

## The Design, Implementation, and Evaluation of a Pilot Online Conflict Management Workshop for High School Sport Leaders

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Conflict and conflict management in sport have received less attention from researchers and practitioners compared to other settings (i.e., business, personal relationships). Studies have focused on athlete perspectives and team outcomes of conflict (Holt et al., 2012; Paradis et al., 2014a), but lack an exploration of explicit strategies for managing conflict. Further, peer leaders of sport teams struggle with facilitating relationships and managing conflict on their teams (Voelker et al., 2011). The purpose of this two-phase study is to explore conflict in sport and potential conflict management resources for youth athletes. In Phase 1, a needs assessment, two focus group interviews with high school team captains identified current sources of conflict, barriers to addressing conflict, and their use of specific conflict management strategies. These results and the COM-B framework (Michie et al., 2011) informed the design and implementation of an online conflict management workshop. In Phase 2, twelve high school student leaders from the same school participated in the online workshop. A mixed-method evaluation measured individual changes in two variables associated with conflict management (cognitive flexibility and problem-solving ability) through surveys and focus group interviews post-workshop. Results indicated this pilot workshop was effective in increasing perceptions of cognitive flexibility and problem solving (i.e., a more positive outlook on problems, a rational problem-solving style, and less avoidance of problems). Results also support the use of a novel framework for managing conflict. The success of this workshop shows promise for future implementation and offers a resource for adolescent athletes.

**S**port is a context where athletes need to work together to achieve a common goal. A great deal of research in sport psychology has explored ways to promote unity and harmony within sport through improving group dynamics (Eys et al., 2019), promoting a task involving climate (Harwood et al., 2015), and developing mental skills training interventions to manage performing under pressure (Ong & Chua, 2021). However, an intense focus on promoting harmony and accomplishing goals may camouflage the need to acknowledge and address conflict, an important and central feature of human existence.

Though a common aspect of relationships, conflict is challenging to understand, and often more challenging to manage due to the variety of definitions and explanations. A universal definition of conflict has yet to be established, which leaves scholars and practitioners alike conceptualizing the term in unique ways. The most common definition of conflict stems from organizational psychologists Barki and Hartwick (2004), “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with attainment of their goals” (p. 234). The perceived misalignment and interference in achieving goals could encourage individuals to participate in competitive behaviors that use deception, coercion, and threats, which escalate conflict (d’Éstrée, 2009). Individuals tend to associate conflict with exclusively negative emotions such as anger, hurt, guilt, or jealousy

(Guerrero & La Valley, 2006). Different types of conflict lead to different group outcomes. Relational conflict (i.e., conflict originating from differences in personal values) tends to decrease group productivity and lower member satisfaction (Jehn et al., 2008). There is mixed evidence on task conflict (i.e., conflict related to what needs to get done in a group) with some studies showing it is equally disruptive as relational conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), and some evidence showing task conflict is constructive for groups working on complex tasks with ample time to process all information related to the conflict (Bradley et al., 2015).

## **Literature Review**

Researchers have studied conflict as a phenomenon where the primary focus is on the individual’s conflict experiences in their sport participation. In a sample of 90 elite athletes (i.e., Olympians, World Champions; Mellalieu et al., 2013), most athletes (57.78%) reported experiencing multiple conflicts while competing at major competitions. When asked about strategies for managing their conflicts, 47% of the athletes reported attempting to solve the conflict by seeking outside help, while 29% reported attempting to withdraw from the conflict. An exploratory study with varsity collegiate athletes revealed that both task and relational conflict are salient on sport teams, with relational conflict being more destructive (Holt et al., 2012). Related to conflict management, results from Holt et al. (2012) indicate that multiple strategies are helpful for addressing team conflict such as team

building early in the season, addressing conflict situations early, using mediators, and structuring team meetings. However, when asked about addressing their personal conflicts, athletes preferred to avoid it entirely (Holt et al., 2012). Paradis and colleagues (2014a) also explored collegiate athlete perceptions of conflict; athletes conceptualized conflict in a way similar to past research. Their perspectives of conflict included perceptions of a disagreement, competitive behaviors, and negative emotions. These findings led to the development of the Group Conflict Questionnaire (Paradis et al., 2014b) which detects task and social conflict on sport teams. Lastly, Partridge and Knapp (2016) further explored the destructive nature of relational conflict and identified three manifestations of conflict on sport teams: general indirect victimization (i.e., starting rumors about a teammate), sport-specific victimization (i.e., refusing to pass the ball to a teammate), and direct victimization (i.e., yelling at a teammate).

Two specific areas of research - coach-athlete relationship, and group dynamics - have examined conflict in greater depth. In their review of the literature on coach-athlete conflict, Wachsmuth and colleagues (2017) addressed multiple intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental factors that are critical to managing conflict effectively. For example, at the intrapersonal level, obsessive passion was positively associated with perceived conflict in the coach-athlete dyad and harmonious passion was inversely related to conflict in sport teams. Communi-

cation is an interpersonal factor that is essential for effectively working through conflict, but establishing open lines of communication can be challenging. Similarly, if a coach communicates infrequently, or communicates via yelling and blaming, this can lead to conflict in dyads and teams. External factors that can lead to both dyadic and team conflict include organizational stressors. A rigid organizational structure may prevent coaches from being flexible in their practices and building effective coach-athlete relationships. Conflicts with other members of the organization (e.g., management, parents) can influence how a coach manages conflict with individual athletes or teams (Wachsmuth et al., 2017).

