LONE GIRLS: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF GIRLS ON BOYS’ SPORTS TEAMS

by

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Abstract

Existing literature informing our understanding of youth sport experiences has largely involved investigations of populations that are similar to each other (e.g., same age, sex). There are, however, instances in sport where individuals enter situations that counter traditional developmental pathways. An example of such a situation is a girl engaged in sport whereby the remainder of their teammates are boys—a phenomenon known as the ‘lone girl.’ Importantly, researchers have yet to explore the contextual considerations and subsequent developmental outcomes of the lone girl experience. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to engage with youth development literature to explore the experiences of lone girls in sport.

Through semi-structured interviews with former ‘lone girl’ athletes (n = 13) and the use of a dual-narrative analysis, four narrative typologies of the lone girl experience were identified: (1) From Insider to Outsider, (2) Boys’ or Bust, (3) High School Hang-up, and (4) No Road to the Show. Moreover, consultation with youth sport literature revealed implications with respect to the setting, activities, and social dynamics of a lone girl’s sport experience. Further, the application of a critical feminist lens highlighted societal constructions and expectations of gender that influenced participants’ sport involvement and outcomes—thus, providing a holistic understanding of the lone girl experience inclusive of important contextual elements. Finally, this thesis aims to advance knowledge within the positive youth development literature by offering theoretical suggestions, future research directions, and practical suggestions for key stakeholders (e.g., coaches, parents, organizations).
Co-Authorship

This thesis was conducted in collaboration with my supervisor, Dr. Luc Martin. As the primary researcher, I was responsible for the study design, participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and the written thesis document. Dr. Martin provided guidance and support when formulating the research topic and study design, challenged the interpretation of the data analysis and results, and provided feedback on the written manuscript.
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List of Abbreviations

3 Ps: Performance, Participation, and Personal Development

4 Cs: Confidence, Competence, Connection, and Character

CWS: Canadian Women and Sport

DMSP: Developmental Model of Sport Participation

NRCIM: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine

PAF: Personal Assets Framework

PYD: Positive Youth Development

TFL: Transformational Leadership Theory
Chapter 1

Introduction

Sport participation is widely considered to be an avenue that can foster positive youth development (PYD) for child and adolescent participants (Côté et al., 2014; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). The many benefits that can be obtained from sport involvement range from physical, to social, to psychological; including improved muscular strength and endurance, opportunities for peer relationships, and increased self-esteem (Eime et al., 2013; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). These benefits, however, do not come automatically and are not guaranteed (Holt, 2008). When young athletes are provided with developmentally appropriate settings, engaging and enjoyable activities, and quality social interactions, they are more likely to acquire foundational assets that will benefit their sport involvement and prepare them to be productive members of society (Côté et al., 2014; Côté et al., 2016). Conversely, sport settings that focus on professionalization and less on positive peer interactions and fostering a healthy social environment can result in burnout, reduced overall enjoyment, and dropout (Evans et al., 2017; Vierimaa et al., 2017).

While previous research informing our beliefs regarding youth sport participation has done much to highlight potential issues, build better programming, and create more inclusive environments for young athletes, it is critical to continuously assess any body of literature for potential gaps or understudied areas. In keeping with this practice, and as I will discuss in the following sections, it is evident that the previous scholarship which has informed our understanding of youth experiences in sport has largely involved
investigations of populations competing alongside individuals similar to themselves (e.g., same sex, age; Robertson et al., 2019). Despite this trend, there are instances in sport where individuals are inserted into situations that counter these traditional developmental pathways and groupings. For example, athletes deemed highly skilled in comparison to their age cohort may play in older age categories (i.e., ‘playing up’; Goldman et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2009). The rationale for allowing young athletes to progress in this way is that the exposure to higher levels of competition and intensity will facilitate decision-making and performance (e.g., Malina, 2010; Wiersma, 2000). It is critical though, that such a decision not rest solely on performance-related motives as research suggests implications for athletes who ‘play up’ from a more general developmental perspective (Goldman et al., 2021).

A similar situation that has received little research attention pertains to girls engaging in sport whereby the remainder of their teammates are boys. Although girls have been reported to participate on boys’ sport teams for heightened competition and intensity, it is also clear that they do so because of limited available sport opportunities (e.g., Velija & Malcolm, 2009). This phenomenon has been described as the ‘lone girl’ (e.g., Heineken, 2015) and, regardless of the motive, these individuals represent a population that has divergent experiences with the appropriateness of the setting they are in, their engagement and enjoyment in specific activities, and their feelings of belonging and acceptance due to their distinctiveness within the team (e.g., Liston, 2005).

Importantly, the occurrence of lone girls in sport as well as the processes by which this designation may impact elements of their developmental outcomes has not yet been explored. Thus, there is a need to better understand what their experiences entail
with respect to the setting, activities, and social dynamics. In particular, as more women are beginning to break through the barriers of professional sport environments, they have received more media attention as the sole woman competitor or coach (e.g., NCAA football kicker, Sarah Fuller and NBA coach, Becky Hammon), making this line of research especially relevant.

Accordingly, the purpose of this thesis was to explore the experiences of girls during their specializing and investment years (i.e., 14-17 years old) who have participated on sports teams in which they were a lone girl and to contextualize these experiences within the broader youth development literature. More specifically, I was interested in exploring the trajectory of the lone girl experience to better understand if and how their involvement on a boys’ team influenced physical and psychosocial development. Additionally, I was interested in exploring why their experience as the sole girl may have influenced their development from a critical feminist perspective. The following chapters provide a detailed account of how this research plan unfolded beginning with a review of relevant literature (Chapter 2), followed by a description of methodology and methods used (Chapter 3), a presentation of the findings, and discussion with respect to the youth development literature (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5), and, finally, a summary of the research project, including practical implications and suggestions for key stakeholders including coaches and teammates of lone girls (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Positive Youth Development Through Sport

When considering research on youth development from a historical perspective, the PYD approach represented a shift in philosophy away from the traditional deficit avoidance focus (i.e., undesirable behaviours were controlled by developing interventions to identify and reduce them; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005) to a focus on youth potential. Although the prevention of problematic behaviours makes sense, PYD researchers argued that this perspective failed to adequately equip youth with the developmental assets needed to be prepared for, and be productive in, adulthood (Damon, 2004; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Lerner, 2000). Accordingly, the PYD approach was positioned as a way to prevent risky and harmful behaviours while also emphasizing youth potential and the adoption of desirable behaviours and life skills (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Weiss, 2019). More specifically, Benson’s (1990) asset-building paradigm is thought to have begun the transition towards emphasizing youth potential and the development of a conceptualization of positive development. Almost a decade following Benson’s conceptualization, a refined and finalized list of developmental assets that should be targeted by communities to facilitate positive development in young people was assembled (Benson et al., 1998). The resulting list of 40 developmental assets can be categorized into external assets (e.g., support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time), and internal assets (e.g., commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity; Benson et al., 1998).
In Larson’s (2000) conceptualization of PYD, initiative is emphasized as the key component for positive social development due to its function as a prerequisite for creativity, leadership, altruism, civic engagement, and other positive attributes. Further, Larson (2000) demonstrated that initiative can be developed through voluntary structured activities (e.g., the arts, sport). The explanation for this was that such activities provide youth with a unique combination of intrinsic motivation and deep attention that other activities—such as schoolwork and unstructured leisure activities—typically lack. Larson (2000) further defined the most suitable context for the development of initiative as, “activities that are voluntary (i.e., not required for school) and involve some structure, that is, where [participation] occurs within a system involving constraints, rules, and goals” (p. 174). As a result of this research, it became apparent that activities such as sport and the arts (e.g., music) are common activities that youth globally participate in fitting this definition.

Research within youth sport specifically demonstrates a wide range of developmental and personal benefits for youth (see Côté et al., 2008; Holt & Neely, 2011; Holt, 2016; Petitpas et al., 2005) including ample opportunity to build the capacity for initiative (Larson, 2000); though this research also highlighted that participating in sport alone does not guarantee that positive development will occur (Holt, 2008). For example, factors such as poor program design and a negative social climate can hinder development (Evans et al., 2017). As such, researchers have moved toward understanding under what circumstances, for specific populations, different features promote or inhibit healthy youth development (Holt et al., 2016). To do so, additional developmental approaches have been advanced in the study and conceptualization of PYD in sport.
2.1.1 The 5 Cs. Among the first models conceptualizing PYD was Lerner and colleagues’ (2000) ‘5 Cs’ of PYD: competence, character, connection, confidence, and caring. Lerner et al. (2000) proposed the 5 Cs as positive outcomes of effective delivery of youth programs and resources. Together, the 5 Cs were expected to lead to a sixth C, contribution, that when developed in youth, promote civil society. Specific to sport, Côté et al. (2010) synthesized the Cs framework and collapsed caring and character to result in a 4 Cs model: competence, confidence, character, and connection. Sport literature has generally demonstrated that programs embodying the 4 Cs result in athletes having higher levels of performance, participation, and personal development (i.e., ‘the 3 Ps’; Côté et al., 2008; Côté et al., 2014). Thus, the 3 Ps were established as long-term outcomes of programs that emphasize the development of the 4 Cs (Côté et al., 2008).

2.1.2 Ecological approaches. An ecological approach (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) has commonly been adopted in research to identify and explore the many facets underlying human development. Ecological perspectives describe the interconnectedness of proximal (i.e., family, friends, peers) and distal (i.e., communities, industries, governing bodies) influences on experiences and behaviour over time. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) further suggested that, for effective development to occur, a person must engage in activities which, “take place on a fairly regular basis…over a long enough period of time to become increasingly more complex and…for reciprocal interactions to occur” (p. 996-997). Similarly, around this time Lerner and colleagues (2000) encouraged researchers to take a developmental systems theory approach to developmental research. Specifically, Lerner et al. (2000) stressed that the primary way to promote PYD and for researchers to enact more change is through
examination of real-world settings and children’s relationships within their contexts (e.g., family, school, community, programs). More recently within the realm of sport, scholars have utilized ecological and integrative approaches to explore athlete development more thoroughly. To demonstrate, Henriksen and colleagues (2010) proposed a working model for their study of talent development environments. Whereas talent development research had traditionally focused on the individual athlete, Henriksen et al. (2010) demonstrated that the entirety of the sport environment (i.e., both the macro and micro components) had considerable influence on athlete development (e.g., influence of national culture toward the sport, organizational rules and values, time and energy spent with family, friends, and school). This research reinforced the importance of looking beyond the individual athlete by considering the influence of the broader environment on developmental outcomes.

2.1.3 The Developmental Model for Sport Participation. In response to the unique conditions encountered by athletes in contemporary youth sport environments, the Developmental Model for Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté et al., 2007) drew on ecological approaches and theory to emphasize the important roles that coaches, parents, organizations, and policymakers inhabit in affecting athlete experiences and, therefore, development (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). Informed by a decade of previous research, the DMSP makes suggestions to best facilitate a ‘rounded’ approach to development (i.e., physical, social, psychological), and is purposefully designed to encourage appropriate pathways to personal and performance development (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). For instance, the model combined elements of the eight setting features of positive development from the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (see NRCIM,
and Benson’s (1990) developmental assets, thus targeting the physical setting and program structure, while also including a social component that makes suggestions for coaches and parents.

Within the model are three different stages or ‘pathways’ that, based on the type and amount of the sport activities, lead to different trajectories and outcomes of development (Côté et al., 2010). These pathways include, (1) recreational participation through sampling, (2) elite performance through sampling, and (3) elite performance through early specialization. Taken together, the pathways suggest that sport sampling (i.e., high amounts of unstructured play and involvement in several sports) during the ages of six to 11 years old, and sport specialization (i.e., balanced play and practice and reduced involvement in several sports) and investment (i.e., high volume of practice and focus on one sport) around the ages of 12 and 15 years old is more likely to lead to favorable outcomes such as enjoyment, elite performance, and improved physical health (Côté et al., 2007). Conversely, early sport specialization (e.g., high volumes of deliberate practices at a young age) is more likely to lead to burnout, reduced enjoyment, and attrition (Côté et al., 2007).

