselves closely alongside the watchful eye of their coaching staff to limit conflict related to this intrateam competition. The potential for detrimental effects of intrateam competition on team atmosphere if not appropriately monitored is reflected in existing research (Cormier et al., 2015; Sambolec, Kerr, & Messé, 2007). Specifically, Cormier and colleagues revealed that coaching coaches were aware of the detrimental effects of intrateam competition yet admitted that some levels of competition can be healthy among teammates. In fact, these coaches admitted to preparing athletes for intrateam competition by outlining team expectations and standards. Similarly, Sambolec and colleagues found that friendly competition served as a motivator for performers, by building on social facilitation and implicit

competitiveness through the presence of a coactive task. This presents the potential for athletes to showcase their abilities and feel the presence of a salient opponent whom they can beat. Overall, current participants revealed that if strong interpersonal relationships existed (outside of sport), this will likely lead to healthier and safer competition with the added ability of moving past personal failures and seeing their teammates succeed over themselves in such circumstances.

While participants in the present study indicated a desire to have strong relationships with teammates and connections outside of their sporting experience, participants were also quick to communicate how individual differences between teammates often presented conflict. This intrateam and intrapersonal conflict was a consistent concern for team members. Conflict may originate from elements of intrateam competition, such as the systems coaches have in place to determine the traveling roster for golf tournaments. Athletes also often measure their progress to their teammates and can easily monitor their performance related to one another. Falling short of their personal expectations or beating a teammate can contribute to feelings of ill will toward one another. This is reflected in findings from Brouwer (2016), where the presence of intrateam competition can change situational contexts of a team, increasing the level of team conflict and decreasing the experienced level of psychological safety. Intrateam competition introduces mutually exclusive goals which are positively related to process conflict in team settings (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Intrateam competition also introduces an environment where team members may increasingly suspect one another of acting with egotistic motivations, thus reducing acceptance of deviating behavior or creativity from individuals, also lowering levels of psychological safety (Edmonson, Kramer &

Cook, 2004). This further increases the potential for intrateam conflict. Additionally, the presence of social comparison through intrateam competition can increase ego orientation in athletes, and thus increases the likelihood of disrupted motivation if an athlete recognizes disparities in their ability compared to their teammates (Sambolec, 2007). In such circumstances, participants reported that if individuals are unable to appropriately regulate themselves, coaches should have a keen eye in identifying frustrations as they are brewing, to step in before conflict presents, or to mediate conflict once it has become apparent. Cormier and colleagues (2015) identified in their study that cross country coaches are thoughtful in recruiting players who can work with others well and can contribute positively to team chemistry and culture. While selection is useful in preempting conflict, participants also communicated a desire for a coach who can identify interpersonal conflicts as they manifest and can continuously build social cohesion despite the consistent presence of intrateam competition.

While the value of building social cohesion seems clear, task cohesion may also be an important factor in creating a high performing coaching team. Just as conflict may arise from interpersonal problems or rivalries between individuals, conflict may also arise as players attempt to balance personal and team goals. Cormier and colleagues (2015) found that coaches found value in establishing team goals to provide a sense of commonality and shared purpose. Further, coaching sport coaches often set team goals that were consistent with those of individual athletes on their teams to prevent conflict (e.g., if the team succeeds, you succeed, and vice versa). Goal setting has been identified as an ideal task cohesion building strategy, for its usefulness in getting athletes to accept responsibility for their contributions to team success and in holding one another

accountable for their actions (Yukelson, 1997). But coaching teams, such as golf teams, are unique in that not all players participate in each competition. Collegiate golf teams traditionally travel with 5 or 6 players to tournaments, and only 4 players' scores will contribute to their team total. With golf teams maintaining average rosters of 10 players, nearly half will not contribute to team score at each competition. Additionally, collegiate golfers simultaneously compete for individual honors (e.g., top 10 finisher, All-Conference/American, etc.), which may skew priorities for different players dependent on whether a golfer has the potential to find individual success regardless of the team's collective ability. In this way, athletes are not uniformly motivated to find shared purpose or commonality across team goals.

