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# Next One Up! Exploring How Coaches Manage Team Dynamics Following Injury

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Injuries are commonplace in high-intensity sport, and research has explored how athletes are psychologically affected by such events. As injuries carry implications for the group environment in sport teams, the authors explored what occurs within a team during a time period of injury from a coach perspective and how high-performance coaches manage a group at this time. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 Canadian university basketball head coaches. Thematic analysis revealed four high-order themes in relation to how coaches managed group dynamics from the moment of the injury event to an athlete's reintegration into the lineup. Strategies to mitigate the negative effects of injury on the group environment while prioritizing athlete well-being involved remaining stoic at the time of an injury event, maintaining the injured athlete's sense of connection to the team, and coordinating with support staff throughout the recovery and reintegration process.

**Keywords:** coach, group dynamics, group environment, performance, roles

An established literature base supports the psychological and social health benefits of sport participation (e.g., Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013); however, empirical studies have also revealed that excessive high-intensity sport participation is associated with an increased risk of injury (Lemoine, Pouline, Richer, & Bussieres, 2017). Athletic injury can be defined as an event that causes an athlete enough harm that they are physically unable to participate in their chosen sport for a certain period of time (Hootman, Dick, & Agel, 2007). Due to the prominence of sport-related injury, researchers have explored the physical and psychological challenges that injured athletes face during the processes of injury and rehabilitation (Petrie, Deiters, & Harmison, 2014). Psychologically, it is clear that athletes can be deeply affected by such events. For example, emotional responses such as depression have been examined longitudinally in athletes who have suffered from anterior cruciate ligament tears and concussions (e.g., Mainwaring, Hutchison, Bisschop, Comper, & Richards, 2010). Injured athletes are also significantly more susceptible to becoming depressed than noninjured athletes (Appaneal, Levine, Perna, & Roh, 2009) and sometimes experience mood disturbances after being sidelined by an injury (Albinson & Petrie, 2003).

Several theoretical models of athletic injury exist within the literature (e.g., integrated model of response to athletic injury; Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey, 1998) and acknowledge the physical, psychosocial, and social contextual elements of sport injuries. For example, the social support provided to an injured teammate may help an athlete feel more confident and supported returning to play (Podlog & Eklund, 2007). With knowledge that athletes work closely together with their teammates as they strive toward common goals and objectives (Evans, Eys, & Bruner, 2012), we must be cognizant that not only may the social

environment of a team affect the rehabilitation and emotional response of an injured athlete, but also that an injury to a member of a sports team may affect the team.

Injury events within a team may alter the personnel available to fulfill certain roles and thus disrupt existing group dynamics—for better or worse. Although a range of circumstances can arise to cause unexpected team member absences (e.g., suspensions, trades), injury events may be particularly salient because of the psychological and physical consequences the injured athlete may endure (Benson, Surya, & Eys, 2015). A study exploring athletes' perspectives of injury events in basketball teams identified that not only do teammates and their support (or lack thereof) influence an injured athlete's recovery, but also that an athlete's injury can have a reciprocal effect on a sport team's dynamics (Surya, Benson, Balish, & Eys, 2015). This work highlighted several factors that may influence a team's reaction to injury, including the previous role of the injured athlete, the timing of the injury in a competitive season, and the severity of the injury. Semistructured interviews with varsity basketball players revealed changes in role responsibilities that could be perceived as either an opportunity or a threat, changes in emotional climate during a time period of injury, and the development of interpersonal tensions, all from an athlete's perspective. Overall, these findings are consistent with the punctuated equilibrium model of group development (Gersick, 1991), whereby the unexpected absence of someone occupying a core role within the group has the potential to destabilize group dynamics if not managed well. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the interviewed athletes perceived the coaching staff to be extremely influential in how the group responded in the wake of an injury, as well as how athletes viewed the injured teammate (Surya et al., 2015). Indeed, scholars have drawn attention to the often overlooked role of the coach throughout the process of athletic injuries (Wadey, Day, Cavallerio, & Martinelli, 2018). With this in mind, it is warranted that we consider the influential role of a coach during a time period of injury.

Coaches are likely to be instrumental in the success or failure of a group, including the decision making around the group interaction processes during a time period of injury. According

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to the notion of *coaching as orchestrating* (Santos, Jones, & Mesquita, 2013), coaches lead a complex social system and must continuously monitor, adjust, and recalibrate their actions to attain their desired goals. In sport teams characterized by a high degree of task interdependence, an injury event may necessitate new team tactics and adjusting role expectations for specific team members. Coaches have the potential to positively shape an athlete's experience through providing effective feedback and competence support, and by fueling intrinsic motivation (Fransen, Decroos, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2016) and playing a role in the development of athletes' life skills, such as self-confidence and respect for others (Super, Verkooijen, & Koelen, 2018).

Although the current research was an exploratory investigation into coach management strategies following injury, our interest in this phenomena was guided by existing theory about the dynamic and episodic nature of team processes. Eys, Evans, and Benson's (2020) conceptual framework for the study of sport teams highlights the many ways that a sport team might be influenced by the sudden absence of a team member. Within this framework, member attributes and the group environment are conceptualized as inputs that feed into the team structure (e.g., role responsibilities), emergent group states (e.g., cohesion), and group processes (e.g., cooperation and competition). These aforementioned elements are conceptualized as throughputs (i.e., team structure, emergent group states, group processes) that jointly contribute to group and individual outcomes (e.g., team success, member retention). When a team member is removed from their physical role on the team due to an injury, it is clear that there may be far-reaching shifts in the roles, responsibilities, hierarchy, and emergent group states. Again, coaches are known to play a key role in managing and trying to diffuse the potentially negative effects of these episodes.

