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Running Head: Return to Sport Following Injury

Professional Coaches' Perspectives on the Return to Sport Following Serious Injury  
REVISION

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Key words: athletic injury, return-to-sport, coaching, social support

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Abstract

Research examining the role of coach assistance among athletes in injury rehabilitation (e.g., Bianco, 2002; Johnston & Carroll, 1998) indicates that coaches can play a significant role in the recovery of athletes with injuries. Little is known, however, about coaches' role in assisting athletes in the post-injury recovery time period when the athlete is returning to competition. The purpose of this study was to examine professional coaches' perspectives of the return-to-sport transition, their role in decisions to return athletes to training and competition, and their role in assisting athletes through this adjustment period. The 14 professional coaches from Western Australia and New Zealand appeared to possess a good understanding of the stressors of returning to sport and recognized the importance of assisting athletes with this transition. The findings are discussed with regard to the extant stress and social support literature on the psychology of athletic injury.

### **Professional Coaches' Perspectives on the Return to Sport Following Serious Injury**

Returning to sport following a serious injury can be a stressful process for some athletes (Bianco, 2001; Gould, Udry, Bridges, & Beck, 1997). Returning athletes may experience fears associated with re-injury (Kvist, Ek, Sporrstedt, & Good, 2005), concerns about their ability to perform up to pre-injury levels (Crossman, 1997), and pressures to meet specific return deadlines (Bianco, 2001). It has also been suggested, that athletes who begin competing after a serious injury may experience heightened competition anxiety (Rotella, 1985), focus unnecessarily on the injured area (Williams & Roepke, 1993), and struggle to regain their technical skills and abilities (Taylor & Taylor, 1997). Ultimately, these negative thoughts and experiences may increase the risk of re-injury (Williams & Andersen, 1998) and can have a detrimental effect on the athlete's confidence (Williams & Roepke, 1993) and post-injury performances (Rotella, 1985).

The aforementioned research is consistent with contemporary conceptualizations of injury as a stressful event. For example, Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey's, (1998) integrated model of the response to sport injury and rehabilitation is grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory of stress and coping. In this model, a central role is given to cognition. It is argued that the way in which individuals interpret (or appraise) an athletic injury will determine their emotional responses (e.g., anger, fear, relief, excitement) and subsequent behaviors (e.g., adhering to the rehabilitation program). As such, cognitive appraisal models of stress and coping help to account for individual differences in the response, recovery and return to sport from injury. For example, athletes who make positive appraisals about their return to sport (e.g., a desire to resume competing) may engage in beneficial behaviors (e.g., compliance with training regimes) that lead to enhanced return to sport outcomes (e.g., a quick return to pre-injury levels). Conversely, negative appraisals regarding the return to sport (e.g., doubts about achieving pre-injury levels) may

lead to maladaptive behaviors (e.g., reduced recovery effort) that result in non-optimal return to sport outcomes (e.g., lowered confidence, poorer performances) (Andersen, 2001).

In order to prevent return-to-sport difficulties, social support and assistance from a variety of sources (e.g., coaches and rehabilitation specialists) may act as prophylaxis for the stresses associated with injury recovery and rehabilitation (e.g., Andersen, 2001; Bianco & Eklund, 2001). As individuals working in close contact with athletes, coaches can have a significant positive impact upon the quality and experience of an athlete's injury recovery efforts (Bianco, 2001; Gould et al., 1997; Johnston & Carroll, 1998). As examples, Canadian national team skiers reported that social support from their coaches was important in providing reassurance about getting better, keeping things in perspective, focusing on future opportunities and encouragement to adhere to the rehabilitation program (Bianco, 2001). Similarly, U.S. alpine and freestyle skiers in Gould et al.'s study believed that their injury recovery was facilitated by coach interest and assistance (Gould et al., 1997).

Johnston and Carroll (1998) also found that social support from a number of sources, including coaches, was beneficial in assisting athletes throughout the injury rehabilitation period. Athletes reported that they needed various forms of social support from the coach (i.e. informational, emotional, and practical) at different points in the recovery period. For example, the need for emotional support was particularly important at the beginning of rehabilitation when athletes were trying to come to grips with the severity of their injury. At the end of rehabilitation, the need for informational support was most salient in ensuring that athletes did not return to sport prematurely. One athlete stated:

At this stage you are raring to go and just want to get back into playing your sport competitively, but you need someone to monitor your re-entry into sport and your training and to make sure you ease back into it and don't re-injure yourself (p. 277).

It was during the final stages of rehabilitation and the gradual resumption of sporting activity, when sport-specific advice, encouragement, and feedback were required, especially from the physiotherapist and coach (Johnston & Carroll, 1998). Ironically, it was at this time that some athletes reported an absence of the appropriate type and amount of feedback.

Johnston and Carroll's (1998) study points to the fact that the type, amount and timing of social support may be crucial in maximizing support effectiveness. As researchers and theorists have noted, social support is a transactional process between two relationship participants that is maximized when the type, amount and timing of assistance offered is congruent with the recipients' needs (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994). Research guided by the optimal matching framework within the sport injury context indicates that social support for injured athletes is most effective when the support provided is consistent with the needs of the support receiver (i.e. the injured athlete) (see Bianco & Eklund, 2001 for a review). The issue of social support and assistance offered to athletes returning to sport following injury is an important issue that has received little empirical attention (Bianco, 2001; Gould et al., 1997; Johnston & Carroll, 1998).

Given that coaches may play an important role in the recovery of athletes with injuries, it seems reasonable to suggest that they may also be instrumental in facilitating athletes' return to sport following a serious injury. Unfortunately, little is known about coach perspectives on the return to sport following serious injury or their perceived role in assisting athletes with the re-entry phase. It is therefore important to ascertain coach perspectives on the importance of providing support and the types of support they offer to athletes returning to sport from injury. Moreover, scant attention has been paid to coaches' role in decisions to return athletes to training and competition following recovery from a serious injury. This information is essential for developing effective coach-based strategies and interventions. The purpose of this study therefore, was to develop an understanding of coach perspectives on the return to sport process, their perceived role in the decision making

process to return athletes to training and competition and their role in assisting returning athletes. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to meet the study objectives.