Participants often noted that their individual goals come first, and if their personal success helps the team achieve a shared goal then that serves as an added benefit. While participants did not find commonality in outcome-oriented goals, they do however report that they find commonality in the shared desire to improve holistically. One reason this may be the case is because group goals should be considered as entirely distinct from individual goals, referring only to a desired state of a group as one unit, not as a collection of individuals attaining a desired state (Mills, 1984). Research from Brawley, Carron and Widmeyer (1992) shines useful light on the present findings. Brawley and colleagues reported that groups often craft competition related goals that are outcome oriented, while process oriented goals are more preferred. Process goals relate to the aspects of performance needed to produce an increased probability of a desirable outcome occurring (Orlick, 1986). These goals aim at improving factors that athletes can control to draw out an individual's potential. With this in mind, it makes sense why

participants in the present study found shared purpose in pushing one another to achieve their individual goals, even if those goals are incongruent. What they share in their individual goals is not the outcome, but the elements of performance they are seeking to improve their control over to increase the likelihood of desired outcomes. To that end, participants reported that a collective of players pursuing similar individual goals was helpful in creating a team that felt united and contributed to a team dynamic that had a motivating atmosphere conducive to their performance. Additionally, participants felt that strong social cohesion was necessary to allow players to provide appropriate support for one another's goals and task related development. In general, participant perspectives demonstrate that while there are opportunities to utilize task cohesion in team golf, it is best suited for use once the team has begun developing elements of social cohesion, which in their mind should be prioritized when it comes to deploying team development strategies. The shared perspectives also indicate that there is potential usefulness for crafting group goals and task related goals so long as those goals are crafted with a focus on performance elements within athlete control and not a focus on team outcomes. This is also reinforced by the idea that team outcome related goals would not be able to include the entirety of the team as only a subset of athletes are able to compete in tournaments and can contribute to overall team outcome.

5.3 Study Summary

While interacting sports such as football, basketball, and soccer command worldwide popularity, a significant portion of student athletes compete in coacting sports such as swimming, diving, track and field, shooting, cross-country running, tennis, and golf. These sports represent the bulk of NCAA affiliated participants on the world stage

at the Olympics. More specifically, there were 287 athletes with roots in the NCAA (current or alumni) participating in running sports alone (track and field, marathon, triathlon), representing 57 total countries and territories (NCAA.org). Thus, the importance of investigating *coacting* sports is justified due to their importance on the world stage and overall number of participants, yet they are not often considered in the bulk of cohesion research. Cohesion research has primarily focused on the cohesion-performance relationship, in which most researchers now agree that cohesion and performance are positively correlated, where higher cohesion leads to more successful outcomes, regardless of sport type. (Carron, Coleman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002; Carron & Chelladurai, 1981; Widmeyer & Williams, 1991). Though overall, sport type appears to mediate overall levels of cohesion within a team and the degree of its positive impact on performance (Carron et al., 2002). Differences in team composition and athlete characteristics make it challenging to generalize this relationship across all sports. Specifically, no study has yet examined elite athlete perception of cohesion in collegiate coacting sports. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of elite college golfers as it related to cohesion.

Participants were six collegiate golfers from two Division 1 NCAA teams. Participants were identified due to geographical convenience for the researchers. The sport of golf was chosen due to its coacting environment, where athletes compete for both team and individual honors, and college golfers often compete against their teammates, throughout the season, to be promoted to the travel roster. Participants were invited to participate in open-ended interviews in a virtual setting and lasted for a period of half an hour to one hour.

A case study design was used to explore the experience of athletes within coaching sport settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted following an interview guide and two higher-order categories emerged from the analysis of the data. These categories were named *athlete experiences and perception* and *team development*. *Athlete experience and perception* pertained to athlete qualities that were reported as meaningful to participation in Division 1 team golf, as well as content related to how athlete's described important elements that shaped their sporting experience in this coaching sport dynamic. Additionally, this section pertained to athlete's perceptions on how coaches impact the team dynamic, specifically cohesion. *Team development* included the participants' beliefs on the importance of cohesion, how these participants considered their relationships and time spent with teammates, as well as their desired team experiences.