In discussing management strategies for coach-athlete conflict, athletes explained that they expected coaches to initiate the conflict management process, and coaches agreed as they perceived themselves to be more experienced and wiser than their athletes (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Both athletes and coaches reported using self-reflection and emotional regulation strategies before addressing the other person in an effort to stay calm through the conversation. Athletes and coaches also acknowledged the importance of taking responsibility for their behavior and willingness to collaborate on future planning. In cases that involved non-negotiables (e.g., behavior misconduct, athlete health), coaches reported being more forceful with their conflict management style. Barriers to successful conflict management in coach-athlete dyads included poor relationship quality,

lack of time or energy, and one or both parties not following through with the agreed upon conclusion (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Should the conflict become too overbearing to manage for the dyad, it may be helpful for a sport psychology practitioner to intervene and provide assistance to both individuals. A sport psychology practitioner can take the role of educator, consultant, mediator/moderator, or action planner in managing coach-athlete conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2022).

Group dynamics research in sport has identified conflict as both a group process (i.e., overt activity that occurs in pursuit of common goals) and an emergent state (i.e., intangible team properties that vary due to context and input). Conflict is often studied in relation to other processes or emergent states such as intrateam cohesion, communication, and collective efficacy (Eys et al., 2019). For group conflicts, activities that directly or indirectly address conflict or conflict management skills (i.e., building a sense of togetherness, improving communication) may be helpful (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). Sport psychology consultants can also lead team-level interventions. Vealey (2017) details her personal experience of meeting with players and coaches on a college team that was experiencing multiple relational conflicts. She reflects on the process of creating an effective team culture through building teammate relationships, promoting supportive coach-athlete relationships, and emphasizing trust on the team.

### **Specific Population Needs – High School Sport Captains**

Critical to group dynamics is the concept of roles. In sport, coaches often assign team captains (i.e., a formal team role). Characteristics of good youth sport leaders include being competitive, accepted by peers, skillful in their sport, and having quality friendships on the team (Moran & Weiss, 2006). Team captains at the high school level felt responsible for facilitating relationships on the team, setting an example for their teammates, and, most pertinent to the current study, mediating conflicts (Voelker et al., 2011). Fransen et al. (2014) highlighted that even informal team leaders, such as a team social leader, are seen as responsible for facilitating good relationships on their team and managing conflicts off the field.

However, while team captains and informal leaders perceive their role is to facilitate relationships, this has not always been identified as one of their strengths. Specifically, high school captains have reported facilitating relationships on the team as a perceived personal weakness and managing other people as one of the greatest challenges of being a captain (Voelker et al., 2011). Scholars have attempted to resolve these concerns through various programs. Pierce and colleagues (2018) reflect on their process of developing an online leadership course for high-school student athletes, and other research notes the success of online leadership courses in youth athletes (Blanton et al., 2019). Relating to in-person program options, Blanton and

colleagues (2014) describe the process and benefits of developing a leadership club, within a single high school, where student-athletes discussed topics such as positive peer modeling and team cohesion. The goals with programs like these are to provide an opportunity for adolescents to explicitly learn and practice an important life skill. Conflict management, another important life skills, can benefit from being included in existing programs, or developing new programming.

The research on conflict management training or workshop delivery is scarce in sport. It may be that schools and other sport organizations offer a type of programming that includes conflict-related concepts, but do not focus exclusively on conflict management. Findings from previous work in elementary schools provide support for an online emotional education program (Ros-Morente et al., 2022) and an after-school program informed by the personal and social responsibility (Jacobs et al., 2017) that include conflict management related concepts (e.g., problem-solving, emotional regulation). Older athletes have yet to be the focus of conflict management trainings or workshops, though research has been conducted with high school sport coaches. A coach education program grounded in the positive youth development framework and teaching life skills has helped coaches better manage internal conflicts (Camiré et al., 2018). To place the responsibility on coaches to resolve all conflicts is ineffective and ignores an opportunity for young athletes to learn

a useful life skill. Given that young leaders already perceive managing conflict to be built into their role, team captains in youth sport have the potential to benefit the most from development in this area. Also, it is worth noting that team leaders can exist on sport teams without being labeled “captain” (Fransen et al., 2014). While leadership training exists within schools or sport organizations, few teams have trainings specifically for team captains. Thus, the purpose of this study is to further explore conflict in sport and develop a conflict management training program with special attention to the needs of team leaders (i.e., captains).

### **General Methodology**

The study is presented in two phases. The first phase involved a needs assessment with high school sport leaders to understand the current perspectives on conflict in sport. Specifically, this phase aimed to understand the current athlete perception of conflict in high school sports, the strategies used to handle conflict, and the barriers of addressing conflict. The results of Phase 1 informed Phase 2: the design, pilot implementation, and mixed-methods evaluation of an online conflict management workshop for high school athletes. This two-phase study was guided by a pragmatic paradigm. Pragmatic research examines topics with the perspective that all knowledge needs to be tested against experience and reality is created from personal experiences (Bazeley, 2013). This paradigm fits well with the current study because conflict is contextual; individuals will

experience and respond to conflict situations differently. A pragmatic approach also supports the use of mixed-methods in that pragmatism is concerned with transferability, not just generalizability or context-specific findings (Morgan, 2007). Qualitative and quantitative methods are needed to understand how conflict presents in the current context (i.e., Phase 1) and if conflict knowledge and management strategies may be transferred to other contexts (i.e., Phase 2). Applied sport psychology research can benefit from a pragmatic approach to bridge the gap between research and practice (Giacobbi et al., 2005).

## **Phase 1**

### **Method**

**Participants.** The scholastic athletes for this study were purposefully sampled from a student advisory council (SAC) for a state-level high school athletics association (a governing body for scholastic athletics in one state in the USA). This group is exclusively comprised of high school juniors and seniors. Each year, the state athletic association adds eight male and eight female athletes (total  $n = 16$ ) to serve a two-year term. Students in this state apply to be on the SAC, and the state association purposefully selects applicants from varying demographic characteristics (e.g., state regions, school size, sport, racial identity) to ensure the SAC is representative of the state high school athletic population. The SAC assists in promoting the value of scholastic athletics by being leaders in their own schools, helping plan and lead state-wide

student-development events (e.g., leadership workshops), and assisting during state championship games. In meetings, the SAC discusses issues in scholastic athletics including scholarship, integrity, fairness, and safety.

