# **Article Critique**

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# Kerr, G., Willson, E., & Stirling, A. (2020). “It was the worst time in my life”: The effects of emotionally abusive coaching on female Canadian National Team athletes. *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal, 28*(1), 81–89.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the effects of emotionally abusive coaching practices on elite, retired, female Canadian National Team athletes. The authors proposed that there would be similarities in the experiences of abusive coaching practices that produced negative psychological effects. The research was aimed towards emotional abuse because it is the most reported form of maltreatment even though sexual abuse is more widely researched and covered by media outlets. The authors hypothesized that exploring the effects of emotional abuse on this particular sample of participants will lead to consideration and more future research of the long-term effects of abuse within the domain of sport.

**Methods**

The study focused on eight retired female Canadian National Team athletes from individual and team sports between the ages of 24 and 29. The average time spent in retirement prior to the interviews was 4.5 years and the average total time as a competitive athlete was 14 years. Participants were recruited via social media by their reported experiences with abusive coaching practices. Of all eight participants, five competed in the Olympics and three others in the Pan American Games and World Championships. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the athletes.

Participant choice is justified by the authors as they were focused on retired athletes because they were more removed than current athletes, making them more reflective about their experiences and more apt to speak of their experiences as emotionally harmful. Females were chosen over males due to the prevalence of reported emotional abuse as higher for females than males. Elite athletes were chosen because previous research indicated more emotional abuse in higher levels of sport.

The authors used semi-structured interviews between 40-90 minutes that first built rapport then used specific prompts and questions to explore longer-term effects of emotional abuse. The interviewer was a previous elite athlete who was sensitive to the experiences of the athletes and potential biases. The data was analyzed by a reflexive thematic analysis that allowed the data itself to determine organization and interpretation. The authors used a constructivist perspective, which acknowledges that every athlete has their own experience and the effects of abuse may be different for each.

**Results**

Athletes reported emotionally abusive coaching practices that shifted over time thus the results were organized into three phases of emotional abuse based on the timeline of retirement: pre-retirement, during the retirement transition, and post-retirement. In the first phase, pre-retirement, athletes reported nervousness and walking on eggshells around their coaches in order to avoid becoming a target of abuse. Athletes’ performances suffered from this anxiety which also made them question their participation in the sport altogether. The abuse was a large reason for the decision to retire. The second phase was during the retirement transition, which was reported as a long and tedious process by most of the participants. Many avoided talking or thinking about their sport entirely. Athletes reported difficulties in maintaining personal relationships as well as forming new ones. The process of retirement made the athletes realize that what was previously recognized as normal coaching practices were in fact “not right at all.” The final phase of post-retirement provided a feeling of new confidence and self-love even though negative memories still triggered emotional responses. All athletes have undergone professional psychological care during and/or after their athletic careers.

**Discussions and Conclusions**

The findings of this study go against the common perception that sports contribute to positive well-being by building self-confidence and positive self-image. Emotionally abusive coaching practices are not ethical, nor do they enhance performance. The findings also mirror previous research in child abuse literature that confirms negative long-term effects from emotional abuse. Two unintended findings were the prevalence of symptoms that could indicate a PTSD diagnosis and the impact of abuse on interpersonal relationships.

It is obvious that changes must be made so that coaches are educated on the impact they have on athletes and their mental health. Parents, administrative staff, program directors, etc. should be aware as well in order to keep accountability. There is clear harm to athletes that could be avoided and while current safeguarding focuses on prevention of emotionally abusive practices, there is not much in the way of support and intervention. Retirement can be a tough time for any athlete as they search for meaning and purpose in other domains and slowly dismantle their athletic identity. Healing from emotional abuse and maltreatment should not be an added stressor.

The authors noted limitations of one-on-one interviewing and suggest more methodical approaches in the future. They also suggest more samples be explored regarding different genders, sports, and races. I found the authors’ description of their methods could have been more detailed like whether the interviews were done face-to-face or via online video chat. It would be worth exploring if the athletes have been diagnosed with mental health disorders akin to PTSD and what their attachment styles were as children due to the heavy influence these have on interpersonal relationships throughout the lifespan.

One particular critique I have on the article is the authors’ interpretation of one athlete’s experience with gaining approval of her coach. When Kaitlyn justified the abuse from her coach by saying it made her work harder, the author identified this as a positive impact of abuse, which was not positive, nor was it conducive to the athlete because it caused her lasting emotional turmoil. Positive coaching behaviors don’t cause psychological disturbances. She focused on conditional, ego-driven motivation instead of mastery-driven motivation–which is much more conducive to healthy psychological well-being.

The impact this article has made on my own experiences with emotionally abusive coaching practices mirrors the sentiments of the athletes. I did not realize how detrimental my training environment was to my mental health until I removed myself from that particular training academy. My coach berated me when I made a mistake despite never teaching or informing me of the proper technique. I was told on some days that I could win against any opponent I face and on other days that I would never be a successful fighter. The turmoil was long-lasting and caused hesitance and cautiousness when I began training at a new academy. I believe the impact this article will have on future research of coaching practices will promote positive changes to sport and training environments. Sports need to add positive coaching behaviors, supportive resources for athletes struggling with their mental health, and avoid maltreatment of athletes. Better performances will likely come from these changes.