While participants had various sporting backgrounds and experiences, many common themes emerged from the data. Importantly, there was clear identification of cohesion as a vital component to team success in golf. Participants reported more specifically that social cohesion outweighed task cohesion in terms of importance, prioritizing positive relationships with teammates and a positive team atmosphere for its value in improving performance outcomes for individuals as well as its impact on athlete wellbeing. Participants agreed that a lack of social cohesion inhibited performance, worsened the experience of intrateam competition, and created more potential for conflict between teammates. Participants indicated that this dynamic can be mitigated by the presence of a coach who closely monitors the group atmosphere and who is adept at managing the emergence of negative rivalries and budding conflict. Additionally, they

desired teammates that shared common values with themselves. These values included being hard working, mentally tough, emotionally mature, and a desire to improve. While participants recognized that they hold individual goals that conflict with one another, they found unity in their mutual desires to improve and achieve. This unity in process goals contributed to team cohesion as well. Thus, task objectives are difficult to utilize as unifiers for a team, but social team elements were widely reported as being more impactful and important for a golf team to find success.

5.4 Conclusions

With considerations of confines and limitations of the present study, the following conclusions appear warranted:

- All participants had a sporting history that developed in childhood but had variety in their participation in both interacting and coaching team sport settings.
- All participants identified team golf as a unique experience in the sport that they enjoyed having the opportunity to participate in.
- Participants found golf to be a sport that presents significant mental strain that demands a degree of mental toughness to manage.
- Participants described golf as a lonely and isolated sport, in which the presence of teammates offers a useful source to combat such feelings.
- Strength of social cohesion significantly contributes to participants' enjoyment of their sporting experience.

- Shared values (such as being a hard worker, mentally tough, emotionally mature, and the desire to improve oneself) are important to connect teammates and should be considered by coaches when selecting new team members.
- Participants found that being around teammates with values that align with their own is powerfully motivating.
- Athlete leadership was described as an important component to team cohesion and impacted whether collective values were widely adopted by team members, especially new members joining the group.
- Athlete leaders were capable of building team cohesion through the organizing of social events outside of formal team activities.
- Participants desired coaches who were invested in the social development of the team, and who programmed opportunities for social cohesion development.
- Participants emphasized the importance of a coach who was capable of monitoring team atmosphere and was capable of intervening to manage conflict.
- Participants reported that the dynamic of intrateam competition had the potential to erode a positive team atmosphere and create conflict and deteriorate performance without the presence of strong team cohesion.
- The presence of strong interpersonal relationships outside of sport leads to healthier and safer competition between teammates

- Participants found that they were unified with teammates in a shared purpose to push one another to similar individual goals, even if those goal outcomes were incongruent.
- Participants reported that strong social cohesion was necessary to provide appropriate support for one another's goals and task related development, otherwise support would not be accepted.
- Task cohesion can still be influenced by crafting group goals related to performance elements within athlete control, not team outcomes.

5.5 Practical Implications

The present study can expand the body of literature on cohesion within coaching teams by including the perspectives of athletes performing within coaching sport settings. Such a sample has little inclusion within research and athlete perspectives of team cohesion development have not been examined enough. The present study has begun to address this gap and can be used to provide a more nuanced understanding of cohesion within varying sport settings, as cohesion research in interacting sport settings can be challenging to generalize to coaching settings.

The current study provides a greater understanding of cohesion within unique coaching teams, particularly in collegiate golf. Previous research has identified the clear need for team cohesion within interacting sports, where teammates share interdependence in task and outcome, though considered coaching sports like golf to need little intrateam cooperation. Though it was found here that not only can cohesion improve performance outcomes for athletes in collegiate golf, but that athlete's place high emphasizes on the

necessity for building and caring for team cohesion and the team atmosphere. With this, coaches should continuously seek opportunities to strengthen cohesion and encourage team members to contribute to team building efforts early and often.

Though, it seems from the perspective of athletes, there is a disconnect between coaches and athletes in how influential either party can or should be in the establishment and promotion of social cohesion. Coaches feel that athletes are best equipped to lead cohesion building efforts, while players indicate that coaches must remain actively engaged with monitoring teammate relationships and providing consistent programmed cohesion building opportunities in and out of sport related activities. These findings may indicate that coaches do not recognize the connection their players want them to have regarding the social development and maintenance of the team. Coaches should consider how to appropriately monitor their team's social connection proactively. Conversely, coaches and practitioners can note that from this study athletes may underestimate and undervalue the influence they as a player have on the team dynamic, particularly in reinforcing team norms and holding teammates accountable when behaviors stray outside of these norms. Coaches and practitioners alike may want to increase their athletes' feelings of competence in handling conflict and holding one another accountable for their behavior.