Responding to calls for more attention to the role of coaches in relation to injury events (e.g., Wadey et al., 2018), the purpose of the current study was to build on previous work (i.e., Santos et al., 2013; Surya et al., 2015) by exploring how coaches manage team dynamics following injury. Specifically, we sought to explore coaches' perspectives on (a) what occurs within a team from the time of injury to when an injured athlete returns to the lineup and (b) how coaches respond to an injury event in the midst of a competitive season, and to identify (c) strategies that coaches implement to manage the group during a time period of injury.

## Method

### Philosophical Assumptions

The present study was guided by a critical realism approach. Critical realism acknowledges that claims "should be continuously changed and revised through scientific research in order to uncover the real, underlying structures, powers, and tendencies that exist" (Patomaki & Wight, 2000, p. 223). This fit our research aims, as the highly dynamic and evolving nature of a team, along with the continuous learning processes of coaching, creates an environment that is constantly subject to change and highly complex. Although a reality exists, we can only attempt to understand the injury process through the subjective experiences of participants and our own interpretations as researchers.

### Participants

We recruited 10 U Sport (Canadian university) head basketball coaches for this study. U Sport is the highest level of interuniversity

sport in Canada and, therefore, served as a sample of high-performance coaches. Six male coaches and four female coaches were interviewed, ranging from 6 to 37 years of varsity coaching experience ( $M = 14$ ;  $SD = 9.05$ ). Basketball offers a high degree of task and outcome interdependence, which offered an ideal context for answering our research questions (Surya et al., 2015). The participants included one Olympic Team head coach, one Senior Women's National Team head coach, one Junior Women's National Team head coach, two Senior Women's National Development Team coaches, one NBA mentor coach, six U Sport medalists, five U Sport conference champions, one training program developer for Canada Basketball, and three provincial team coaches. We explained the nature of the study to each coach beforehand and offered access to the interview guide to ensure that they had experiences relevant to the study. All of the interviewed coaches had ample experience in relation to injury events within their teams and, thus, were well positioned to provide detailed descriptive accounts about the phenomena under investigation.

### Procedure

After ethics approval was obtained from the Nipissing University research ethics board, 21 U Sport basketball head coaches were e-mailed information about the study via e-mail addresses that were publicly available. We formulated our research questions pertinent to how injury impacts team dynamics by reviewing recent work on the psychological consequences of injury events from both an individual and team perspective (e.g., Surya et al., 2015). The semistructured interview guide was separated into three major sections. Following Patton (2014), the first section asked general questions intended to initiate a general conversation around the topic and establish comfort with the participants (i.e., "Can you tell me about how the current season is going?"). The proceeding parts of the individual interview focused on the actual time of the injury, the moments immediately following, and the time period of the injured player returning to the team lineup. The interview guide was developed to address the following: (a) what occurs within a team at from a time of injury to when an injured athlete returns to the lineup, (b) how coaches respond to an injury event in the midst of a competitive season, and (c) identify strategies that coaches implement to manage the group during a time period of injury. During each interview, the coaches were asked to recall times that the players on their roster had sustained injuries that removed them from the lineup. They were given opportunities to describe the group interaction processes that occurred following injuries in the past and the strategies that they had implemented at that time and during periods of athlete reintegration. Coaches were asked to share as much information as possible, by speaking both generally about the topic and by drawing from specific past experiences.

Eight interviews took place over the telephone, and two were conducted in person. All coaches were interviewed individually, ranging in duration from 23 to 57 min ( $M = 33$  min) dependent on the nature of the conversation. Although phone interviews pose some limitations, there are also numerous benefits (e.g., participant comfort in their own setting, Novick, 2008; decreased cost, Chapple, 1999; ability to take notes unobtrusively, Smith, 2005), and traveling to conduct face-to-face interviews was not feasible for the researchers. All 10 interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The participants were offered a copy of their transcript to provide them with an opportunity to read over their responses and to add any other relevant insights that they felt were missing from

their responses. None of the participants chose to alter their answers, indicating that the interviews accurately represented the participants' thoughts (Patton, 2014).

## Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) protocol for reflexive thematic analysis, we sought to identify generalized themes from the coaches' personal accounts. This protocol for thematic analysis aligned with our aim of obtaining rich descriptions and generating patterns pertaining to how coaches manage team dynamics in the wake of an injury. We used NVivo software (QSR International, Burlington, MA) throughout the coding process. The first author began by immersing herself in each of the 10 transcripts, during which, she highlighted relevant sections to sort into potential themes. Once this initial process was completed, a chart was created, outlining potential theme names, descriptions, and supporting quotations. The third author acted as a "critical friend" and met with the first author to both challenge and assist in the understanding of the themes identified. This feedback and discussion with the third author led to the detailed refinement and renaming of themes, and the selection of quotations, followed by the write-up.

To increase the credibility of our analysis and results, several procedures were undertaken throughout the described study to enhance methodological rigor. Through regular meetings, the third author advised the first author on how to best establish rigor for the study. The second and third authors have extensive research experience in the field of group dynamics in sport. Another important component of the research process was *researcher positionality*, which refers to the notion that a researcher's personal experiences and/or underlying assumptions relevant to the research and motivations for conducting research can collectively influence the way in which information was interpreted (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). The first author has experience as both a player and a coach in U Sport basketball. During time spent as a player, she sustained two consecutive anterior cruciate ligament tears, both of which were traumatic. Having personally experienced athletic injuries, it was important for the first author to explicitly acknowledge her assumptions about the relation between injuries and group dynamics in high-performance sport teams. Considering the potential difficulty in having the first author summarize her thoughts in a useful way, two strategies were used to facilitate reflexivity. Prior to interviewing the participants, a colleague interviewed the first author with the interview guide. The first author also wrote a reflective journal entry prior to the first coach interview to acknowledge her own perspectives as a former varsity athlete who had sustained a traumatic injury. From these two practices, the author mentioned a shift in the group dynamics in her team when she sustained multiple injuries, as she was asked to take on a coaching role. She mentioned being thoroughly impressed by the way that her coach handled her injuries and felt that it impacted her motivation to return and involvement with the team while injured. The reflexive procedure helped the lead author develop an awareness of how her experiences and biases might influence interpretations of the data, as she had a previous opinion on how these matters should be handled. As such, we recognize that it is important to reflect on how the first author's subjective lens led to the interpretation of the data, but accept that this is part of the research process. As said by Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 549), "the researcher's role in knowledge production is at the heart of the approach!" Following this, the first author piloted the interview guide with a competitive youth basketball coach. As social

experiences cannot be viewed through an objective frame of reference, we felt that the researcher's deep knowledge of the context under investigation and "insider status" as a fellow coach served as a strength, which helped in the recruitment of participants, facilitated a rapport with the other coaches, and garnered detailed accounts from the coaches.