2.1.4 The Personal Assets Framework. Building upon the PYD literature and ecological models of development, the Personal Assets Framework (PAF) was proposed focusing on the dynamic relations between athletes, their coaches, peers, and parents, in relation to the sporting environment broadly (Côté et al., 2014). In keeping with ecological perspectives, this framework accounts for the time required for youth to acquire personal assets and describes these changes with respect to the developmental age and maturation of the sport participant (Côté et al., 2014).
Within the PAF, the personal, relational, and organizational factors in sport are referred to as ‘dynamic elements’ and are discussed specifically as appropriate settings, personal engagement in activities, and quality social dynamics (Côté et al., 2014; Côté et al., 2016). These elements are represented as interlocking gears that play an active role in shaping the immediate, short-term, and long-term sport experiences of youth athletes (Figure 1). For example, there is a greater likelihood that athletes will develop personal assets represented by the 4 Cs (confidence, competence, connection, and character; Côté et al., 2010), which will contribute to long-term outcomes comprised of the 3 Ps (participation, performance, and personal development; Côté et al., 2008). However, as scholars have recently highlighted (e.g., Côté et al., 2020; Vierimaa et al., 2017), each of these gears should be considered at the micro and macro levels. For example, the playing field, club/organization structure, and community structure all make up the setting in which athletes participate in (Côté et al., 2020). Further, quality social dynamics can account for both interpersonal relationships, the overall team dynamics, and the social environment generally (Côté et al., 2020). Lastly, the sport of interest in addition to complementary physical and non-physical activities all fall within an athlete’s personal engagement in activities (Côté et al., 2020). When exploring each element in terms of their interaction with the others, researchers should consider the various layers that exist within the elements individually.
Fig. 1  
*Personal Assets Framework*

![Diagram of Personal Assets Framework]


**Personal engagement in activities.** This element accounts for the variety of activities that youth participate in. It includes the athlete’s sport of interest in addition to complementary physical and non-related activities. This is reflected in the DMSP, whereby Côté and colleagues (2007) suggest that for positive progression in sport, both elite and recreational athletes should (a) be engaged in diverse activities and experiences and (b) participate in deliberate play over deliberate practice. This includes participating in a variety of activities outside of sport (e.g., music, visual arts, clubs, volunteering) to promote overall wellbeing (Côté et al., 2020). It is proposed that athletes who partake in these practices gain a wide range of experiences, skills, exposure to diverse social settings, and generally, experience more positive outcomes (Côté et al., 2014; Côté et al., 2020). Conversely, athletes who specialize early during their developmental or sampling
years are more likely to experience decreased motivation and are more at risk of injury and burnout (Côté et al., 1999; DiSanti & Erickson, 2019; LaPrade et al., 2016).

**Quality social dynamics.** As an inherently social activity, the quality of social dynamics continues to be cited as one of the most influential factors affecting the sport environment (Côté et al., 2014; Côté et al., 2016; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Petitpas et al., 2005; Turnnidge et al., 2016). As an example, Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) found that the quality of interpersonal relationships between athletes and their coaches, peers, and parents was related to whether or not they had positive or negative experiences. This position has been supported by other scholars (i.e., Henriksen et al., 2010; Petitpas et al., 2005; Turnnidge et al., 2016) demonstrating that successful athletes were more likely to be a product of youth programs in which coach-athlete relationships, group cohesion, and community were prioritized. The importance of social dynamics has also been reinforced by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (NRCIM; 2002) features of positive developmental settings, whereby half the proposed features involved support and relationships (e.g., relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, and support for efficacy). It is evident that the social interactions between athletes and their coaches, peers, and parents, whether positive or negative, play a role in how athletes experience sport and therefore their attainment of personal assets such as the 4 Cs. This suggests implications on continued sport participation as the quality of athlete relationships may in fact dictate whether or not they wish to pursue a particular sport (Evans et al., 2013).

**Appropriate settings.** The appropriateness of the setting outlines the context in which athletes compete during sport. This dynamic element is also rooted in the eight
setting features of positive development from the NRCIM (2002). Half of the proposed features pertain to the physical setting (e.g., physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, opportunities for skill-building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts). Appropriate settings can also refer to those that are proximal to the athlete, such as the playing field, as well as distal such as the community or league structure. Regardless of the proximal or distal relationship to the athlete, scholars highlight the importance of creating sport settings that are in line with the NRCIM’s recommendations while also focusing on play, skill development, fun, and interest to promote long term participation (Côté et al., 2016; Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

2.2 Girls and Women in Sport

As previously mentioned, historically, research in youth sport has largely involved investigations of populations competing alongside those similar to themselves. It is important to recognize that girls engaging in sport, and especially those whereby the remainder of their teammates are boys (i.e., the ‘lone girl’), have received little attention to date in academia despite being well-documented in the grey literature (e.g., Lypka, 2017; Sekeres, 2009; Smith, 2018; Rehmann, 2011). While the existence of lone girls may be linked to a variety of explanations including those beyond individual choice (e.g., limited opportunities in a region, financial reasons), nevertheless their occurrence necessitates a larger discussion regarding sport and its relationship with gender. As both a component and influencer of culture, sport is unique in that it mirrors society, its social norms, and expectations (Kay & Jeanes, 2008). A look at the current state of girls and women in sport, therefore, offers the opportunity to explore present-day constructions of gender and its influence in both society and sport.
In their latest Rally Report, Canadian Women and Sport (CWS; Canadian Women in Sport, 2020) found that only 18% of women age 16-63 report being involved in sport compared to about 40% of men of the same age. Moreover, one in three girls is expected to drop out of sport compared to one in 10 boys (CWS, 2020). This suggests that not only are girls less likely to participate in sport, but even when they do, they are less likely to continue on into adulthood. Of particular concern was the finding that ‘access to sport’ was reported as the number one barrier to participation, followed by ‘quality of sport experiences’, ‘limited alternatives’, and ‘cost’ (CWS, 2020). Fifty per cent of girls aged 13-15 and 60% of girls aged 16-18 reported limited access to sport participation, with one in three girls reporting a lack of belonging and feeling unwelcome when they do participate (CWS, 2020).

The results from the Rally Report are alarming as they highlight that girls and women are less likely to obtain the health and social benefits of sport participation (e.g., Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010; Poitras et. al., 2016). One reason for the low sport participation numbers and identified barriers to participation highlighted in the Rally Report stems from the fact that sport was created by, and has historically favored, men and boys (Kay & Jeanes, 2008). With the most popular North American sports (e.g., baseball, basketball, football, ice-hockey, American football) predominantly occupied by men, girls and women in sport continue to be cast as ‘outsiders’, having to face negotiations with persistent gender constructs and stereotypes (Bevan et al., 2020; Kochanek et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2020). While not to discredit the considerable advancements made by individuals in women’s sport to reduce the gender imbalance over the last century, it is evident that an imbalance still exists (e.g., Bevan et al., 2020; Kochanek et al., 2021;
Taylor et al., 2020) and sport for girls in Canada continues to lag behind—in both participation and quality—that of boys (CWS, 2020).

2.2.1 The lone girl. The term ‘lone girl’ has been used in analyses of children’s sport fiction books to describe situations where girls participate on boys’ teams (e.g., Heineken, 2015). Not only are these girls faced with ‘outsider’ perceptions by being participants in an environment historically dominated by men, but an additional layer of ‘outsider’ is added as they compete as the sole girl on their team. The research—albeit limited—that describes perspectives of individuals who have participated as lone girls in sport begins to uncover the experiences and perceptions of this unique population of athletes.

For instance, Liston (2005) investigated women’s introduction into sports (i.e., Gaelic football, soccer, and rugby) in Ireland that have historically been played by men only. Using in-depth interviews based on established-outsider relations theory, Liston (2005) explored how women in these sports were perceived as outsiders, and how this representation is related to the production of negative self-images and stigmatization from society including labels such as being ‘butch’, lesbian, or overly-masculine.

In another study by Velija and Malcolm (2009), young girls participating in cricket in England were asked to report on a range of experiences from their involvement on boys’ teams. For instance, girls expressed how they felt they were able to challenge common gender stereotypes about women athletes by demonstrating their abilities and skill. They did however also express feelings of isolation and failure to receive acceptance from the boys. As a whole, the authors indicated a lack of increasing
participation by girls in sport because of the inability to move beyond their reputation as ‘outsiders’ of the game (Velija & Malcolm, 2009).

These findings shed light on implications for the dynamic elements of the PAF. Velija and Malcom (2009) demonstrated how girls experienced feelings of rejection from boys, which has clear implications pertaining to quality social dynamics. Friendships and peer acceptance from teammates have been associated with a number of positive outcomes at both the individual (e.g., enjoyment, motivation, commitment, goal orientation) and group levels (e.g., cohesion, group norms, social identity; Bruner et al., 2013). Similarly, a lack of such experiences could have negative consequences on development that may contribute to interpersonal conflict or dropout behaviours. The fact that girls experienced a sense of pride when they were able to challenge common gender stereotypes by demonstrating their ability to compete at the same level as boys could be considered in relation to appropriate settings. The physical environment for these athletes gave them the opportunity to engage in social comparison, as youth use similar others as a frame of reference for developing identity and competence beliefs (Wood & Wilson, 2003). Here, girls experienced positive self-esteem and confidence competing alongside the boys. Lastly, participants from Liston’s (2005) study reflected on their experiences of constraint within their sport; feeling the need to legitimize their athletic talents with appropriately feminine characteristics. In comparison, Velija and Malcom (2009) noted that girls described feelings of isolation as the only girls on their team. Both perspectives sit within the personal engagement of activities element. It is possible that feelings of competence and isolation could have implications for enjoyment, opportunities for sampling, and deliberate play. Taken together, this suggests the need to take a more in-
depth look at the potential implications for each of the dynamic elements for this group of athletes.

Thus, the purpose of this thesis was to investigate the sport environment of individuals who have participated as ‘lone girls’ on competitive sports teams during their specializing and investment years of youth sport (i.e., 14-17 years old). A brief overview of the youth sport literature highlights an understudied population of girls who are among the few, or in some cases the only, girl on their sports team. Evidently, individuals in these scenarios represent a population of youth who, based on their gender, appear as ‘outsiders’ on the team. Knowing what we do about the opportunities for positive development through sport and the dynamic elements of the PAF, it is reasonable to speculate that their physical and social sport environment may be different compared to those participating in single-sex teams.
Chapter 3

Methods

3.1 Philosophical Approach and Theoretical Assumptions

Two traditions of research guided my approach to this study: critical realism and critical feminist theory. Drawing from both positivist and interpretivist assumptions, critical realism accepts the existence of objective reality but acknowledges that an individual’s truth is constructed by their own experiences (Fletcher, 2020; Maxwell, 2012). As a result, individuals are unable to objectively interpret this reality and so multiple explanations of reality exist (Maxwell, 2012). For instance, athletes described experiences as they relate to each of the dynamic elements of the PAF, but because of their own unique experiences, their perspectives within each element vary. Further, this study is guided by a constructivist epistemology. A constructivist epistemology assumes that knowledge is created from individual perspectives as they relate to the real world (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019). Knowledge, therefore, is theory-laden and it is the role of the researcher to engage with the data and theory to propose explanations that best describe reality (Fletcher, 2020). Thus, to gain a better understanding when discussing athlete experiences on boys’ teams, these events were considered within the context of the PAF—a seminal theory of youth development through sport.

In concert with critical realism, critical feminist theory provides a lens through which to explore inequalities in social hierarchies that are related to the social construction of gender, and how they may be revealed through language and storytelling (Martin, 2003). As a facet of practically all social relations, gender intersects with various components of identity (e.g., ethnicity, class), making it a complex but necessary
category for critical analysis. A feminist approach in academia seeks to explain these interrelationships by demonstrating the gendered nature of social practices and how gendered assumptions are produced, sustained, and negotiated (Lazar, 2007).

Importantly, a feminist vision is not one in which power shifts in favour of women, as this suggests a dualistic and hierarchical structure of gender, but is rather “a just society in which gender does not predetermine or mediate our relationships with others or our sense of who we are or who we might become” (Lazar, 2007, p. 145). Thus, a critical approach aims to resist further perpetuation of gender inequalities through a critical examination of the language and discourses of participants, but also through reflexive consideration of the research questions and how they are asked (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). In sum, critical feminist theory offered a lens through which to explore how gender-related beliefs in society influence girls’ experiences as lone girls on sports teams.