Scholastic athletes involved in the SAC were selected for this study due to their status as leaders in high school athletics and experience in participating in discussions surrounding critical issues in sport. Participants in this study were 14 SAC members ( $n = 7$  males,  $n = 7$  females). All participants competed in at least one sport during the year the study was conducted. This group contained athletes from both interactive sports (i.e., basketball, football, soccer) and coactive sports (i.e., tennis, golf, cross country, track and field). The state athletic association share the names of the SAC members through press releases and photos on social media, thus, no further demographic information was collected to protect confidentiality of these scholastic athletes.

**Procedure.** After approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, the first author contacted the supervisor of the SAC to set a time for the focus group interviews. Parental consent and participant assent was obtained via consent forms that were emailed out prior to the session and collected on the day of the session.

Interviews took place in-person during the last hour of one of the group's regularly scheduled meetings in April of 2019. The group was randomly divided in half with the first author and a

doctoral student each leading one of the two focus group sessions. Focus groups lasted an average of 35 minutes. Given the exploratory nature of this phase, interview guide questions were determined based on key elements in past literature including: perceptions and experiences with conflict (Paradis et al., 2014) and conflict management (Holt et al., 2012; Partridge & Knapp, 2016). The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide based on the initial research topics: athlete perception of conflict in high school sports (e.g., How would you define conflict?, What kind of conflict do you see happening on your teams?), strategies used to handle conflict (e.g., How are conflicts typically handled?), and barriers to address conflict (e.g., Do you feel prepared to step in and resolve a conflict between teammates?). A final question was posed: Should a workshop related to conflict in high school sport be offered, what would you want that workshop to include? Throughout the discussion, each researcher invited individuals to share their thoughts and encouraged all voices to be heard.

**Data Analysis.** Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. The first step in this process is familiarizing oneself with the data (Braun et al., 2016). The completed transcripts were printed and re-read to become familiar with the data. The first author kept an audit trail for each interview transcript with their initial thoughts and comments. Then, transcripts were coded by the first au-

thor. Coding was first done inductively and codes (i.e., a label for something of interest in the data; Braun et al., 2016) were placed into categories that captured the range of participant responses. Finally, the categories created in the previous step were deductively analyzed into higher order themes determined by the initial research topics that contextualize the current nature of high school sport conflict.

### **Results**

The results from the needs assessment are presented as they relate to the initial research purpose of creating a conflict management workshop for high school sport leaders. The data from these focus groups directly informed aspects of the workshop which can be seen in Table 1.

**What is the Current Nature of Conflict in High School Sport?** When asked to define conflict, the athletes provided examples of situations centered around playing time, differing motives for sport participation, underclassmen, school rivals, and parents. Athlete 8 discussed how it was difficult for larger teams to provide equal playing time and “the biggest conflict in sport is inclusion, like getting everyone to play.” Multiple athletes added how different motives for playing sport can also lead to conflict. Athlete 1 explained that some athletes are “just there to play sports and they don’t want to make a big effort to try to get along with everyone.” Athlete 4 added that conflict is, “anything that disrupts

**Table 1***Interpretation and Implementation of Needs Assessment Themes in Workshop Design*

<b>Themes &amp; Subcodes</b>	<b>Interpretation of responses</b>	<b>How this was implemented into the workshop</b>
<i>Sources</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Playing time</li> <li>● Underclassmen</li> <li>● School rivalries</li> <li>● Parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Variety in sources of conflict</li> <li>● Mainly relational conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Used variety of example situations in workshop activities including underclassmen and parents</li> </ul>
<i>Barriers</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fear of Dislike, Escalating Conflict, and Ruining Relationships</li> <li>● Timing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Personal barriers related to reputation</li> <li>● Fear of negative relational consequences</li> <li>● Athletes do not want to make situation worse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Addressed ways to overcome relational barriers</li> <li>● Offered information related to potential positive outcomes of addressing conflict</li> </ul>
<i>Strategies</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Calling People Out</li> <li>● Going to Coach</li> <li>● Computer Mediated Communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Athletes willing to have conversations about conflict</li> <li>● Texting and social media used for communicating during tough situations</li> <li>● Coach is a resource</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provided athletes with an opportunity to refine and practice these strategies</li> </ul>
<i>Workshop Suggestions</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Good examples</li> <li>● Personal impact of conflict</li> <li>● Initiate conversations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Offer relevant examples</li> <li>● Discuss potential outcomes of conflict and how to communicate in challenging situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Used video examples</li> <li>● Shared self-care techniques</li> <li>● Included activity for identifying harmful communication</li> </ul>



the team chemistry.” These athletes, mostly upperclassmen, suggested that underclassmen players present conflict when there is a need for them to break old habits and learn new ways of playing. Athlete 13 commented, “that’s a learning curve that comes with just joining in high school sport, coming from middle school.” Parents also created a source of conflict, specifically their behavior during games like yelling from the stands. Rivalries with other schools was the only source of conflict with an external group.

**What Prevents Athletes from Addressing Conflict?** Disrupting social relationships or team functioning was a consistent concern for athletes in the focus groups. Athlete 6 explained, “For me, it’s a fear of people disliking me if I bring [conflict] up because people can get defensive.” They added, “It’s really hard and truthfully I just haven’t said anything in the past because I just don’t know what to do and I don’t want to be a snitch.” Athlete 3 added, “I don’t want to cause more conflict by trying to address the conflict.” Athlete 6 further explained, “some things that I know that kids have done wouldn’t be acceptable for them to be playing the sport, they’d be kicked out...so thinking about losing your teammates, that’s something I worried about.” Athlete 1 explained their worry about a confrontation causing a teammate to perform poorly in an important game.

