The purpose of this study was to examine female varsity athletes’ perceptions of teammate conflict. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 19 female varsity athletes (M age = 21.17 years) from four sport teams. Analysis revealed that conflict was a prevalent feature of playing on their teams. Conflict relating to performance and relationships was identified. Strategies athletes thought may help create conditions for managing conflict were to (a) engage in team building early in the season, (b) address conflict early, (c) engage mediators in the resolution of conflict, and (d) hold structured (rather than unstructured) team meetings. It also seemed that athletes required personal conflict resolution skills. These findings are compared with previous research and offered as implications for professional practice.

Sport psychology researchers and practitioners have devoted a great deal of attention to understanding ways in which to optimize team functioning and performance. Numerous approaches to team building have been reported, including (but not limited to) promoting communication (Crace & Hardy, 1997; Yukelson, 1997), personal disclosure interventions (Dunn & Holt, 2004; Pain & Harwood, 2009), and team goal setting (Senecal, Loughhead, & Bloom, 2008). Interventions designed to enhance task and social cohesion have also been presented (Spink, 2011). In addition to promoting team building, sport psychology consultants (SPCs) may also be required to improve team functioning by helping to resolve conflict between teammates (Hardy & Crace, 1997).

Conflict between teammates can undermine team cohesion and performance (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). For example, Holt and Sparkes (2001) found numerous sources of conflict between teammates on a collegiate (male) soccer team, including disputes about playing roles, accusations of selfishness, and poor communication, all of which appeared to be negatively associated with cohesion and performance. Conflict has also been identified as a feature of friendships (Weiss, Smith, & Theeboom, 1996; Weiss & Smith, 1999) and peer motivational climate (Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005; Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2005) in youth...
sport. Similarly, Holt, Black, Tamminen, and Fox (2008) found that conflict was a prevailing feature of involvement on (female) adolescent soccer teams. Results from this season-long qualitative study with two teams showed that some players decided to resolve their differences for the good of the team. Others formed small groups of friends on the team to deal with conflict, while some tended to ‘ignore’ or move away from conflict. Combined, the findings from these studies indicate that conflict is a relevant issue that influences peer/teammate interactions in various sport settings.

Given the potential negative consequences of conflict for team cohesion and performance (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Holt & Sparkes, 2001), Weinberg and Gould (2011) suggested that SPCs working with teams should “resolve conflict immediately” (p. 199). In fact, one of the primary reasons we conducted this study arose from the lead author’s experiences of working with university sport teams in the past. He had encountered some conflict and suspected other conflict occurred without specifically being brought to his attention. Unfortunately, the types of teammate conflict that occur and the ways in which conflict can be resolved have not been extensively documented in the sport psychology literature. Furthermore, as LaVoi (2007) pointed out, coaches’ and athletes’ ability to manage conflict may too often (and mistakenly) be taken for granted. With little previous research to guide his actions, the lead author decided to conduct the current study to learn more about conflict in university-level sport to help guide future work. Hence, the current study addressed the issues described above with a view to providing some applied implications for SPCs.

Conflict involves disputes or disagreements between two or more people (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006) and is “a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party” (Wall & Callister, 1995, p. 517). Hence, the basic source of conflict lies in one party’s needs being opposed by another party’s needs and one party being deprived or frustrated by the other party (Pruitt, 2006). Although there are competing definitions and nomenclature, there are generally two types of conflict. One is achievement/content/performance conflict (‘performance conflict’) that refers to issues relating to the execution of a particular task. The other type is relational (‘relationship conflict’) and refers to emotional or interpersonal issues (LaVoi, 2007; Rahim, 2002). Both types of conflict have been shown to have negative associations with team performance if not addressed (Drew & Weingart, 2003). However, moderate levels of performance conflict (e.g., when individuals disagree about how to solve an issue) may ultimately have a positive influence on performance if it stimulates discussion and problem-solving among team members (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). For example, players may disagree about the extent to which teammates are adhering to a personal fitness training program during the off-season (i.e., a performance task). The disagreement may arise due to the timing of the fitness sessions (e.g., early morning). If this disagreement stimulated discussion and problem-solving between teammates it could lead to improvements in the training schedule and ultimately increase individuals’ adherence to the fitness program. In this case a performance conflict could have positive consequences for the team.

Organizational psychology research has shown that relationship conflict generally appears to be more destructive than performance conflict (see Schulz-Hardt, Jochims, & Frey, 2002). Relationship conflict often produces tension and antago-
nism that distract team members from performing the task. Emotional resources are used for managing and reducing interpersonal friction rather than working to resolve the problem (Teakleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009). When relationship conflict occurs people often resist alternatives, solutions, and options to resolve the conflict (Gilley, Lane Morris, Waite, Coates, & Veliquette, 2010). Furthermore, unresolved conflict has a destructive and negative impact on team performance (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2002). Conflict resolution competencies are therefore absolutely critical to the effectiveness of teams (Gilley et al., 2010). Some of these concepts from organizational psychology were used to inform the latter phases of the analysis conducted in the current study.