3.2 Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Having personal experience as a lone girl, it is important to discuss/disclose my positionality and influence on the study. During my soccer career from ages 4 to 18 years, I encountered two separate instances of being the lone girl on my team—once at age 10 and again at age 16. Contrary to the participants in this study, my experiences took place at the recreational level within a co-ed league, and occurred because of few registered female participants. My first experience could be described overall as negative. I had minimal social interaction with my teammates, would be ignored by teammates on the pitch, and had a coach who rarely acknowledged my presence. Walking away from games, I often felt frustrated, like I was unable to develop my skill or experience social connection. This was a contrast from my experience at age 16, where I had a vocal coach.
who advocated for my respect from others, and encouraged and supported me. These behaviours were also reflected in the behaviour of my teammates who treated me a member of the team, and an equal on the pitch. Overall, this experience was enjoyable and had a positive influence on my performance, confidence, and sense of belonging.

Given my experience, and the significance of coach and teammate interactions on my experience, being reflexive and transparent during the development of the proposed project was necessary. For example, I engaged in reflexive practices which included journaling and discussing my previous experiences and related beliefs with critical friends (e.g., supervisor, lab members). Throughout the process, I continued to have discussions with these individuals as well as my proposal committee members to help acknowledge and embrace my experiences and biases in relation to how they may have influenced my findings.

While it is understood that objectivity can never fully be reached, several steps were taken to help achieve ‘empathic neutrality’ (Ormston et al., 2014). I continued to practice reflexivity by using a reflection journal and recording voice memos following interviews to capture thoughts pertaining to my role, and the influence of my beliefs and behaviours on the research being conducted and subsequent findings. In doing so, potential biases including those that are obvious, conscious, and systematic were engaged with and presented to readers transparently. At the same time, my ‘insider’ perspective also served to be advantageous for developing rapport with participants during the interviews and increased my capacity to understand participants’ experiences and perspectives, which lent to the generation of rich data (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002).
3.3 Design

Self-identifying women in their late adolescence and early adulthood (i.e., 17-25 years old) were recruited to participate in a one-time semi-structured interview. After obtaining ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board at Queen’s University (Appendix A), participants were recruited by creating recruitment posts on popular social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram). Posts included a brief statement regarding the study purpose and listed the inclusion criteria, as well as the contact and institution information of the primary researcher (Appendix B). In addition to the age range indicated above, inclusion criteria were any individual who identifies as a woman, and who has had experience playing a competitive team sport in Canada as a lone girl during their specializing and investment years of youth sport (e.g., ~ages 14-17; Coté, 1999). Women who were interested in participating in the study were asked to contact the primary researcher to set an interview date and time. Corresponding emails from individuals confirming their desire to participate signified verbal consent. Willing participants were given a letter of information (Appendix C) prior to the interview indicating that their participation is voluntary and they may withdraw at any time without consequence.

All interviews took place remotely via Zoom or phone call. First, a pilot interview was conducted with a critical friend and Ph.D. student in a related field who fit most of the inclusion criteria. This friend was able to provide constructive feedback with regards to the questions asked, probes used, flow, and pace of the interview prior to engaging with participants. Due to internet capabilities, all but three interviews were conducted over the phone. Each interview was audio recorded with the permission of the participant.
and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were analyzed following a dual-narrative analysis approach similar to that of Perrier et al. (2014) and Allan et al. (2018), resulting in the generation of themes within and between participants, as well as four narratives representative of the lone girl sport trajectory.

3.3.1 Participants. Of the 21 individuals who responded directly, 13 met the inclusion criteria outlined above, the remaining being excluded as a result of being above or below the target age range (i.e., ± 5 years). Therefore, a total of 13 interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in this study.

Across the 13 participants included in the analysis, 3 provinces (e.g., Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia) were represented, as well as one American State (West Virginia). Six different sports were discussed (e.g., hockey, baseball, soccer, basketball, football, and lacrosse). Six participants described their lone girl experience occurring within a club or league at the competitive level, six competed at the high school level, and one discussed competing for both. 10 participants competed for multiple seasons as a lone girl and three competed for a single season only. Although our age of interest was the 14-17 year range, many participants described their lone girl experience beginning before this and extending into the age range of interest. Thus, to capture the full picture, their lone girl experiences before this age were also discussed and included in the analysis. The mean age of participants was 23.15 years (SD = 2.19 years) at the time of the interview.
Table 1

Summary of Participants’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Birth Month-Year</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Age as Lone Girl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>Aug-96</td>
<td>Vaughan, ON</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>8-18yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Apr-98</td>
<td>Niagara Falls, ON</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>6-14yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Jul-96</td>
<td>Vancouver, BC</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>6-13yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>Sep-97</td>
<td>Georgian Bay, ON</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>15-17yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Sep-98</td>
<td>Simcoe County, ON</td>
<td>Basketball/</td>
<td>Competitive /</td>
<td>12-16yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lacrosse</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary-Lou</td>
<td>Mar-96</td>
<td>Lanark, ON</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>14-16yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>Oct-92</td>
<td>Pilot Mound, MB</td>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>12-14yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>Jun-01</td>
<td>Mississauga, ON</td>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>3-17yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Nov-96</td>
<td>West Virginia, USA</td>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>14-17yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelley</td>
<td>Aug-96</td>
<td>Etobicoke, ON</td>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>15yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Jun-96</td>
<td>Markham, ON</td>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>16yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>Aug-99</td>
<td>Iroquois Falls, ON</td>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>4-15yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>Jan-97</td>
<td>Ottawa, ON</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>15yrs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3.2 Interview guide. The purpose of the interview was to engage participants in a broad discussion about experiences on their sports teams. Specifically, the discussion began by asking participants for contextual information about their sport experiences generally (e.g., “Tell me about your first experiences with sport”), and then proceeded to a discussion about their entry into the boys’ team(s) they participated on (e.g., “Who was involved in the decision that you would play on this team?”, “How was the decision actually made?”). During this discussion, the focus was placed on exploring participant experiences with respect to each of the dynamic elements of the PAF (e.g., “What was the competition structure like?”, “What were your relationships like with your teammates?”, and “Did becoming involved with this team change the way you could sample different sports?”). With the permission of the participant, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Appendix D provides an outline of the interview guide.

3.3.3 Analysis. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. This study specifically took a dual-narrative approach to analysis (e.g., Allan et al., 2018; Perrier et al., 2014). Taking elements from both a thematic and narrative analysis, this particular approach fits with the philosophical and theoretical assumptions of the current study and places the researcher at the centre of knowledge production. In doing so, each step of the analytic process and reporting of findings is made transparent. Narrative analysis views humans as storytellers by nature, and as such, qualitative researchers can use stories to aid in understanding participant life experiences and the production of meaning (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Moreover, aligning with the aims of a critical feminist approach, narrative analysis provides the opportunity to uncover social and cultural
narratives of participants’ reality that they draw from (Smith, 2015). At the same time, the stories told and language participants use provides insight into their subjective experiences. As suggested by Smith and Sparkes (2012), to perform a productive dual-narrative analysis this study utilized the technique of analytical bracketing to move back and forth between exploring the what and how/why of the interview transcripts, focusing on different aspects of the participants’ experiences at a time. Following an approach similar to that of Allan et al. (2018) and Perrier et al. (2014), the subsequent paragraph provides a step-by-step overview of the analysis process.

First, a categorical-content analysis of the interview transcripts was performed using NVivo—a qualitative analysis computer software. This first step involved scanning, making notes, and coding for the content, or the what, of participants stories, keeping in mind and drawing connections to theory (i.e., the PAF) as a means of exploring what participants were discussing in relation to the PAF. For example, some of the codes used during this phase of analysis included: ‘positive teammate interaction’, ‘increased deliberate practice’, ‘identity confusion’, and ‘physical challenges’. Using the codes, patterns within the data were used to generate themes within and between participant transcripts that capture higher-level meaning and broader ideas pertaining to the research question (e.g., ‘belonging’, ‘overcoming gender norms’, ‘lacking opportunity’, ‘keeping up with the boys’). Next, a structural analysis of the interviews was performed to explore the narratives participants told as a whole. This involved identifying the structures of the narrative (e.g., thematic foci, time) and using these structures to produce a storyline for each participant (e.g., Allan et al., 2018). Here, additional codes were added, such as, ‘early entry into sport’, ‘change in social dynamics
with age’ and ‘developmental changes’, and a storyline for each participants’ lone girl experience was visually represented using XMind—a mind mapping software. Figure 2 provides an example of this process for Participant 5, Emily.
Figure 2.

Example of Participant 5’s Lone Girl Storyline

Additional lines demonstrating the quality of participants’ experience at various time points (e.g., high for positive, low for negative) were also added to each participants’ storyline and were connected to visually illustrate the changes in their participation over time. The combination of these processes allowed for participants to be distinguished from one another or united together through the generation of various
narrative typologies that lone girl athletes experienced. Specifically, by visually observing each of the participants’ stories, they were then grouped based on the type of narrative through which they told their story. Using the themes that emerged from the categorical-content analysis, I was then able to compare and contrast the different narrative typologies. By performing this type of analysis, a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences as a lone girl, and their journey and development through sport over time were captured.

A systematic approach to the order in which interviews were analyzed was taken. Given that just over half of the participants’ narratives involved their participation on a boys’ hockey team, these interviews were analyzed first. Participants playing on baseball teams were analyzed next as the second most common, and so on. Systematically grouping participants by sport and analyzing accordingly allowed me to focus on one particular sport setting at a time and recognize more easily the similarities and differences between participant experiences within and between different sports.

3.4 Ontological Plausibility

Given this study is guided by realist assumptions, and recognizing the concerns of validity that are associated, steps towards ontological plausibility were taken (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019). Specifically, this study addressed aspects of ‘validity’ outlined by Maxwell (2012) that aid in developing plausibility. For instance, rich quotes from participants reflect the real-world experiences of the athletes (e.g., descriptive strength). Athletes’ interpretations of events and experiences were recognized as one individual’s perception of reality and were exposed to evaluations from myself as well as critical friends. Lastly, pre-existing theory (e.g., PYD, PAF) was consulted throughout the
research process to ensure an evidence-informed understanding of athlete experiences (e.g., theoretical strength).
Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Themes

Themes were first generated based on the content of the interviews (e.g., reoccurring ideas, topics, and foci). They were then compared and summarized to create higher-level themes between participants to depict a general understanding of the lone girl experience. From this, three themes are presented: always the outsider, challenging stereotypes, and chasing opportunity. Following an overview of each theme, four narrative typologies of the lone girl experience are presented and examined in depth.

4.1.1 Always the outsider. This theme is representative of lone girls’ overall sense of belonging (or lack thereof) as members of a boys’ team. Regardless of if they formed quality connections with their teammates, girls were regularly aware they were out of place: “I always felt like not part of the team. It’s weird because it’s mostly guys I grew up with and knew well…It feels like you’re an outsider with one foot in the door but not really part of it.” (Gina, 20, Hockey) Holding this perception prevented girls from feeling like they truly belonged in the sport. In addition to the individuals who spoke directly with girls’ regarding their misplacement in the league, being isolated from teammates and treated like a novelty contributed to their outsider perspective. Even positive recognition of their skill appeared to amplify their ‘otherness’ as it was often perceived to be coming from a place of lowered expectations.

The broader social environment was also a source of feeling isolated. Developing connections with teammates was particularly challenging for lone girls. Although interactions were not necessarily negative, they lacked depth or closeness. Moreover,
resistance or anti-social behaviours that came from ‘others’ (e.g., opponents, opponents’ parents, and coaches) had a substantial impact on the girls’ sense of belonging. Whereas girls were generally able to earn the acceptance of their teammates over time, when it came to ‘others’, the opposite was true:

As soon as I got into a real game situation at another school with different people it was *so* different. It was kind of like, ‘Why is she here?’ And then all of my excitement and confidence plummeted. That lasted most of the season, at least the first half until I got more comfortable in game situations, which looking back, is frustrating because I feel like I didn’t get the most out of the experience that I really wanted because I was so worried about what people thought. (Dana, 24, Soccer)

Participants described how they continued to experience resistance to their participation through demeaning comments and behaviours, attempts to remove them from the team, and constant questioning regarding their purpose on the team from outsiders. As described in the above quote, this made game scenarios, and especially away games, particularly challenging.