**Strategies and Actions to Address Conflict Situations.** Three themes emerged about confronting conflict situations: calling people out, involving coaches, and computer mediated com-

munication (i.e., texting, social media). “Calling people out” was a common strategy for addressing conflict which involved dealing with a situation in the present moment and speaking up when a teammate was doing something unacceptable. Athlete 12 explained,

I’m not a person that likes to call people out very often, but when you’re leading a team, in order to resolve conflicts and stuff, you need to be willing and not scared to call someone out if they need to hear it.

Athlete 6 added the benefit of talking directly to an individual is “that person will be more aware that what they’re doing is wrong. Whereas if it’s addressed to a group, they might be like, ‘Oh, maybe that’s not me.’” Coach involvement was a trickier matter. In some cases, it helped when coaches intervened to handle difficult and large-scale conflicts, but coaches did not always understand the full extent of the problem, or it was not always a good idea to involve the coach. General consensus suggested that coaches should address the team with performance conflicts, but should keep individual athlete concerns as a private conversation. The athletes acknowledged that computer/smartphone communication could play an important role in some situations. Athlete 2 noted, “even just an apology over the phone. It’d be better than nothing.” Still, face-to-face communication was generally preferred.

**Workshop Suggestions.** The athletes identified three suggestions for the content of a conflict management workshop: use real examples, give advice

for managing the personal impacts of conflict, and explain ways to initiate a confrontation. Athlete 11 summarized, “I think you have to explain what’s going to happen more mentally and emotionally when you have to confront someone because that’s by far the hardest part.” The athletes also suggested that a workshop could also be adapted for delivery to a full team, coaches included, and not just designed for captains.

## **Phase 2 Background**

The results from the needs assessment directly informed the content and learning design of a conflict management workshop. A workshop was the chosen delivery method as workshops allow for both experiential learning and individual learning within the same setting which makes them flexible and transferable to many contexts, including sport (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 1999). A problem-solving approach to conflict represented a workshop pedagogy that was appropriate for the nature of conflict management strategies and the target population. This approach promotes collaboration by challenging individuals and groups to focus on the common end goal and offering multiple solutions to achieve that goal (d’Estrée, 2009). One important aspect when using a problem-solving approach is practicing *cognitive flexibility*, an individual’s ability to identify and act on alternative solutions in a situation (Martin & Rubin, 1995).

Phase two of the study aimed to educate high school athletes on interpersonal conflict and practice conflict manage-

ment skills. Based on the literature, it was hypothesized that upon completion of the workshop, athletes would: (1) report higher levels of cognitive flexibility when considering conflict situations and (2) report an improvement in problem-solving skills during conflict situations.

## **Description of the Workshop**

The first author led the development of the workshop and worked in an iterative fashion, seeking feedback from colleagues. Pedagogies included the use of video vignettes, short descriptive lectures from the first author to conceptualize conflict and introduce a conflict management framework, followed by discussion activities and a role-play activity (see Appendix 1 for a full workshop outline). The descriptive lectures helped the athletes build their understanding of conflict, by breaking it down into three different parts (relational, situational, and emotional). Before beginning the activities, participants completed a self-reflection exercise to increase awareness of their personal experience with conflict and management strategies they have used in the past. The workshop was designed for and delivered by Zoom video-conferencing software.

Three theoretical frameworks guided the workshop. First, the COM-B framework (Michie et al., 2011) guided the intervention to target sources of behavior at the individual and group levels. The COM-B framework states that capability (C; the individual’s psychological and physical ability to complete the desired activity), opportunity (O; the social and

physical factors outside the individual that either prompt the behavior or make it possible), and motivation (M; both automatic and reflective cognitive processes that direct behavior) are the three main determinants of behavior (B; Michie et al., 2011); Appendix 1 provides an overview. Second, the Perspective, Proactive, and Self-Care conflict framework, which emerges from past research in sport, communication, organizational psychology, and leadership literature. This workshop represents a novel combination of these three elements, heretofore uncombined in previous interventions. Perspective and Proactive pieces highlight how positive conflict outcomes are often the product of individuals taking a different perspective and how leaders use a variety of strategies to manage conflict proactively (Baron, 1991; Holmes & Marra, 2004). Self-care components suggest that leaders should be in their best mindset to handle challenging situations, which is also supported by organizational sport psychology research that emphasizes the need for self-compassion and overall well-being in order to perform at an individual's best level (Neil et al., 2017). Third, a training-outcomes framework (Kraiger et al., 1993) helped to identify and categorize cognitive, skill-based, and affective outcomes prior to workshop implementation, thereby guiding the program evaluation process.

## **Phase 2 Method**

The workshop was delivered in a single hour-long session using Zoom video-conference software. A convergent paral-

lel mixed methods design was employed to evaluate the workshop (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Qualitative and quantitative data were collected shortly after the workshop's conclusion and were given equal influence during the analysis. Quantitative data assessed constructs of interest identified a priori (cognitive flexibility, problem-solving) while qualitative data provided information on learning outcomes not hypothesized a priori. Qualitative data complemented the survey data and extended understanding of change that was limited due to the small sample size, and also addressed participants' ideas for workshop improvements.

## ***Participants and Procedure***

The Senior Assistant Director for the state athletics association recommended a local athletic director in search of leadership programming. This athletic director recruited athletes from their high school and shared necessary information from the first author (e.g., study description, consent forms, Zoom link). Twelve female athletes from a midwestern suburban high school participated in the workshop. Their high school has an average enrollment of around 1,000 students; 11% of students qualify for free lunch; over 85% of the student population is White; and sport teams compete at the Class A division (determined by enrollment size; Class A has >835 students). The group included one freshman, six sophomores, three juniors, and one senior (average age = 16 years). In reviewing the survey responses, one participant did not complete the items

regarding their perspectives before the workshop. Another participant experienced technical difficulties and could not complete any of the survey nor participate in the focus group interviews. The authors removed these responses and analyzed quantitative data with 10 participants, and qualitative data with 11 participants.