## Results

We identified 13 subthemes couched within four higher order themes that reflect the group interaction processes and coach management strategies that unfold following an injury (see Figure 1). The coaches described how a range of interconnected factors potentially influence both the group and the injured athlete, as well as their many responsibilities in attempting to facilitate a smooth transition for athletes as they adjusted to new roles. All themes are presented in a chronological timeline going from the time of the injury to the time of the injured athlete returning to the lineup.

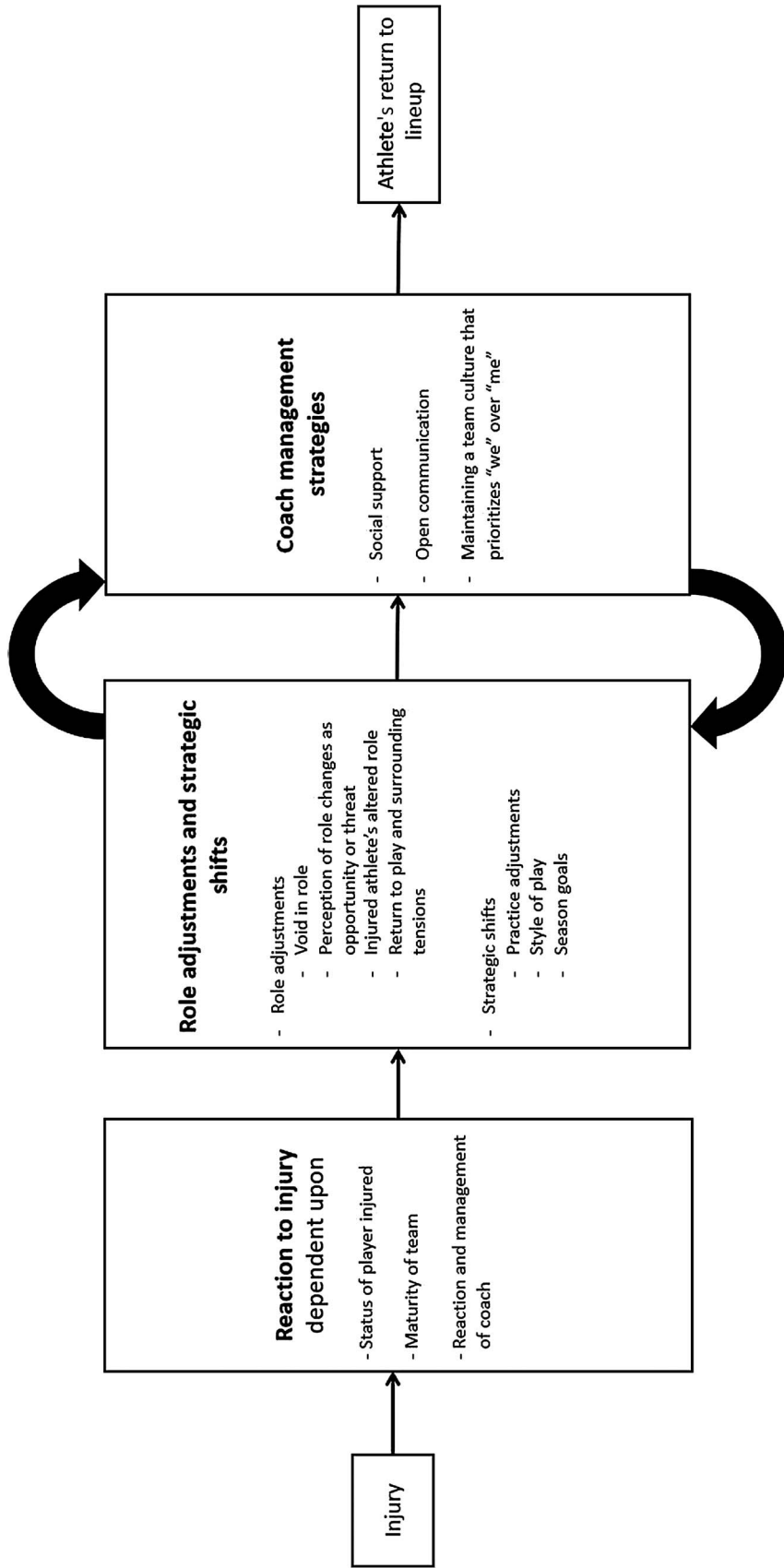
### Reaction to Injury

**Status of Player Injured.** Three coaches explained how the status of the injured player played a significant role in the reaction from players when they went down with an injury. The players were described as more reactive when a starter or high scorer went down, as opposed to a bench player or somebody who did not fill a key role on the team. As stated by one coach, "When let's say a starter is going down, I think that there's probably a lot more concern" (C5). Overall, injuries to the athletes who fulfilled core roles—both a specialized task role and leadership roles—prompted a greater reaction from the team.