The notions of performance and relationship conflict have some similarities with the ways in which cohesion has been studied in sport teams. Cohesion can be conceptualized in terms of perceptions of group integration and individual attractions to the group based on task and social aspects of group involvement (Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002). Performance conflict may be a feature that relates to (i.e., undermines) task cohesion. Relationship conflict appears to be a feature of social cohesion, in that measures of individual attraction to the group, reaction to conflict, and tolerance of differences have been used assess social cohesion (Carron et al., 2002). Thus, sport psychology research in the area of cohesion, while not directly addressing teammate conflict, further suggests that conflict is an important and relevant issue to examine.

In summary, it has been recommended that SPCs deal with teammate conflict (Weinberg & Gould, 2011) and shown that conflict occurs on male collegiate (Holt & Sparkes, 2001) and female youth sport (Holt et al., 2008) teams, but little is known about the prevalence of conflict, type of conflict, and ways to manage conflict in sport teams. An initial step to redress these gaps in the sport psychology literature is to examine athletes’ perceptions of conflict. We studied team (rather than individual) sport athletes because on teams there is a high reliance on teammates for performance success, including issues such as communication and coordination. Female athletes were sampled because conflict may be a particularly salient feature of participation on female teams (Carron et al., 2002; Holt et al., 2008). University (i.e., varsity) athletes were selected in part because the idea for this study came from the lead author’s experiences working in varsity sport, plus the fact we wanted to recruit from multiple teams of similar levels of performance for the purposes of comparison (and we had access to the teams in question). Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine female varsity athletes’ perceptions of teammate conflict. The following research questions were addressed: (1) What are some of the features of teammate conflict in varsity sports? (2) What strategies may be useful in attempting to manage teammate conflict?

**Method**

**Participants and Recruitment**

Following Institutional Research Ethics Board approval the lead researcher obtained approval from the Athletics Department at a large Canadian university to approach coaches of female teams to ask for permission to contact their athletes. Coaches were e-mailed and they provided permission to approach their athletes and identified
individuals who met the sampling criteria (see below). Athletes were contacted via e-mail and asked to participate in the study. In this e-mail it was explained that participation was voluntary and not a condition of their involvement on their teams. Furthermore, it was emphasized that their coaches would not be made aware of who agreed to participate in the study, and issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and use of data were explained. Interested participants replied to the e-mail and an interview was scheduled.

A purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2002) was used, which means specific sampling criteria were established a priori to recruit participants who could provide the most insightful responses to the research questions. The first criterion was to recruit female athletes. Second, athletes from the sports of ice hockey, volleyball, field hockey, and basketball were recruited because these teams were among the most successful in the country. We recruited successful teams because (we assumed) they may have been able to deal with conflicts in the past and thus obtaining the views of the athletes from these teams would be useful in providing some implications for practice. The success of the teams was reflected by the fact that in the previous five years they had won a combined total of six Canada West (i.e., regional/zonal) conference titles and 12 Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) national championship medals (5 gold, 4 silver, 3 bronze).

The third sampling criterion was to recruit players with two, three, or four years of playing experience. This criterion was applied because these more senior athletes were likely to have experienced numerous types of conflict at different stages of their university career and may also have been involved in trying to resolve such conflict (cf. Weinberg & Gould, 2011). We did not recruit athletes with only one year of experience because in the CIS system players have five years of eligibility (and college transfers and graduate students are also permitted to compete). As such, it is rare that first year players are extensively involved in a team—most (with some exceptions of course) tend to be ‘red shirts’ (i.e., members of the squad but not the competitive team) and those who actually make the ‘first team’ usually see limited playing time. Hence, athletes with more seniority were sampled because they would have more experiences to draw on (having been on the team for several years) and therefore be able to provide insightful responses that could be used to answer the research questions (cf. Patton, 2002).

In total, 19 female athletes (M age 21.17 years, SD = .92) participated in this study. They were from the sports of ice hockey (n = 7), volleyball (n = 6), field hockey (n = 4), and basketball (n = 2). They had completed two (n = 6), three (n = 6), and four (n = 7) years of playing on their team. All athletes provided written informed consent.

Data Collection

Each athlete participated in one semistructured individual interview, which lasted approximately 50–60 min. Interviews were completed in a private office on the university campus by one experienced and one less experienced interviewer. The lead author did not conduct any interviews because he was a professor at the university in question and (while he did not work directly work with any of the teams/athletes in the study) was a colleague of the coaches, which may have negatively influenced how forthcoming the athletes would be during their interviews. The more
experienced interviewer had worked with one of the teams as an SPC but she did not conduct interviews with members of the team with which she worked—hence the need for the second interviewer (who completed six interviews). These two interviewers worked together, under the supervision of the lead researcher, to ensure a rigorous approach to interviewer training and interview guide development.

The less experienced interviewer’s training was extensive. Before the start of the study he worked with the lead author for six weeks to develop a background understanding of qualitative research and interviewing. This involved a weekly meeting, readings about interviewing techniques, and discussion of these readings. Two mock interviews were then completed. First, the less experienced interviewer interviewed the more experienced interviewer (using the preliminary version of the interview guide). Then the more experienced interviewer interviewed the less experienced interviewer. The less experienced interviewer also conducted three pilot interviews (explained below). Audio files from interviews were reviewed and discussed to help refine the interviewer’s skills, particularly in terms of when to probe for further information to obtain concrete accounts of specific events that had occurred. A debriefing protocol was also put in place. The two interviewers debriefed after every interview to discuss what went well and if any areas could be improved (particularly in terms of using probes to elicit concrete accounts). The second interviewer had a weekly one-on-one meeting with the lead author to discuss the study. All three members of the research team also met on a weekly basis to further review and discuss the data collection (and later, analysis). This protocol prepared the less experienced interviewer and ensured a level of consistency between the manner in which the interviews conducted by both interviewers. That is, while the interviews were not standardized (because they were semistructured—as explained below), both interviewers were ‘on the same page’ in terms of emerging issues they should probe and in the general manner the interviews should be carried out.

