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Feeling Elite: The Collective Effervescence of TEAM USA at the 2012 ITU World Triathlon Grand Final

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Abstract

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Keywords

Team USA, Triathlon, Collective Effervescence, Athlete Arousal

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Feeling Elite: The Collective Effervescence of TEAM USA at the 2012 ITU World Triathlon Grand Final

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Collective effervescence is an amplified, excited reaction made possible when a group of people experience something emotional together. We used a descriptive mixed methods approach to investigate both the individual and collective emotions of Team USA age group triathletes as they participated in the 2012 International Triathlon Union's (ITU's) Grand Final in Auckland, New Zealand. The results of our study suggest that participation in this event evoked emotions consistent with the themes of Intrinsic Arousal, Anxiety, National Pride, and Social Arousal. Further, the results indicated that this group of experienced athletes was less motivated by performance outcome goals (i.e., placing in the top three) and more motivated by the individual and collective emotions associated with being a member of Team USA and representing the USA on a national stage. While some have suggested that the more elite athletes may be more attuned to their emotional states than less accomplished competitors, we found the very nature of the Grand Final as a world championship event, coupled with the symbols and rituals associated with Team USA membership, provided age group athletes a rare chance to experience similar states. Keywords: Team USA, Triathlon, Collective Effervescence, Athlete Arousal

Introduction

At the *Olympic Games*, nationalistic feelings peak among athletes (Kersting, 2007; Sullivan, 2009). Team members chosen by their respective National Olympic Committee to participate in the Games are recognized as not only the best in their sport but also as ambassadors of their respective nations. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the Frenchman responsible for the revival of the *Olympic Games* in 1896 said, "The most important thing in the *Olympic Games* is not winning but taking part; the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well" (International Olympic Committee, 2012, p. 2). All nations, large or small, strong or weak, are encouraged to participate, not for the purpose of gaining national honors, but in the spirit of friendly rivalry and respect for the ability of the individual athlete. For de Coubertin, the focus of the *Olympic Games* was not on nationalism but rather on unbridled internationalism.

Few athletes earn the opportunity compete at the *Olympic Games*. In the sport of triathlon, it's even rarer. There are more than 140,000 athletes that hold membership in the sport's National Governing Body (NGB) in the United States, *USA Triathlon*. Of those, only five earned the right to compete at the 2012 *Olympic Games* in London. The International Triathlon Union (ITU) oversees international elite competition outside of the Olympiads. For seven races each year in locations spread across the globe, the ITU assembles the world's top triathletes for head-to-head competition. The series ends with the *Grand Final*, where the world champions for each gender are crowned. It is at this venue that age groupers, or amateur athletes who compete against other amateurs in five-year age increments, are invited to feel elite:

For the age group athletes, this is their *Olympics*. It really is.... We believe that *Team USA* is one of the most critical programs we have within the organization. We believe that because what it does is inspire people. People

here will go home from this event and they'll talk to others about this experience and what they had the opportunity to do and the people they had the opportunity to meet and others will be inspired to go to the qualifier and, perhaps, represent their country, too, on this world stage. We believe in that so much that we put the personnel behind it... [and] continue to nurture this philosophy that amateur athletes can be Olympians in a unique way, as well. They are not, per se, actual Olympic athletes, but they have a stage where they can race and put everything on the line. (Tim Yount, personal communication, October 20, 2012)

The 2012 *World Triathlon Grand Final* featured more than 3,000 age group athletes. The United States was one of 45 countries represented. Three hundred fifty-six athletes represented the United States of America on *Team USA* by participating in either the sprint distance (1000m swim, 24k cycle and 5k run) or Olympic distance (2000m swim, 40k cycle, and 10k run) race. Each participating country was allowed to enter no more than twenty athletes in each age group, per gender, per race distance. *USA Triathlon* relied on its *National Championship* events to guide the highly selective process of choosing *Team USA* members for this world championship event. To be invited to the team, triathletes in the United States must have placed in the top 18 in their respective age group at *USA Triathlon's National Championship* race the previous year, or they must have been ranked in the top 20 in their age group in the USAT Official Rankings at the close of the previous season (*USA Triathlon*, 2012). Once chosen, *Team USA* athletes represented their country in common national colors and wore race suits emblazoned with the letters *USA* across the chest, much like the nation's elite athletes do during their own international competition, including at the *Olympic Games*.

The triathlon race was the culmination of a week's worth of activities the ITU had planned for the athletes. A *Parade of Athletes* welcomed the athletes to Auckland three days prior to the first race. Through Auckland's downtown waterfront area, athletes marched in unison wearing their national colors and trailing their country's flag. They were greeted by thousands of spectators. Afterwards, at the *Opening Ceremonies*, athletes were welcomed by the Mayor of Auckland, and by the President of the ITU, who is also a member of the International Olympic Committee. Following their welcome, athletes were entertained by a comic and by native Māori dancers who performed a haka dance. Afterwards, athletes were treated to a celebratory pasta party. Just as de Coubertin encouraged with the *Olympic Games*, the gathering encouraged intercultural dialogue and social discourse. Other festive events during the week included a *Sport and Lifestyle Expo*, various site-seeing tours, a *Teams Triathlon* (super sprint race with four people per team who each swim, cycle and run before tagging the next team member), and elite athlete races. Following the age group races, there was an *Awards Ceremony* and a *Closing Party*.

Through personal interviews, many of the age group triathletes in attendance claimed the experience was unparalleled. They claimed emotions so strong that it could even be argued that what they felt from engaging in such an opportunity was comparable to what elite athletes feel when also representing the USA in international competition, such as at the *Olympic Games*. Émile Durkheim might even refer to it as a *religious* experience.