## Method

### *Participants*

Fourteen professional coaches (4 female and 10 male) from Perth, Western Australian ( $n = 9$ ) and Auckland, New Zealand ( $n = 5$ ) representing a variety of individual (e.g., squash, athletics, swimming) and team sports (e.g., rugby, field-hockey, water polo) were interviewed for the study. All of the coaches had extensive experience coaching elite athletes ( $M = 11.29$  years) and were currently working with national and international level competitors (i.e., Olympic, World championship and/or Commonwealth Games participation). Moreover, 10 of the 14 coaches had worked with at least three athletes with serious injuries who had returned to compete and all coaches had worked with at least one seriously injured athlete who returned to competition. Finally, eight of the 14 coaches had personal experience in returning to sport following a serious injury.

Coaches from Perth ( $n = 9$ ) were recruited through the West Australian Institute of Sport (WAIS) with the assistance of WAIS staff members. These individuals circulated a memorandum endorsing the study and encouraging coach interest. WAIS coaches were contacted by telephone to determine their interest in participating and to organize interview appointments. Five coaches with comparable international experience from New Zealand were recruited with the assistance of researcher contacts at Unitec, New Zealand in Auckland.

### *Interview Guide*

An interview guide was created based on a review of the literature, results from previous investigations on the return to sport transition following injury (e.g., Podlog & Eklund, 2005; Podlog & Eklund, in press), and the first author's experience in returning to sport following several severe injuries. It was designed to elicit information regarding coach perceptions of the return to sport

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process following injury and their perceived role in assisting athletes with the return-to-sport transition. Following Institutional Human Research Ethics Committee approval, the interview guide was pilot tested and refined before commencement of the investigation. Questions from the interview guide are available by request from the authors.

### *Procedures*

Informed consent procedures were conducted at the start of each interview. Each coach agreed to participate and signed a consent form prior to the interview. All interviews were tape-recorded and lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Interviews were conducted in institutional settings and in coaches' homes by the first author. Coaches were asked to reflect on their experiences in dealing with athletes returning to sport following a serious injury. In line with previous research (Bianco, 2001; Flint, 1998; Podlog & Eklund, in press), a serious injury was defined as one requiring a minimum two-month absence from sport participation.

A semi-structured interview format was used to enable participants the opportunity to answer the same set of questions in each interview and to discuss themes/issues not included in the interview guide. The ordering of questions was flexible to make the interview conversational in tone and to help foster rapport. When appropriate, probe questions (e.g., What do you mean by...? How do you think athletes feel when...?) were used to explore specific issues in greater depth and to clarify points raised in the interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

Audio recordings of the 14 interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim. The identification of key themes within each interview (i.e., intratextually) and across interviews (i.e., intertextually), was conducted through the constant comparative method of analysis (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Intratextual analysis of the data involved placement of meaningful text segments (i.e. quotes) relevant to the research questions into theme categories. This process was carried out in

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an inductive fashion until all text segments had been grouped into theme categories. Once no new categories emerged, it was assumed that saturation had been reached. At this point, individual transcripts were analyzed deductively by examining the appropriateness of the classification of text segments into established theme categories. This procedure was conducted in order to verify the accuracy of the inductive analyses.

Intertextual analysis of the data was conducted on several levels. First, comparison of common ideas, quotes and themes took place across interviews. Second, comparison of participant responses by interview question took place across interviews. Finally, intertextual analysis entailed constant comparison between the individual transcripts and contact summary sheets to ensure the classification of themes was coherent with the interview transcripts. Contact summary sheets were completed by the first author following each interview to record impressions of the interview and to note information not captured on tape (e.g., impression of the interview session, coach's openness, tone of conversation, main points discussed).

In analyzing the data, an empathetic stance was adopted by reading through the transcripts on several occasions, recording analytical notes regarding salient themes and listening to the audio-taped versions of each interview (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Listening to the audio-taped version of each interview enabled a contextual analysis of the data by focussing on the tonal inflection, temporal pacing, and emphasis placed on specific ideas by individual respondents.

With regard to the "goodness criteria" (Rees, Smith, & Sparkes, 2003; Sparkes, 1998), the use of investigator triangulation, devil's advocate and member checks were used in the present investigation. Investigator triangulation was addressed by having the first author's interpretation and categorization of themes reviewed by a postgraduate human movement student. After reading through each of the 14 transcripts, this individual provided feedback regarding the key themes and categories emerging from participant transcript data. Discussions with this individual on two

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separate occasions provided valuable opportunities for critical reflection on the themes under investigation. Serving as “devil’s advocate,” the second author acted to support and challenge potential biases and assumptions of the first author. When points of contention were raised, transcripts were reviewed and disagreements were discussed. Finally, all of the coaches were invited to provide member checks by reviewing the accuracy of their interview transcripts and by verifying the accuracy of the themes listed in Figures 1 and 2. Of the seven who chose to do so, all indicated both the accuracy of the interview transcripts and the list of themes presented in figures 1 and 2.

## Results

Analysis of the interview data yielded a number of salient themes including: decision making processes in returning athletes to sport, coach perceptions of the stressors of returning from injury, and perceptions about their role in assisting athletes. Each will be dealt with under the corresponding heading.

### *Decision-Making Processes in Returning Athletes to Sport*

Coaches were asked to comment on how decisions concerning the return of athletes were made. All coaches indicated that before athletes could begin sport training, medical clearance from the physiotherapist or doctor was required. As a field hockey coach commented:

It’s all medical. We really rely on the medical people saying ‘it’s now time for him to start training.’ So I won’t make that call, the physios and the doctors will make the call that the athlete can now do X amount of training. My only role with that would be monitoring that he does X amount.