**Maturity of Team.** In addition to the reaction and status of the player injured, the maturity of the team played an important role in how the team reacted immediately to an injury. As team members gained more experience at the collegiate level, the coaches believed that they tended to be more mature in their reactions to injury, versus a younger group who had yet to experience many injuries within their team. One coach shared, "I think that it depends on the experience of the athletes and the leadership group within the athletes, within the team" (C3). This coach indicated that a more veteran leadership group might respond to an injury event with less negative emotions, perhaps minimizing the extremity of the reactions within the group.

**Reaction and Management of Coach.** The final factor influencing a team's reaction to injury was the reaction of the coach and how the coach managed the injury at the time of the event. Six coaches said they felt that their own stoic response was the reason for this: "I think I'm the factor that influences how they react because I don't react" (C4). One coach specifically reflected on how their players may embody their reaction at a time of injury and admitted to previous struggles with their own reaction. This coach admitted to projecting a visible overreaction to injuries earlier in their career, which they believed caused their athletes to do the same. However, the coach added that regulating one's emotions in response to such unanticipated events is a skill that can be improved with time:

I think that's the key with coaching for everything and I just think that as I get older I just become more aware of, the better that I can manage my response, likely the better the team is going to



**Figure 1** — A visual representation of what occurs from the time of injury to the athlete's reintegration in the lineup, from coaches' perspectives.

manage their response. We obviously have empathy for that player but if it's a little bit business as usual, then it's just like we're going to deal with injuries on a more consistent basis where, if I'm freaking out or getting mad or who knows what, then that obviously opens the door for the girls to do that too. (C5)

Overall, the coaches believed that the players' responses to an injury event often mirrored their own and, thus, it was important to lead by example through maintaining a calm demeanor. The coaches discussed that the best thing they could do in this situation is not react emotionally, so that the athletes stayed calm and were able to focus on the on-court task.

## Role Adjustments

When a player who occupied a large task or leadership role went down, inevitably, a player who was less experienced or less skilled would have to step up and take over their role, causing a subsequent cascade of role changes. The coaches shared their perspectives on the role changes that occurred during a time period of injury and how they believed this may have affected the team. As the roles changed, this potentially led to strategic shifts within the team and could alter the group dynamics.

**Void in Role.** Four coaches felt that, when a player was unable to physically participate, this created a void in whichever role they previously occupied. For example, if a player who scored 10 points per game was injured, those 10 points essentially needed to be accounted for by someone else or the group as a whole. Additionally, if a formal or informal leader was missing from the lineup, there would be a noticeable deficit in leadership within the team:

I think the biggest impact around dynamics is when it is a leader, when it's your point guard or a fifth year player or somebody that people look up to. When that presence is missing specifically on the floor, there's definitely a void felt in performance. (C8)

The coaches then needed to consider how they would identify and manage this role deficit. One coach explained their potential thought process when a player goes down in regard to the deficit felt on the floor:

How does that impact our rotations, playing time, our potential performance? It probably throws someone into a different role than what they've been accustomed to, or it may not. Again, depending on who it is, but someone who plays a larger role it may impact on playing time with a lot of others. So, I think that it does have a lot to do with the player who's injured and the role that they have on the team. (C8)

Overall, there was a clear void in any role that the injured athlete previously occupied. When a player suffered an injury, the coaches immediately brainstormed about the potential implications that this would have on their team and the emotional tensions or strategic changes to which it would lead. Just as initial reactions were influenced by the role of the injured player, the magnitude of the role changes were also reliant on their previous role.

**Perception of Role Changes as Opportunity or Threat.** Eight coaches explained that, when there was a role deficit, there existed a need to fill this role with other personnel through strategic adjustments. Many coaches explained that, although no one was happy about an injury to a teammate in a malicious way, someone's injury

may technically benefit another player, whether in terms of playing opportunity, or statistically, for example, in the form of scoring opportunities. There was also the possibility that suddenly moving into a more prominent role due to another player's injury may result in anxiety, fear, or an abundance of other emotions. The coaches explained that, when a less experienced or less skilled athlete filled a new role, they wanted that player to simply "control what they can." The coaches did not necessarily want someone to embody the player that they were replacing for the time being, but rather, to play to their own individual strengths:

Well, I think that there are likely a variety of different responses. Of course, one person's misfortune is definitely somebody else's new found opportunity. Not that people are running around being excited when somebody gets injured, and they may actually be a little bit scared because they know of the increased role that they potentially could play. (C5)

Most coaches explained that, along with their limited visible reaction to injury, they also did not overthink the role-filling process. A common phrase used was "next man up," metaphorically indicating that, when one player went down with an injury, the next player filled their role without hesitation, and the team moved on as a unit:

Next guy steps up. I mean, maybe they're thinking [about the role adjustments] but we don't notice it. We had one of our best players that we played without and we still won eight straight games, you know it's a part of that next guy has to step up and play, and that's it. (C4)

The coaches felt that transitions were easier when the roles were communicated early and often, and were made apparent to all group members. The emotional tensions or questioning of how one player's injury may affect another team member's role was minimized when the roles were clear.