The university's Institutional Review Board approved the study; parental consent was obtained via electronic form prior to the day of the workshop and participant assent was obtained on the day of the workshop. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they had the option to withdraw at any point. They were informed ahead of time that the topic of the workshop was conflict management skills. This workshop took place in April of 2020. Participants completed surveys immediately following the workshop, and the link to the surveys was distributed using the Zoom chat feature. Two focus group interviews ( $n = 5$ ,  $n = 6$ ) were conducted after the workshop, immediately after the athletes completed the quantitative surveys, with focus groups averaging 24 minutes. The first author used the virtual breakout room feature of Zoom to randomly sort participants into groups. Focus groups were conducted by doctoral students that had not designed and conducted the workshop to avoid socially desirable responses and conflicts of interest. Questions for these interviews focused on three sensitizing concepts: (1) Overall reflections and learning experience; (2) cognitive flexibil-

ity and problem-solving ability; and (3) workshop improvements. A copy of the interview guide can be requested from the authors.

### ***Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis***

The quantitative analysis assessed cognitive flexibility and problem-solving using two instruments: the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI; Martin & Rubin, 1995), and the Social Problem-Solving Inventory - Revised, Short Form (SP-SI-R:S; D'Zurilla et al., 2002). Items from both measures were slightly modified to include language related specifically to conflict in sport. The Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI; Martin & Rubin, 1995) is a 12-item measure employing a 6-point Likert strength of agreement scale. Total scores are created by summing individual items scores with reverse scoring on negatively worded items. Instrument validation studies have shown its reliability ( $\alpha = .76$ ) and both construct and concurrent validity (Martin & Rubin, 1995). The Social Problem-Solving Inventory-Revised – Short Form (SP-SI-R:S; D'Zurilla et al., 2002) is a 25-item measure employing a 5-point Likert scale (not at all true of me to extremely true of me) with five subscales: Positive Problem Orientation (PPO), Negative Problem Orientation (NPO); Rational Problem Solving (RPS), Impulsivity/Careless Solving (ICS), and Avoidance Style (AS). Negatively worded items (NPO, ICS, and AS subscales) are inversely scored. Total scores and subscale scores are created through summing individual item scores.

Previous validation studies have shown high test-retest reliability ( $r = .93, .89$ ) and high internal validity across subscales ( $\alpha = .79 - .95$ ; D’Zurilla et al., 2004).

Seven novel items to assess specific learning outcomes of the workshop were included. These items used a four-point Likert scale assessing degree of agreement (false, somewhat false, somewhat true, and true) based on their experience in the workshop and are shown in Table 2. Age, class year, sports played, and leadership experience were the demographic variables collected at the end of the questionnaire. In total, the quantitative instrument contained 49 items.

Using SPSS, descriptive statistics were calculated for all measures. Both the CFI and SPSI-R:S report total scores were analyzed using a paired-samples t-test for degree of change in cognitive flexibility and problem-solving ability for conflict

situations. For the workshop specific questions, frequencies of responses were determined.

**Measurement Design.** For the CFI and SPSI-R:S measures, a retrospective post-test (RPP) design was used. This data collection method occurs at one time-point where participants rate themselves on each survey item in reference to two timepoints: before and after the workshop. This design has been previously validated (Little et al., 2019) through comparison to the traditional pre-/post-test design (TPP) with students ranging from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Previous results indicated that using the RPP was still sensitive to change in ways that the TPP was not, and that a pre-test is not needed to show change even in youth populations (Little et al., 2019). Advantages to this approach, compared to the TPP, include participants having

**Table 2**  
*Workshop -Specific Post-Test Items (Means and Standard Deviations)*

Item	Mean	Std. Dev	n
This workshop improved my knowledge of conflict.	4.00	0.00	10
This workshop improved my self-confidence in handling conflict situations.	3.90	0.32	10
After this workshop, I will be more proactive about conflicts.	3.90	0.32	10
This workshop taught me how to consider other perspectives during conflict.	3.90	0.32	10
After this workshop, I think about conflict in a different way.	3.90	0.32	10
This workshop prepared me with skills to help take care of myself during conflict.	3.90	0.32	10
The activities in this workshop allowed for me to practice my conflict management skills in situations that I experience in the real world.	3.60	0.70	10

Note: Scores ranged from 1-4 (false, somewhat false, somewhat true, true)

a greater awareness and precision in the degree of change for each construct relevant to the workshop as well as being useful for topics in which participants may not be as knowledgeable (Little et al., 2019). Given that this workshop included educational components and the participants' understanding of conflict was not directly measured, an RPP design was appropriate for this workshop.

### **Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis**

Qualitative data helped describe the process-related experience of the leaders during the workshop, served as an explanatory check for the quantitative measures, and provided detailed feedback for areas of improvement for the workshop. The focus group interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature, and cleaned for clarity by the first author, and the first author kept an audit trail to record the initial thoughts while re-reading interview transcripts. The first round of deductive coding used the predefined codes of (1) reflections and learning experience; (2) cognitive flexibility and problem-solving ability; and (3) workshop improvements. The first author coded both focus group transcripts independently before meeting with the tertiary author to ensure predefined codes accurately reflected the data. No modifications were made to the predefined codes. Next, the first author conducted the second round of inductive coding to address emergent themes. The lead and tertiary authors met again to discuss codes. The tertiary author

served as critical friend that challenged the first author's analyses and interpretation to minimize biased assumptions made during the coding process (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This method of abductive coding has shown to be useful in that it allows for codes to be created based on theory and sensitizing concepts, yet also allows for data-driven codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

### **Phase 2 Results**

#### **Quantitative**

Results indicated a significant increase in mean scores on the CFI between the retrospective pre-test ( $M = 49.70$ ,  $SD = 5.19$ ) and the post-test ( $M = 58.20$ ,  $SD = 4.13$ ) after conducting a paired samples t-test analysis ( $t(9) = 7.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with a large effect size ( $d = 2.49$ ). There was also a significant increase in total SPSSI:R-S scores ( $t(9) = 8.041$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.54$ ) from retrospective pre-test ( $M = 59.1$ ,  $SD = 12.05$ ) to post-test ( $M = 72.2$ ,  $SD = 10.05$ ). See Table 3 for full results.