Obtaining medical clearance to return to training required that athletes were able to meet a range of clinical (e.g., range of motion, strength, proprioception) and sport specific (e.g., agility) tests. Physical criteria (i.e., medical clearance) were suggested to be of primary significance because

coaches wanted to take precautions against re-injury and because “duty of care” procedures had to be adhered to. As this gymnastics coach succinctly stated: “ultimately, we are bound by the professional decisions of the physio or the doctor. If the physio says don’t do something and the coaches feel we can do it, then we [still] can’t do it.” The importance of listening to medical recommendations was articulated given an awareness of litigious issues within the contemporary sport environment.

Coaches raised the issue of having “trust” in the judgments of medical practitioners when making decisions to return athletes to full activity. Receiving accurate information about athletes’ limitations and capabilities was considered essential since the coaches’ wanted to keep athletes active to whatever extent possible. Coaches typically indicated that they trusted the decision-making abilities of their medical practitioners.

Working with medical clinicians who were ex-athletes from their sport was considered beneficial by coaches. There was a belief among the coaches that personal knowledge and understanding of the requirements of their respective sports gave the medical practitioner greater insight in their decision-making. Coaches who discussed the issue indicated that trust was easier to extend to ex-athlete clinicians because of the latter’s understanding of the need to keep athletes active to whatever extent possible.

Nonetheless, occasional disagreements between coaches and treatment providers regarding decisions to return athletes to sport were acknowledged. One of the coaches was candid about the fact that he did not always see eye to eye with the doctors on staff. He commented:

One of the problems that we have with our doctor is we think she’s too conservative. We believe that [the athlete] has too much time where they do nothing and while they’re doing nothing, everything is degenerating. We believe they shouldn’t do nothing, they should do something, even if it’s a little something. We’re not medicos but sometimes we see athletes

come back and they're fine. We think it's too long before they've come back and our belief is that the doctor is erring on the side of caution because of fear of negligence or being sued. Our feeling is that they're overly cautious. We're in a high level sport where you take a risk pushing your body every day of the week. You're hammering your body and fatiguing yourself probably more than the average person. High level sport is a risk and we think that the doctors need to be a little more innovative and certainly a little bit more risk-taking without injuring the athlete.

A preference for direct contact between coaches and treatment providers was articulated, as coaches reported feeling that athletes were often overzealous to return or were prone to “put their own spin” on things. Six coaches had on-site physiotherapists who would monitor the athletes' training themselves. The gymnastics coach described how her physiotherapist provided instructions and monitored athlete activities from her window adjacent to the training room. Those who did not have the benefit of on-site trainers or physiotherapists indicated that there was generally regular communication regarding athlete activity levels.

Although the level of coach-practitioner communication was generally perceived to be quite good, three of the coaches reported feeling there were times when they received ambiguous information regarding the status of returning athletes. One of the water polo coaches remarked:

You have a comment from the physio, ‘restricted egg beater kick’. Now what the hell does restricted eggbeater kick mean? If they say restricted running for example, how much are you supposed to run? That tells me nothing really. It tells me to kind of back off a little bit but it doesn't give me the right amount, it doesn't tell me how much. So I have to fill in the gaps and interpret what restricted eggbeater means based on what I know of the athlete, what the athlete looks like, what I see and what they're telling me.

In expressing some frustration with ambiguous information, this coach's observations also illustrate another matter generally perceived to be important by the coaches participating in this study. Specifically, coaches recognized that their awareness of athlete individual differences also played an important role in preparing athletes to return to competition. When queried about any psychological criteria used for determining athletes' readiness to return to sport, coaches reported believing that a number of personal factors were important. These included knowledge of the athletes' personality, injury history and severity, pain tolerance, and motivational levels to resume former activities. Having an understanding of these individual differences appeared important in making determinations regarding athletes' readiness to resume sport participation. For example, coaches suggested that they dealt with "training nuts" or "mentally tough athletes" differently than those perceived as "soft" or unable to tolerate pain. Having an understanding of individual differences was regarded as important for determining when an athlete needed to be encouraged to do more and when they needed to be held back. One coach commented that part of her job was to protect athletes who were likely to work too much and to encourage those who were overly cautious about feeling any "twinge."

Coach knowledge of the individual athlete's personal characteristics were also seen as helpful in recognizing signs of psychological difficulties or hesitations in trying new skills. As the gymnastics coach succinctly stated "You know them so you can see it in their face, you can see that they're reluctant." Coaches indicated that acquiring a personal knowledge of individual athletes took time and required a history with the athlete.

#### *Perceptions of the Stressors Associated with Returning to Sport from Injury*

Coaches typically recognized that making a return to sport following a serious injury could be a difficult transition for the athlete. A variety of physical, social, and performance related stressors were perceived to be significant among returning athletes (See Figure 1). Although coaches

indicated that individual differences were apparent in the extent to which athletes' experienced these stressors, it was noted that athletes often experienced stressors in at least one of these areas. Each is discussed below.

*Physical stressors.* Physical stressors included a fear of re-injury, fitness concerns and the effect of physical limitations on the athlete's ability to perform. It was apparent, that the fear of re-injury was viewed as one of the most salient issues for returning athletes. As one of the rowing coaches commented:

they may not be 100% sure their [rehabilitated body part] is going to hold up. Competition pressure is very different to training pressure so if they get to competition sometimes they doubt that their body can actually make it through this without breaking down.

Given the salience of re-injury fears, coaches suggested that it was not uncommon for athletes to catastrophize over what appeared to be minor injury "flare-ups" once they resumed training and competition. As one coach remarked:

It's not always a smooth transition from rehab into the program and sometimes it's a couple of steps forward and a couple back and that is probably the hardest time for them. They think that it's all okay. They come back in and a little niggle comes up and they wonder 'is it just what I've had before, do I have to stop, what's happening?' The hardest time for them if something doesn't go right, how bad is it and what can I do now? Can I do normal training?