Specifically, when Durkheim (1965) studied religious societies, he discovered a fundamentally social phenomenon in which beliefs and practices are held sacred. Durkheim (1965) found that, when together, the religion's group members lost all sense of individuality and were instead collectively united with their god(s). That same collective effervescence, as Durkheim labeled it, could also be perceived within the collection of athletes that formed *Team USA*. Collective effervescence is an amplified, excited reaction made possible when a

group of people experience something emotional together (Durkheim, 1965). At the *Grand Final*, we witnessed collective effervescence as a strong energy that prompted a majority of *Team USA* athletes to forget about the individuality of their sport or their own individual race performance and focus instead on team membership and team performance. This was especially apparent when a particular emotion, such as nationalism was shared among the group.

Durkheim (1965) contended that collective representations must be periodically strengthened and recharged. Since 2010, the ITU has extended an invitation to amateur athletes from more than 40 countries to compete in the World Triathlon *Grand Final*. Age group athletes hoping to race at the *Grand Final* were required to qualify for their national teams, with many National Federations holding qualification races. Each participating country was allowed to enter no more than twenty athletes in each age group, per gender. *USA Triathlon* relied on its National Championship event to guide the highly selective process of choosing *Team USA* members. To qualify, triathletes in the United States must have placed in the top 18 in their age group at the *USA Triathlon National Championships* the previous year or have been ranked in the top 20 in their respective age group in the USAT Official Rankings at the close of the previous season (*USA Triathlon*, 2012). Once chosen, *Team USA* athletes collectively represented their country in common national colors and uniforms emblazoned with the *USA* letters, much like the nation's elite athletes do during international competition, including at the *Olympic Games*.

While the competitive format of the sport is virtually the same, many *Team USA* members interviewed before the Auckland race said they believed that representing one's country would be intensely emotional. Representing one's country is a rare opportunity for amateur athletes. Because of this, we sought to discover whether or not the sense of collective emotion and nationalism experienced by *Team USA* members was comparable to those emotions experienced by US Olympic athletes, as noted in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of our study was to explore the emotional experiences of age group triathletes as they participated on *Team USA* at the 2012 *ITU Short Course Triathlon World Championships Grand Final* in Auckland, New Zealand.

Researchers' Experiences

The lead author of our study, C. E. Faure, was selected to participate on *Team USA* at two different world championship triathlon events. The first was in 2010 for the *Grand Final* in Budapest, Hungary. It was there that she was overcome with emotion at the grandiose nature of the event. Having aspired to be an Olympic athlete in her youth but having fallen far short of that dream, the opportunity to represent the United States of America at an international event was overwhelming. The weeklong excursion to Budapest as a member of *Team USA* included numerous sightseeing and social team gatherings in addition to the triathlon events. In the days prior to the race, the streets of Budapest were cluttered with thousands of athletes from around the world, many of who were sporting their nation's colors. For Faure, the simple act of wearing the red, white, and blue *USA* shirt or sweat suit while venturing around town evoked an enormous sense of nationalistic pride. Additionally, the team camaraderie was apparent, even for her, a newcomer. Within the first hours, it was obvious to her that this experience was not just about spending a week abroad and competing in a triathlon, it was making lifelong friends. Regardless of future race outcomes, Faure now had a lifetime membership to a very *special* fraternity of athletes. During the *Parade of Athletes*, she was overcome with even more emotion as she walked in unison with other *Team USA* members behind Old Glory, just as she had observed on television when watching the *Olympic Games*. For the hours and days that followed, she felt *special*, too, and had

difficulty controlling the sense of pride she felt to be one of the “lucky” ones: an *American*. During the two-hour-long opening ceremony, welcoming speeches, music and cultural spectacle entertained the athletes and fans. The race, itself, (held four days later) was the culmination of the experience. Without question, this was the biggest athletic event she had ever participated in and nerves were at an all-time high. But in this race, she was surprised to discover herself not concentrating on her race performance. Instead, she found herself focused on representing the United States of American through every stroke, cycle and stride. In the final meters of the race, a *Team USA* coach reached out over the barricade and handed Faure a small, American flag to waive as she crossed the finish line, just as he had done for every other *Team USA* member. Nothing in her life could compare to the emotion Faure felt at that very moment. As she grasped the flag and held it up, she felt unbridled passion. She felt clearly that crossing the finish line was a representation of the ideals her country holds dear: democracy, equality, and freedom. Her finish time did not matter. Her finish order did not matter. All that mattered were those three letters across her chest: *USA!*

In the months following Budapest, the magnitude of what Faure had experienced resonated, and she wondered whether or not others collectively shared the strong emotions she herself had experienced in Budapest as a member of *Team USA*. Subsequently, this research project was born. After being selected to race in Auckland, Faure engaged in participant observation in an attempt to verify previous experiences and also establish rapport with other participants.

Methods

Our study followed a descriptive mixed methods approach and the primary researcher also acted as a participant observer. It was guided by the following questions:

1. What performance expectations do *Team USA* members have regarding competing in the 2012 *ITU World Triathlon Championship Grand Final*?
2. What individual and collective emotions do members experience as a result of being chosen to *Team USA*?

Research Design

We utilized a qualitative descriptive design. Qualitative description is a naturalistic method by which authors provide a descriptive summary of an event from the participants’ perspective with no a-prior assumptions such as theory building (Sandelowski, 2000). Sandelowski (2000) suggested that descriptive techniques are most appropriate for researchers who investigate questions “of special relevance to practitioners and policy makers” and, in most cases, which are related to event specific situations (p. 337). We deemed this particular research design appropriate for the study because our research questions were focused on participants’ experiences on *Team USA* at the 2012 ITU World Triathlon Championship *Grand Final*.

Descriptive qualitative designs use a number of data collection techniques in order to describe participant experience. These techniques include, but are not limited to, individual interviews and observation (Sandelowski, 2000). We used individual interviewing techniques in order to glean a first person understanding of the experience from the participants at the event. Through observation, we were able to focus on the meanings of team membership, as seen from the standpoint of participants (Jorgensen, 1989; Spradley, 1980; Znaniecki, 1934).