**Injured Athlete's Altered Role.** When a player went down with an injury, not only did their surrounding counterparts' roles change, but so did their own. Eight coaches stressed the importance of a player maintaining involvement with the team while injured. One coach described their caution when demanding that a player be present at all times, as they wanted to ensure that practices were not a negative environment for players while injured, but felt that they should still be involved to the highest extent manageable for the player. This included providing energy in any way an injured athlete was able. Although their physical role was altered, the rest of their role on the team remained the same or was potentially even increased. One coach explained their philosophy surrounding an injured player's role at practice:

We keep them engaged at all times, we don't have anybody standing around at practice, whether you're the manager or the film guy, we don't care, you're doing something. Whether you're injured or otherwise, if you're in there, you're working, you're doing something, so our injured guys are no different. (C4)

The same coach explained why they believed injured athletes should attend practice:

We expect them to be at practice unless they are rehabbing in their time but we expect everyone to be at practice because we're still teaching, you're going to come back eventually so you want to be a part of everything, you want to know what we're doing, where we're at, what we're changing so

whenever injured guys come back and they don't miss a whole lot because they've been around it the whole time. (C4)

Roles could change into a variety of tasks, such as filming, taking statistics, taking on a coach role, etc. One coach explained some of the strategies they have employed:

I think then let's say if it's somebody who's injured that can't be active at all in terms of doing [physical] kind of stuff, we track different things in our practices so we would have that player tracking for one team; especially when I've had more old, veteran players, putting them with a team so that when any time a team is having a debrief or any time they're in a drill, that injured player is on the sideline is still responsible for communicating and working with the team. They become that extra set of eyes to be able to give constructive feedback and/or celebrate things for that team. (C5)

**Return to Play and Surrounding Tensions.** When an injured player returns to the lineup, the coaches seemed to follow one of two routes with their reintegration. The coaches either chose to integrate the injured player back into their previous role immediately, or if the team was doing well without them, they may have elected to leave things the way they were when the player was still injured, if a long period of time had passed. Nine coaches explained their thoughts, indicating that they would use whichever strategy worked best at the time and said that it was contingent on the specific situation. They explained that an injured player could return with a chance to integrate themselves back into their original spot, but ultimately, the coach had to evaluate all options and act in the best interest of the collective. One coach explained,

My basic philosophy is that whoever could help us the most is going to be on the floor. So, it's not that an injured player would automatically return to their past role but if I believe based on what I saw in practice that they were ready to let's say, go back into the starting lineup, I would have no problem putting them back in the starting lineup ahead of somebody who's replaced them for two or three weeks or however long, if I thought that at that point in time they had already progressed to the point where they were ahead of the people who had started in their place. (C6)

The coaches believed that there may also be other factors in this decision-making process when reintegrating somebody back into the lineup. What point the team was at in their season and the tactical adjustments that had already been made play a part in this decision:

It really depends on how far into the season you've gone and your effectiveness on what you've done that far into the season, and then the third component is how that player integrates into what you have done. So if you have made adjustments because of that player being out, how does that player being back integrate into what you have done and the success of what you've done and then if the integration is really good, you may not change it at all. (C9)

Finally, one coach described the need to alleviate pressure sometimes when an athlete was returning to the lineup:

We're finding that he's trying to do too much or he's working too hard, I might just slip it to him in practice like, "Hey listen, relax man you don't have to do a million things, just relax right

now," or, "Just run up the floor hard right now." Just one thing, just focus on one thing and do that thing really, really well, and you start to sort of rebuild your confidence one step at a time as opposed to throwing yourself back in and doing everything that you could do before. (C4)

We can see that the role adjustment process can be a very delicate and specific process to be handled by the coaching staff, which requires tactical evaluation. The coaches identified multiple elements that went into these role adjustment decisions, which were also influenced by factors outside of their control, such as how far along the season was.

## Strategic Shifts

Along with the potential shifts in role responsibilities, the coaches explained how things may change technically and tactically within the team during and after a time period of injury. Although some changes were apparent, the coaches were reluctant to make major changes in a season plan.

**Practice Adjustments.** Three coaches specifically indicated that they did not believe that changing practices due to one player being injured would benefit the team, but one coach did note that they took time to reflect on their practices after the season ended to ensure that their coaching style or administered workload was not putting the athletes at greater risk for injury in the future:

I think my practices have been similar post-injury, but my reflection on what the season plan is, that injury is noted obviously in that reflection so you know what my impact on the injury was. If it was a workload situation or practice situation, that's something that I would adjust not necessarily at the time but in the following season plan. (C3)

As such, it was apparent that practices were not changed due to tactical adjustments from a player being injured, but primarily to ensure the safety of all players moving forward.

**Style of Play.** Five coaches stated that they would not make significant changes in their style of play based on one player. The coaches tended to abide by previously used tactical strategies and shared that their game was not dictated by one single player, as this would make their team more vulnerable to unexpected personnel changes. However, an exception was when other players were physically incapable of replacing an injured athlete who possessed a unique skillset or ability that enabled the team to employ specific tactics or strategies. For instance, if the only player giving a team a large interior presence went down with an injury, the coaches would have to make major tactical adjustments: "If a person changes [roles in a way] that's significant to that tactical environment, we will alter that [tactics] because we may not necessarily have the characteristics that are necessary for that tactic to work" (C8).

**Season Goals.** Although some changes may be made in other areas, three coaches indicated that they would not change their long-term or season goals based on the removal of one player from their lineup. Most coaches indicated that they focus more on process-oriented goals (e.g., improving their defensive intensity), rather than product-based goals (e.g., winning a conference championship), during injury and at all other times:

Yeah, I'm not huge on maybe changing our goals; yes for sure it does depend on who it is. I guess we tend to focus more on

process-oriented goals, so we don't talk about wins, we don't talk about what our record should be. I think that some of the players probably do, like they're smart enough to know where we're trying to go, but we're just trying to talk about how we want to play knowing that if we're focusing on how we want to play, that ideally that's going to lead us to the results that we want. (C5)

Again, we note that who an athlete is played a large part in how the coaches managed their team following an injury. This was not limited only to their leadership role, but also to their physical presence on the court. Although the coaches preferred making as few adjustments as possible to their overarching goals for the team, there were simply things that some players specialized in more than others.