The transition back into training and competition is very emotionally tough for them.

Difficulties associated with regaining competitive (i.e., "match") fitness was also raised as a salient stressor amongst returning athletes. Coaches reported feeling that athletes were often worried about their fitness levels because the fitness requirements for effective competitive play were higher than in training.

Finally, adjusting technical aspects of one's play due to injury restrictions and/or limitations was perceived to be another potential stressor for returning athletes. A squash coach described how one of his players had to alter the mechanics of his swing because of his injury. Not being able to swing the same way that he had done for years previously was believed to be difficult and frustrating for the athlete under discussion.

*Social stressors.* In terms of social stressors associated with returning to sport, discussion about social isolation from teammates and training partners, pressures to return quickly and negative comparisons emerged from coach interviews. Feelings of isolation were believed to be common both during injury rehabilitation and upon the return to sport. Because athletes (especially those in interactive team sports) were often working on an individual basis with coaches during the return to sport, feelings of isolation and separation from the team were believed to linger during this time. Several interactive team sport coaches commented that athletes often did not seem to feel like full team members unless they were training with the team and helping them achieve their goals.

Pressure to return quickly was another social stressor discussed. It was felt that these pressures emanated from a variety of sources including the athletes themselves, family and friends, teammates or the coach. Four of the coaches recognized that they could inadvertently place pressures on the athlete to return because they were “only human” and wanted to see the athlete compete once again. Although a conscious effort was made not to rush athletes into returning, coaches indicated that ultimately they too wanted to see the athlete accomplish particular goals.

Ensuring that the athlete was not coming back because they were made to feel guilty or because they felt pressured to return was considered important by 12 of the coaches. According to the gymnastics coach:

We try not to bully them in to feeling they should be doing it to please the coach because there can be an aspect of that if you're not careful. You can bully an athlete into doing things

going ‘oh, my foot’s really sore’, ‘is it, OK well I suppose we won’t be ready for nationals but OK don’t do anything then’. As opposed to ‘my foot’s really sore’, ‘OK well what do you feel you can handle. Do you feel you can do a few of these, no not really, well leave that for today, we’ll try it tomorrow.’ That’s a very different approach to making the athlete feel guilty if they’ve come to you and said I can’t do it and you go that’s fine or you make some snide or underhand remark, and that’s very easy to do.

The gymnastics coach emphasized the importance of keeping the “locus of control with athletes” by teaching them to make good judgements about what they were capable of doing. It was recognized that pressuring an athlete to return was only doing a disservice to the athlete because performances were likely to suffer, the chances of re-injury were increased, and the athlete was likely to question whether the coach had their best interests at heart.

Negative social comparisons were perceived to be another stressor for returning athletes. Coaches suggested that athletes were often either unprepared or had difficulties accepting the fact that their skills may have diminished while others had improved during their competitive absence. It was reported that for many athletes, this reality did not completely set in until they resumed their training and competing and were beaten by others they used to beat. This experience was believed to be very frustrating for returning athletes. One of the rowing coaches remarked:

Most of them think they’re going to be back at the level they stopped pre-injury. It’s a big shock to them that they come back and other people who’ve had 6 to 12 months more training have moved forward one or two steps and the injured athlete is probably one or two steps below where they were. So the gap has increased and someone they were beating easily before is now beating them easily. Sometimes that’s a bit of a shock to them.

*Performance stressors.* Performance concerns and difficulties among returning athletes were also articulated. In particular, concerns about “falling behind others”, losing or regaining a spot on the

team, and reaching pre-injury levels were suggested to be common performance stressors among returning athletes. Coaches reported feeling that performance stressors were often related to the time-off due to injury. Speaking on the subject, an athletics coach explained:

In an event like high-jump, the athlete needs to be explosive, strong and have speed. You can get your strength levels up and your speed levels up but if you haven't had time on the task then your technical stuff falls a bit. Everything else might be great but because the athlete doesn't have that kinesthetic awareness of where they are, and because they haven't done it enough times, that's probably the biggest downer for the athlete. He'll say, 'I'm in great shape, why can't I do this anymore?' That can be quite disheartening for them.

#### *Coaches' Role in Assisting Athletes with the Return Transition*

Having an awareness of the potential stressors associated with returning to sport, coaches recognized both the importance and potential benefits of assisting athletes during this transitional period. Despite differences in the extent of involvement, various forms of assistance including individual (i.e., one-on-one) training sessions, keeping athletes involved in sport and providing social support were described. These forms of assistance are presented in Figure 2.

*Individual training sessions.* The use of individualized training sessions was one of the most commonly mentioned forms of athlete assistance. These sessions were reported to provide coaches with opportunities to monitor athlete activities and to introduce skills in a gradual or progressive fashion. Discussing her work with returning athletes, the gymnastics coach commented that in the case of athletes with serious injuries, it was imperative to add to their repertoire of skills in a "step-by-step" fashion. Individual training sessions also provided coaches with opportunities to assess athletes' level of physical conditioning and recovery status, to give athletes skill related feedback and to help rebuild confidence. Coaches suggested that decreases in athlete's confidence to remain uninjured and to achieve their goals were not uncommon. By focussing on physical and technical

areas in need of attention, individual training sessions provided coaches with the opportunity to help restore athlete's confidence levels. Making physical and technical improvements was reported to be one of the most effective ways of boosting athletes' confidence levels.

Finally, from the coaches' standpoint, holding individual training sessions served two purposes. First, it helped to remind athletes that coaches were concerned about their personal well-being. Moreover, coaches reported believing it provided a clear indication to the athletes that they were willing to invest time, effort and energy into helping athletes to achieve their goals. This was believed to be important for maintaining a positive coach-athlete relationship.