The role of the primary research team member as an athlete participant on *Team USA* also added a degree of insight to our investigation, and helped to validate our findings (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Participant observation is defined as the process by which researchers are able to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities. It has been shown to provide the context for development of sampling guidelines and interview guides, as it did with our study (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Bernard (1994) found that participant observation gives the researcher a better understanding of what is actually happening within a culture and lends credence to one's interpretation of the observation. This is because observations might help the researcher have a better understanding of the context and phenomenon under study. While the methodology is appropriate for studies of almost every aspect of human existence (Jorgensen, 1989), the use of participant observation has long been associated with the study of sport. Loy and Segrave (1974) suggested participant observation was of value in sport, claiming that such "exploratory research with its emphasis on discovery and creativity often results in the discovery and description of significant sociological variables" (p. 299).

For the purposes of our study, the first author engaged in participant observation by being a member of *Team USA* and competing in the *ITU Grand Final* event on two separate occasions. The first such experience was two years prior to Auckland and provided a basis for the design of this study. Through this active engagement she was able to experience, first hand, the emotional and social process that this event elicited and, therefore, was able to better understand and describe the experiences of the participants in our study. Furthermore, her past experiences as a *Team USA* member and the resulting collective emotions that were generated from that experience helped to validate our study.

While it can be argued that participant observation can be affected by the researcher's own bias, DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) contended that "the goal for design of research using participant observation as a method is to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study that is as objective and accurate as possible given the limitations of the method" (p.92). Because these same authors suggested that the validity of this research strategy becomes stronger when supplemented with interviewing and quantitative measures such as questionnaires, our research team elected to integrate such mixed methodology into the design of our study.

Participants and Sampling

Upon institutional IRB approval the first and second authors traveled to Auckland, New Zealand for the ITU world championship event. After arrival, participant recruitment for our study was initiated at the team's host hotel where team members were gathering upon arrival. We obtained a sample of convenience for survey distribution during the *Team USA* photo shoot on the Auckland pier four days prior to the race, and again at the *Team USA* pre-race meeting, which took place at the team hotel two days prior to the race. We felt it was important to query *Team USA* members in person in Auckland both prior to and immediately after the race experience. This was because we felt *Team USA* members would be at the height of the emotional experience during these times. Research by Carr and Worth (2001), Fontana and Frey (1994), and Shuy (2003) support the value of such face-to-face interview methods.

Research participants ranged in age from 18 to 83 and included both males and females from 32 different states. The inclusion criteria for participation in our study were, (a) membership on *Team USA* (either sprint or Olympic-distance athletes), and (b) participation in the *ITU Grand Final*. We obtained a sample of convenience during the *Team USA* photo shoot on the Auckland pier four days prior to the race, and again at the *Team USA* pre-race

meeting, which took place at the team hotel two days prior to the race. We conducted additional interviews in an effort to gauge the participants' race experience immediately after the triathlon race near the finish line. Participants who were present at either of these events fit the inclusion criteria and were deemed appropriate for the study. We randomly approached and asked *Team USA* members if they would volunteer to participate in our study. We provided all potential participants with a statement of informed consent, and we gave them details about the goals of our study.

Data Collection

After consenting, we gave each study participant a one-page questionnaire that requested basic demographic information (gender, age and home state) along with questions related to triathlon experience (number of years as a triathlete, number of times selected to *Team USA*, and history of podium finishes at both national and international triathlon events). Also, given a list of prompts, we asked participants to describe their emotions related to the *Team USA* experience using a five-point Likert scale. Responses ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

As stated previously, we used a mixed methods approach for our study, as it has been shown to add to the validity of qualitative inquiry (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). We felt integrating a quantitative approach was necessary in order to better understand the demographic characteristics of the participants. Jones (1998) espoused the strength of mixed methods approaches in sport fandom research, posits qualitative paradigms are effective methods to understand the "cognitive and affective" (para. 10) components of an experience, while quantitative methods are appropriate to interpret the "behavioural" components of experience (para 7). Much like research in the sport fandom area, our current study was focused on cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements of participant experience. Therefore, after questionnaires were completed, we administered follow-up interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol to a convenient sample of participants (n=10) and also with the Chief Operating Officer of *USA Triathlon*. Purposeful interviews with triathletes identified by *USA Triathlon* staffers as first time team members, repeat team members, and/or medal contenders helped us target those of particular interest. These interviews helped us to balance responses across experience groups.

We asked interview participants to discuss their feelings of participating on *Team USA* and to describe their expectations and emotions. Each interview ranged in duration from four minutes to 17 minutes. Because we felt it was important to interview participants on site, these interviews were much shorter than traditional in-person interviews, yet we still found them to be descriptive and rich. These in-person interviews allowed us to better understand the unique experiences of the athletes. We conducted all of the interviews face-to-face while the athletes were immersed in the weeklong *Team USA* experience. We recorded each of the interviews, transcribed them, and later emailed those transcripts to each participant. This member checking was done for verification purposes. We encouraged participants to make any necessary changes and return the interview transcript back to us, via email. Member checking is commonly used qualitative strategy that can help reduce "...the chances of misrepresent[ation]" by the researcher (Krefting, 1991, p. 218). Through personal experience as a member of *Team USA* and by taking field notes, the first author was also able to authenticate the results of the questionnaire and the thematic constructs of the interviews. DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland (1998) noted that such methods help to provide an accurate description of what is observed and are products of the observation process.