**4.1.2 Challenging stereotypes.** An overwhelming response from participants was the need to prove themselves for fear of conforming to stereotypes that suggest girls to be less skilled or capable in comparison to boys. Consistently demonstrating that they were competent athletes was discussed as a prerequisite for a chance at gaining acceptance and respect. This started first with the coach and then extended to teammates, opponents, and spectators. As such, pressure to perform at their best every game was common. To this
end, they felt as though they were representing more than just themselves, but women athletes generally:

There’s a bit more pressure having the ponytail coming out of your helmet. The players, the people watching, people are going to notice and keep an eye on you to see if you’re holding your own. ‘Can the girl keep up? Or does she fit the stereotype of not being as good as the boys?’ (Nicole, 24, Hockey)

The participants reported how this pressure translated into more hours of training outside of the sport, seeming to have to work harder than their teammates to challenge and overcome preconceived ideas about their performance.

4.1.3 Chasing opportunity. Opportunity was discussed in various forms. For some, participation on the boys’ team was seen purely as a way for self-improvement and an avenue for enhanced skill development, competition, and exposure as girls’ sport was viewed as being of lower quality and having fewer resources. For others, opportunity was discussed in the sense that if they wanted to play sport at all, the only opportunity was by playing with the boys. Being denied opportunities such as advancing in a boys’ league, playing on provincial teams, acquiring leadership roles, or getting scouted were also discussed:

As much as I really liked my coach and got along with him, I think there was still…like for example, I was never in the starting lineup regardless of how I would play in practice. Whereas someone who didn’t show up for practice would be on the starting lineup. And so as much as he said, ‘I’m going to treat you as equal’, I was like, ‘Are you?’ [high inflection, laughs]. (Dana, 23, Soccer)
Opportunity was also discussed in relation to the transition out of a boys’ league. Each participant described a switch to a girls’ team or new sport as a result of looking for more opportunities to compete at a higher level, or because they did not see an opportunity to advance in the boys’ league. Importantly, whereas opportunity was initially driving participation on a boys’ team for many, the lack of opportunity to advance in sport given their lone girl status later became one of the main reasons for leaving.

4.2 Narratives

The major themes identified above acted as stepping stones to the generation of narratives by providing the ‘backdrop’ or context and were used to compare and contrast the different narrative typologies that were generated. The structural analysis generated four narrative typologies: (1) From Insider to Outsider, (2) Boys’ or Bust, (3) High School Hang-up, and (4) No Road to the Show. First, each narrative is presented as a figure, outlining its defining characteristics and trajectory. Further, the demographic information of the participants who informed the narrative is provided, followed by its description with representative quotes. Although four narratives were identified, it is important to emphasize that there was overlap across stories and timelines for lone girl experiences. Further, whereas aspects of the beginning and middle of the narratives differed, each narrative came to a similar conclusion, described as ‘the switch to girls’ sport,’ which is signified by an inflection in the narrative trajectory (see Figures 3-6) and that will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

4.2.1 From insider to outsider: When an athlete becomes a girl-athlete. Three women (i.e., Dana, Gina, and Cindy) had lone girl experiences that were best described using this narrative. At the time of the interview, the women were 23, 19, and 20 years of
age, respectively. Both Gina and Cindy were involved in competitive hockey for multiple seasons and Dana’s experience occurred for one season on her grade 10 high school boys’ soccer team (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Narrative Typology 1: From Insider to Outsider*

These women participated in boys’ sport despite having the option to play in a girls’ league. Seeking a competitive edge and access to better resources were some of the primary reasons for joining a boys’ league:

> The fact that [the girls’ team] was far away would be challenging but that wasn’t the problem. The problem was that it’s not high-quality hockey. If I want to be the best player I can be, that would be by playing with the guys. (Gina, 20, Hockey)

Though Gina and Cindy were initially placed in boys’ hockey because of their parents’ negative attitude towards girls’ hockey, as they became capable of making their own decisions about sport, they remained in the league for these same reasons (i.e., greater quality and status, more resources). Regardless of when they entered the setting, the girls entered with a similar attitude toward girls’ sport compared to boys.

This narrative is first characterized by a period of normalization. Essentially, a period of confidence early in their experience was expressed, making the girls feel
comfortable and like they were “one of the boys.” Gina described how the early years of being a lone girl were “normal” without knowing any different and feeling like another member of the team:

I didn’t start thinking so much about sex differences and sexism until we got older and people start talking about it more. It was just so natural and normal to me growing up that I didn’t think about it…That was the team that I had grown up with, that was the team in town. (Gina, 20, Hockey)

Dana entered the setting at a later age (15 years old) compared to Cindy and Gina, but her familiarity with members on the team, having played recreationally with some in the past, gave her a similar feeling of insider status.

As time passed, however, this perspective shifted to a period of realization. As Gina and Cindy progressed through boys’ hockey leagues (~ ages 14-15), their perception of belonging began to decrease. Now, they were receiving unusual treatment from others around them. To demonstrate, Cindy described the uncomfortable dress code talk with her coach in front of the team:

Right after tryouts we had a team meeting and talked about dress code, about what the guys had to wear. At some point the coach looked at me and was clearly thinking on the spot. He’s like, [purposefully stuttering] ‘Uhm, Cindy yeah…you uh, you can maybe, maybe you could wear that or uh, you could wear a dress if you wanted?’ [laughing] And it was just so uncomfortable. (Cindy, 19, Hockey)

The physical distance and isolation they began to experience also interfered with their development and performance. For instance, girls were typically alone in their own change room, missing out on bits of pre- and post-game talk, social support, and
opportunities for comradery: “The locker room experience was never fun and was just kind of like, I show up and put my gear on and that’s it…being in different locker rooms made me feel like I was on the outside of the team.” (Gina, 20, Hockey)

During this period, developmental differences between themselves and their teammates were heightened. No longer were they taller nor as tall as the boys, and the shots and passes were coming faster and harder. This resulted in a decrease in the girls’ confidence and competence. For Dana, it showed in her performance:

I was so timid. It was almost like this switch flipped. I felt so timid and nervous. I feel like I wasn’t able to actually play at the level of game I was capable of because all of a sudden it hit me: I’m the only girl here. (Dana, 23, Soccer)

Instead of being a source of discouragement, it became motivation to engage in additional training to “keep up” with the boys. Gina described how she sought out a hockey trainer for additional help but was initially turned away because of her gender: “That was the first time that somebody said they’re not going to train me because I’m a girl. That seemed very foreign and weird to me.” (Gina, 20, Hockey)

To this end, another major source of outsider feelings stemmed from the behaviours and comments made by ‘others’ (e.g., opposing players, coaches, parents, new teammates). Dana commented on the impact of spectators and opponents, expressing the worry she had prior to each game—wondering what opponents would say to her or what spectators would think about her:

There was lots of catcalling or weird looks. It just felt like I didn’t belong [uncomfortable laugh]. It definitely took away from the experience. The game would be going on and someone standing beside me would turn to me and be like,
‘Hey, what’s your number?’, and I was like, ‘Excuse me?’ [laughs] Like, we’re in the middle of the game! So, it takes away from the experience of being there.

(Dana, 23, Soccer)

The differences between the girls and their teammates became more obvious by an increasing lack of opportunities as they progressed through the sport. Gina was cut from a AAA hockey team because having a girl on the team would mean having to get a woman chaperone and separate hotel room for tournaments. She was also denied the opportunity to try out for the women’s provincial team because of her participation on the boys’ team. Cindy was cut from her team because of overwhelming demand from parents of new players who did not want their sons to play with a girl. Dana’s experience took the form of no opportunities for leadership roles.

Given that the girls were initially participating on the boys’ team for the opportunities it was expected to provide, the sudden lack of opportunities to progress in sport was a major reason contributing to their eventual switch to a girls’ team. Gina reflected on this realization:

As I got older that’s when I started realizing some of my friends who play girls’ hockey, they’ve got university offers and I’m playing boys’ hockey and I’ve got better averages than the other goalies and save percentages but I have nothing from universities because I was so hidden in the boys’ league. (Gina, 20, Hockey)

Overall, this narrative describes the women’s experiences and transition from feeling like a person in sport to a girl in sport, whereby over time their gender became more apparent and resulted in different treatment and opportunities than their male teammates. The
gradual realization that they were in fact missing out on opportunities resulted in a switch to a girls’ team.

4.2.2 Boys’ or bust: When the only choice is the boys’ team. Mary-Lou, Joyce, Sam, and Emily could all be grouped within this narrative. Mary-Lou and Sam, both 24 years old, competed as lone girls on their high school football and hockey teams, respectively. Joyce, 28, competed as a lone girl on a competitive hockey team, and Emily, 22, had lone girl experiences in competitive lacrosse and high school basketball. With the exception of Joyce who began boys’ hockey at the age of five, the women were between 12 and 14 years old when they started to play in a boys’ sports league (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Narrative Typology 2: Boys' or Bust

This narrative type is considerably influenced by the setting in which the experiences took place. With no girls’ leagues available but a keen interest and motivation to participate in sport, ultimately led to playing with the boys. Joyce, who described where she grew up as a “quintessential small hockey town” in Manitoba, Canada, recounted: “It wasn’t so much an opportunity as a necessity, you know? It was like, ‘I want to play hockey…’ and, ‘Okay, we’ll sign you up for the team [pauses] and the boys’ team is the only team there is’”. For Mary-Lou, this was amplified as she was
coming from a small, Northeastern Ontario town and interested in playing American football, a sport historically restricted to men. Similarly, Sam described the status of hockey in West Virginia, United States:

There was no women’s team in the State of West Virginia at the time. I still don’t think there is, actually…There’s not enough opportunities to do it, and not a lot of girls want to do something when only boys are doing it. (Sam, 24, Hockey)

As a result of their setting, these participants were presented with the option of either playing with the boys or not playing at all. Thus, the ‘Boys’ or Bust’ narrative is underscored by necessity rather than choice. But, because it was generally understood that there were minimal opportunities for girls in their respective communities, there was more of an expectation that a girl might play on a boys’ team.