*Keeping athletes involved in sport.* Keeping athletes involved in sport during the injury recovery process was perceived as helpful for assisting athletes once they returned to sport. A number of social, educational and physical benefits derived from keeping athletes involved in their sport were articulated. From a social standpoint, continued involvement with teammates and training partners was believed to help facilitate the return to sport by preventing feelings of alienation and isolation. Coaches commented that athletes were often concerned about losing touch with the group and that the coach no longer cared about them because they were injured or were not yet competing. By ensuring continued contact, coaches reported believing that athletes did not feel like "outsiders" or "total strangers" coming back into the group but were simply transitioning into more work.

From an educational standpoint, continued involvement with the team helped to ensure that athletes were up-to-date on team tactics and team plays. Keeping athletes informed about new tactical information and team plays was suggested to be important for facilitating their reintegration into the squad. Without such knowledge, it was felt that athletes would miss out on important information that they could acquire regardless of their physical status.

Keeping the athlete involved in training was also reported to provide opportunities for both athletes with and without injuries to learn from one another. Coaches reported that having returning

athletes remain involved in their sport provided opportunities to learn and interact with teammates who had successfully returned to sport following injury (i.e., role models). It was also felt that athletes without injuries could learn from athletes with injuries about what needed to be done in order to make an effective return to sport. One coach suggested that this was beneficial from a coaching standpoint because rather than having to “flog” the message himself, athletes without injuries could see what was involved in making an effective return to sport.

The primary physical benefit of continued involvement was believed to relate to the maintenance and/or improvement of particular skills and techniques. Having the time to focus on specific skills and technical areas of one’s game was regarded as important for ensuring quality performances once the athlete began competing. One of the squash coaches reported feeling that one of his athletes was hitting the ball better following his return to sport than he was prior to the injury because his injury forced him to focus on specific aspects of his game.

A caveat raised regarding the issue of athlete involvement raised by coaches was that it was important to have athletes participate in ways in which they were able to help themselves improve. Five coaches commented that forcing athletes to watch others perform skills they were unable or not yet allowed to perform could result in boredom and/or frustration. One of the track and field coaches indicated that in an individual sport it was more important to modify athlete’s training program to best suit their needs than to have them stand around and watch others simply for the sake of being around others. Several team sport coaches echoed this sentiment. A netball coach for example, articulated the importance of having athletes participate in team activities where they could be physically active (e.g., the weight training room) or could contribute to the team by performing a particular role or function.

*Providing social support.* Coaches reported believing that an important part of their role with returning athletes was to ensure that athletes' support needs were met. The provision of various types of social support—namely, emotional, tangible and informational—were articulated.

Emotional forms of support mentioned included: taking a personal interest in the athlete, counteracting unrealistic expectations, and providing positive encouragement and reassurance following a poor performance or injury-related setback. Taking a personal interest in the athlete by simply listening to their concerns was believed to be important for maintaining a positive coach-athlete relationship. A triathlon coach emphasized the importance of taking an interest in the athlete's life as a whole as a way of maintaining a close coach-athlete relationship. He suggested that his athletes were like “members of the family” and that they knew they could talk to him about any difficulties they were facing, sport-related or otherwise. For this triathlon coach, taking a personal interest in the athlete was important especially at times when an athlete might be going through a difficult period, like a return to sport from injury.

Coaches also suggested that athletes often had unrealistic expectations for making a quick return to form. As one rugby coach commented “they want to get straight back in and be as good as they were before. That's probably where a coach needs to slow them down a little bit and give them a reality check...” It was reported that unrealistic expectations could result in a “vicious circle” of frustration, poorer performances and reduced confidence. The importance of counteracting unrealistic expectations was emphasized. One coach remarked:

I just try and guide them and point them back in the right direction because generally what they're thinking is pretty unrealistic and irrational so you've just got to calm them down and point them back in the right direction again. It's not a big shift, you've just got to slightly change the focus a bit.

Finally, coaches reported providing athletes with positive encouragement and reassurance following a poor performance or an injury-related setback. Coaches suggested that it was not uncommon for athletes to experience frustration if they were not meeting their personal expectations. Reminding athletes of what they had achieved and what they were yet to accomplish was perceived as helpful in getting athletes through difficult periods. The following types of statements were aimed at providing those experiencing difficulty with emotional support: “You’re not going to be here the whole time. With more training, you’re going to get better and be back where you should be” or “I know that you’re not back at your best yet, I know you’ve got a lot more to come but that’s a great start mate. You’re on your way and I’m stoked.”

The provision of tangible support included the use of goal-setting, arranging meetings with sport psychologists and organizing matches against lower caliber opponents. Setting goals was regarded as important for giving athletes a sense of direction about what lay ahead. Coaches indicated that athletes got excited about having a vision of where things were headed and what competitions they were aiming to compete in. As one coach said, it’s important to “... let them know that there is light at the end of the tunnel and then show them how to get there.” The importance of verbalizing “different stepping stones” on the path to achieving one’s post-injury goals was emphasized.

During the initial part of the return to sport, coaches reported that they emphasized specific process goals in order to build athletes’ confidence that they were physically healed and ready to achieve their goals. Setting clearly defined and reasonable goals for the initial return to sport was seen as important for keeping athlete expectations at a reasonable level and helping them avoid a sense of frustration. As one of the squash coaches commented: “it helps them to say that’s what I’m working toward so they don’t get carried away with things that are a bit too early for them. If it doesn’t quite happen for them early on when they’re still recovering, confidence can get knocked.”

Another form of tangible support mentioned by coaches was referral to and/or work with a sport psychologist. Although coaches recognized the importance of providing social support to athletes, many believed it was impossible for them to be all things to each athlete. Recognizing signs of difficulty and when referral to a sport psychologist was needed was considered part of the coaches' role. Sport psychologists were also used to facilitate the return transition by assisting coaches in goal-setting and imagery exercises. This process was reported to be especially useful in helping ease athletes' transition back into sport because they had the chance to discuss and mentally rehearse potential barriers and/or difficult situations.