Data Analysis

Independently and after return to the USA, we analyzed the data from the questionnaires using basic descriptive measures. To analyze the qualitative data acquired from the interviews, the first and second author each reviewed the written transcripts independently and identified raw data themes and subthemes using descriptive coding. According to Saldaña (2009), a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (p. 3). Our coding process allowed us to segregate, group, regroup, and re-link the interview data, which thereby helped us consolidate meaning and explain (Grbich, 2007; Saldaña, 2009). At each progressive stage of the thematic analysis and coding process, we sought and obtained consensus among all of the authors. We reported consensual findings using a combination of hierarchical content trees and direct quotes from the interview transcripts in an effort to enable our readers to better understand the participants' perceptions and experiences. Subsequent coding helped us to link the identified themes to traits of elite athletes identified in sports psychology literature (Deci, 1980; Hanin, 1980; Kersting, 2007; Lomong, 2012; Sullivan, 2009; Pensgaard & Duda, 2003). Following the data analysis, we asked a third author with extensive qualitative research experience but not directly involved in this interview process to confirm the categories. The goal of our triangulation strategy (was to establish a common understanding of the meaning of the various themes through extensive exploration and discussion of the *Team USA* members' thoughts. Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, and Sparks (2001) suggested that readers should be provided with an opportunity to evaluate and interpret interview data in a way that is most meaningful to them. Therefore, the findings of our study are presented using both hierarchical content trees and direct quotations.

Results

Demographic Profile

In all, we distributed 143 survey questionnaires to *Team USA* members and 128 were returned, for a response rate of 89.5%. Additionally, we conducted 10 on-site interviews with a convenient sample of the participants who responded to the questionnaire. The participants represented 32 states in the USA. By gender, 64.8% (n=83) of the participants were female and 35.2% (n=45) were male. Table 1 shows the participants' age range.

Table 1. Participants' Age Range

Age Range	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Under 19	3	2.3%
20-29	11	8.6%
30-39	25	19.5%
40-49	38	29.7%
50-59	23	18.0%
60-70	19	14.8%
Over 70	17	7.0%

Triathlon Experience

Related to triathlon experience, 37.8% (n=48) of the participants acknowledged competing in the sport of triathlon for more than ten years, 28.3% (n=36) reported they had raced between two and four years, 22% (n=22) said between five and seven years, 10.2% (n=13) had eight to ten years of experience, and 1.6% (n=2) said they were in their first year competing in the sport. Fifty percent (n=64) were participating on *Team USA* for the first time, 41.4% (n=53) had participated on *Team USA* between two and four times, and 8.6% (n=11) had participated on the team five or more times. Most athletes on the team did not have previous podium finishes at the national or international level. Overwhelmingly, 72.7% (n=93) of participants had never placed in the top three at a *USA Triathlon* National Championship event compared to 27.3% (n=35) who had. At *ITU Grand Final* events, 89.9% (n=114) reported they had never placed in the top three compared to 10.2% (n=13) who had experienced a podium finish. Most participants said they trained, on average, between 10-15 hours per week (60.9%; n=78). 22.7% (n=29) said they trained between 15-20 hours per week; 10.9% (n=14) said less than 10 hours per week, and 5.5% (n=7) reported training for more than 20 hours per week on average leading up to the race in Auckland.

Race Expectations

Race expectations among the participants varied, however we found the vast majority had no expectations to win or place in the top three overall in their respective age group. In fact, close to 73% of our participants acknowledged having no aspirations to place in the top three in their respective age groups. Table 2 summarizes the participants' race expectations.

Table 2. Participants' Race Expectations

For the ITU race in Auckland, I would summarize my race expectations as (check one box for each statement):

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
I'm hoping to win my age group.	57.03%	22.66%	7.81%	7.03%	5.47%
I'm hoping to place in the top three in my age group.	46.88%	25.78%	8.59%	8.59%	10.16%
I'm hoping to place in the top ten in my age group.	24.22%	17.97%	19.53%	20.31%	17.97%
I'm not expecting to place in the top ten in my age group.	20.31%	14.06%	19.53%	25.00%	21.09%

Emotional Experiences

Though the questionnaires and interviews, we found the experience of participating on *Team USA*, and representing the USA in international competition in particular, created intense emotion in a large majority of the participants. Nearly 80% of our participants said they felt they were part of a team (rather than competing as an individual, as is typical for triathlon), 98% felt a sense of team camaraderie, 98% felt both excited and honored to be given the opportunity, and 98% felt a sense of pride in the opportunity to represent the United

States of America at the event. Additionally, 91% said the emotions they were feeling were heightened as a specific result of their representation of the USA. Wearing their nation's letters and colors was also a highlight for the vast majority of our participants. Ninety-six percent of our participants said they looked forward to the social opportunities the experience offered, and nearly 94% said they felt "special" as a result of their selection to and participation on *Team USA*. Table 3 provides a summary.

Table 3. Participants' Emotional Experiences

I would summarize my emotions on being a part of Team USA by the following (check one box for each statement):

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel as though I am part of a team (USA) for this experience rather than representing myself as an individual.	0.78%	6.25%	13.28%	53.91%	25.78%
Talking with other <i>Team USA</i> members gives me a sense of camaraderie with my fellow countrymen/countrywomen.	0.78%	0.78%	0.78%	49.22%	48.44%
I am excited to be a part of <i>Team USA</i> .	0.00%	0.00%	1.56%	36.72%	61.72%
I feel honored to be a part of <i>Team USA</i> .	0.00%	0.00%	2.34%	28.13%	69.53%
I feel a sense of national pride in representing the USA at the ITU world championship event in Auckland.	0.00%	0.00%	2.34%	33.59%	64.06%
Because I'm representing the USA at a world championship event, the emotions I'm feeling about this race in Auckland are more intense than those I experience at a typical triathlon in the USA.	0.00%	3.13%	5.47%	39.06%	52.34%
I am looking forward to the opportunity to wear the USA letters and colors on my uniform for the race.	0.00%	0.00%	3.13%	25.78%	71.09%
I will wear USA letters and colors during my stay in Auckland even outside of race day.	0.00%	2.34%	13.28%	44.53%	39.84%
Wearing the USA letters and colors makes me feel proud of my country.	0.00%	0.00%	6.25%	32.81%	60.94%
I'm looking forward to meeting and socializing with other triathletes from across the USA and world.	0.00%	0.00%	3.91%	38.28%	57.81%
I'm looking to have the experience of a lifetime .	0.78%	4.69%	6.25%	39.84%	48.44%
Being a part of <i>Team USA</i> makes me feel special .	0.00%	1.56%	4.69%	35.16%	58.59%