The last questions of the quantitative measure were created by the first author and included to gather feedback specific to the framework of this workshop. For each question, the majority of the group (at least 6 of 10) rated the statements "true" (the strongest level of agreement) while the remaining participants (5 or less) rated the statement "somewhat true" (the next strongest level of agreement). None of the participants rated any statement as *false* or *somewhat false*. See Table 2 for results.

**Table 3***Average Changes in Cognitive Flexibility and Problem-Solving*

Scale	Retrospective			Post-test				
	Pretest			Mean (SD)	SE	<i>p</i> value	Cohen's <i>d</i>	$\alpha$
CFI Total	49.70 (5.2)	1.64	.60	58.20 (4.1)	1.30	< .001	2.49	.46
SPSI:R-S Total	59.1 (12.05)	3.81	.89	72.2 (10.05)	3.18	< .001	2.54	.84
Negative Problem Orientation	11.30 (4.32)	1.37	.90	14.6 (3.72)	1.18	< .001	2.85	.85
Positive Problem Orientation	12.10 (3.07)	.97	.64	14.40 (2.32)	.73	< .001	1.54	.33
Rational Problem Solving	9.50 (2.92)	.92	.72	13.50 (2.22)	.70	< .001	2.56	.76
Impulsivi- ty/Careless Style	13.1 (3.12)	.98	.57	14.5 (2.55)	.81	.094	.59	.34
Avoidance Style	13.1 (2.42)	.77	.62	15.20 (2.49)	.79	.002	1.63	.40

*Note: SPSI:R-S Total Scores out of 100; each subscale scores out of 20.*

*CFI Total Scores out of 72*

### **Qualitative**

The coding process began by deductively organizing meaning units into four themes: Reflections and Experiences, Learning, Skills, and Workshop Improvements. Within each of these themes emerged three to four categories.

**Reflections and Experiences.** The participants stated that the workshop structure enabled them to share examples openly in a safe space and appreciated the mix of lecture and group-based problem-solving activities. They also appreciated splitting into small groups, then

returning to a full-group format to compare their solutions. Furthermore, their familiarity with the other participants enhanced the learning environment, and the diversity of sport teams represented added depth. Athlete E noted “it’s good to know like it’s not just my sport, that it [conflict] does happen in all other sports too.” Athlete F added, “you shared a scenario, and someone was like, ‘Oh yeah, I’ve experienced that too’. That was reassuring and nice to hear that. Then, you can talk it through of how you handled it or how they handled it.”

**Learning.** Without being prompted by the interviewer, the participants recalled their learning relative to the Perspective, Proactive, Self-Care framework. Athletes resonated with the idea that everyone has a unique point of view and set of experiences. Athlete I explained, “I like the reminder to remember that you don’t necessarily know everything that’s going on with somebody. So, not to really jump to conclusions and help them out if they’re having a problem in the best way that you can.” Athlete K added, “I really liked how it just gave me a reminder to always be putting myself in other people’s shoes with their conflicts and also to have an open mind when you go into anything.”

Athletes acknowledged the value in acting early and de-escalating problems. Athlete J said, “Yeah, I hadn’t really thought about being proactive. Normally you just think about a situation and then how to solve it. But I hadn’t really thought about how to prevent a situation from happening I guess.” Athlete G added that going forward, they want to “not let the problem snowball into something bigger, just address it when it needs to be addressed first” Athletes appreciated the inclusion of self-care and thought it was important to incorporate in their own lives. In describing self-care, Athlete I explained:

I hadn’t really ever focused on the self-care aspect. If you’re having a bad day, the way you handle other people’s situations probably isn’t going to be the best. So, I guess I’ve never really focused on the

way that a leader should take care of themselves as well.

**Skills.** Skills included action-oriented statements about dealing with (or preparing to deal with) conflict situations, which included intervening and being thoughtful in their actions. Athletes mentioned that in this workshop, they were able to get more comfortable with the concept of intervening during a conflict situation. Athlete C mentioned:

I liked being able to involve yourself in other people’s situations. Cause a lot of times when you think about conflict you think about your own. But if you’re a captain or a leader on the team, obviously people are going to look to you to help with that stuff.

Athlete H expressed her confidence in stepping up saying, “maybe if a teammate won’t do it, or someone who usually does it, we’ll do it now.” Along with intervention, this group discussed how they feel more comfortable involving their coaches when conflict seemed difficult to handle. Athlete A explained, “it’s not like you’re like taking the place as a coach but more like you’re working together to solve the conflict.”

These team leaders also mentioned concepts that spoke to a rational thought process surrounding their actions. Athlete D said, “When I’m solving a problem, I never really thought about steps or what way to take to solve an issue. I thought it was really put in perspective of what you should do and how you should solve the issue.” Similarly, athletes expressed feeling confident going for-



ward since they intentionally spent time practicing conflict management skills.

**Workshop improvements.** Participant suggestions for workshop improvements included more realistic example scenarios and addressing other interpersonal challenges. The examples were intended to be general with the intent of allowing flexibility in their decision making, however, the participants suggested the examples needed to be more pertinent to high school athletes. Most participants agreed that there could have been more details in the role-play activity scenarios so that they had more direction when working through their plans of action. Athlete D explained, “I know that my group just had a hard time just starting it off because the topics were kind of vague.” These athletes also mentioned wanting more guidance with interpersonal challenges such as building trust with their teammates.