A third form of tangible support discussed in coach interviews was the arrangement of matches between returning athletes and lower caliber opponents. These matches were believed to provide athletes with opportunities to work on particular skills and to build confidence. The importance of emphasizing process goals during initial matches was articulated. As one of the squash coaches commented: "Initially, we targeted certain areas movement-wise. If she was able to get the ball back or able to move to a certain area of the court, that was considered a success."

Providing athletes with as much information and feedback as possible about their current skill and/or performance levels and capabilities was considered important. This was done through biomechanical analyses, fitness and strength testing and video analysis. Coaches reported feeling that providing such information gave athletes a better understanding of their current performance levels, a sense of control over the return process, and an understanding about what needed to be done to achieve their goals. The triathlon coach discussed how one of his athletes found the use of video analysis to be beneficial in enabling the athlete to see positive changes in his technique. This was also reported to have positive motivational consequences for the triathlete.

## Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to gain a deeper understanding of professional coaches' perspectives of the return to sport following serious injury. Information regarding the process in which athletes were deemed ready to return to sport, perceptions of the stressors of returning to sport and coaches' perceived role in assisting returning athletes was obtained. One of the issues discussed by coaches in the present investigation was the decision-making process involved in returning athletes to sport following serious injury. This topic has received very little empirical attention. Investigations that have examined the topic have looked at the factors influencing coach decisions to return athletes with moderate injuries (e.g., a second degree ankle) to competition. Flint and Weiss (1992) found that high-school and university basketball coach decisions were influenced by the player's status (Bench player, substitute, starter) and the game situation (e.g., a close game, a clear win/loss). Similarly, Vergeer & Hogg (1999) found that athletes' ability, along with the importance of the upcoming competition, influenced gymnastics coach's decisions to return athletes to competition. Specifically, for important competitions, the likelihood of competing was greater for athletes of high ability than those of average ability. According to Vergeer and Hogg (1999), coaches weigh the importance of the competition against the athlete's chances of success at that meet. An exception to this decision making pattern was made, however, for younger athletes (i.e., 8 year olds versus 15 year olds) with more severe injuries (i.e., a severe 2<sup>nd</sup> degree ankle sprain versus a mild sprain). In these instances, no differences appeared between average ability and higher-level performers. Vergeer and Hogg (1999) concluded that coach decisions appear to be influenced by their assessments of interactions among situational factors.

Findings from this investigation extend research on decision-making processes by examining the role of professional coaches in decisions to return athletes with severe acute and chronic injuries. It was apparent that all considerations were secondary to formal medical clearance in determining

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athletes' readiness to return. Although all coaches indicated an awareness of the potential psychological stressors involved in returning to sport after injury, differences were apparent in the extent to which coaches reported feeling comfortable addressing such concerns. While some coaches saw themselves as having somewhat of a parental role in assisting their athletes, others indicated that their primary role was to ensure that their athletes were physically ready to achieve top-level performances. Certainly, these individual differences may be a function of the coaching norms and values of different sports. They may also be a product of individual differences with regards to coaching philosophies on injured athletes, or the result of the unique characteristics of this particular sample. Future research could examine the factors associated with coach involvement and the extent to which they feel comfortable addressing the psychological issues associated with injured athletes' return to sport following injury.

Findings from this investigation also extend knowledge about coaches' role in decisions to return athletes with injuries to sport by highlighting the importance of effective coach-practitioner communication. Although research has been conducted on athlete/therapist communication during injury recovery (e.g., Potter, Gordon, & Hamer, 2003) little is known about coach/therapist interactions regarding decisions to return athletes with serious injuries to training and competition. As individuals playing an integral role in such decisions, it is imperative to maximize the effectiveness of the coach/therapist relationship. Coaches in this investigation were typically satisfied with the accuracy and amount of information they received from treatment providers regarding returning athletes. The purposefully selected sampling of this investigation and its qualitative nature, however, indicates the strong likelihood of a selection bias. Presumably only coaches who felt comfortable articulating their views participated in the investigation. Coaches who wanted nothing to do with athletes with injuries or who did not want athletes with injuries around their teams (due to potential "contaminating effects") were unlikely to have participated in this

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study. Thus, the findings may be limited to this particular sample or *some* professional coaches. Nonetheless, the finding that coaches were generally satisfied with the information they received from treatment practitioners does highlight the potential profitability of research into coach expectations of treatment providers and vice-versa.

The benefit of having on-site physiotherapists was an issue raised by coaches that has not been documented in previous publications. These types of arrangements were generally considered useful in terms of facilitating discussion regarding athlete activity levels and planning or charting the course of athletes' return to full activity. Although coaches did not discuss the issue, the arrangement of on-site physiotherapists may pose a number of potential dual role conflicts for clinicians in these positions. The obligation of the therapist for ensuring the safety and well-being of the athlete may not always coincide with the coaches' opinion or desire to have the athlete return. Ethical and professional questions regarding who the therapist is ultimately responsible to may arise in these types of situations. Research examining the views of on-site physiotherapists and the manner in which potential role conflicts are handled could be addressed in future research.

Coach perceptions regarding the stressors associated with returning to sport were largely consistent with psychological theory and research on sport injury recovery and return to sport participation (e.g. Bianco, 2001; Crossman, 1997; Gould et al., 1997; Johnston & Carroll, 1998). In line with Wiese-Bjornstal et al.s', (1998) cognitive appraisal model in which injury is considered a stressor, coaches in this investigation indicated that returning to sport following a serious injury could be stressful for elite level athletes. Moreover, consistent with appraisal theories of adjustment to injury, coaches indicated that individual differences were apparent in the extent to which athletes may experience any or all of the stressors mentioned in this investigation. The key personal (e.g., personality, injury severity and location) and situational (e.g., timing of the return to sport, social

support) factors moderating athletes' cognitive appraisals of their return to sport remains unclear. More research is needed in this area.