Given the lack of previous research into conflict on competitive adult teams, the initial version of the interview guide was created based on questions used in previous qualitative studies of teammate conflict in youth sport psychology (i.e., Holt et al., 2008; Weiss et al., 2006) and suggestions for future team conflict research in organizational psychology (Deutsch, 2006). The interview guide included open-ended questions and was designed in a semistructured manner to allow participants to discuss issues relevant to their experiences and avoid ‘forcing’ data into preconceived ideas (Smith, 1995). The interview guide was refined following the training protocol and mock/pilot interviews. In particular, the three pilot interviews with female tennis players (conducted by the less experienced interviewer) helped establish the appropriateness of the interview guide. Data from these interviews were not included in the study but were useful for helping to clarify some of the key issues to examine and ways in which to phrase certain questions. We evaluated the appropriateness of the structure of the interview and some of the specific questions asked. In addition to minor phrasing issues, two main improvements were made to the guide. First, a longer introductory/rapport building section was added. Second, the need to provide ‘our’ definition of teammate conflict was identified as an issue to make clearer in the interview guide.

Before each interview the participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, that there were no right or wrong answers, that we were interested in their own
experiences and opinions, their participation was voluntary, and their responses would remain confidential. The interview guide was divided into four sections: Ice-breakers, transition questions, main questions, and concluding questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). After asking the participants to provide demographic information, the ice-breaker questions were designed to give us a basic understanding of the individual and their team’s dynamics and to help the participant feel at ease in the interview situation. These questions were posed in a very conversational manner and included asking participants to describe the team dynamics, atmosphere, and their general role on the team to help create some rapport. Transition questions focused on types of conflict. First, participants were asked, “How would you define conflict?” Then participants were given our broad definition of conflict (i.e., disputes or disagreements between two or more teammates: cf. Rubin et al., 2006; Wall & Callister, 1995) to ensure interviewer and interviewee were talking about conflict between teammates (rather than, for example, with coaches). Participants were then asked to describe conflict they had experienced consistent with our definition. The interviewers did not direct the interviewees to make any distinction between performance and relationship conflict—these concepts were applied during the latter stages of data analysis. The main questions focused on conflict management/ attempts at resolution (e.g., How were you involved in managing any of the conflict? How did you feel about the conflict? What were the consequences? If the conflict was resolved, how did resolution take place? What do you think is the most effective means of conflict resolution on your team? What types of things could you do to help prevent conflict?). For concluding questions participants were asked to further reflect and recap on the main types and sources of conflict, means of resolution, recommendations for managing conflict, and if they had anything else to add. Throughout the interviews participants were asked to provide concrete examples and discuss specific events that had occurred during their tenure on the team. The guide is available from the lead author. Participants received a $25 gift certificate for a grocery store as a token of appreciation for their involvement upon completion of the interview.

Data Analysis

Audio files were transcribed verbatim, which produced 667 pages of typed data. Analysis followed the steps of content analysis (as outlined by Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) and was led/coordinated by the first author in conjunction with the two other members of the research team (i.e., the two interviewers). All transcripts were coded to ensure confidentiality (and pseudonyms were assigned). Individual meaning units were first identified using ‘line-by-line’ inductive analysis rather than imposing a framework on the data. That is, salient units of meaning were identified. The term line-by-line analysis is a little misleading because although researchers review every line of a transcript, meaning units identified may be represented by a phrase, sentence, or paragraph. Similar meaning units were coded together as themes. ‘Rules of inclusion’ (or ‘essence phases’) were written for each theme. These are propositional statements that describe the meaning of the provisional theme and the meaning units (i.e., data) housed in that theme. Similar themes were grouped together as categories, which were again assigned rules of inclusion to convey the meaning of the themes they represented. This process led to the provisional long list of specific themes being reduced to broader categories.
For example, themes identified in relation to the roles of captains/senior players, SPCs, and coaches mediating conflict were grouped into the category of ‘mediation.’ Throughout the analytic process each meaning unit, each theme, and each category was assessed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to ensure that the meaning units in each theme and the themes in each category were distinct and appropriately categorized. That is, meaning units, themes, and categories were constantly compared with each other and a table describing the connections between the themes/categories was created (Table 1). Emerging findings were discussed via weekly meetings among all three members of the research team.

Writing represents the final stages of qualitative analysis (Richardson, 1994). A written narrative was initially drafted, reviewed, and redrafted several times. To advance beyond the initial exploratory aspects of the study attempts were then made to link the findings (more deductively) to relevant previous research in sport and organizational psychology in terms of the categorizing the types of conflict (i.e., performance and relationship). Categories presented refer to the prevalence of conflict, types of conflict (performance and relationship) and creating conditions for conflict resolution. A final issue, that athletes lacked conflict resolution skills, was also identified. This emerged as a consequence of interrogating the findings for missing links in the data in terms of what athletes said and ‘did not say’ regarding how they personally dealt with conflict (cf. Thorne, 2008).