Thematic Constructs

Through analysis, researchers are able to engage with their data in an effort to gain a relatively clear understanding of what it means (Grbich, 2007). Through analysis of interview transcripts of the 10 selected participants (T1-T10) and through participant observation of *Team USA* members at event functions throughout the week in Auckland, we identified four themes and nine subthemes related to the emotional experiences of *USA* members. Each of the identified themes, intrinsic arousal, anxiety, national pride, and social arousal, were themes also evident through a review of literature relevant to the psychological experiences of elite athletes who participated in international competition (Deci, 1980; Hanin, 1980; Kersting, 2007; Lomong, 2012; Sullivan, 2009; Pensgaard & Duda, 2003). Table 4 *Team USA* members. *Figure 1* summarizes our thematic constructs.

Table 4. Themes and Subthemes Related to Participants' Emotional Experiences
Examples of Raw Data Themes and Subsequent Subthemes and Major Themes

<i>Raw Data Theme</i>	<i>Subtheme</i>	<i>Theme</i>
Attention from <i>USA</i> <i>Triathlon</i> Race Uniforms/swag So few got the opportunity I "win" just by being a part of the team	Feeling Special	Intrinsic Arousal
I was surprised to qualify. I earned the right to be here. I'm a good athlete. My friends/family are impressed.	A Sense of Belonging	
I feel all "choked up" inside I get a tingly feeling inside It makes me feel like an Olympian	Excitement	
I hope I have a good race It's a bigger race than what I'm used to	Nervousness	Anxiety
I'm not good enough to be here Others are better than me	Lack of Self- Worth	
I don't deserve to be here Others have sacrificed a lot	Guilt	

for me to have this
opportunity

Representation of an
ideology
Service as ambassadors of
the USA

Political
Awareness

National
Pride

Red, white, and blue colors
USA letters on race
uniform
USA flags
“USA” chants from crowd
Wearing USA clothing
outside of race

Symbolic
Representations

Meeting new people
Forming lasting friendships
Moral support from
teammates

Team
Camaraderie

Social
Arousal

Seeing new countries
Keeps me active/healthy

Travel Enjoyment

Intrinsic Arousal

Within *Intrinsic Arousal*, we identified three subthemes. These were *Feeling Special*, *A Sense of Belonging*, and *Excitement*. While the vast majority of our participants had extensive triathlon training and racing experience, nearly all triathletes we interviewed said the *Grand Final* experience was “special”. Nasir bin Syed, Rahman bin Jantan, bin Ahman and binti Othman (2006) defined a sense of belonging as an intrinsic dimension that consists of emotional feelings, commitment and cohesiveness between people within a group. *Team USA* athletes were clearly united, and some even contended the opportunity was similar to what they could imagine as elite athletes:

There’s just a specialness of the race. It’s almost like it’s a once in a lifetime type of feeling. It’s almost like the *Olympics*, even though it’s the world championships. It’s that similar type of feeling of what you’d think the *Olympics* would be like. That’s why I love it. That’s why I love it so much. I can say I’m part of *Team USA*. There’s no other way you can experience that. (T1)

Growing up, I always wanted to be an Olympian. But by age eighteen or so, I realized that just wasn’t going to happen. I left competitive sport for about twenty, twenty-five years... and then I found triathlon. When I made it on *Team USA* I was just floored. (T6)

As an age grouper that makes you feel like you're big time... like you're a pro. And to see the USA on the front of your jersey... yeah... It's special! (T4)

Others said being selected to the team was validation of their athleticism:

Some of it you kind of undersell from a personal perspective, but your friends are really impressed. You post a picture of yourself in the race kit and your friends are really impressed. They're like, "Dude! That's really incredible!" (T3)

It's been great for my family... and it's great for my kids to see me as a part of *Team USA*. They think it's pretty cool. (T7)

Both the selection to the team and the Auckland experience spawned excitement:

It's just incredible. The first time I did it I really didn't know what to expect. But I got there and I was just completely overwhelmed. (T6)

I really got choked up in the team meeting. You know, I just do what I enjoy doing. This has just been the icing on the cake. (T7)

This is a tremendous experience. I think it's really helping me grow as a person. I'm not a brave person. You're never too old to experience new things. (T8)

Anxiety

Within *Anxiety*, three subthemes were evident. These were *Nervousness*, *Lack of Self-Worth*, and *Guilt*. Several of our participants seemed nervous about the race. Several participants including T1, T2 and T6 said they felt the race was much more organized than the races they were accustomed to competing in back in the USA. Specific areas mentioned included course markings and closures, signage, sponsorships, spectator areas, and ceremonies.

Some questioned whether or not they were good enough to compete among the world's best: T2, a female in her forties who was selected to her first *Team USA*, questioned her value to the team when she first arrived in Auckland. But she said that feeling subsided as the week went on and the experience became less "intimidating":

At first I really felt I didn't deserve to be here. You know, you look around and you see all these great athletes and you can't help but wonder why you're on the team...I will say though that there's a part of me that wonders why I'm here. I mean, there are so many good athletes here. I guess sometimes I feel like I don't fit in. But I earned the right to be here, I guess, so that's why I'm here. (T2)

Other participants had similar feelings. T3, a female in her fifties also on her first *Team USA*, even expressed feeling a little "guilty" when she earned her spot on the team:

I had a horrible race [at nationals], an absolutely horrible race, and I still qualified so that was exciting. But it's hard because all I remember is having a

horrible race; I don't remember the bonus of making it on *Team USA*. People were like, "you're looking at the wrong thing." For me as an athlete, I'm looking at the quality of the race and it was just hard for me for so many reasons. I think I'm still trying to grasp that even a year later. Here I am in New Zealand getting ready to race in the world championships and I'm not sure that I had a good enough race to get here. I suppose you could say I feel a little guilty. (T3)

Some expressed a sense of guilt, too, but for different reasons. More than a year had passed between the time participants were selected to the team and the time they traveled to New Zealand for the *Grand Final*. This gave *Team USA* members a long opportunity to prepare. For many, getting to Auckland was the culmination of not only their own hard work, but also in the sacrifice of others:

It's hard being away from my wife and kids. They gave up a lot for me to be able to do this. Our whole family has made some sacrifice so that I can have this opportunity. (T1)

It's just the culmination of a year of thinking about it and dreaming about it and getting sponsors. I have a whole team of people behind me that have supported me in so many ways and so much community support. So it starts there. (T7)

National Pride

Within *National Pride*, we found two subthemes to be apparent. These were *Political Awareness* and *Symbolic Representations*. Several participants acknowledged that, to them, the experience of being on *Team USA* was about more than a triathlon race. They also felt it was an opportunity to represent the ideals of their home country. T1, a male in his thirties participating in on his fourth *Team USA*, and T5, a female in her sixties participating on *Team USA* for the fifth time, acknowledged the sense of patriotism that comes from the experience. T1 even compared it to an obligation:

It's that we represent an ideal – where we come from and what we represent. It's democracy and freedom. We are representatives of our country when we're here in New Zealand. We're almost like an ambassador or a representative of our country and how we interact with people is going to be a reflection of what others see and think of our country. (T1)

It's really special to be able to get out of the political system but love your country and be able to represent it. There's a lot of stuff that comes personally back. Normally I don't get wrapped up in that stuff. But here it's just really obvious. The parade [of athletes] solidifies that. (T5)

Nearly every participant interviewed remarked how he or she felt emotionally stirred by the symbols that surrounded them. This included red, white and blue team uniforms with "USA" scripted across the chest, the waving of American flags, and crowd chants of "USA!"

You know, doing the races at home you have a little bit of the nervousness but here you have that *plus* the tingly feeling of the pride of racing for your

country. In all the triathlons that I've done I've never experienced the uniqueness and the pride of racing for your country. When you're doing races, people will cheer for you by your name and by your country. They'll yell, "Go USA!". It's just a very emotional experience. There's no other feeling like it. (T1)

I think the first part really hit me during the parade of athletes. We all marched in as a team – representing the United States of America. We were all wearing red, white and blue and we marched in behind an American flag. I think that along with seeing all the other countries there celebrating their own nationalities really hit me. (T6)

During the parade of athletes we were walking behind the American flag. I just felt so much pride. (T2)

Having their own name on the jersey alongside the "USA" letters also moved many:

It was surreal! Getting that USA race jersey with your name on it and you put it on and it was like, "Wow! That's really incredible!" (T3)

It's incredibly special. The day that jersey arrived I was just in awe. Seeing my name right there with the letters U-S-A was just a very emotional experience for me. Like I said, I always dreamed of being an Olympian, and I still get very emotional watching the *Olympics*. But to see my name and those letters on the same uniform was just about as emotional as it can get. I thought my Olympic dreams were dead. But then I made *Team USA* and I have been able to experience that feeling twice now. (T6)

T2, T4, a male in his forties participating on his fourth *Team USA* and T6, a male in his thirties participating for the second time, said these emotions were strongest during the last part of the race, itself.

It was amazing! I've never experienced anything like that. All the people and on the run course there were people cheering for "USA". I was just overcome with emotion on that last quarter mile. It was incredible! (T2)

I think the part that affects me the most is the final 200 yards of the run, to be honest. There are so many people lining the finish line area. There are so many people that you just don't recognize anyone and it's all a blur. But then you come around that last corner and you see a USA coach there and he hands you an American flag to cross the finish line with. Suddenly any pain you have from the race is just gone. It's almost like everything gets quiet around you. All you see is the USA flags waving in the crowd... you're just blind to everything else. You can't help but raise your arm up in the air and wave that flag. It's just an amazing feeling. (T6)

When you're coming through the finishing chute and the *USA Triathlon* people are there and they're so enthusiastic, and then you see the American flag flying it's just an amazing feeling. You don't get that from a typical race. (T4)

We found the emotions related to nationalistic pride were no different for participants who had race performance expectations to either win or place in the top three in their age group. T10, who had previously won a world championship event and had medaled in another, said she was also overwhelmed with pride:

Every time I put that USA jersey on I get a little choked up inside. And when I get the opportunity to stand on the podium and have that medal draped around my neck, it's even more special to be representing my country. It can be very emotional. (T10)

Social Arousal

Within *Social Arousal*, two subthemes were evident. These were *Team Camaraderie* and *Travel and Discovery*. Many participants commented on the thrill of meeting other triathletes from across the United States and from around the world:

I love knowing that I'm racing for the USA and I love seeing people from all the other countries out there on the course. You see athletes from Mexico, Canada, Great Britain, Italy, Australia... I even saw girls from Poland and the Czech Republic a couple of years ago. This event just brings us all together. It's one of my favorite parts of the race – just looking and seeing where all the other athletes are from. (T8)

Team camaraderie was especially evident among *Team USA* members. Typically, triathlon is an individual sport. While many triathletes are members of local clubs within their home communities and represent those clubs on their race apparel at home, the sport, regardless of setting, offers few races in the United States with a club-based point structure or formal competition among various clubs. Therefore, the emphasis on individual human performance in the disciplines of swim, cycle and run are what is typically highlighted. The collective association of *Team USA* as one club resonated with many, especially considering the team was united by apparel with common red, white and blue colors with the USA insignia:

A race at home, you go, you race, and you maybe hang out through the awards and you leave. But this is very much a feeling of community. I feel like I can walk up to anyone here wearing *Team USA* stuff and just immediately have a conversation. You have that connection. That's really been neat. (T7)

All my teammates on *Team USA* are so nice and so welcoming... I really feel like I'm part of a team here, and I have the best teammates. Coming here, strangers are like my best friends. I just love it. It's amazing! It's really obvious that when you become a part of this team, you have friends and teammates forever. So many of them have formed close bonds just by being on this team and seeing each other year after year. And I think that's going to happen for me, too. (T2)

We also discovered that participants with previous *Team USA* experience had formed lasting friendships with other *Team USA* members. This was especially evident in those aged sixty and older. T5, a female in her seventies, said the social aspects were her favorite part of the experience. While she acknowledged competing in more than 100 triathlons in her life,

including having completed the *Ironman World Championships* in Hawaii two weeks previous to the *Grand Final*, she said she preferred the format of the *Grand Final*, particularly because of the opportunity it presented to be a part of *Team USA*:

This has been my goal – to get to go to Worlds – and I’ve made lots and lots of friends with people from my own country and with people from other nations. Some of my closest friends are from the US Team. It’s really a gathering point and a reunion for us every year. It’s just really nice to be able to see them all again every year and catch up. (T5)

T9, a male in his seventies who had raced on *Team USA* on six different occasions and won a world championship title, agreed that his emphasis was on the social atmosphere:

I enjoy the racing, obviously, but I really enjoy the people, too. It’s nice getting together with all the friends that I’ve met through the years and seeing them all again. T9

A fringe benefit for many was the opportunity to see the world:

It’s also a fantastic opportunity to see the world. The travel is unbelievable and so are the people. (T4)

I think it’s really helping me grow as a person. I’m not a brave person. You’re never too old to experience new things. (T7)

For most of the participants interviewed, we found the *Team USA* experience to be an accumulation of all of these emotions: intrinsic arousal, anticipation, national pride, and social arousal. T10 and T6, both of whom had previously placed in the top three in their respective age groups at a world championship event, reiterated those feelings:

The *Team USA* experience is special each year. And it’s a little different each year. Obviously, we travel to different places and we race on different courses. There are also different people that we race against sometimes. You never know what kind of competition is out there. But it really doesn’t matter. It’s a special experience every time. I think if you talk to a lot of the first timers here they’ll tell you that being on *Team USA* is a very special experience. It’s no different for me. Just because I’ve won in the past or been on the podium in the past doesn’t make it any different. It’s always going to be special. This type of opportunity just doesn’t happen everyday and it doesn’t happen for everyone. I’m very thankful. (T10)

For me this is about the experience. To be honest, I just want to go out there and have a good race. I just want to finish. And that’s so different for me. Usually I’m pretty neurotic about races because I have this *need* to do well and to finish in the top three. I just put so much pressure on myself. But here, it’s a totally different thing. There is no pressure. I think the fact that it’s the world championships has something to do with that. *Everyone* here is good. Plus, I’m already doing something special by wearing the USA jersey. That’s a win in itself. (T6)

USA Triathlon's Chief Operating Officer confirmed the triathletes' perceptions:

For 70% of the athletes here on these teams, it's not about coming here and winning a medal or being disappointed if you don't, it's about the opportunity to wear the red, white and blue. It's about the opportunity to say, "I was on a national team. I was on a *Team USA* that traveled to a world championship." That's pretty unique.

Discussion

Deci (1980) described emotion as a reaction to a stimulus event either actual or imagined. Emotions are also said to be relevant to the quality of the sport experience (Pensgaard & Duda, 2003). Emotions can be positive or negative (Hanin, 2000), and Lazarus (1991) claimed that positive emotions should lead to positive outcomes.

It was clear to us that most *Team USA* members did not set high performance expectations for themselves at the *ITU Grand Final*. Instead, we found that participants prioritized the opportunity according to a hierarchy of intrinsic and social experiences. It was also clear to us that the experience was highly emotional for all participants, regardless of performance expectations. These emotions were felt both individually and collectively. In fact, these emotions were so strong for most participants that we would argue the *Team USA* experience was comparable to our interpretation of Durkheim's description of a religious experience. According to Durkheim (1965), religion is not a theological, philosophical, or psychological phenomenon. Rather, it is an eminently collective experience that is social in nature. We found the *Team USA* experience to be inherently social. Many participants told us they felt the actual race experience was secondary to other social and cultural factors. Several acknowledged that the opportunity to reunite with "old" friends, make new friends, and experience culture through world travel. In fact, *USA Triathlon* scheduled a series of cultural and social events for its team members throughout the week in Auckland. These included sightseeing adventures throughout the northern island of New Zealand and various pre- and post-race parties.

Key to religion, according to Durkheim, are symbols and rituals. Symbols come to be treated as sacred. Rituals become stylized patterns through which individuals express their respectful relationship to those symbols (Birrell, 2001). Symbols are fundamental to this process as they arise from focusing attention on specific objects in "otherwise anonymous crowds," and from "personal identities and narratives" (Collins, 2004, p. 87). It was apparent to us that *Team USA* members cherished the symbols they adorned, especially the red, white, and blue race jerseys adorned with *USA* emblems. These symbolic references united *Team USA* members as one, collective group while also separating them from other athletes at the venue. The colors and letters also symbolized a set of ideals. Athletes were racing as representatives of democracy and freedom.

In describing interaction ritual theory, Cottingham (2012) noted four key elements that help to analyze the interactions that make up social encounters. These four elements consisted of ritual ingredients, ritual outcomes, and collective effervescence. In most cases, the ritual ingredients consist of having multiple people (a) physically assembled in the same place (which was restricted to others), (b) focusing their attention upon a common activity; and (c) sharing a common mood or emotional experience (Collins, 2004). Ritual outcomes include (a) group solidarity, or a feeling of membership, (b) emotional energy, or a feeling of confidence, elation or enthusiasm, (c) group symbols, and (d) a sense of morality, or an obligation to adhere to the group, respect its symbols and defend against transgressors

(Collins, 2004). The extent to which the above ingredients and outcomes sustain intersubjectivity across interactions determines the degree of collective effervescence. Certainly, the findings of our study suggested all four ingredients to be present within the group that comprised *Team USA*.