Coach perceptions of the physical stressors of returning to sport replicate findings in the extant literature on athlete fears of re-injury (Andersen, 2001; Kvist et al. 2005), concerns over physical fitness (Taylor & Taylor, 1997; Tracey, 2003), and difficulties making technical adjustments as a result of the injury (Gould et al., 1997). Interestingly, athletes in Tracey's (2003) investigation did not report experiencing fears of re-injury. According to Tracey (2003), these fears may not yet have become salient because some participants were still a long way from their return to sport at the time of their final interview. It does seem likely that different types of stressors may be more or less significant depending upon the stage of injury recovery and/or return to sport. Coaches in this investigation also described being aware of other athlete concerns relating to performance including "falling behind others", losing or regaining a spot on the team and returning to pre-injury competitive levels. Their comments on this account are consistent with athlete descriptions of stressors encountered in returning to sport in the extant literature (e.g., Bianco, 2001; Podlog & Eklund, in press; Rotella, 1985; Tracey, 2003; Williams & Roepke, 1993).

Discussion of the social stressors associated with returning to sport were also generally consistent with previous research examining return to sport issues following injury (Bianco, 2001; Curry, 1993; Gould et al., 1997; Nixon, 1992; Young, White, & Mcteer, 1994). Specifically, coaches reported feeling that social isolation from teammates and training partners was a common stressor among returning athletes, a finding echoed in several investigations examining athlete stressors during the rehabilitation period (Bianco, 2001; Gould et al., 1997; Johnston & Carroll, 1998). Findings also revealed that notions of autonomy (i.e., the degree of personal control over one's circumstances) were prominent. In particular, the importance of not putting pressure on athletes and of "maintaining the locus of control with the athlete" was discussed. Pressuring an athlete into

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rushing their return could result in dire consequences including, reduced confidence, poorer performances, a greater risk of re-injury and a strained coach-athlete relationship. These results support previous research examining the negative consequences regarding pressures to return to sport following injury (Bianco, 2001; Curry, 1993; Nixon, 1992; Young, White, & Mcteer, 1994). For example, Canadian national team skiers reported returning to competition because they felt pressure to prove themselves to the coaches and they wanted to avoid losing a spot on the team (Bianco, 2001). All of the rookie team members in Bianco's purposive sample suffered further injuries that they attributed to their premature returns. The skiers commented that much of the pressure they experienced to return could be alleviated if there were no performance expectations placed on them by the coach or specific return deadlines.

Negative social comparisons (i.e., being beaten by others one used to beat) were cited as another key social stressor among returning athletes in the present investigation. Gould et al. (1997) also found that injured athletes identified social comparisons as a source of stress upon returning to competitive skiing. One returning athlete indicated that it was hard to "lose to people I used to beat", and another stated frustration over "being beat by people I used to beat (Gould et al., 1997, p.368)." That matters regarding the variety of potential stressors facing athletes returning from injury were in the awareness of the professional coaches in this investigation is encouraging. Nonetheless, these participants are not representative of all active coaches given they are professional coaches of elite athletes. Future investigation is needed to examine the extent of awareness among other active coaches as well as the potential utility of coaching education programs to ensure widespread awareness of relevant issues.

Coaches' revealed that one of the primary aims in working with returning athletes was to rebuild confidence in physical capabilities and their ability to regain pre-injury levels. In particular, individual training sessions involving positive encouragement and reassurance, goal-setting, and

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organizing matches against lower caliber opponents were designed to help athletes' reaffirm their sense of competence. In support of Cox's (2002) case study of a rugby player returning to sport following a severe injury, coaches in this investigation reported that seeing physical and technical improvements enhanced athletes' sense of competence in their abilities. The importance and effectiveness of coach-support in fostering athlete feelings of competence has received support in the literature (Bianco, 2001; Johnston & Carroll, 1998). More research however, is needed to determine athlete perceptions of the support they receive from coaches during the return-to-sport transition. Given the transactional nature of social support, it would seem important to assess the cognitions and behaviors that each of the participants engage in or claim to engage in (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994). The extent to which support exchanges are helpful for building athletes competence in returning to sport may be dependent on the extent to which athletes perceive the type, amount, and timing of the support offered as helpful. This remains a potentially fruitful area for future investigation.

Coaches also felt that an important part of their role in assisting athletes returning from injury was to maintain continued social contact and involvement with teammates, training partners and the coach. Continued social contact was deemed important for preventing feelings of alienation and isolation, a finding supported in numerous research articles and investigations (e.g., Ermler & Thomas, 1990; Gould et al., 1997). It was suggested that maintaining social contact minimized the difference between being injured and fully healthy. That is, continued social contact facilitated the return to sport because essentially the only difference between injured and fully healthy athletes was that the latter were training more intensely and were competing.

Statements from athletes in Tracey's (2003) investigation provide a counterpoint (and possible caution) to coaches' belief that keeping athletes involved in sport may be beneficial. Injured athletes indicated that attending practice was frustrating as it provoked concerns about fitness loss,

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reminded athletes of their participation restrictions, and reinforced beliefs about letting down their team simply by watching. These beliefs led to negative affective states including anxiety, frustration, anger and depression. These findings indicate that coaches may need to be cautious about the ways in which they attempt to keep athletes involved in sport. Individual differences may be apparent in terms of the extent to which athletes want to be involved with their teammates (specifically in terms of practice attendance) and the degree to which such involvement is psychologically beneficial. Nonetheless, findings from this investigation point to the fact that relatedness (i.e., connectedness) issues may figure prominently in the return to sport experience.