**Methodological Rigor and Validity**

We used self-correcting verification strategies during the process of the research itself (see Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) in addition to ‘post hoc’

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<th>Themes</th>
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<td>Types of Conflict</td>
<td>Performance Conflict</td>
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<td>Practice and Competition Concerns</td>
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<td>Playing Time</td>
<td>Relationship Conflict</td>
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<td>Interpersonal disputes/disagreements</td>
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<td>Conflicting personalities</td>
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<td>Creating Conditions for Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>Team building</td>
<td>Team Building Early in Season</td>
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<td>‘Nip it in the bud’</td>
<td>Address Conflict Early</td>
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<td>Don’t let conflict escalate</td>
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<td>Go to captains/senior players</td>
<td>Mediation</td>
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<td>Go to sport psychologist</td>
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<td>Go to coach [last resort]</td>
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<td>Unstructured team meetings</td>
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<td>Resolving own conflict?</td>
<td>Missing Link—Conflict Resolution Skills</td>
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techniques. Specifically, given the novel aspects of the research and the lack of previous research in this area, extensive attention was given to the creation and refinement of the interview guides and preparation of the interviewers. This included extensive interviewer training, pilot testing the interview guide, and regular debriefing during the course of the study to self-correct any problems. The analysis was also reviewed and assessed by all members of the research team continuously (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

In addition to these measures taken during the course of the study, all participants were e-mailed a one-page summary of the results and asked to comment if it was an accurate reflection of their experiences and/or if there was anything they thought was incorrect. Fourteen athletes responded and they were overwhelmingly positive in their support for the results. They made comments such as “I find it to be consistent with my experiences and an accurate representation of my responses.” “Ya that sounds perfect and reflects our discussion quite accurately. Everything that you have printed I have had an experience with.” “I agree with the different types of conflict, as well as that there are different means to mediate different issues that may arise as such.” “Conflicting relationships between players, especially with the significant amounts of time spent together through my experience are the most difficult to deal with.” Hence, member-checking supported the analysis.

The results were also presented at a meeting of professors, coaches, and coaching/sport psychology undergraduate and graduate students for scrutiny. The purpose of this presentation was not to revisit the analysis, but rather to help ensure that findings were logical, coherent, compelling, and that the applied implications were relevant and made practical sense (cf. Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The findings appeared to be compelling to the audience, and coaches in particular, because several requested follow-up meetings and sought ways to incorporate conflict management strategies into their coaching practice.

Results and Discussion

Prevalence of Conflict

Writing in sport psychology, LaVois (2007) claimed that, “conflict is an inevitable part of life and relationships” (p. 34). Although this claim has not been empirically documented in the sport psychology literature, we found evidence that conflict was a regular occurrence and a normal feature of being involved on all the teams. Participants made comments such as “There’s always people that don’t get along, but then I think that’s with every team” (P3), “I guess it just sucks but it’s [conflict] always gonna happen” (P13), “You’re never gonna be able to prevent having any conflict” (P14), and “I don’t think you’ll ever have a season without conflict” (P1).

Several participants also thought conflict was particularly salient among female teams. P14 suggested that, “during girls’ sports it’s like there’s always gonna be conflict because people’s emotions get involved” and similarly P18 said “…especially girls I think. Girls are way worse than boys…. Girls specifically do crave it [conflict]. There are girls on my team that will go looking for trouble sometimes.” These findings reflect studies that have shown conflict is a more prevalent feature of females’ friendships in sport than males (Weiss et al., 1996) and a regular part of involvement on female (adolescent) teams (Holt et al., 2008). Furthermore, based
on their meta-analysis of team cohesion research in sport, Carron et al. (2002) suggested, “from a performance perspective, it would seem especially important for coaches and applied sport psychologists to strive to maintain high cohesiveness and prevent team conflict in female teams” (p. 183). The current findings support this perspective.

**Performance Conflict**

Ten athletes reported issues that were coded in the theme of performance conflict. Performance conflict was coded as issues that centered around practice and competition concerns (i.e., related to the task) and playing time (see Table 1). For example, P12 explained that:

> Everyone on the team’s really competitive so it’s usually more like performance conflicts that start to come out. [That] would be more of what happens on our team. Like within practices, if people are getting frustrated with people during the practice time, that’s usually when they’ll start bitching about that… I guess yeah talking about the performance, people’s performance.

In addition, some performance conflict arose from concerns about playing time. For example, P16 said:

> There was some [conflict] where people, there were just like less skilled players and more skilled players that were, in regards to ice time and stuff like that. People would get frustrated and just, they’d fumble the puck or cause turnovers.

Our analysis suggested that performance conflicts were not necessarily extremely dysfunctional. In fact, performance conflict could be functional. The following quote from P13 captured this perspective. She said:

> A lot of the [performance] conflict isn’t necessarily a bad thing… I think a lot of that conflict ends up coming from the will to win… I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad conflict or a bad thing to come up…. I think for me that’s a good thing because otherwise I’d be on a complacent team and that’s not where I want to be…

These findings tend to support the idea that conflict relating to performance can have beneficial performance effects under certain circumstances (Jehn et al., 1999).