Despite this, the ‘Boys’ or Bust’ narrative type was characterized by a tendency for the participants to describe their experiences with respect to “sticking it out”. The fact that their participation was not as novel to those around them did not equate to immediate social acceptance. Instead, participants discussed tolerating an absent, or conversely, adverse social environment. For Sam, the desire to play hockey at an out-of-state university was a motivator for sticking out the “toxic” social environment they experienced:

At the end of the day, I just wanted to play. I ignored that sense of being left out as much as I could because I wanted to play. If I made a big deal out of something, I might not have been able to play so I just didn’t say anything…I saw the issues. I was uncomfortable with the issues but I wanted to play badly enough that I said nothing. Because had I rocked the boat, I wouldn’t have been able to
play. That’s the problem with hockey. I saw it then. I see it now. (Sam, 24, Hockey)

Similar to the ‘Insider to Outsider’ narrative, these participants struggled with belonging and identifying with the team. Many described having to find their own space to change, sitting alone on the bus, being the last one picked for partnered drills, and the inappropriate conversations of teammates. Particularly for Joyce, her identity and sense of belonging became blurry as her reputation as a lone girl began to bleed into other aspects of her life:

The social component of me playing on that team, it really bled out into school and other things. Even in school we would do stuff where someone would say like, ‘Boys on this side of the room, and girls on this side’ to do an activity. And the teacher would say, ‘Joyce, you can go with the boys,’ because I was mostly around the boys. And I remember this one kid being like, ‘Joyce is not a boy’ and then the girls being like, ‘Well, she’s not a girl,’ and they’re like, ‘Oh, she’s just Joyce.’ (Joyce, 28, Hockey)

Because of the limited options to play their sport, the participants had a tendency to make light of instances such as that described by Joyce. For instance, inappropriate behaviours like stealing the lone girls’ clothes from her change room and inappropriate ‘locker room talk’ were justified as “boys being boys”:

I wanted them to like me…so I didn’t say anything. I wanted to be included and there was that feeling of wanting to belong so bad that you just don’t say anything. And you’re a 14 year old, so you’re like, I guess this is fine. (Emily, 22, Basketball/Lacrosse)
The necessity to tolerate undesirable social environments also stemmed from a fear of conforming to stereotypes of women in sport. Having no other option but the boys’ team resulted in pressure to prove they were contributing members of the team. Emily stated: “Because I’m a girl, I had more to prove. It felt like I shouldn’t have been there so I had more to prove to feel like I do belong in that league.” (Emily, 22, Basketball/Lacrosse) But not only were they representing themselves, they felt as though they were representing all women. Mary-Lou explained that this even meant playing through physical pain and injuries given the aforementioned pressure:

There was plenty of drills where the wind would get knocked out of me or I would be afraid and didn't want to do it or something, but you can’t show that because there’s this perception about girls that they are not strong enough, they can’t take a hit, they can’t compete, so you don’t want to feed into any of that because it’s more than just you playing, you’re a girl playing… You’re a girl playing boys’ sports, don’t be the worst because what does that say about girls compared to boys?... And so part of the other reason I quit was because I couldn’t move my hands at the end of the season. (Mary-Lou, 24, Football)

Thus, participants told their stories with respect to ‘walking a tight-rope’: fear of messing up, speaking up, or not being good enough, and the consequences of such (e.g., reinforcing stereotypes, being benched, or kicked off the team). But for the most part, their exit from boys’ sport came as soon as the opportunity to participate on a girls’ team was made available. The quickness in which this decision to switch was made not only reinforces the sense of necessity that is at the root of this narrative, but also the perseverance and motivation to challenge stereotypes that each of the lone girls faced.
4.2.3 High school hang-up: When the girls’ team is cut. This narrative type was representative of the stories from three women: Shelley, Nicole, and Phyllis. Nicole and Shelley, both 24, had lone girl experiences while playing ice hockey whereas Phyllis, 23, had hers while playing basketball (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Narrative Typology 3: High School Hang-up*

The context in which this narrative takes place involves the high school’s girls’ team being cut and the girls deciding to try out for the equivalent boys’ team during their grade 10 year. The women disclosed their competitive nature and wanting to have every opportunity to get more exposure to improve their skills. At the time of their lone girl experience, each was also playing on a competitive girls’ team outside of school. When reflecting back on their desire to try out for the boys’ team, the women had a tendency to describe the events that unfolded as rare and unique:

> It didn’t seem like it had to be too big of an obstacle to go over luckily…I don’t know a lot of people that experienced this. I imagine that it’s not always this easy, but honestly, it didn’t feel like we had to pass through a lot of obstacles. It was more like logistics and just making sure that there was a female coach present at each practice or tournament. (Shelley, 24, Hockey)
The women also regarded their previous participation on the girls’ team and their overall athletic reputation to be an asset to their smooth entry on the team. For example, Nicole reflected on this process:

It wasn’t that much of a challenge in terms of allowing me to try out. The fact that I played competitively and didn’t suck made it so that [the coaches] weren’t hesitant to say yes. I earned the starting position over the other goalie early into the season so that was good. But I think if I hadn’t been playing competitive hockey at the time, I think [the coaches] would have put up more of a fight.

(Nicole, 24, Hockey)

Essentially, they had already demonstrated they were skilled athletes and therefore, were accepted and welcomed into the team almost immediately.

Though the transition into the team appeared smooth, participants recalled that it was also met with intimidation. Shelley noted a shift in her confidence as she realized the differences in the boys’ sport setting compared to the girls’:

I was definitely a little intimidated because after going to some of the practices I realized how skilled [pauses] it’s interesting, guys and girls are so different, at least at the level I was playing. They’re so different skill-wise…So that made it a little intimidating because if my team is like this, I wonder what the competition will be like [laughs]. (Shelley, 24, Hockey)

The women were also caught off-guard by the changes to their pre-game routines as a result of the physical environment. Phyllis reflected specifically on away games:

At an away game, you change in a different space or the stall changeroom…then it’s like, ‘Oh, I’m on my own.’ I have to walk into the gym alone, from a different
door than everyone else, across the court to our bench, and then it gives everyone an opportunity to notice you. I think that definitely builds up pressure and it builds up expectation. (Phyllis, 23, Basketball)

The change in the social environment from their girls’ teams was also something the women had to adjust to. Although they were welcomed and accepted into the team quickly, there were minimal opportunities for social interaction with teammates which resulted in feeling as if they were playing for the boys rather than with the boys. However, they were quick to reiterate that their motivation to play with the boys was for playing time and skill development. Nicole described this idea and her attitude toward the environment:

It definitely changed the experience. It was less so a social event. Instead of being there with friends, doing sport with friends, it became more of just playing and improving skills, getting better, there for hockey only, instead of the friendship portion of organized sport. I liked hockey enough, I was okay with that. (Nicole, 24, Hockey)

Shelley also touched on this idea, stating:

In high school, I was playing hockey more for the sake of playing and for the competitive level. Having that kind of mindset definitely helped because if I was more into it for the social aspect it would’ve sucked being on the guys’ team. Like my boyfriend’s best friend was on the team and I didn’t even know! [laughing] So that shows you how focused I was on the game ahead then the social aspect. (Shelley, 24, Hockey)
Each of the women mentioned that if it were not for their girls’ team outside of the high school team, it would have been far more challenging to stick with the boys’ team because of the lack of social interaction. Thus, it appears that acceptance within the team did not necessarily guarantee friendship or connection with teammates.

After the season they had with the boys, some women had more girls try out for the boys’ team and were no longer the sole girl on the team. For the others, the girls’ team re-formed. Overall, the women who contributed to this narrative had centered their stories around their reputation assisting them with a smooth transition, and their reason for participating as motivation to continue to develop in sport.

4.2.4 No road to the show: When girls want to go pro. Denise, Sarah, and Julie represented this narrative. Denise and Julie were both 24 years old at the time of the interview and Sarah was 22 (Figure 6). The women representing this narrative type all experienced being a lone girl within the context of baseball. Each began playing as soon as it was permitted (~6-8 years) and had originally started in the sport because of an older brother who was also participating. The women recalled being one of few girls in the league for a majority of their playing years. These numbers were reduced further as they started to play more competitively. Because there were no girls’ baseball leagues in their hometowns, the women grew up as the only girl on their baseball team until an eventual change in sports that will be discussed further.
Despite not having a girls’ equivalent league, the women did not express a desire to have had one during that time. Instead, there was a focus on the normalcy of the environment. However, hindsight appeared to play a role in how the women perceived their experiences now. Whereas the women first described feeling like they belonged and were connected with their teammates, they also reflected on their later experience on a girls’ team to compare and contrast the reality of their position on the boys’ team. By doing so, they were able to identify aspects of the sport environment that were missing, but that they did not realize at the time. As such, a comparison between the boys’ and girls’ teams they played on became a central piece in this narrative:

Playing on an all-girls team, I can see now that obviously, my sense of belonging [with the boys] wasn’t as high as it should’ve been. But at the time you don’t notice it, you’re okay with how it is. So I feel like I felt like I belonged, but I don’t think as much as I should’ve. (Sarah, 22, Baseball)

Julie also compared the social environment on the boys’ team with the girls’ team she competed on when she was older:
With the boys, I knew that they did stuff together. I would always hear about it at practice. Even if it wasn’t the whole team, it was just like a couple of them, they would still do stuff together. But with the girls it was like, everybody is invited, let’s all go do this. We always went to other places together. I don’t even know why…I think [the boys] were maybe just uncomfortable with me or a girl being there. [Pauses] Damn, that’s really sad to think about [small laugh]. (Julie, 24, Baseball)

While the role of hindsight was a key feature of this narrative type, there were also some differences that they were aware of when they were in the sport. Similar to the narrative type, ‘From insider to outsider’, the women experienced changes in their sense of belonging as they progressed in the sport. Denise recalls the response she would receive from spectators and opponents as she got older in the sport:

I vividly remember I was walking out to the mound as a pitcher and the other team started laughing. Then you go and throw a perfect game or a great game and then it’s like, okay you belong here. But I feel like if you’re not as head-strong or as competitive then it might be harder to get past that challenge. So it was kind of a feeling of, ‘I’m in the wrong place,’ like I’m not supposed to be here, but I just took it as, ‘Okay you have to try harder.’ (Denise, 24, Baseball)

Further, it became evident that their place in the sport was no longer accepted as it once was. Around this age (i.e., 12-14 years old), girls were pressured by the league and family members to switch to softball—typically thought of as the girl alternative to baseball. Denise described how as she began to excel in baseball, there was pressure placed on her to switch to softball:
The organization wanted to switch me to softball because I was a good baseball player. They’re like, ‘Okay well you can go help our softball team’. It’s also easier to get a scholarship in softball for females, there are more opportunities there whereas in baseball there’s almost nowhere to go. So, they kept saying, ‘It’s in your best interest to switch,’ but also [pauses] it’s not the same sport!

[laughing] I grew up playing baseball, I didn’t want to switch into softball at this point. (Denise, 24, Baseball)

Julie encountered a similar situation after winning the Little League World Series championship with the boys’ team: “I was looking to continue playing baseball but everybody kept telling me and my family that we should move into softball…After the Little League World Series, we got a call and an email right away saying, ‘There are tryouts for softball.’” (Julie, 24, Baseball)

While Sarah was also experiencing pressure to switch to softball, changes in the physical abilities of her teammates, rules of the sport, and aspirations for a college scholarship were also persuading her to switch:

For high school [ages] specifically, they switch over to wooden bats and I was not going to be able to hit with that. I was also thinking about playing in college and I knew that I wouldn’t be able to play baseball-baseball, so I thought maybe I should try switching now to see if I could get anything out of it. (Sarah, 22, Baseball)

The concept of not being able to play their sport professionally was another difference they became more aware of around this age period. Julie, who grew up with a twin brother also in the sport, talked about the different perceptions of their future in the sport:
“I had the mindset that there won’t be a girl in the MLB…My brother was playing baseball at the time and was like, ‘I want to make it to the show’, but I never saw any girls going there.” (Denise, 24, Baseball) Julie made a similar remark, stating how at a young age, her priorities shifted as she realized there were few, if any, individuals like her playing baseball:

I never really saw myself playing professional sports. It was just never a thing in my head right because you can’t do it in the sport I play. So I guess from a young age I kind of just threw that out the window and focused on school more and baseball was just a fun outlet at that point…When I was growing up it was very uncommon for a girl to play baseball…I literally thought I was the only girl playing the sport. (Julie, 24, Baseball)

Recognizing there was little room to grow in the sport, Sarah and Julie both made the switch to softball and earned scholarships to compete at the collegiate level in the United States. Conversely, Denise continued with boys’ baseball until the end of her eligibility at the age of 18. It is evident that at the heart of this narrative lies the norms surrounding sports traditionally dominated by men, such as baseball, and the opportunities (or lack thereof) for girls that ultimately influenced their sport trajectory.

4.2.5 The switch to girls’ sport. Each participant encountered a switch from the boys’ team they were playing on to a girls’ league or new sport within a girls’ league. As illustrated by Figure 7, whereas each of the narratives progressed in their own way, they all came to a similar conclusion: ‘the switch’. Of the 13 participants, nine switched to a girls’ competitive league, two moved to a girls’ recreational team, and two switched to different sports within a girls’ league. Despite where they ended up, the rationale was
similar: limited opportunities, no sign of career advancement, and mental and physical fatigue. Of the 10 participants who played for multiple seasons, only one played until 18 years of age.