Overall, a number of important implications can be gleaned from these findings for coaches and applied sport psychology practitioners working with athletes returning to sport following serious injury. First, given the salience of competence, autonomy and relatedness issues discussed by coaches in this investigation and by athletes in previous research (Bianco, 2001; Gould et al., 1997; Johnston & Carroll, 1998; Podlog & Eklund, in press), it may be important to ensure that these issues are addressed. Second, findings from this investigation suggest that coaches are aware of the range of potential stressors facing athletes in returning to sport following injury. They also seem to be cognizant that individual differences may be present in the extent to which athletes experience such stressors. Consequently, discussions with athletes about any specific concerns, fears or difficulties may be useful as a return to sport approaches. Finally, in line with previous research examining the benefits of social support among injured athletes (e.g., Bianco, 2001; Johnston & Carroll, 1998), coaches indicated an awareness of the importance and potential benefits of providing social support to athletes returning to sport following serious injury. As indicated, attempts to provide the right type, amount and timing of support may be crucial in maximizing the effectiveness of support exchanges. While research has yet to document this assumption in the return-to-sport from injury context, the notion holds clear intuitive appeal.

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Although this study has provided important information regarding coach perspectives on the return from injury, two notable limitations merit attention. Coaches from a range of sports were represented in this investigation however, the list was by no means exhaustive. It may be that coaches from different sports (e.g., winter sports), sporting levels (e.g., “bigtime” professional sports, non-professional level, junior coaches, community league coaches) or sporting contexts (e.g., different countries) hold systematically different perspectives about the return to sport phase of injury recovery. There is therefore a need to examine coaches working in varying contexts with regard to their perceptions of the return to sport transition following injury.

Second, there may have been a discrepancy between the assistance coaches suggested they offered returning athletes and the “actual” assistance offered in order to present themselves in a socially desirable light. As Moran (2004) suggests, there may often be incongruencies between self-reported and “actual” behaviors. Studies relying on a triangulation of data sources (e.g., observation of coach behavior, injured and non-injured athlete interviews) may therefore help to eliminate biased information on the provision of assistance to returning athletes. Future investigations could examine the perceptions of athletes, administrators, and health practitioners regarding the assistance provided by coaches to athletes making a return to sport following injury.

The intent of this investigation was to examine professional coach perspectives on the return to sport process and their perceived role in assisting returning athletes. Findings suggest that professional coaches possess a good understanding of athlete experiences and perceptions of the return to sport following injury. They also regard the provision of various forms of assistance as an important part of their coaching responsibilities and appreciate the benefits of such assistance in facilitating the return transition.

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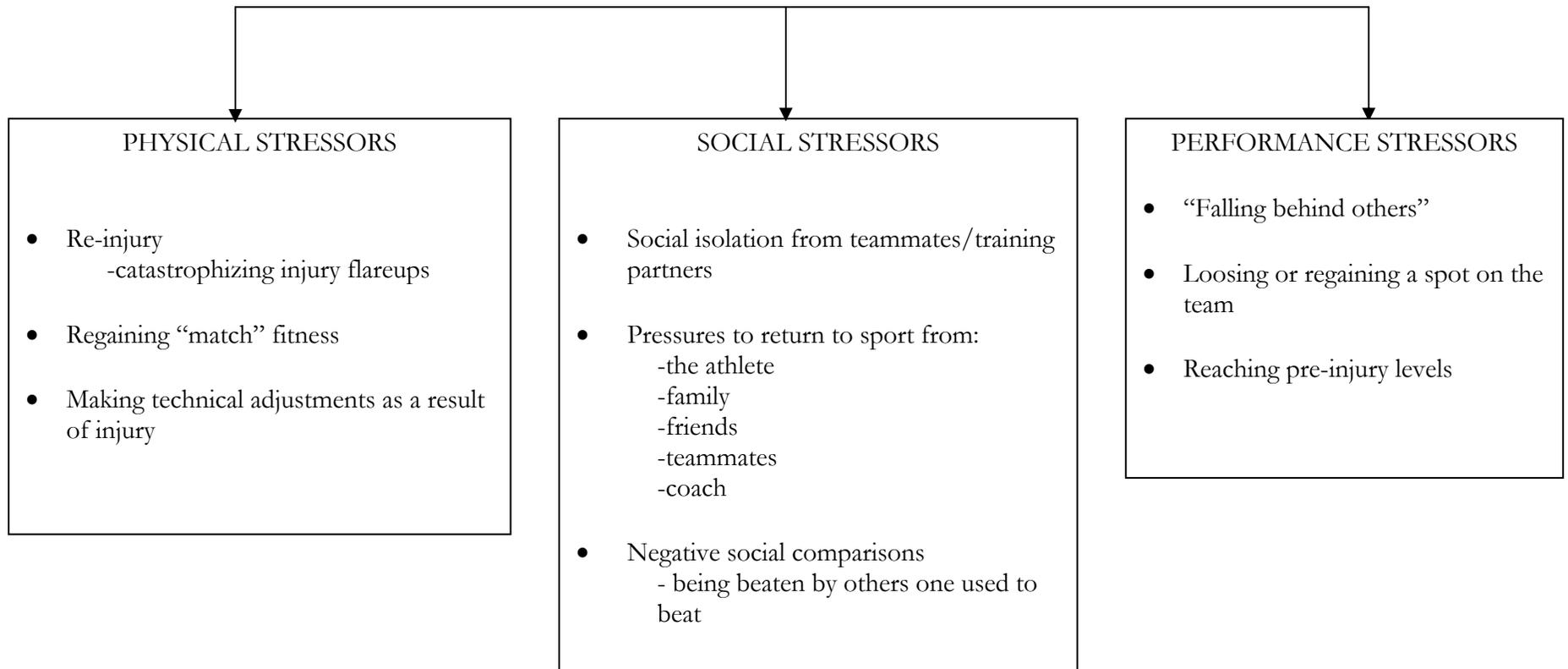
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**Figure Captions**

Figure 1. Coach perceptions of the stressors associated with returning to sport from injury

Figure 2. Coaches' role in assisting athletes with the return transition.

STRESSORS ASSOCIATED WITH RETURNING TO SPORT FROM INJURY



COACHES ROLE IN ASSISTING ATHLETES WITH THE RETURN TRANSITION