**Relationship Conflict**

Fourteen athletes reported issues that were coded as relationship conflict. Relationship conflict referred to interpersonal disputes/disagreements between two or more teammates that did not directly relate to a performance issue on the court/field/ice as well as conflicting personalities (see Table 1). We categorized what the athletes referred to as disputes/disagreements and conflicting personalities conflict under the umbrella category of ‘relationship conflict,’ which captured the fact that the issues raised all reflected interpersonal relationship issues. Athletes reported that relationship conflict was more dysfunctional than performance conflict. P5 said:
I think performance based conflicts are more, in terms of, they’re the easiest thing to resolve. Um, personal conflicts are very hard to resolve [emphasis added]… [Performance conflicts are] just you as an athlete, it’s not you as a person. When you’re dealing with people as a person… their flaws are being exposed and people don’t like their flaws being exposed. It’s very uncomfortable and it’s very hard to do it in a way that you’re not criticizing them as a person.

Similarly, P17 reported that:

Um, I’d say less destructive would be the things [that happen] on the court [i.e., performance conflict], when things happen, arguments happen, like in the heat of the moment, because obviously everyone knows it’s in the heat of the moment of the game, and those are the things that are usually pretty easy to like get over after and just talk about them. And I guess more destructive would be I guess more personal things [emphasis added]. Like if someone was annoyed with like someone just in general or something they were doing I guess outside of volleyball, and they just didn’t really get along. I guess that could be brought like onto the court and kind of affect team play.

Our findings and previous research in organizational psychology (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2002; Teakleab et al., 2009) therefore suggest that relationship conflict may be particularly destructive and dysfunctional.

Creating Conditions for Conflict Resolution

There was not a ‘one size fits all’ type solution for dealing with conflict. As P5 remarked, “I don’t think there’s really any sort of map in conflict resolution because it’s individual based.” This view that there is neither a single model of conflict management nor a singular way to approach conflict in particular settings is entirely consistent with the organizational psychology literature (Deutsch, 2006). Retaining this caveat in mind, the subsequent sections are presented as different ways in which athletes thought conflict was and could be addressed in their teams.

Team Building Early in Season. Fourteen athletes identified that engaging in team building early in the season, while not preventing conflict, could build trust and open channels of communication to help them more effectively resolve conflict that may arise. For example, P8 said that a helpful activity her coach ran during the preseason was when they had:

A huge session of our training camp dedicated to goal setting and to expectations… We have goals to help us achieve them and then we have methods to help us achieve our goals. I believe that a lot of what we do in there, especially in the expectations of our players really sets the bar for you know, I am responsible for myself, I am responsible for my play and I am responsible for bringing the team up with me. And so I think that all those things together especially the last one, sort of connects you to the team… Just having everybody on the exact same page I believe is where it really starts.

Similarly, when asked what she would do to address conflict on her team, P11 said:
I would probably just kind of set up maybe some team values or team norms, 
um what is expected of the player and what’s expected of the coaches, so that, 
that those things are known, so it’s easier for people to know what they have 
to do… Keeping communication open ‘cause I feel like sometimes if there’s 
not good communication, then that can really make it hard to solve conflict… 
I think just communicating and team bonding or team kind of exercises help.

Sport psychology research has shown that team building exercises can be 
valuable in helping to establish social norms around the expected behaviors and 
interactions among teammates (Munroe, Estabrooks, Dennis, & Carron, 1999). 
Furthermore, establishing group communication processes early in the season may 
enhance the effectiveness of SPCs’ work during latter phases of a season (Holt & 
Dunn, 2006; Pain & Harwood, 2009; Windsor, Barker, & McCarthy, 2011). Our 
study builds upon these findings by suggesting that engaging in team building 
practices early in the season may have consequences in addition to team building 
outcomes because they create open lines of communication that may help in creating 
conditions for dealing with conflict during the season.

**Address Conflict Early.** Having engaged in early season team building, 10 athletes 
also emphasized that as the season progressed it was important to ‘nip it [conflict] 
in the bud.’ P4 said “I think people need to address it early rather than later, so it 
doesn’t build up inside of them.” P10 referred to a conflict she had been involved 
with and said it was better to:

Like nip it in the bud almost, like the conflict [last year]. Like if I hadn’t said 
something it could have gotten worse, but like since I did say something quite 
quickly it was like oh ‘OK like I’ll change’ and then that was like kind of the 
end of it. [But] if I hadn’t have said anything or if it just kind of had happened 
again then it would have been a bigger issue I think.

Similarly, athletes identified that not dealing with conflict early in the season could escalate 
problems later in the season. P13 said “within volleyball it depends on what point of the season it is… if it’s in February, like you stop it before it 
happens because that’s playoffs and you can’t have that.” And P8 provided further 
insight when she explained that:

The problems just come out in times, like my first year it’s the National 
Semi-finals, that’s when those issues come out. That’s when people see their 
opportunity to play in the National Championship and when stuff starts getting 
hard and those traits that people have come out.

The idea that conflict may change over the course of the season has previously 
been reported in a study of team dynamics over a season (Holt & Sparkes, 2001). 
The current findings emphasize that conflict should be addressed early (cf. Weinberg & Gould, 2011) because otherwise it may cause problems during the intensive pressurized environment of CIS conference and national championship playoffs in which up to three games may be played over the course of three or four days.