Last, coaching sport athletes and coaches must navigate an environment that is consistently influenced by intrateam competition. Athletes and coaches both recognize the value of competition to motivate team members to develop more rapidly than alone. Though intrateam competition without the necessary support systems for athletes may serve to deteriorate performance and interpersonal relationships among teammates. Sport

psychology practitioners and coaches alike can buffer the negative impacts of intrateam competition by bolstering social cohesion, closely monitoring for signs of conflict, and emphasizing team unity through shared purpose. The current findings indicate that shared purpose in coaching teams can focus on similarities in individual goal pursuit, each player's desire to improve compared to their own standard, to limit ego-oriented climates and unhealthy rivalries amongst team members. Findings also indicate that coaches should be aware of recruitment decisions, introducing players that share values that existing team members deem critical, such as being hard working. This study could provide coaches of coaching teams helpful insight into monitoring their team atmosphere to best serve their athletes.

5.6 Limitations

The present study did fulfill its purpose in furthering the understanding of cohesion from the perspective of elite level collegiate golfers but does have some limitations to keep in consideration. First, the sample of golfers utilized was entirely from the female perspective. It has been suggested that gender differences may exist in beliefs and behaviors related to cohesion for coaches (Fasting, 2000; Millard, 1996). If such findings extend to coaches, similar differences may present in athletes in coaching settings as well. To this end, it may be additionally insightful to investigate perspectives of male golfers to compare to the present findings. Second, the present study only sampled U.S. collegiate golf programs. While some of the included athlete perspectives were from international student-athletes, it is still important to note that golf programs located in other countries may have differing perceptions related to cohesion within the sport. Third, to the previous point, athletes from different backgrounds such as nationality may also bring differing

perspectives and opinions related to cohesion into their team settings. It may be useful to investigate such cultural differences as a moderator for cohesion related beliefs. Last, while golf can appropriately be categorized with other coaching sports to consider elements of cohesion, it remains possible that the findings related to golfers are not entirely generalizable to other collegiate coaching team sports.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Research

The current study aimed to explore athlete experiences and perceptions of cohesion within a coaching sport like golf. This addressed a significant gap in the literature concerning athlete perspectives within non-revenue generating collegiate sports, which most student athletes at the college level participate in. Future research could build from this study in several ways to advance research related to cohesion and coaching sports. First, it may be interesting to explore athlete perceptions in various coaching sports like gymnastics, swimming, diving, tennis, or track and field. In exploring additional coaching sports, researchers can account for the limitations of generalizing findings from one coaching sport that may not consider the nuanced differences present in another coaching sport.

Second, researchers may find interesting value in exploring perceptions across different demographics. From the current study, some participants mentioned in passing that their beliefs may differ from others related to their experience as a female golfer, or an international student competing in the United States. This may indicate that comparing findings from this group of athletes to that of other differences in identity may shed light on further athlete perceptions on the value and impact of cohesion in coaching sports.

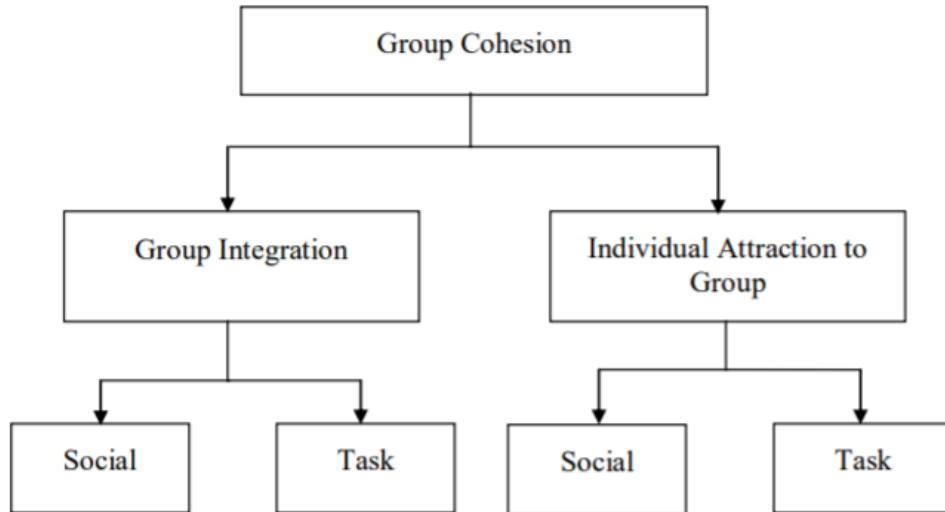
Last, in the case of the present study, collegiate golf acts as an interesting insight into coaching sports but is limited in its participant pool primarily to collegiate golfers, as golf at other levels does not commonly use a team model for competitions. For this reason, there may be interesting exploration into sports that have coaching competitions at different skill at age levels to compare the thoughts and perspectives of athletes to that of the present study. Additionally, in the sport of golf there are some efforts to increase youth participation by creating local youth leagues adopting a coaching team model. Researchers interested in sport participation may consider this a unique route to consider if such team experiences are successful in increasing participation in a sport like golf for children.

