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Exploring the Unique Challenges Faced by Female University Athletes Experiencing Prolonged Concussion Symptoms

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The present study explored female university athletes' experiences with protracted concussion symptoms, including the factors that impeded or facilitated their recovery. Five female athletes who competed in 4 different university sports in Canada participated in this study. All participants suffered concussion symptoms that lasted from 10 weeks to 14 months. An interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to inductively analyze the interview data. The participants discussed the unique challenges that stemmed from suffering a prolonged concussion while competing in university sport, which included serious emotional responses (depression, attempted suicide) and reduced academic performances. Participants also alluded to the types of emotional and informational support from their coaches, doctors, athletic therapists, and parents that facilitated their recovery. Overall, the detailed descriptions provided by the participants in this study offer a rare look into their lived experiences of university athletes suffering from protracted concussion symptoms. Given the serious emotional responses reported in this study, the present findings highlight the need to monitor concussed university athletes' psychological health and academic performance. These results provide individuals such as coaches, medical professionals, and sport psychology specialists with detailed information about the impact of protracted symptomatology on an athlete from a personal (social), athletic, and academic perspective, which may enhance their applied work with this population. The present findings also highlight the need for social support for concussed university athletes throughout their recoveries to help them cope during this important and challenging time of their lives.

Keywords: collegiate athletes, concussions, qualitative research, injury recovery, social support

Sport-related concussions have received a great deal of attention both inside and outside of the academic domain (Wiebe, Comstock, & Nance, 2011). Researchers have estimated that 1.6 to 3.8 million concussions occur each year (Langlois, Rutland-Brown, & Wald, 2006), with the majority of these injuries occurring in sport. According to McCrory and colleagues (2017), a concussion is a traumatic brain injury that results from biomechanical forces incurred through direct or indirect contact to the head, face, neck, or elsewhere on the body. Often, the neurological impairment that accompanies a concussion is transient, and physical signs of trauma (e.g., loss of consciousness) are rarely apparent following acute injury (McCrory et al., 2017).

Some of the most commonly reported concussion symptoms include headache, dizziness, fatigue, and sensitivity to light and sound (McCrory et al., 2017). Although the majority of symptoms resolve within 10–14 days among adults, ~10% to 20% of athletes experience protracted concussion symptoms[1] that can last for days, weeks, or in the most severe cases, for months to years (Stein, Alvarez, & McKee, 2015). For example, Caron, Bloom, Johnston, and Sabiston (2013) studied the effects of mul-

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[1] We used McCrory and colleagues' (2017) description of protracted concussion symptoms, which refer to concussion-related impairments among adults (>18 years old) that persist for longer than 10 to 14 days.