**Mediation.** Thirteen athletes referred to the importance of mediation, which involved the engagement of a third party in teammate conflict situations (i.e.,
captains/senior players, SPCs, or head coaches—as a last resort). The general perspective was that athletes first seek out the assistance of senior players and captains to mediate conflict. The athletes we interviewed acknowledged this process. P18 said:

I really think that having a captain, like mediator in the middle is one of the best ways... being a captain doesn’t necessarily mean you have to dictate how it gets resolved but you just kinda referee to make sure that it’s resolved.

P13 recognized this when she said: “It’s my role as a fifth-year player to get involved and kind of be more involved with it [dealing with conflict].” Similarly, P12 said:

But like now [as a senior player] I would, if I saw something like that I would probably like pull that girl aside, or one of those girls and be like, you know, like this isn’t going to work, like you should really try to do this. And [I] try to like help them out, and kinda just, kinda befriend them and try to like make them see a different side of things. So it kind of almost forces them to be open [to other perspectives].

The idea of engaging other players in conflict management has been reported in a previous study of adolescent females’ soccer teams (Holt et al., 2008). Involving captains and senior players as mediators has also been identified in a study of high school team captains. That is, Voelker, Gould, and Crawford (2011) found that captains reported the need to mediate, but stay neutral, in conflict situations on their teams.

Two teams worked with a SPC (one of whom was a member of the research team but she did not conduct interviews with any members of the team with which she worked or review their interview transcripts). In these teams athletes reported they would approach SPCs to help mediate conflict. For example, P1 explained a situation that had happened to her (and this situation involved one of the SPCs who was a coauthor of this study). P1 said:

I just went through [name of SPC] and like me, and [SPC], and [name of teammate with whom there was a conflict] sat down.... [It was] way easier than just having me and [teammate], cause I think it would it would turn into something else... The best way and the only way that I would go about it would be with [SPC].

Referring to a different SPC (who was not involved with this study) who worked with her team, P3 explained a similar instance:

I think it can help having a third party. It’s helped in the past when two people on our team don’t see eye to eye and then they can meet with our sports psych and then say what they wanna say. It’s just easier to kind of have a third party who’s not involved and maybe they can say their opinions too, and just kind of help get a happy medium.

Athletes were quite prepared to go to the head coach with performance conflict. But in terms of relationship conflict it seemed that the head coach would be
involved only when other mediation routes had been exhausted. In fact, athletes preferred not to involve their coaches in relationship conflict if possible. As P10 said:

You don’t want the coach ever to know that there is like stuff going on in the team, like it’s not like really their place... So if they get involved then it’s definitely escalated to like more than I guess our team could handle.

In this way the head coach was the ‘last resort’ for dealing with relationship conflict.

**Structure Team Meetings.** Thirteen athletes reported that team meetings played a role in conflict resolution. This finding was distinct from engaging mediators because team meetings involved convening the entire team to discuss conflict. We distinguished between *unstructured* and *structured team meetings*. Unstructured team meetings usually involved only the athletes and were a ‘free-for-all’ in which they discussed their concerns. These unstructured meetings appeared to be an ineffective means of resolving conflict; in fact, they often seemed to escalate the conflict. P1 explained that talking about an issue in a general team setting could be a problem because “[we] don’t want to create a bigger issue out of it and have a bigger problem with that person. Don’t want people on the team to be like off put like, taking sides or whatever.” Similarly, P10 referred to an unstructured meeting on her team that resulted in “those three friends hold[ing] grudges against the other person and that just [got] like more blown out of proportion like the more people involved.” And P13 reported a time when an unstructured meeting was called,

…by this one girl for this conflict. … she didn’t like the tone people talked to each other... She still didn’t agree by the end of the meeting. There were 15 people who agreed… who think that ‘this is OK’ and then there’s one person who’s really bothered by it.

Such unstructured team meetings in which players simply gather to discuss an issue may actually lead to participants adopting entrenched positions that can escalate conflict (Pruitt, 2006).

On the other hand, several instances of structured team meetings helping to resolve relationship conflict were reported. Often these meetings were mediated by a SPC (on the two teams that had access to a consultant). One SPC (who was not an author of this study) organized ‘rap sessions’ which were a structured approach to deal with any issues. P3 explained the format of these rap sessions. She said:

We all get together and then there’ll [be] our sport psych with us. We’ll all write down an issue we have, or if we don’t have an issue, just write down something nice or something, and then she’ll read them out and if you have something to say on that issue then you say it, and then if you don’t say it there, then the issue’s done. We don’t talk about it anymore, once that rap session is over, and I find that’s a good way to deal with it ’cause, on our team everyone tends to speak up and say what they need to say, and so then it’s dealt with right there.

The other SPC (who was an author of this study but did not conduct interviews with the athlete in question), while not following the structure of these ‘rap sessions’, nor being aware of this approach, also mediated team meetings and created a structure which seemed to be effective. P14 explained:
I think our team meetings work pretty well like everyone kind of gets to have their say and then yeah, it was really good to have [name of SPC] there because she kind of mediated the meeting and I think without her there it would have never, nothing would have ever been resolved ‘cause everyone was just kind of throwing out their opinions of stuff, and she kind of mediated it to, into a resolution kind of thing so probably yeah, team meeting with someone kind of helping out with the team meeting almost.