While the results of the current study provided information regarding the experiences of elite collegiate golfers related to cohesion, considerable questions remain unanswered in this area of research. Regardless, these findings are another step in furthering research on cohesion and coaching sports.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

A Conceptual Model of Group Cohesion



Adapted from:

Carron, A. V., Widmeyer, W. N., & Brawley, L. R. (1985). The development of an instrument to assess cohesion in sport teams: The Group Environment Questionnaire. *Journal of Sport and Exercise psychology*, 7(3), 244-266.

APPENDIX B

Demographic Survey

What is your age in years?

What is your gender identity?

- Male
- Female
- Nonbinary
- Prefer to self-describe _____

What is your race?

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-describe _____

Are you of Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or of Spanish Origin? (One or more categories may be selected)

- No, not of Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish Origin
- Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano/a/x
- Yes, Puerto Rican
- Yes, Cuban
- Yes, Another Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish Origin
- Some other race, ethnicity, or origin
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-describe _____

What sport do you play?

What is your current eligibility year?

What is your academic classification? (ex. Freshman)

How long have you participated in your sport?

How long have you participated in a team setting in your sport?

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Letter to Coaches

Dear [insert coach name]

My name is Jared Hrabcak, and I am a master's student at the University of Kentucky conducting thesis research regarding athlete experience and perception of team cohesion in coaching sport settings. The purpose of this project is to fulfill requirements for the sport and exercise psychology graduate program.

I am seeking the participation of collegiate athletes who are on teams in coaching sports to participate in this research study, such as those on your current roster.

This study intends to explore how collegiate golfers perceive the experience of team dynamics within this sport and how they recognize its impacts on their athletic experience and performance. Their involvement will greatly contribute to the body of research regarding the direct experience of athletes in different team settings in sport.

After receiving permission from the IRB and yourself to conduct this study with your athletes, I will send you a recruitment email to then pass on to the athletes on your roster. If the athletes reach out to me consenting to participate, I will then send a short demographic survey and an invitation to participate in a 30-45 minute Zoom interview to explore their perceptions of team cohesion in their specific sport experience.

All current student-athletes on your roster are eligible to participate. If you are willing to allow me to contact your team, please reach out to me at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jared Hrabcak (primary investigator)
Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion, University of Kentucky
Phone: 614-406-9751
Email: jared.hrabcak@uky.edu

Dr. Marc Cormier, PhD (faculty advisor)
Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion, University of Kentucky
Phone: 304-777-8024
Email: marc.cormier@uky.edu

APPENDIX D

Athlete Recruitment Letter

Dear [participant name]

My name is Jared Hrabcak, and I am a master's student at the University of Kentucky conducting thesis research regarding athlete experience and perception of team cohesion in coaching sport settings. The purpose of this project is to fulfill requirements for the sport and exercise psychology graduate program.

I am seeking college athletes like yourself to participate in my research study to gain a better understanding of how individuals in your sport interpret and perceive their team environment.

This study intends to explore how collegiate golfers perceive the experience of team dynamics within this sport and how they recognize its impacts on their athletic experience and performance. Your involvement will greatly contribute to the body of research regarding the direct experience of athletes in different team settings in sport.