### ***Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data***

After analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative data separately, the results from each section were taken together to create a comprehensive analysis. Table 4 summarizes the findings from this research with both quantitative and qualitative support.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this two-part study was to investigate conflict in high school sport from the athlete perspective, then to design, deliver, and evaluate the effectiveness of a conflict management

workshop that addressed their specific needs. Effectiveness was determined by significant change in individual scores on cognitive flexibility and problem-solving measures as well as feedback from focus group interviews. Overall, this study provides initial support that this specific workshop was effective in increasing cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills related to conflict situations.

From interviews following the workshop, athletes expressed generally positive comments related to the content of the workshop. Conflict can be a complex concept when it is not broken down into smaller elements or specific examples are not presented. However, athletes and other individuals in sport are still aware of these elements even if they do not identify them the same way as scholars do. Athletes in this study identified specific elements of conflict in their own terms, and this has been seen in past research as well (see Paradis et al., 2014a). Therefore, it is not a matter of *what* conflict is, but rather *how* to manage it.

Athletes in this study were able to reiterate effective conflict management practices following the workshop without being prompted. The Perspective, Proactive, Self-Care framework resonated with this group and informed their future plans for managing conflict. In the Perspective piece of the framework, cognitive flexibility is important. Athletes reporting an increase in cognitive flexibility following the workshop offers support for engaging in activities that challenge current conflict perspectives. The Proactive piece of this framework

**Table 4***Quantitative and Qualitative Data Integration*

Result	Quantitative	Qualitative Theme	Representative Quote
Participants think more flexibly about conflict and consider multiple perspectives.	CFI scores increased	Describing thinking of alternative solutions.	“I never really thought about how many different solutions there can be and different methods of dealing with different things that come up within your team.” Athlete A
Participants perceive greater individual problem-solving skills.	SPSI-R:S total scores increased		“I think that when you go onto a problem, now, you can step back and think about what we learned today and just think about how you should feel, what they're feeling too and not just push it off till later. Really solve that problem as much as you can right then or say, can we talk about this later?” Athlete I
Participants embrace rational problem-solving.	SPSI-R:S subscale scores increased for rational problem-solving	Practicing problem solving and taking thoughtful steps.	“I've never really thought of when I'm solving a problem I never really thought about steps or what way to take to solve an issue.” Athlete D
Participants are less likely to avoid future conflicts.	SPSI-R:S subscale scores decreased for avoidance style	Describing taking action to address a current problem.	“When a problem occurs, you're always scared to confront the person or try to solve the issue. But she said if you let it just go, it could get worse. So, get on top of it and solve it as soon as it's okay, maybe not right then and there, but when it's a safe and good place.” Athlete B
Participants adopted a positive problem orientation rather than a negative problem orientation.	SPSI-R subscale scores for positive problem orientation increased and scores for negative problem orientation decreased	Feeling more confident with problems going forward.	“It was nice because it made you have a more open mind. And it helped me out with future things, like how to solve a conflict if there's ever one or how to be there for somebody if someone needs help... And be more confident and listen to your situations.” Athlete H

validated previously held ideas that it is better to address conflicts sooner rather than later. Athletes never mentioned avoiding conflict in any discussions, and their role-play activity solutions mentioned ways in which the conflict could have been prevented from the start. It is encouraging to report young athletes are wanting to attempt to manage conflicts given that past research noted a common conflict management strategy was to avoid conflicts entirely. (Holt et al., 2012). Follow-up questioning from the instructor or other participants may have strengthened the relatability of the current scenarios. Future work may consider running parallel workshops each with different scenarios and comparing participant feedback.

Related to the social environment, athletes shared that they appreciated hearing perspectives from sports they did not play. Athletes in this group were all female leaders from the same high school, but varied in their sport and years of experience. This slight difference allowed for meaningful discussion, and we suspect hearing different perspectives influenced the training effect for cognitive flexibility. This finding provides additional support for creating opportunities within schools for student-athletes to discuss life skills (Blanton et al., 2014). Still, the participants noted that the workshop could be useful to conduct with an entire team, so it is promising to think that the workshop could work in multiple settings. A workshop exclusively for formal and informal team leaders might focus on conflict as it specifically

relates to leadership skills (e.g., trust) that these athletes felt were missing.

Athletes expressed a sense of comfort with the other participants in a virtual space. The online delivery of this workshop was successful in achieving the intended outcomes, offering additional support for future delivery of online training (Blanton et al., 2019; Ros-Morente, 2022). Online workshops can ease the scheduling process by allowing participants to attend from any location. Also, with potentially challenging topics like conflict, participants may feel more secure being in their own space with the option to turn off their camera. In addition to the social environment, athletes appreciated the structure of the online session. Specifically, they enjoyed a variety of activities combined with shorter lectures. This feedback is not surprising given that educational research at the high school level shows that students are more satisfied with their online learning experience when it includes learner-content interaction (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, videos, group work; Zhang & Lin, 2020). Similarly, teachers preferred professional development workshops that included practical learning activities and fostered participant engagement (Bragg et al., 2021). Online workshops offer a noninvasive, effective method for teaching athletes skills that could help their sport and personal development.