**Figure 7**
*Common Narrative Conclusion ‘The Switch to Girls’ Sport’*

The retrospective nature of the study gave participants the opportunity to reflect critically on their experiences on each team. Thus, comparison between their experiences on different teams was a common discourse for participants and frequently resorted to as a way to express how the environments impacted them differently. For example, Denise reflected on the quality of friendships she had on a boys’ baseball team compared to a girls’ team:

I had two very different experiences. So on the boys’ team, it was very like, you were here to play. Whereas on the girls’ team, I developed lifelong friendships with them. But I also feel like that's because we all went through similar
experiences. Like everyone on that team had also played on a boys’ team at some point in their life. So, it was just kind of like a…it's a very different experience when you move from being the only girl to being one of 13, right? (Denise, 24, Baseball)

More specifically, they emphasized the challenges that occurred when switching, such as, the change in social climate and physical aspects of the game (e.g., pace, equipment, dressing room). For instance, Joyce discussed how the minimal social interaction on the boys’ hockey team left her without the social skills to connect with the girls on her new hockey team:

I didn’t have those dressing room experiences with the boys. So, when I was with the girls it was almost like self-isolating, and I just thought, ‘You know, maybe if they don’t like me, or don’t want to talk to me in the dressing room at least I can prove on the ice how good I am. And that I’m worthy of being here and I’m actually contributing to the team’ sort of thing. (Joyce, 28, Hockey)

With respect to the physical aspect of the game, Emily described how her performance was negatively impacted once making the switch to a girls’ lacrosse team:

Playing with guys made me a better athlete. When I switched to playing girls’ lacrosse, there was a low downhill trajectory for my skill set. I was definitely in a higher category of skill playing with the boys. I had to be faster. I had to be stronger…The level to compete in boys’ is so much higher than in girls’ lacrosse. (Emily, 22, Lacrosse/Basketball)

However, she then went on to talk about the long-term implications:
Having such high expectations really wore me down. So, when I got to play lacrosse in [university] I was tired of competing. I didn’t want to compete anymore. I just wanted to play for fun and get the fun back, which is why I quit the team in [university]. (Emily, 22, Lacrosse/Basketball)

Though she believed she became a better lacrosse player having played with the boys, the expectation to perform at a certain level and fear of performing below this level had a lasting impact on her motivation and interest in pursuing the sport competitively.

Overall, the finding that the narrative typologies came to a similar conclusion, and the amount of emphasis placed on ‘the switch’ by participants, is indicative of its influence on their sport experiences as a whole. The prevalence of the switch among each of the lone girls also highlights an outcome that may be likely for the vast majority of lone girls in competitive sport.
Chapter 5
Discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the experiences of girls who had competed as the only girl on a competitive sports team (i.e., lone girls) during their specialization and investment years (i.e., ~14-17 years of age). I investigated how their participation as the sole girl was influenced by their environment and, subsequently, impacted developmental outcomes. The application of a critical feminist lens enabled me to uncover societal constructions and gender-imposed expectations that influenced participants’ sport involvement and outcomes. Additionally, the interviews provided clear implications that aligned with the PYD literature, and more particularly, the dynamic elements of the PAF (i.e., settings, activities, social dynamics). Further, In the following sections, I apply a critical feminist lens to holistically describe the lone girl experience, and contextualize the results with respect to development through sport literature. Lastly, study strengths and limitations are discussed, and practical implications and future directions are highlighted.

5.1 The Lone Girl Experience—A Critical Feminist Lens

Considering the developmental implications of being a lone girl within the context of the PAF generally is important, but it is also worth purposefully engaging in a critical analysis of gender to understand how broader societal forces impact experiences. Essentially, the challenges faced by lone girls came down to societies’ deeply engrained norms and expectations of gender. The origin of gender norms lies within the beginning of civilization itself, but relative to how much humans have evolved, these roles and norms have remained stagnant and damaging to all genders (Zhu & Chang, 2019).
Certainly, when considering the last few decades, opportunities for women and girls in sport have increased (e.g., International Olympic Committee, 2020), but it is evident that norms and stereotypes surrounding women in sport have persisted. For instance, in this study, participants expressed a general lack of opportunity to participate in sport, let alone advance in it (whether that be a girls’ or boys’ league). Notably, even when they could participate, they felt like an outsider or a novelty, and thus, felt pressure to engage in behaviours that would prevent them from being stereotyped (e.g., additional training sessions, over or under-representing their femininity). These preconceived ideas about their sporting abilities predetermined participants’ relationships and interactions with the physical and social environment. While this inspired some to challenge and overcome stereotypes, the fact that they felt a need to prove themselves further reiterates the stereotypical and gender-biased perspectives that exist in the sport context (e.g., Heinecken, 2015).

Girls and women competing in sport traditionally occupied by men report facing negotiations of their gender and identity—in other words, a tension exists in attempting to maintain femininity while participating in ‘masculine’ activities (Bevan et al., 2020; Kochanek et al., 2021; Liston, 2005). The age range for this study was 14-17 years old, which is a critical developmental period for youth who experience pressure to conform to the behaviours expected of their assigned sex (Bevan et al., 2020). The results of this study demonstrated the struggle and confusion participants’ encountered with their identity and provides further evidence that girls continue to perceive their gender and athleticism as society has framed them, that is, as mutually exclusive (i.e., one cannot be both feminine and athletic; Heinecken, 2015). For example, lone girls described
situations where they would emphasize their femininity by wearing pink hair ties or using pink tape to avoid receiving the stereotypes of being a tomboy or lesbian, while also adopting the boys’ behaviours and language to avoid being called a ‘girly-girl’ or looking non-athletic. Thus, while efforts to increase opportunities in women’s sport have been made as a means to ‘normalize,’ scholars such as Cooky (2010) and Meier (2015) caution that this does not automatically translate to increased participation and a sense of belonging, nor does it decrease the prevalence of stereotypes and the pressure to conform to feminist ideals.

Given the deeply ingrained gender biases that exist in sport, there is a need to change the perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes of key stakeholders. Olsson and Martiny (2018) determined that children’s beliefs and subsequent behaviours that reinforce gendered practices could be changed by exposure to individuals in counter-stereotypical or gender-incongruent situations (e.g., women as CEOs, men as nurses, women as scientists) over time. This idea reinforces the heavily discussed topic and importance of time that was accentuated in the interviews. Especially for participants’ who participated for several seasons within boys’ sport, these individuals claimed the longer they participated on the team, the more their teammates began to get ‘used to them’ and see beyond their gender. Importantly, these perceptions only involved teammates and not opponents or spectators who did not have the same consistent exposure. Thus, representing behaviours counter to those that young boys are typically exposed to (for example, in the media) shifted their attitudes towards being more accepting of having a girl on the team. This also supports the literature that suggests gender schemas (i.e., beliefs about gender that influence behaviour) are not fixed and can change across the age
span with regular exposure to counter-stereotyped behaviours and practices, despite being prominently developed (Leaper & Friedman, 2007).

Therefore, role modeling and exposure of women athletes depicted in an authentic, non-stereotypical way, and representative of all walks of life is needed in media and society generally. Sport research has highlighted the important function of role modeling, social connection, and mentors for promoting participation, leadership, gender equity, and empowerment (Bevan et al., 2020; Meier, 2015). While important for young children developing their gender schemas, this change needs to also occur from the top-down (e.g., policies) and bottom-up (e.g., educational frameworks; Meier, 2015). Changing attitudes and perceptions need to happen within places of power and influence to inspire and create change at the grassroots and individual levels. For instance, organizations recognizing a place for girls in their leagues, as opposed to suggesting they should be playing the ‘girl version’ (e.g., ringette, softball versus baseball), is a clear way for organizations to challenge gender norms and support women and girl athletes in the pursuit of their goals. Thus, it is critical to reinforce to athletes the norm of girls participating in any sport.

5.2 The Personal Assets Framework

The findings from the narrative analysis highlight important implications of girls’ participation on boys’ sports teams. To best describe the results, I will first situate them within the developmental literature in relation to the dynamic elements of the PAF.

5.2.1 Personal engagement in activities. Sport research suggests that the achievement of long-term developmental outcomes begin with a balance of deliberate play (i.e., unstructured, fun activities) and deliberate practice (i.e., structured training)
during the specializing years (~13-15 years old), followed by more deliberate practice entering the investment years (~16-18 years old; Côté et al., 2008). If athletes engage in high volumes of specializing behaviours prematurely, they are at a greater risk of experiencing a range of negative consequences (e.g., burnout, injury; Côté et al., 2009).

In the current study, several athletes described how their entry and acceptance into sport was contingent on performance—thus, it was the determining factor for whether they could participate or not. In this regard, many discussed the necessity of engaging in specializing behaviours simply to have the opportunity to participate. They described seeking out and engaging with reputable trainers and increasing the volume of deliberate training outside of typical team practices. These decisions meant that opportunities to socialize with friends, teammates, or to participate in other activities were minimized. This is consistent with findings from Goldman and colleagues (2021) who observed a similar motive in individuals who differed from their teammates in age (i.e., athletes who ‘play-up’). With regard to the activity component of the PAF, this presents a concern as lone girls may be more likely to burn out, become injured, and/or experience less enjoyment. Further, it is likely that lone girls may persist through injury or less enjoyment because for many, playing with boys represented the only opportunity to play.

Sport sampling is described as a viable way to promote increased participation and performance (e.g., Bridge & Toms, 2013, Côté et al., 2007; Soberlak & Côté, 2003). This idea also extends to within-sport sampling (e.g., Côté & Hancock, 2016), which involves rotating playing positions or playing on different teams, with the expectation that the variety within the sport stimulates skill development, as well as motivation and interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Contrary to these findings, lone girls described the
unattractiveness of this type of sampling given the constant need to earn acceptance from teammates which was already difficult and not always achieved. Indeed, Allen (2003) discussed the importance of social validation and one’s perception of belonging for interest and motivation development in sport. These processes were particularly challenging for lone girls when transitioning between boys’ teams and during their switch to a girls’ team. Literature shows athletes can undergo periods of high stress, anxiety, and ambiguity during times of transition (Samuel & Tanenbaum, 2011; Stambulova et al., 2020). Whereas within-sport sampling is typically recommended by scholars, in the present study, it was found to be more taxing on lone girls, suggesting potential implications on interest and motivation, as well as connections with teammates. Ensuring that coaches understand the difficulties experienced by these athletes and providing them with strategies to help during transitions could improve enjoyment, interest, and willingness to maintain involvement (e.g., Stambulova et al., 2009).

**5.2.2 Quality social dynamics.** Given the social nature of sport, it is not surprising that the quality of relationships with coaches, teammates, and parents impact sport experiences (e.g., Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). Of the aforementioned individuals, teammate interactions were among the most influential for the lone girl experience.

The frequency and quality of teammate interactions is a fundamental part of youth athletes’ social and moral development (Benson & Bruner, 2018). Daily prosocial behaviours towards teammates can enhance feelings of identity, including perceptions of belonging and positivity around membership (Benson & Bruner, 2018). However, lone girls typically spent little time with their teammates, processing wins and losses on their
own and missing out on opportunities for comradery because of simple proximity-related barriers (e.g., different dressing rooms). As such, it was difficult for them to develop a sense of identity and perceive cohesiveness with the boys’ team. There is evidence to suggest that surface-level (i.e., age, physical appearance, gender) and deep-level (i.e., attitudes, values) similarities have implications on social and task cohesion in groups (Dunlop & Beauchamp, 2011; Beauchamp et al., 2021). Coaches could emphasize task and social components of cohesion, such as ensuring that everyone feels like they are involved in determining team objectives and all members are provided with opportunities to interact and get to know one another (see Caron et al., 1985; Bruner et al., 2014). Given the association between cohesion and developmental outcomes (e.g., social skills, goal setting, positive experiences; Bruner et al., 2014), by fostering deep-level similarities among the lone girl and her teammates, coaches may also be strengthening their perceptions of belonging within the team, which could contribute to an increase in confidence and a sense of connection with teammates.

In this regard, it is worth noting how impactful coach behaviours were in relation to the lone girl experience. For instance, failing to use inclusive language, singling the lone girl out, setting different expectations for them, and being inattentive to the social challenges of the environment was particularly impactful. Transformational Leadership Theory (TFL; see Bass, 1998) in the context of coaching has been used to emphasize the importance of small, but positive intra- and interpersonal behaviours (e.g., providing athletes with meaningful choices, enhancing the quality of their relationships, and acknowledging their feelings and concerns; Price & Weiss, 2013; Turnnidge & Côté, 2017; Vella et al., 2013). Evidence has demonstrated that these types of behaviours
encourage the development of the 4 Cs (Turnnidge & Côté, 2018). In this regard, coaches who actively engage in TFL behaviours can ensure they are promoting positive development while not inadvertently reiterating features that make lone girls ‘different.’