### Coach Management Strategies

**Social Support.** The coaches spoke about the importance of support from themselves and teammates, to both the injured athlete and the athlete stepping up in a role. Five coaches emphasized consistently supporting all team members throughout the entire injury process. The coaches identified a common lack of confidence in the athletes returning to play following an injury and explained that the coaches and/or peers needed to exhibit extra support at this time. The coaches spoke about the emotional support that they specifically provided to injured players and explained that, at times, the athlete was thought to be doing very well with their recovery, when they were, in fact, suffering from depressive symptoms due to their inability to play basketball. One coach felt that it was important to reach out at this time and not to make assumptions about the athlete's mental health:

I try to spend more time initially with an injured player. We talk a little bit more, we have individual meetings a little bit more, just trying to make sure that they're doing okay and that we've still got them in our sights and stuff like that. (C9)

With the injured player often taking priority with support, the coaches felt that it may have been easy to forget about the athlete(s) who felt pressure due to an increased role. Lack of experience may have led to nervousness, at which time, support from teammates was thought to be essential to integrate a lesser experienced player into a greater role. One coach said,

You need them to gain confidence and you need to give confidence in the people who are injured, and the people who aren't injured you still have to give them confidence because some of them might not usually play as much, and now they're playing. (C1)

Overall, the emotional support of all team members during a time period of injury was believed to be of high importance. Ensuring that the injured athletes felt confident and motivated in their recovery, and the athletes with increased roles felt comfortable with the changes was deemed key for team success.

One coach spoke about an injury meeting group within their athletic department. The athletic department at their institution had a sport psychologist who dealt with a variety of issues (mental health and performance anxiety). One of their other responsibilities was to facilitate a group in which injured athletes from a variety of teams got together on a regular basis to discuss struggles, rehabilitation processes, and team dynamics. This coach believed that this support group was a key element during a time period of injury at

their institution and said that players actually came requesting it when injured.

**Open Communication.** Eight coaches talked about the importance of ongoing and transparent communication with the entire team from the initial time of injury, over the course of changes in the roles and responsibilities, and up to the point of an injured athlete being reintegrated into the lineup. Consistent communication with the injured athlete, the team, and the medical staff ensured that everyone who was part of the process was on the same page. Many coaches felt it was imperative to communicate the roles and responsibilities early and often to avoid any misunderstanding at the time of injury. If the roles were communicated in advance, the players already knew what to do when an injury occurred:

I think the most important thing is just having constant conversations with that athlete and the team, and the other athletes that are affected so that they're not surprised and have a clear picture of what's happening. It doesn't mean that they're always going to like it but they're at least going to know what's going on. (C2)

The coaches also discussed the importance of communicating with an athletic therapist or other medical staff member during the process of an athlete's injury and recovery. The coaches accepted that they were knowledgeable about the professional knowledge of the game, but perhaps not always about the physical technicalities of injury. Often, athletic departments could provide a strong resource that was knowledgeable and responsible for their athletes' physical health. One coach explained that health care providers had been integral in providing key information when injuries occurred:

I mean, we basically just share whatever information we know from the health care practitioners so the sooner we know in terms of prognosis and how long they're going to be out I think the better, because again I think the anxiety revolves around the unknown. (C8)

Another coach explained that they looked to their athletic therapist throughout the rehabilitation process to know exactly how much the athlete could give:

I speak with the therapist to find out what they can be doing, I don't like people coming to practice and being an observer, I think they have to be an active observer. So what I do is do things through therapy, and if they're no good in the gym then I tell them to get out and go to therapy. (C1)

Adding to the statement above, when asked how to manage the return of an athlete at the time that they are declared healthy enough to practice or play, the coaches explained that some athletes were at times cleared with limited capabilities. With this in mind, the coaches indicated that they would not let an athlete return to a practice or game unless they were fully ready to go; they did not want anyone returning who could not fully participate at the same pace as their teammates, as they would slow the team down:

I would start by saying our philosophy is that athletes don't return to action until they're fully able to practice at our level. I would never let a player, no matter how talented they are, not practice before they play or go through the motions in practice before they get out on the court. I'm a big believer that no matter how talented someone is that you have to prove it to yourself that you can play at pace for however long. (C6)



When addressing an injured athletes' return to play with the team, one coach explained that they reminded the players of the concepts that they had bought into at the beginning of the season. Although certain roles may not always be desired by players, having these conversations ensured that people were prepared to help the team, however it was seen fit for them:

By having those conversations and having them early, the understanding has been really good and the buy-in has been good . . . “hey, remember we bought into the idea that we were going to do whatever we could to help the team. Right now what would help the team most is if you accepted coming off the bench rather than going back to the starting role,” as an example. If we can relate it back to the core values that we've bought into, then usually the understanding is like, yeah, I see where you're going with this, they just want to be part of the winning team, and then we're good. (C9)

Communication with all parties involved was seen as imperative to team functioning throughout the entire duration of an injury. Not only was it important that the injured player knew what was unfolding, but it was also important that all members were aware of all role adjustments and the injured athletes' progress. The coaches did their best to remain transparent with all relevant people and took a collective approach to dealing with injury, including the expertise of health care professionals.

#### ***Maintaining a Team Culture that Prioritizes “We” Over “Me”.***

Four coaches strongly emphasized the significance of their team culture during a time period of injury, just as throughout any other struggle that arises. The coaches described this in a variety of ways and indicated that the team culture always superseded any individual athlete. As described by one coach, “it's always bigger than us” (C4), whereas another repeated the mantra “next man up” (C1). One coach explained that establishing a team-first culture was crucial:

I was just saying culture is king, or queen, culture is everything at our place so we have an environment where it's always bigger than us. We understand that it's never about coach, or it's never about one player or the best scorer. It's about us as a group trying to achieve something together. That always stands above anything. (C4)

The coaches also felt that this “team-first” emphasis should be implemented early and often. One coach spoke to the importance of setting up the culture of their team so that they could return to their team's values if an injury occurs, perhaps mitigating some of the negative outcomes:

The biggest part of this goes back to how we set up the culture of the team. We're very much team-oriented so that no one individual supersedes the values of the team. We get that buy-in long before any injury occurs or anything like that, and we go back to what those core principles are saying. (C9)

The underlying culture of a program can be imperative throughout many processes, not excluding the injury process and reintegration of an athlete to a team's lineup. The coaches attempted to maintain alignment with a team culture that emphasized the group superseding individuals to ensure a smooth transition for all athletes whose roles changed throughout these processes.