Although there does not appear to be any applied research specifically examining the ways in which SPCs resolve conflict, studies have shown that SPCs can play an important role in enhancing team unity, communication, and trust through the delivery of team building interventions and exercises (e.g., Harwood & Pain, 2009; Holt & Dunn, 2006). Specifically, these studies have shown that SPCs can enhance team functioning and unity by conducting team meetings that are characterized by open and honest communication in a safe and regulated environment ensuring athletes feel comfortable enough to discuss team issues and identify ways to address their concerns. The extent to which team meetings were structured (e.g., ‘rap sessions’) versus unstructured (i.e., ‘free-for-alls’) appeared to be the crucial factor by which athletes distinguished the success of conflict resolution.

The importance of having someone other than the head coach structure team meetings with the purpose of dealing with conflict was emphasized. For example, P4:

The [meeting] with the coaches was more laying down this is what’s going to happen because of it. The second one we had a sports psych sort of help um guide it, so that, that was more effective, because it, people were more honest with their opinions.

The issue of coach involvement in sport psychology sessions has been disputed in the literature. Ravizza (1990) suggested that coaches should attend SPC-led team meetings to show their support for the sport psychology program. But others (e.g., Dunn & Holt, 2003; Halliwell, 1990) have argued that the presence of the coach could lead to athletes being reluctant to share their opinions and concerns. The latter perspective was reinforced by the current findings.

A ‘Missing Link’—Conflict Resolution Skills

An important aspect of qualitative analysis is to look for ‘what is not’ in the data to help ‘fill in the gaps’ between participants’ experiences and implications for practice (Thorne, 2008). Although all participants discussed numerous ways of approaching conflict, only two reported that they directly tried to resolve their own conflict. The remaining 17 participants, when asked how they personally would approach a conflict, reported that they preferred to avoid conflict. In terms of avoiding situations P6 discussed a relationship conflict she had with a teammate and said “you know, you don’t have to like everyone on the team, but I just kind of separated myself from her and I took myself out of the picture.” Referring to a similar situation, P8 said, “I would say [with this] specific individual, [I] just ignore it. I avoid any opportunity that I’ll have to be around that person.” Similarly, P10 said she “kind of would rather just not deal with it to be honest. Like I don’t want
to have that conversation with her umm I….yeah I just really don’t want to have that conversation.”

P9 recognized an irony when she spoke earlier in her interview about the need to deal with conflict, but when asked how she dealt with a relationship conflict she personally experienced she said:

I just let it build up and pretend[ed] that nothing’s wrong, nothing’s wrong, and then if someone says something and I’m in a bad mood, I’m just like just lose it inside and get so angry for some reason but it’s just like, obviously it’s good that I realize that so that I know from experience that it’s not good to build it up…. I can tell people don’t let it build up, don’t let it build up, but I do it to myself which is [offensive word] but so, so easy to do.

From these reports of preferring to avoid conflict that actually involved them we inferred that athletes lacked personal conflict resolution skills. Indeed, as P11 expressed:

I know like lots of people don’t really know what to say or what to do if they are involved in one, and so maybe just kind of being trained at the beginning to kind of learn how to deal with them [would be useful].

Similarly, in their study of leadership among high school captains, Voelker et al. (2011) concluded that coaches and SPCs can “foster more effective peer leadership and team success in high school sport by teaching conflict management and promoting more positive collaboration between multiple captains on a team” (p. 62).

**General Discussion**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine female varsity athletes’ perceptions of teammate conflict. Conflict was a prevalent feature of involvement on all the teams and two types of conflict were identified (performance and relationship). According to the athletes’ reports, relationship conflict appeared to be more destructive than performance conflict. This is consistent with previous research in the organizational psychology domain (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2002; Teakleab et al., 2009). Although it has been suggested that SPCs must deal with conflict (cf. LaVoi, 2007; Weinberg & Gould, 2011), to date the issue of conflict has not been extensively documented. The current findings detailing the prevalence and nature of conflict in female varsity sport therefore offer potentially important and previously unreported contributions to the sport psychology literature.

Several strategies, in combination, appeared to create conditions that could help SPCs’ attempts to resolve conflict. Team building early in the season, while not preventing conflict, may help establish trust and open channels of communication and a climate of mutual understanding and honest self-evaluation (also see Crace & Hardy, 1997; Yukelson, 1997, 2006). The implication is that SPCs (and coaches) can engage in early team building to create conditions for effective ‘midpoint’ (or in the case of sport, midseason) conflict management, which is a particularly important time period in team development for overcoming inertia and developing cohesion (Teakleab et al., 2009).
The current findings also suggest practical strategies such as addressing conflict early, engaging mediators in the resolution of conflict, and holding structured team meetings may be useful for managing conflict that arises. Given that there may be parallels between the performance conflict with task cohesion and relationship conflict with social cohesion (cf. Carron et al., 2002), strategies designed to promote team cohesion may also be useful for dealing with conflict. In other words, proactively promoting team cohesion may have added benefits of reducing the prevalence and/or impact of conflict (or creating conditions for conflict resolution). Approaches that can be used during the season for building cohesion and improving team functioning can include activities such as team pledges, movie clips, fake press conferences, and personal disclosures (see Dunn & Holt, 2003; Dunn & Holt, 2004; Holt & Dunn, 2006).