Lastly, interactions with the broader social environment had a substantial impact on making lone girls feel out of place. Opposing players letting them have the ball, asking for their phone number, parents explicitly discussing their desire for them to be cut from the team, and spectators surprised by their performance (e.g., “You’re good for a girl!”), all contributed to an environment that made them uncomfortable and feel as though their abilities and gender could not be mutually exclusive. Empirical evidence demonstrates that long-term positive development comes down to a collective effort by all involved (e.g., coaches, parents, administrators) to protect and care for the well-being of participants by cultivating positive social interactions (Henriksen et al., 2010; Wagstaff, 2019). Additionally, these individuals must be attentive to the interactions the lone girl experiences with others and support her when necessary. By demonstrating their support, the community can collectively enhance the lone girls’ 4 Cs and overall, positively improve the environment for them. As discussed in the previous section, such an approach, however, requires changing the attitudes and perceptions of those who view lone girls as out of place.

5.2.3 Appropriate settings. The athletes described physical challenges (e.g., faster game pace, stronger and taller opponents) that increased as they progressed into adolescence. Although difficult, these challenges were also perceived as opportunities to demonstrate that they (and all women, for that matter) were capable of competing and improving as athletes. It is well established that girls and boys begin and progress through
puberty at different ages and rates; that is, the onset of puberty being earlier and slower for girls, and later and faster for boys (Cumming et al., 2017). While research has yet to explore the physical or biological implications of girls competing with boys during this period specifically, comparable studies examining methods of grouping young athletes (e.g., chronological age, bio-banding) provide insight into potential outcomes. To demonstrate, the relative age effect (RAE) describes how athletes with birthdates close to a registration cut-off are more likely to dropout due to developmental immaturities compared to those born earlier in the same grouping (Delorme et al. 2011; Helsen et al., 1999). While this effect is most dominant in younger athletes when developmental differences are more drastic (Cumming et al., 2017), it parallels the lone girl experience as the developmental changes that occurred in boys around the onset of puberty led to rapid and dramatic differences in skill and ability. While initially having a negative influence on participants’ feelings of competence and confidence to continue, for many, it manifested into motivation to prove themselves, and thus impacted their sport-specific behaviours (e.g., higher volumes of training).

The athletes also described the club/organization as being influential for their experiences because of their role in establishing the policies and structures pertaining to the sport (Cobley et al., 2009; Musch & Grondin, 2001). This is an underdeveloped body of literature and requires more attention generally, but also for specific instances such as this. Indeed, the community at large played a role in the opportunities provided to participants and their treatment within them, but these findings are also representative of the societal values that were highlighted in the previous section, and that continue to favour men and boys’ sport over that of women and girls’ sport.
Made evident by participants was the significance of the geographical location of one’s hometown in shaping their story. It has been suggested that development is influenced by the context in which sport participation takes place (Turnnidge et al., 2014). The findings from this study align partially with the ‘birthplace effect’ (see Côté et al., 2006) that suggests rural communities (<1000 people) lack the opportunities to invest in physical activities and sport. Smaller cities (<500,000 people), on the other hand, have been favoured in the literature for providing opportunities for talent development as a result of more social support and more access and resources (Côté et al., 2006). Findings from the current study align more closely with Lidor et al.’s (2014) research that found for girls and women specifically, contextual factors such as the sport of interest and environmental and cultural variables played a notable role in the opportunities made available in a given location. For instance, despite living in populated Canadian cities, there were no opportunities for lone girls wanting to play baseball within an all-girls team or league. This also aligns with reports from CWS (2020) who found that one of the biggest barriers for girls in sport is access, which decreases interest and motivation to participate.

5.3 Practical Implications

For this thesis, I was also motivated to see how these findings could be used to impact the lone girl experience more practically. Within the following section, I provide examples from the results to demonstrate how the findings can be used by coaches and teammates of lone girls to improve their immediate sport environment and increase the potential for long-term positive outcomes.
Based on my understanding of lone girl experiences, I encourage coaches to be mindful of the compounding statements and small acts that may contribute to lone girls’ outsider perception. Drawing from the ‘Insider to Outsider’ and ‘Boys or Bust’ narratives for example, small actions like making sure the lone girl has access to a safe changing space prior to her arrival, waiting for her to finish changing before the team enters the playing field, and asking her how she would like to be addressed in the group may positively influence the enjoyment, sense of belonging, and identity within the team. Coaches should be purposeful with their behaviours and reflect on how the environment and interactions are different for lone girls. Indeed, from the narratives, but also within the literature, we see that intrapersonal knowledge is a critical element of effective coaching (Côté & Gilbert, 2009), and simply being aware of these could elicit minor changes that could have a profound impact on the lone girls’ experience. On a larger scale, it is important for coaches to create team bonding experiences that are inclusive of all members. The narratives demonstrate minimal purposeful bonding or team building activities designed to connect and foster cohesion or deep-similarities among the lone girls and her teammates. However, participants described a preference for activities that required them to work or play with their teammates. The use of purposeful and integrated activities rather than single instance social activities (e.g., team dinners) is supported within the team-building literature (e.g., Martin et al., 2009; Paradis & Martin, 2012). Overall, coaches are also encouraged to communicate with the lone girl about their specific needs and be attentive to their socialization into the team (e.g., Benson & Eys, 2017).
For teammates, there is a need to prioritize acceptance and respect. It is important to understand that lone girls are teammates and are striving to achieve the same objectives, but that they may experience other challenges (e.g., outsider opinions, stereotypes). For instance, from the ‘High School Hang-Up’ narrative, teammates should place themselves in the shoes of the lone girl, acknowledging what it might be like for them having their team cut, and the courage it would have taken to go against the social conventions of grouping athletes. Developing empathy for one another, acknowledging biases, and changing one’s perspective of stereotypes is necessary and can be achieved through reflexive practices such as this. This may also be achieved through education practices (e.g., diversity education), individually and collectively as a team.

However, teammates need not only acknowledge that the lone girl may experience other challenges, but also support them when faced with these challenges. For example, in the ‘No Road to the Show’ narrative, when Denise was being laughed at when walking out to the pitcher’s mound, she did not feel any support from her teammates during this rather frequent situation. Support in instances such as these could be as simple as providing the lone girl with encouragement and informing officials and coaches of instances of bullying or harassment. This also goes for instances of bullying or anti-social behaviour from their own teammates, such as those seen in the ‘Boys or Bust’ narrative, and holding one’s own teammates accountable for their actions.

In this capacity, teammates should treat lone girls similarly to teammates, while ensuring appropriate behaviours and respecting their boundaries. Similar to coaches, small but meaningful actions to make them feel like an appreciated and supported member of the team are suggested, such as talking to them as frequently as others and
getting to know them or asking to be their catching or passing partners. As previously discussed, cultivating a space with more frequent prosocial behaviours can improve athlete moral behaviour toward teammates and strengthen their perception of identity with the team (Benson & Bruner, 2018). Therefore, simple acts of care and inclusion can manifest through a team and create a greater sense of identity for all involved.

5.4 Study Strengths

To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the experiences of this specific but nonetheless common population of youth athletes from a developmental perspective. This research adds to the youth development literature by exploring broader contextual factors such as gender and norms that inherently influence our understanding of developmental theories, yet are not always considered. Additionally, sport research has previously had a tendency to use samples of men and boys (Murata et al., 2021), and so, this thesis adds to the limited but growing research on women and girls in sport.

Because I was interested in exploring the lone girl sport experience from entry to exit, the interviews conducted were retrospective in nature. Though retrospection comes with limitations (which will be discussed below), in this case, the interviews provided the participants with the advantage of reflection and hindsight. Having hindsight allowed them to look at their experiences from a different perspective, along with additional knowledge and understanding acquired over the years, and to reflect on the gender stereotypes and sexism that were at play. In fact, many participants noted that in reflection, they now understood that they were unable to fully grasp the severity of what was happening at the time. At the same time, interviewing individuals who had already gone through this experience but were not too far removed (i.e., only a few years older)
allowed for a somewhat more accurate recall in relation to the richness of examples, as well as the ability to explore the outcomes of their experiences that would have been difficult if we had sampled individuals who were currently participating as lone girls.

Lastly, my personal experience as a lone girl at the recreational soccer level for several instances (age 10 and 16) proved to be an asset for my research. It allowed me to develop a connection and strong rapport with participants as a result of our shared experiences, which lends to the generation of rich data (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). This insider knowledge also helped me to understand participants’ experiences, especially complexities such as the negotiations of gender identity and navigating gender stereotypes. However, having my experience take place at the recreational level (as opposed to a competitive level) provided an additional outsider perspective that enabled me to recognize when to probe for participant’s experiences and feelings in particular scenarios that may have been taken for granted from someone who has participated more competitively (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Finally, I believe my experiences and gender allowed participants to feel comfortable sharing stories of the inappropriate or disrespectful comments and behaviours they experienced, resulting in important outcomes and suggestions for key sport stakeholders.

5.5 Study Limitations and Future Directions

The results of this thesis must be considered in light of certain limitations. First, internet capabilities from both myself and participants resulted in interviews being conducted almost exclusively via telephone. While this permitted for a smooth, uninterrupted discussion and straightforward transcription, it also prevented me from observing participants’ facial expressions and body language, which are often telling of
participants’ feelings. Though providing reliable internet access for participants may be an unrealistic solution, strategies for conducting effective phone interviews and developing rapport prior to conducting interviews (see Trier-Bieniek, 2012) is a practical way to go about navigating this type of interview when required to do so.

Whereas the retrospective nature of the study helped to uncover the gender dynamics at play, it could also be considered a hindrance in terms of limited and biased recall. It is important to note that this study was conducted during the coronavirus (i.e., COVID-19) global pandemic, and thus, common methods of stimulating recall prior to interviews (e.g., demographic survey, creating sport history or life timelines) were removed as an attempt to reduce the burden on participants. However, life histories and calendars have been shown to be an accurate method of helping participants with retrospective studies by stimulating recall and preparing participants for the questions to be addressed in the interview (e.g., Axinn et al., 1999; Côté et al., 2005). Moving forward, incorporating these methods into a retrospective study may help to increase the recall of the accounts for participants.

The exploratory nature of this thesis opens the door to a variety of directions for future research. This study demonstrated the impact of gender and context for developmental theories of youth sport. More broadly, it highlights the importance of forthcoming research in the field of sport psychology to approach topics with a sociocultural lens. In fact, Côté and colleagues (2021) recently proposed revisions to the PAF to account for such categories. They present socioeconomic status, disability, and gender (among others) as ‘class barriers’ that may impede the dynamic elements and thus, the acquisition of personal assets. Such a position provides additional support for
the use of a critical feminist interpretation to these findings, and for future sport psychology research to also engage with these types of approaches to provide a holistic understanding of sport experiences and outcomes that may be more broadly a product of social class categories.