### **Practical Implications**

The pragmatic methodology employed in the current study design facilitate the use of the research findings in

similar sport settings. Though not generalizable to all youth sport contexts, our findings that a one-hour conflict management workshop can create desired learning effects in high school athletes provides immediate implications for team and program leaders in scholastic athletics. This program can be implemented in isolation or in combination with already established sport programming. The online format provides flexibility in scheduling for the sport organization. The activities that allow for examples can include examples relevant to that specific group, potentially making the workshop more relatable. The current workshop outline is shown in Appendix 1 and further details can be requested from the authors for those wanting to implement this workshop in their own setting. While this study focused on the athlete perspective, it would be beneficial to provide a similar workshop to coaches, administrators, and parents, or include them in the current workshop. Including these individuals in discussions around conflict management is a necessary endeavor to ensure that all parties are committed to resolving challenging situations and doing so in an effective manner.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

These findings are not without limitations. First, this workshop was only implemented and evaluated once with a small sample. Results show large effect sizes, but multiple, larger replications and evaluations of this workshop would strengthen these findings. Second, the effectiveness of the workshop could be

more accurately understood through an alternate study design such as a delayed-control design. This design would strengthen the study by including a comparison group and follow-up measurements. The focus groups following the workshop are relatively short, however, there was consistent agreement among participants with the thoughts shared, and this was not the only source of data; the quantitative survey measured the same constructs. Still, contextual factors such as conducting the focus groups after completing a 49-item survey and having this online workshop soon after sports were paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to the limited discussion. Finally, the participants in the workshop were all female student-athletes. Given that males and female athletes have shown to handle conflicts differently (Sullivan, 2004), it would be beneficial to implement this workshop with male student-athletes, or a combination of athletes, to have a more complete understanding of the effects of this workshop.

Future work in this area could continue investigating how athletes use conflict management skills. This may be best addressed through ethnographic and longitudinal methods. Gould and colleagues (2021) investigated social emotional learning (SEL) outcomes of male and female high school basketball athletes by conducting interviews over the course of an entire season. This method produced data that illustrated the process through which the SEL outcomes developed as well as specific moments and total sum-

maries of the athletes' experiences. A similar approach could be taken to better understand the exact types of conflict athletes are experiencing and their preferred conflict management strategies. As conflict often elicits an emotional response, collecting data in challenging moments and over time would provide a more complete picture than retrospective interviews or surveys.

Related to methods, another future direction is to further the development and use of sport-specific conflict questionnaires. Thus far, the Group Conflict Questionnaire (GCQ; Paradis et al., 2014b) is the only validated, sport-specific conflict questionnaire. The GCQ measures the presence of task and social conflict on sport teams, but does not address conflict management. A questionnaire designed to assess athlete conflict management skills or knowledge about conflict management would bring rigor to this topic area. It would also make evaluating the current workshop easier as it would provide a common language to discuss athlete conflict management. Development of such a questionnaire could follow a process similar to that of the GCQ: a qualitative phase, content and factorial validity phase, and a construct validity phase (Paradis et al., 2014b).

With the single implementation of this workshop, future work should also evaluate this workshop with more sport teams both in-person and online. Given that this workshop introduced a novel framework for managing conflict (i.e., Perspective, Proactive, Self-Care), further evaluation work is needed to support using this framework in workshops.

It would be important to conduct this workshop with different populations of adolescent athletes (i.e., race, gender, social class, ethnic background) as culture influences conflict perspectives and management styles (Ting-Toomey & Takai, 2006). Future evaluations should also include follow-up data that assesses the long-term effects of the workshop on athlete conflict management attitudes and skills.

## Conclusion

Conflict exists in all areas of life and can be challenging to manage without the proper skills. Athlete leaders reported strategies they use to manage conflict, though continued to experience barriers that deterred them from addressing team conflicts. The current workshop was designed to teach conflict management to youth sport leaders and offer activities to help them practice conflict management skills. Athletes reported an increase in cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills as a result of attending the online conflict management workshop. Continuing to develop conflict management among young athletes can lead to more positive outcomes of conflict and promote overall athlete well-being.

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## Appendix 1

### Workshop outline and outcomes

Learning Activity	Description	Learning Outcome (COM-B aspect)
Introduction (5 minutes)	Instructor and audience introduction Workshop expectations	
Conflict Videos and Discussion (6 minutes)	Conflict situations from television, movies, and real-life will be shown.	
Conflict Mini-Lecture w/ Examples (3 minutes)	<i>Relational Aspect:</i> Involves two <i>interdependent</i> people who have a meaningful relationship. <i>Situational Aspect:</i> There is no singular way to handle conflict, it depends on the person and situation <i>Emotional Aspect:</i> Negative feelings are associated with conflict, but outcomes can be positive (closer relationships, build trust, more confidence in own skills).	Cognitive ( <i>Capability</i> )
Proactive, Perspective and Self-Care Framework (3 minutes)	<i>Proactive:</i> Doing things at the beginning of a relationship can help prevent future conflict; also address conflict early <i>Perspective:</i> Need to consider the viewpoint of the other person and the situation <i>Self-Care:</i> With the negative emotions, we have to make sure that we take care of ourselves too and as team captains we have an outlet	Cognitive ( <i>Capability</i> )
Self-Reflection (5 minutes)	Captains will take time to reflect on the strategies they use to address conflict	Cognitive and Affective ( <i>Capability</i> and <i>Motivation</i> )
Effective Communication Examples (15 minutes)	Conflict causing statements will be presented. Captains will work to decide which is an appropriate and polite response. It's often that people are on the same page with conflict, but the things said can escalate it. This is why listening is very important.	Skill ( <i>Opportunity</i> )
Conflict Role-Play (15 minutes)	Conflict situations will be presented to the captains. In small groups, discuss the pros and cons of using different approaches. Allow for captains to generate their own examples they want to talk through.	Skill ( <i>Opportunity</i> )
Self-Care for Leaders Mini-Lecture (3 minutes)	4 strategies for practicing self-care	Cognitive ( <i>Capability</i> )
Wrap-Up/Action Plan (5 minutes)	The next time you are in a conflict situation, what is one thing that you will take with you for perspective, proactive and self-care?	Affective ( <i>Motivation</i> )