Participation in this study is minimally invasive, carries minimal risk, and will greatly contribute to documented research direct from the perspectives of athletes. After receiving your intent to participate, I will send you a short demographic survey, an informed consent document outlining more information about the study, and an invitation to participate in a 30-45 minute Zoom interview to explore your perceptions and experience of team cohesion in your sport.

If you are interested in participating, please reach out to me via email at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jared Hrabcak (primary investigator)
Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion, University of Kentucky
Phone: 614-406-9751
Email: jared.hrabcak@uky.edu

Dr. Marc Cormier, PhD (faculty advisor)
Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion, University of Kentucky
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APPENDIX E

Informed Consent and Study Information Document



Consent to Participate in a Research Study

KEY INFORMATION FOR *Exploration of Athlete Perception on Cohesion in Coaching Sports*

We are asking you to choose whether or not to volunteer for a research study about your perception on cohesion in your collegiate team setting. This research is for partial fulfillment of Jared Hrabcak's graduate coursework for a master's degree in sport and exercise psychology. We are asking you because of your experience as a Division I NCAA college golfer. This page is to give you key information to help you decide whether to participate. We have included detailed information after this page. Feel free to ask the research team questions. If you have questions later, the contact information for the research investigator in charge of the study is below.

WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The purpose of this study is to use a story-telling type approach to explore your perception of team cohesion in your college golf career. By doing this study, we hope to learn more about how athletes interpret the value of cohesion in unique coaching sports, such as golf. Your participation in this research will last about 45 minutes. Researchers anticipate 6 to 12 participants in total.

WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

A key reason to participate in this study would be to help further inform sport psychology professionals and coaches in how to better approach creating team cultures that best benefit their athletes. For a complete description of benefits and/or rewards, refer to the Detailed Consent.

WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

Reasons you may be unable to participate in this study are:

- Lack of time
- Lack of access to stable internet

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study contact Jared Hrabcak of the University of Kentucky, Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion at jared.hrabcak@uky.edu.

Dr. Marc Cormier, PhD is the Faculty Advisor for this study and any complaints or suggestions may also be directed to him at marc.cormier@uky.edu.

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact staff in the University of Kentucky (UK) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) between the business hours of 8am and 5pm EST, Monday-Friday at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

DETAILED CONSENT:

ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU WOULD NOT QUALIFY FOR THIS STUDY?

Participant inclusion criteria:

- Participants must be at least 18 years or older to participate.
- Participants will be eligible if they have participated in a Division I NCAA college golf team for longer than one season (fall or spring).

WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND WHAT IS THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF TIME INVOLVED?

This study consists of the completion of a 5-minute demographics survey and a 45-minute interview that will take place via Zoom video conferencing at a time agreed upon by the participant and the researcher. The interview will consist of 10-12 open ended questions pertaining to the participant's experience in team golf settings. If a participant is uncomfortable answering any question or wishes to skip it for any reason, they may skip it. If invited to participate in an interview, it is optional and not required.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

You will be asked questions about your perception and interpretation of cohesion in your team setting. Some general questions about your career as an athlete will be asked during the interview as well. While you will be recorded, you are free to skip any question for any reason. The interviews are optional, and not required.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

There is the possibility that you may become uncomfortable or distressed when discussing your experience within your college golf career. If this is the case, the National Alliance on Mental Illness hotline is always available for consultation: 1-800-950-6264.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Your willingness to participate will facilitate understanding on the role of cohesion in coaching sports such as golf and will add insight directly from athletes to understanding the value of cohesion in coaching sports. You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?

Your interview will be voice recorded and video recordings of the interview will be destroyed. Only the members of the research team will have access to the recording of your interview or transcripts of your interview. We will make every effort to keep confidential all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. Your interview will be conducted via a secure Zoom location. It will be recorded and transcribed by the research team, but only members of the research team will have access to the recordings and transcriptions. The video portion from the interview will be deleted and only the audio recording will be saved for research purposes. All recordings and transcripts will be stored on an encrypted flash drive or a password-protected computer. The recordings will be kept for at least 6 years after the end of the IRB approval period.