Future research could also consider exploring the experience of ‘lone boys.’ Particularly in sports that have been characterized as feminine (e.g., dance, gymnastics, figure skating), lone boys are not uncommon (Chimot & Louveau, 2010; Clegg et al., 2019). Interestingly, whereas lone girls tend to be viewed as a burden to the team, in the aforementioned sports, lone boys tend to become a focal point and are used for their strength in movements like lifts, jumps, and throws (Chimot & Louveau, 2010). However, regardless of their centrality or contribution to the sport, it is common for boys and men in such roles to experience stereotyping and bullying from peers and spectators (e.g., Alley & Hicks, 2005; Chimot & Louveau, 2010; Plaza et al., 2017). As such, exploring how their distinction has impacted their experience would be a practical and impactful follow-up to the lone girl study.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

Minimal sport PYD research has explored instances whereby individuals compete alongside others that are observably different, and the impact that their distinction has on experiences. Thus, with my master’s thesis, I sought to contribute to this body of literature by exploring the experiences of girls competing on boys’ sports teams. Overall, the results from this study demonstrated that lone girl experiences related to the setting (e.g., lack of opportunities), activities (e.g., more deliberate practice), and social environment (e.g., minimal social connection) could influence their attainment of developmental assets and positive outcomes. Applying a critical feminist lens, I was able to recognize that the aforementioned implications within the dynamic elements of the PAF are rooted in gender norms, roles, and stereotypes that have prevented girls and women from thriving in sport. And so, while this thesis contributes theoretically to the understanding of girls’ sport experiences and practically offers suggestions to improve this environment for organizations, leagues, and coaches, it also sheds light on larger, societal issues related to our understanding and perception of women and girls in sport and society.
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Appendix A
General Research Ethics Board Approval

August 18, 2020
Miss Jennifer Coletti
Master’s Student
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies
Queen’s University
28 Division Street
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GSKHS-360-20; TRAQ # 6030365
Title: "GSKHS-360-20 The ‘Lone Girl’: Experiences of Girls Playing on Boys Sports Teams"

Dear Miss Coletti:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GSKHS-360-20 The ‘Lone Girl’: Experiences of Girls Playing on Boys Sports Teams" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.1) and Standard Operating Procedures (405), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at [http://www.queens.ca/traq/signon.html](http://www.queens.ca/traq/signon.html), click on “Events,” under “Create New Event” click on “General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies”). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is ‘completed’ so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one-year period (access this form at [http://www.queens.ca/traq/signon.html](http://www.queens.ca/traq/signon.html), click on “Events,” under “Create New Event” click on “General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form”). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at [http://www.queens.ca/traq/signon.html](http://www.queens.ca/traq/signon.html), click on “Events,” under “Create New Event” click on “General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies.” Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, GREB, at University Research Services for further review and clearance by GREB or the Chair, GREB.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

Chair, General Research Ethics Board (GREB)
Professor Dean A. Tripp, PhD
Departments of Psychology, Anesthesiology & Urology Queen’s University

cc: Dr. Luc Martin, Supervisor
    Dr. Patrick Coutignon, Chair, Unit REB
    Josie Birdsell, Dept. Admin.
Appendix B
Recruitment Poster

School of Kinesiology and Health Studies, Performance Lab for the Advancement of Youth in Sport

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED for
‘Lone Girl’ Sport Study

We are looking for volunteers between the ages of 17 and 25 years who participated on a competitive sports team when they were ~14-18 years old and were the only girl on their team.

Willing participants will be asked to complete a one-time, online interview (e.g., Zoom) that will take approximately 45-60 minutes. As a participant in this interview, you would be asked to recall some events about your sport experiences while on this team and to answer a few questions about them.

If you are interested in taking part, please email Jennifer Coletti for more information and to arrange a time to discuss your experiences.

jen.coletti@queensu.ca
Appendix C
Letter of Information for Participants

‘Lone Girls’: Experiences of Girls Playing on Boys’ Sports Teams

Primary Investigator: Jennifer Coletti

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this research is to explore your experiences as a ‘lone girl’ (i.e., a girl who participates on a sports team in which the remainder of their teammates are boys). We are interested in the experiences you had related to the physical setting, your relationships and interactions with coaches, teammates, and officials, and other sport/physical activities associated with the sport environment while you were competing as a lone girl. The key objectives of this study are to: (a) develop an understanding of lone girl experiences in various aspects of the sport environment, and (b) to examine what the sport environment looked like and felt like to you, and how this might compare to single-sex sports teams.

Procedures Involved in the Study
If you consent to participating in this study, you will be invited to participate in an online (e.g., Zoom) and password protected interview. The interview is expected to take 45-60 minutes and with your permission, will be audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The interview will help us understand experiences specifically related to the setting, relationships, and activities of the sport environment during a time(s) in which you competed as a lone girl. The interviewer will first ask you to provide a brief background about your sport history (e.g., how you got involved in sport, sport(s) played, years competed) to provide contextual information prior to discussing your experience as a lone girl. The interviewer will ask you outline your first experience as a lone girl (e.g., how the decision was made to play on this team) and then proceed to a discussion about the physical setting (e.g., competition level, rules of the game), the social dynamics between you and your teammates, coach, and officials, and lastly your engagement in activities such as practice and play within and outside of the sport environment. Questions may include topics such as how you feel about your experiences as a lone girl, the environment, and your relationships, as well as any prominent stories that are representative of your experience at the point of the interview.
Potential Benefits
Participation in this project will encourage you to reflect on your experiences having been a lone girl athlete. You will be asked about the quality of your experiences and how you feel about the environment. More broadly, your participation in the study will contribute to creating knowledge for the youth sport programmers and coaches who may apply the findings to enhance the sport environment for other lone girls. Overall, the results of the study can be used to improve the quality of lone girls’ experiences in various aspects the sporting environment and will support the positive development of lone girl athletes. Note however, that beyond the benefits listed previously, there are no direct benefits to yourself for participating.

Potential Harms, Risks, or Discomforts
If you choose to participate in the study, negative thoughts or feelings may be elicited if you have had a poor experience. However, when you are asked to consider your experience as a ‘lone girl’, you will also be asked about your positive experiences as well. In addition, you do not have to answer any questions in the interviews that you do not feel comfortable answering, and you do not have to give the reason as to why you chose to not answer a particular question. Your responses will still be used in the study if you do not answer all the questions, and you will be given a month from the date of your interview to request that your responses be withdrawn from the study. After that month has passed, you can still request that they be removed however this cannot occur once analysis has begun [example date 2-months after interview to be included]. Your demographic information will be deleted, but your responses will have been included in the analysis. You may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study.

The researchers will do everything in their power to create a welcoming, safe, and judgment free environment. If you require counseling services during the study, you will be provided with contact information for Canadian-wide resources such as Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT 686868) and Crisis Text Line (Text HOME 686868), which will connect you to a confidential helpline that provides professional counselling, information, and referrals for mental health and well-being to individuals of all ages across Canada.

Confidentiality
Your identity will remain confidential and the responses that you provide will never be linked to your name. The identification codes we create to accompany your responses will be kept in a password-protected document and laptop in a secure location. The only people who will have access to your data are the investigators named above. Should an additional research assistant be given access to the data, they will have to have signed a confidentiality agreement. Further, following completion of the project, data will be stored on a password-protected computer owned by the Sport Psychology Laboratory for five years following publication. After this time, data will be securely destroyed. The Queen's General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may request access to study data to ensure that the researchers have or are meeting their ethical obligations in conducting this research.
We plan to publish and present the results of this study in academic journals and at conferences. We will include quotes from some of the interviews when presenting the findings; however, the quotes will be anonymized (i.e., they will not have names) and all potential identification information will be removed.

Should you be interested in the results of this study, you can request a copy of the findings which could come in the form of the actual refereed publication or a general summary.

Questions about the Study

Any questions about study participation may be directed to the Graduate Student investigator, Jennifer, at jen.coletti@queensu.ca or the study supervisor, Dr. Luc Martin, at luc.martin@queensu.ca. If you have any ethics concerns please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. Please note that GREB communicates in English only.

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Appendix D
Interview Guide

General Introduction and Research Purpose

Thank you very much for participating in my research project. As you already know now, my name is Jennifer Coletti, and I am completing a Master’s degree at Queen’s University. The purpose of my research is to understand what being a ‘lone girl' looks and feels like to you, and how it may have affected you as an athlete and a person. By sharing your experiences with me, I hope that I can use your knowledge to make this environment better, or even better, for future athletes.

During our discussion, you will have the chance to discuss your feelings about being a lone girl athlete. Please understand that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask you. Your participation in this discussion is also completely voluntary, in that you do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. If you would like to stop the discussion at any time, there will be no negative consequences.

I would also like to remind you that the information you share in our discussion will be kept in confidence. This means that you and your responses will remain anonymous and not be shared with anyone outside the research team. If, when our discussion is over, you feel that there is anything you would like to add or remove from the interview transcript, please feel free to contact me and I will make the necessary changes. Finally, I would like to ask if you are comfortable with me making an auditory recording of this online conversation? I would like to do this because it allows me to check that I have understood and written out your information correctly.

Do you have any final questions before we begin? If not, please confirm your consent to participate by saying: “I consent to participate in this study.” [Proceed if the athlete consents]

Participant Introduction

I would like to start by asking you a couple of questions about your sport background in general.

1. Tell me a little bit about how you got involved in sports.
   o What were your first experiences with sport?
   o What do you enjoy the most about playing sports?

2. Describe the team(s) you participated on.
   o What age were you when you were playing on this team(s)?
   o How long did you play on this team(s) for?
   o How did it make you feel to be a member of this team(s)?
First Discussion about being a Lone Girl

Thank you for telling me about your sport background and the team(s) that you played with. I would now like to move on to the main focus of our discussion, which is your experience of being a lone girl athlete. My next question relates to the decision for you to play on this team.

3. What sport(s) did you play during your experience(s) as a lone girl?

4. How long (or for how many seasons) did you participate on this team for?
   o At what age(s) did you participate on this team?
   o What team, if any, did you participate on before this one?
   o Was this the only team you participated on as a lone girl?
     ▪ Previous teams mixed? Female-only?
   o Did you continue with sport following leaving this team?
     ▪ Can you tell me a bit about your reasoning for leaving the team?

5. Tell me how you learned about the opportunity to play on this particular team.
   o Who was the most important person in making the decision for you to play on this team?
   o How was this decision made?
   o Did you encounter any challenges to joining this team?
   o Describe how the decision was made in other cases, if applicable (i.e., when playing on other teams)

Appreciate Settings

6. What was the level of competition like? (i.e., competitive, provincial, national; club/organization structure)
   o Given the level of competition, how did you feel entering this setting?
   o What were your coaches expectations for your performance like?

7. Were there any rules of the sport that impacted your experience differently than your teammates? (playing field)

8. Were there any aspects of the physical sport environment that impacted your experience? (playing field)
   o Probe for things like dressing room assignments, carpooling, etc.

9. Were there rules or aspects of the league that impacted your experience? (community/league structure)

10. Did the community play a role in your experiences? (community/league structure)
    o Probe for things like push-back or support from parents
**Personal Engagement in Activities**

11. A term we use in sport psychology is ‘deliberate play’, and it refers to times where you are playing sports with others just for fun, outside of the organized sport environment. Can you talk about if and how you engaged in deliberate play (i.e., playing for fun) with your teammates outside the sport environment? *(sport of interest)*

12. Did becoming involved with this team change the way you could sample different sports? *(complementary physical activities)*
   - If so, how? If not, why do you think that is?
   - Did playing on this team make a difference in your experiences on other teams?
   - If so, how? If not, why do you think that is?

13. Did you participate in any activities outside the sporting realm with during this time? *(complementary activities)*

**Quality Social Dynamics**

14. Tell me about your relationships with your teammates, coaches, and referees *(interpersonal relationships).*
   - Can you give me an example of what your interactions were like with these different people?
     - Probe for transformational leadership style
   - How did these relationships and interactions make you feel?
     - Probe for belongingness, self-worth, physical competency, and motivation, etc.

15. Can you tell me a little bit about the team dynamics or what team atmosphere was like? *(team dynamics)*
   - Probe for opportunities for leadership roles, identity development, cohesion, effective communication

16. What was the overall social environment of the sports organization like? *(social environment)*
   - Probe for organization values, norms, leadership style

**General Discussion**

At this stage, we can move into the bulk of our discussion of what being a Long Girl means to you and how it has influenced your development. When answering the following questions, you can think about one specific season when you, compare different seasons if you had different experiences, or think about your overall experience.

17. Tell me about what it feels like to be a lone girl on a sports team.
Conclusion
As we come to the end of our time together, I have some final questions to round out the discussion and offer closure.

1. Did this experience have any short-term or long-term impacts on you as an athlete and a person?
2. Looking back, what would have made your experiences better?
3. What advice would you give to other lone girls?
4. What advice would you give to coaches of lone girls?
5. What advice would you give to teammates of lone girls?
6. As we end the discussion, do you have any final thoughts about being a lone girl that you feel are important and that we did not already cover?
7. Do you have any questions for me?

We will end the discussion here. I would like to thank you very much again for participating in my research project and sharing your thoughts and feelings about being a lone girl. I would also like to remind you that if you would like or add or take away from the information you shared during the interview, you can contact me by email.