## Discussion

Responding to recent calls for greater attention to the role of the coach in the sport injury process (e.g., Wadey et al., 2018), the current study provided insight into coaches' perceptions of what occurs within a team at a time of injury and how coaches respond to an injury event in the midst of a competitive season, and identified strategies that coaches implement to manage the group during a time period of injury. We aimed to understand the complex, interlocking group processes and the emergent group states situated around Eys et al.'s (2020) framework regarding the study of sport groups. Four high-order themes and 13 subthemes were identified from semistructured interviews with U Sport basketball head coaches. Building upon research highlighting the health and psychosocial impacts of athletes during a time period of injury (e.g., Albinson & Petrie, 2003; Petrie et al., 2014), our findings shed light on the ways that coaches view and manage group processes and the emergent group states that occur following injury.

Whereas previous work has explored group member interaction processes following an injury event from the perspectives of athletes (Surya et al., 2015), our results extend these findings by garnering coaches' perspectives on the implications of injury events for a team's dynamics. Corroborating Surya et al., the coaches spoke to how an injury to a core role occupant could lead to several changes to the existing group member interaction processes—including collective shifts in team strategy and a cascade of role adjustments. The coaches also commented on changes to the emergent states of specific interpersonal relationships and the group as a whole—reflected by teammates' perceptions of the injury as an opportunity or threat, the development of interpersonal tensions, and changes in the emotional climate of a team. Our findings highlight the ways in which injury events can destabilize and disrupt existing group dynamics (e.g., cascading role adjustment, changes in the team's emotional climate) from coaches' perspectives. Furthermore, the results illustrate the vital role that coaches feel they play in managing groups throughout the injury process (e.g., providing social support and clarifying role expectations). Given the role of the coach in facilitating maximal participation, performance, and developmental outcomes, it is pivotal to understand their perceptions of injury, an event that can so gravely affect athletes, and the dynamics of the teams.

Our study identified a range of distinct yet interrelated factors that were perceived to influence their team's reaction to injury in the moment. It is important to emphasize the interplay between these factors, such that none of these occurs in isolation from one another. For example, a team's reaction to a core role player's injury was likely to be amplified by both the severity of the injury and the reaction of the injured player. However, our results also speak to potential factors that might buffer against the potential consequences of unexpectedly losing a core role player—such as having an experienced group who has overcome adversity before (i.e., team maturity) or a coach who is able to refocus the group (i.e., reaction and management of the group). Some practical strategies described by the coaches in the event of an injury include a minimal or stoic reaction at the time of injury to prevent an extreme reaction from the team and communicating early and often with all team members about the roles and responsibilities on the team. This way, there is less overwhelming information being decided and shared during the already distracting event of an injury.

Following an injury event, the coaches described the shift in role responsibilities, which were previously explained to be perceived as either an opportunity or a threat by teammates (Surya et al., 2015). Roles can be defined as the expectations held for individuals in a specific position in group membership and can either be formally communicated (e.g., coach to athlete) or informally inferred (Benson, Surya, & Eys, 2014). When a player is removed from the lineup due to injury, the coaches identified a void in the role that the injured player previously occupied for the team. For example, some athletes occupy specialized task-oriented roles (e.g., scoring many points per game), which another, less experienced or less skilled teammate may now have to take over for an indefinite period of time. Although the injured athlete will no longer occupy their task-oriented role, they may have an increased auxiliary task-oriented role (i.e., energy giver), leadership role (e.g., mentor, take on a coaching role), or social-oriented role (e.g., social organizer; Benson et al., 2014). In summary, the coaches discussed how keeping injured athletes actively involved with the team in a role or capacity that best suits the athlete might mitigate feelings of alienation for athletes and was believed to keep them engaged and motivated. In Surya et al.'s (2015) work, these role changes were at times perceived as a source of uncertainty and discomfort by athletes, but the coaches noted that constant communication to all athletes undergoing a change in their role responsibilities (i.e., the injured athlete and the athletes "stepping up" in their place), and with the team as a whole was imperative to keeping everyone on the same page. The coaches also described that healthy athletes should be encouraged to "step up," but not to "replace." More so, athletes should not be expected to mimic the player whose role they are stepping up in, but rather to fill it to the best of their ability, with their own skills and strengths. Role clarity within a group is linked to team functionality, role performance, and the prevention of intragroup conflict (Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2002, 2003), which places importance on coaches maintaining clear and consistent role expectations throughout times of change.

Injury can be a vulnerable time for athletes, potentially requiring an increased effort in supporting both the injured athlete and those with changing roles. It was evident that the coaches recognized that injuries may threaten an athlete's feelings of belongingness—a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)—and thus attempted to ensure that the injured athletes still felt socially connected to the team. The coaches described injury as a time period during which they would increase their interactions with injured athletes to check on their well-being to ensure that they felt the necessary social support. The coaches also stated that peers are imperative throughout this time in supporting both the injured athlete and the athlete(s) with generally lesser roles, who are stepping up in the place of the injured athlete. It is evident that the coaches recognized that, regardless of what type of role the group members occupied within the program (i.e., injured or not injured; playing or not playing), their bonds and support should remain consistent. This line of reasoning is supported by the social identity change model, which emphasizes how losing a sense of connection to a valued social group can be particularly disruptive for one's well-being (Praharso, Tear, & Cruwys, 2017). Although developing a strong sense of togetherness and team identity early in a team's life cycle is an important leadership function fulfilled by coaches, an athlete's sense of connection to their team is dynamic and must be nurtured (Reicher, Haslam, & Platow, 2018). Given that athletes tend to report greater commitment and effort when they feel strongly

connected to their team (i.e., ingroup ties; Martin, Balderson, Hawkins, Wilson, & Bruner, 2017), our work highlights that coaches also have the difficult task of managing an athletes' sense of connection to their team throughout the trials and tribulations of a competitive season.

