



The social dynamics involved in recovery and return to sport following a sport-related concussion: A study of three athlete-teammate-coach triads

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ABSTRACT

An athlete's connection to their team and team members is an important part of their sport experience. However, researchers currently know little about the nature of these social dynamics with respect to concussed athletes. Our study explored athletes' recovery and reintegration into the team environment following a sport-related concussion. We conducted semi-structured interviews with each member of three athlete-teammate-coach triads ($N = 9$). We analysed the data using thematic narrative analysis and present the results as three stories that focused on each athlete's experience. For *Cassie*, we found two major plot points in her story: the transition in her role (and shift in identity) from athlete to student assistant coach/team manager and, once recovered, back to an athlete on the team. For *Jess*, we found that the main plot in her story was "pressure". Specifically, the interplay between internal (placed on herself) and external (perceived from teammates and coaches) pressures to return to sport. In the third and final story, the main plot point was the tensions that arose from *Jaden's* preferences for social support and the type of support that his teammates and coaches believed he needed during his recovery. Our results highlight the interplay between athlete's personal and social identities, feelings of pressure to return and readiness, and the challenges of providing the right amount and type of social support. This research contributes to our limited understanding of the social dynamics involved in athletes' return to sport following a concussion.

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Sport-related concussions are a type of traumatic brain injury caused by a direct or indirect blow to the head, face, neck or elsewhere on the body that results in impaired cognitive functioning (Caron, 2019). An ever-expanding literature on sport-related concussions has investigated a variety of topics related to diagnosis, management, and long-term sequelae associated with the injury and recovery process (e.g., Broglio et al., 2019; Kontos et al., 2019). However, the psychosocial aspects of sport-related concussions remain an under-explored phenomenon (Kontos, 2017).

Contemporary research on psychosocial aspects of sport-related

concussions can, at least in part, be traced back to the work of neuropsychologist Dr. Jeffrey Barth and his colleagues (e.g., Barth et al., 1983; Rimel et al., 1981), who studied individuals who acquired brain injuries in motor vehicle accidents. Barth et al. found that study participants reported emotional stress and deficits associated with their attention, concentration, memory, and judgement. Almost 40 years later, researchers are in agreement that similar psychosocial impairments may also be observed in concussed athletes (Covassin et al., 2017; Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 2015). In a reviewing of the psychological implications that can result from sport-related concussions, Covassin et al. (2017) found that topics like mood disturbance, anxiety, depression, and suicide have all received empirical attention in relation to concussed athletes. Additionally, Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (2015) developed a conceptual model to hypothesize the types of psychological responses that

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