Another practical implication is that it seems to be important that practitioners understand that different types of conflict that may occur on teams and be able to identify these types of conflict. Performance conflict may be quite obvious and relationship conflicts more difficult to discern (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2002). But SPCs may face some challenges in identifying conflict—especially relationship conflict that may take place away from the court/field/ice. One way in which SPCs may be able to identify (or at least learn about) conflict is by developing strong, open, and trusting relationships with the athletes. Such relationships may enable athletes to be more forthcoming in sharing conflict concerns with the SPC.

SPCs may wish to teach athletes (especially senior athletes) conflict management skills because the resolution of conflict is critical to the effectiveness of teams (Gilley et al., 2010). Such skills can include enabling team members to identify the type and source of conflict, recognize desirable conflict, and implement appropriate conflict resolution using cooperative (win–win) negotiation strategies rather than competitive (win–lose) strategies (Deutsch, 2006; Stevens & Campion, 1999). People are more likely to succeed in changing their conflict into a resolvable problem if they use cooperative behavior and have the skills that facilitate effective cooperation (Deutsch, 2006). Hence, SPCs should encourage athletes to engage in the activities listed above rather than investing their emotional resources into dealing with interpersonal friction (Teakleab et al., 2009) and ensure that athletes remain open to multiple problem-solving options (Gilley et al., 2010).

Furthermore, it would seem important that SPCs themselves receive training in conflict management and resolution skills. Deutsch (2006) suggested that some skills for effective conflict resolution include the ability to place the disagreements in perspective by identifying common ground and common interests. Practitioners should also ensure conflicted parties refrain from making personal attacks and help them seek to understand the other’s point of view. Furthermore, parties should limit and control expression of negative feelings and be willing to forgive. Finally, practitioners should encourage parties to be appropriately honest because one can be unnecessarily and inappropriately truthful during conflict resolution.

During our presentation of the results to professors, coaches, and students we were asked what a coach who did not have access to a SPC could do in terms of managing conflict. We suggested that coaches could facilitate team building activities early in the season. But, our findings suggested it may be inappropriate for a head coach to mediate conflict (especially for relationship conflict). Perhaps in such cases assistant coaches, if they have a strong relationship with athletes,
could act as a mediator or help structure team meetings. In addition, one coach told us he developed a ‘24–48’ rule to deal with conflict. That is, after a conflict arises his athletes must wait 24 hr before they act (to reflect on the issue and avoid a ‘kneejerk’ reaction). Then, within the next 24 hr the athlete must resolve the conflict. After the passage of a total of 48 hr, the coach then expects the matter to have been resolved and never revisited. The notion that after the discussion of an issue it should be ‘put to bed’ was also a feature of the way in which ‘rap sessions’ were structured. Although we did not specifically have data to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, they are techniques SPCs and coaches may wish to consider.

Given the exploratory nature of this study several issues identified provide areas for further investigation. Athletes reported that relationship conflict was particularly destructive, but we were unable to link types of conflict with specific conflict management strategies (although it seemed that many of the athletes’ comments referred to relationship conflict issues). Conflict may be a dynamic concept. For example, types of conflict may be more or less prevalent at different stages of the season. It is also possible that athletes’ experiences of conflict may change over the duration of their tenure on a team. That is, more senior athletes appeared to be expected to take on mediating roles. Further study is needed to examine both how experiences of conflict change over time and how athletes may come to adopt roles in which they mediate conflict.

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Some findings may have been sample-specific because all athletes played on teams affiliated with one university. Every year these teams are expected to be competitive for conference titles and national championships. The players presumably faced high performance demands which may create conflict that is not as prevalent on less competitive teams. Hence, SPCs must consider contextual factors unique to their own team settings when considering these findings (cf. Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Henschen, 1998).

Another potential limitation was our decision to sample members from successful teams. In the future it may be important to examine conflict among members of less successful teams (as well as among members of more elite teams) to gain a better understanding of how conflict may vary across context to provide more precise implications for sport psychology practice. Although our decision to sample female athletes proved to be reasonable and appropriate, studies examining ways in which male athletes deal with conflict would also make valuable contributions to the literature (especially given that previous research with male collegiate athletes has identified numerous sources of conflict; Holt & Sparkes, 2001).

Finally, the information obtained from the athletes allowed us to reach an adequate level of data saturation. The total number of athletes across all the teams was about 60 people. When one considers we sampled more senior athletes, the total number of potential participants is reduced to about 30 people. Hence, we sampled approximately two-thirds of potential participants. We decided that the sample of 19 athletes enabled us to reach an adequate level of data saturation and provide a strong account of conflict experienced on the teams (which was further confirmed via member-checking).

In summary, the four strategies identified (i.e., engage in team building early in the season, address conflict early, engage mediators in the resolution of conflict, and hold structured team meetings) provide practical suggestions for SPCs working with teams. We have also explored other implications for professional practice
as described above. We hope the findings of this exploratory study may stimulate further research detailing ways to manage conflict. In particular, research examining the effectiveness of the team-based conflict resolution strategies suggested here, as well as other approaches, will add to the literature. It is important to evaluate both aspects of program delivery and characteristics of SPCs to produce knowledge that can guide practice (Brawley & Paskevich, 1997). Given the potentially destructive consequences of conflict, such research may have important consequences for team performance and athlete well-being.

References