The coaches identified the necessity of communication with the injured athlete, the athlete(s) with newfound role responsibilities due to injury, and the team as a whole. Interestingly, this contrasts the findings by Surya et al. (2015), in which players explicitly recounted that the coaches did not play an active role in communicating with or managing the group during a time period of injury. In the present study, the coaches identified a number of deliberate strategies to manage a team during a time period of injury, including addressing the situation at the time of the injury event, open communication with the team and medical staff members, and supporting the athletes with changing roles. This discrepancy could potentially reflect the quality of coaches in this study; the coaches interviewed were generally very successful and, thus, they might have more developed approaches for managing groups in the wake of an injury. However, these differing views might reflect social desirability bias or simply a skewed view of one's level of communication with athletes.

Finally, the coaches expressed the need to stay true to the team culture throughout the injury process. Culture has been commonly defined as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration" and is believed to consist of three levels: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions (Schein, 1985, p. 19). "Bigger than us" and "controlling what we can" were examples of phrases used to describe these underlying values and assumptions through not only the process of injury, but all group processes. In light of an injury being an adverse event through which teams must work together, in alignment with their cultural values, we can acknowledge the role of team resiliency. According to Morgan, Fletcher, and Sarkar (2013), team resiliency can be defined as "a dynamic, psychosocial process which protects a group of individuals from the potential negative effect of stressors they collectively encounter. It comprises processes whereby team members use their individual and collective resources to positively adapt when experiencing adversity" (p. 557). In the present study, injury is a dynamic, psychosocial process whose effects may be mitigated by way of strong task resilience and compliance with team culture.

Given the nature of this study, it is important that we communicate the limitations of our findings. The sport of interest, basketball, is a sport with few players on the court at one time and a high degree of task interdependence due to the multiple task-oriented roles (both offensive and defensive) of players. Teams with more members on the field of play or lower levels of task interdependence, such as football, may experience less perturbation across the group in response to the injury of a single member. Our findings are also exclusive to team sports. Although varying in extent, all team sports possess a level of task interdependence. A unique future direction would be to explore the unfolding group processes and management following injury in individual sports, as injury to a member of an individual sport team (e.g., Nordic skiing) has yet to be explored. Despite often having lower task interdependence, members of individual sport teams have identified teammates as an important source of motivation, social facilitation, and teamwork (Evans, Eys, & Wolf, 2012). Teammates are of influence on individual sport teams; therefore, future work should aim to understand how an injury to a team member on an individual sport team affects other team members and how group leaders aim to manage these changes and the injured athlete at this time.

Additionally, in the present study, we only conducted one interview, either via telephone or in person, with each of the participating coaches. Phone interviews are often neglected in qualitative research, as they are thought to possess some limitations, such as the absence of nonverbal data, compromising some rapport, and interpretation (Novick, 2008). Although this may seem like an unattractive option, being able to conduct interviews over the phone aided with study feasibility and posed some potential benefits. Telephone interviews may allow participants to better relax due to the comfort of being in their own setting (Novick, 2008), decrease the cost and travel associated with interviews (Chapple, 1999), and increase the interviewer's ability to take notes unobtrusively (Smith, 2005). This resulted in gathering in-depth, retrospective accounts of how the coaches managed their group, but future work should consider conducting multiple interviews with multiple social agents. Additionally, the coaches noted the need to prioritize collective team goals and team culture (i.e., we over me) during a time period of injury, which may involve deemphasizing the needs of the individual athlete who was injured. However, coaches also spoke to the importance of ensuring that all athletes felt socially supported following an injury event. Given the potentially conflicting goals and priorities coaches must navigate over the course of a season and the previously discussed discrepancy between coach and athlete perceptions of how coaches manage their team during a time period of injury, another attractive future direction would be to discuss injury management with coaches at multiple timepoints throughout a single sport season or with coach-athlete dyads or triads (e.g., an athlete who recently returned from injury, a teammate, and their coach). Indeed, this would help us to better understand the group dynamics that unfold during a time period of injury and exactly what is being prioritized at this time. An ethnographic study might be a particularly informative approach to garner insight into how injury events are managed within teams from the perspective of a third-party observer.

Finally, although only identified by a single participant, one coach spoke of their school's injury meeting group. This was a group facilitated by staff at the institution, which prompted injured athletes to get together in a formal setting once per week. Athletes from different sports teams met and touched base to discuss their rehabilitation progress, team concepts, struggles, and feelings throughout their time being injured. This was seen as something that fostered friendships and was an event that injured athletes looked forward to on a weekly basis. An injury meeting group such as the one described may have the ability to prevent feelings of alienation in injured athletes. An attractive future direction would aim to explore this group or assess the effectiveness of similar interventions and the potential social identity that they foster among injured athletes.

## Conclusion

Our results speak to the complexities involved in coaching, highlighting how an unexpected occurrence such as an injury requires quick adjustments (e.g., personnel decisions, strategy, and tactics) that can carry potentially long-term implications for both athletes and team functioning. Effective coaching not only requires careful planning and preparation, but also the ability to adjust in response to team-level stressors, such as losing a core role occupant. Coaches shed light on valuable practical strategies that could be implemented, including having a stoic reaction in a moment when injury occurs, communicating roles and

responsibilities with athletes and support staff early and often, prioritizing injured athletes' well-being, and keeping them involved with the team throughout the injury rehabilitation process. Continued research on the group dynamics that unfold following an injury event may better equip coaches and practitioners with strategies on how to optimize team functioning during times of adversity.

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