In addition, please be aware, while we make every effort to safeguard your data once received from the online survey company, given the nature of online surveys, as with anything on the Internet, we can never guarantee the confidentiality of the data while still on the survey company's servers. It is also possible the raw data collected for research purposes will be used for marketing or reporting purposes by the survey/data gathering company after the research is concluded, depending on the company's Terms of Service and Privacy policies.

We will keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to tell authorities if you report information about a child being abused or if you pose a threat to yourself or someone else. Also, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be assured we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Kentucky.

Due to the use of Zoom for interviews: Please be aware, while we make every effort to safeguard your data, the interview is being conducted via an online medium and, as with anything involving the Internet, we can never guarantee the confidentiality of the data while still on the company's servers or while in route to either them or us.

CAN YOU CHOOSE TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY EARLY?

You can choose to leave the study at any time. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, or if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you. If you decide to withdraw from the study early, data previously collected from you will be removed from the study database and will not be included in any analysis.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study.

WILL YOUR INFORMATION BE USED FOR FUTURE RESEARCH?

Your information collected for this study will NOT be used or shared for future research studies, even if we remove the identifiable information like your name.

By proceeding with the demographics survey, you indicate your consent to participate in both the survey and the upcoming interview.

Jared Hrabcak
Master's Student—Sport and Exercise Psychology
University of Kentucky Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion
Jared.hrabcak@uky.edu

APPENDIX F

Interview Guide

Opening Statement: In the sport of golf, athletes not only compete against other schools and their golfers, but also against members of their own team. It is because of this dynamic that I am interested in how collegiate golf athletes interpret and value cohesion (togetherness) and its development within their team.

Intro

1. Briefly discuss your athletic career, and participation in various sports.

Probe: Initiation to golf

Probe: How did you come to the decision to focus on golf over other sports?

Focus

2. How do your teammates impact the team environment?

Probe: How does your coach?

3. How important is cohesion (or togetherness) for a golf team?

4. How does your relationship with your teammates influence the training environment (at practice, workouts, etc.)?

Probe: Is it motivating? Distracting?

5. How does your relationship with your teammates influence the competitive environment (qualifying, at tournaments, etc.)?

Probe: Motivating? Distracting?

6. How important are social relationships with your teammates?

Probe: How much time should teammates spend together outside of training/competition?

7. What makes a golf team successful?
8. What are the specific challenges in being a part of a golf team?
9. How does your team impact your pursuit of personal goals/individual performance?
10. Is there anything you would change about your team environment/culture right now?

Probe: If so, what? If not, why?

Conclusion

11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX G

Table 2. Alphabetical Listing of the Frequency of Topics Discussed by Each Participant

Tags (Level 1)	n	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6
Athlete attitude	3	1	0	0	0	0	2
Athlete identity	3	0	0	0	1	0	2
Athlete leadership	3	1	0	0	1	0	1
Athlete talent	5	0	0	3	0	1	1
Athlete thoughts/beliefs – cohesion	12	2	1	2	3	3	1
Athlete values	7	2	0	1	2	0	2
Building friendships	18	4	1	7	2	0	4
Coach leadership	18	5	0	4	3	3	3
Coach thoughts/beliefs – cohesion	4	0	0	0	3	1	0
Cohesion - Importance	12	0	3	3	2	1	3
Enjoyment	5	1	0	2	0	0	2
Goal Incongruence	4	0	1	1	0	2	0
Goal/Performance Monitoring	8	1	0	5	0	0	2
Individual Goals	11	3	1	3	1	1	1
Interpersonal Conflict	2	2	0	0	0	0	0
Interpersonal relationships	25	3	4	4	6	6	2
Intrateam Competition	20	3	1	0	8	4	4
Life balance	6	0	0	2	1	0	3
Mental strain	8	0	2	1	4	1	0
Motivation	17	0	4	5	1	4	3
Personal growth	6	1	0	0	1	1	3
Previous sport/team experience	8	1	0	2	2	2	1
Prioritizing self	3	0	0	1	2	0	0
Shared/Congruent Goals	10	4	1	3	1	1	1
Social events	7	3	1	0	2	1	0
Supporting teammates	30	1	2	7	8	9	3
Team atmosphere	18	2	3	5	0	6	2
Team conflict	9	5	2	1	0	0	1
Team member differences	4	0	0	4	0	0	0
Total	286	45	27	66	54	47	47

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