Beyond being motivated collectively, the participants in our study also discussed aspects of individual motivation. For example, the subthemes, *A Sense of Belonging* and *Team Camaraderie*, focused on aspects of individual motivation such as earning the right to be at the competition, impressing others, meeting new people, and forming lasting friendships. The motivation for these athletes to compete at the World Championship level may be, in part, explained by Competence Motivation Theory (Harter, 1978). This theory suggests that individual motivation can stem from the perception of mastering a task. This mastery is, often, moderated by “socializing agents” (i.e., other people) who can increase the “perceived competence, enjoyment, and motivation” to engage in and execute that task (Weiss, Amorose, & Wilko, 2009, p. 476). These results of our study suggest that participants were motivated to engage in the world championship triathlon experience by social agents such as family, friends, and the creation of new friendships (i.e. “I want to impress my friends and family”, I enjoy “meeting new people,” and “forming lasting friendships”) more than the achievement of individual performance goals.

Deci (1980) defined emotion as a reaction to a stimulus event either actual or imagined. Among the team of 300-plus athletes assembled in Auckland, emotional energy was rampant. Fewer than 13% of all *Team USA* members who participated in our study had race expectations to place in the top ten in their respective age group (as indicated by marking *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* to the question prompt). Even with the de-emphasis on performance, these same athletes acknowledged being consumed by a rush of emotions that precipitated the race. More than 91% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that the emotions felt in Auckland were more intense than those they experience at a typical triathlon race in the United States. Nowhere were these feelings more evident than in the area of national pride. It has been written that nationalism is evidenced by passion and emotion (Denitch, 1994). We experienced and witnessed such passion and emotion in abundance in Auckland, especially during the Parade of Athletes that prefaced the race and as athletes crossed the finish line after the race. While Connor (1994) simply defined nationalism as, “loyalty to the ethnic group” (p. 40), Guibernau (1996) clarified that nationalism is a sentiment of belonging to a community whose members identify with a set of symbols, beliefs, and ways of life. The sentiment has long been associated with sport. Simply by being selected to *Team USA* and representing that team in Auckland, nearly 98% of participants either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the sentiment of feeling a strong sense of national pride. As that collective group, *Team USA* members were emotionally stimulated by the symbols that represented them: the red, white and blue uniforms, their race jerseys with their country’s name, the American flags they raised as they crossed the finish line, and the chants of “USA!” Their loyalty to their team, passion for their sport, and sense of national pride was unmistakably on display (as evidenced by the 84% who told us they would wear the USA letters and colors during their stay in Auckland, even outside of race day – something we were able to visually verify throughout the week). *Team USA* members understood their role was about more than being an athlete; they also served as their nation’s ambassadors.

We witnessed social cohesion and interaction as keys to the *Team USA* experience. Goffman (1967) contended that ritual is expressed in the every minute, everyday-life interactions that comprise the bulk of the social experience (in Birrell, 2001). He contended that the symbols, or objects of special value, are not only found as visible items such as crosses or flags, they also consist of intangible, unseen phenomenon, such as those experienced within the self and through social interaction. Using this theory and relating it to

the World Championship experience, the symbol portrays the ideal qualities, such as the proud citizen, the dedicated athlete, or the loyal teammate. In summarizing the works of both Durkheim and Goffman, Birrell (2001) concluded, “the athlete is an exemplary figure who embodies the moral values of the community and thus serves as a symbol of those values” (p. 373). Generation of emotion among group members determines the degree and longevity of a group’s solidarity and its ability to maintain coherence beyond specific situational events. As several participants told us, the social cohesion of *Team USA* lasts long before and after the triathlon race.

Sports’ National Governing Bodies face daily challenges to balance the needs of their elite athlete programs with those of the grassroots participants. *Olympic Games* inclusion can have a significant effect on a sport. Although research on the effect of Olympic inclusion on sport is limited, a study by Berry (2009) revealed a gap between the ability of a NGB to balance the needs of its elite athletes with the needs for all others who participate following the sport’s inclusion to the Games. With *Team USA*, *USA Triathlon* appears to be meeting the challenge. For most NGBs, the developmental or age group levels are where their sport’s membership is largest, yet opportunities for these age group athletes to represent the United States in international competition are scarce. *USA Triathlon* is one of the only known NGBs that provide such an opportunity to its amateur members.

Durkheim (1965) contended that collective representations must be periodically strengthened and recharged. *USA Triathlon*’s Chief Operating Officer reiterated the importance of *Team USA* to triathlon’s NGB and his organization’s commitment to ensure its future:

We believe that *Team USA* is one of the most critical programs we have within the organization....For twenty three years, since year one, *USA Triathlon* has believed in this mission so much that we have supported it every single year with staffs, and product...so that people can be on that stage and support it with the look and feel of representing our country....We believe that because what it does is inspire people. People here will go home from this event and they’ll talk to others about this experience and what they had the opportunity to do and the people they had the opportunity to meet and others will be inspired to go to the qualifier and, perhaps, represent their country, too, on this world stage. We believe in that so much that we put the personnel behind it. We create the packages. We have the staffs. We have the product. We have all that stuff just to make it more of a complete program for people to be able not just to *tell* people what it was like but also to *show* them what it was like.

Conclusion

Pensgaard and Duda (2003) agreed that emotions experienced when competing at the highest level are both stronger and more diverse in nature due to the importance of the outcome and/or the experience of the competitors. Certainly, the *ITU Grand Final* is the highest pinnacle that age group athletes competing in sprint and Olympic-distances triathlon races can achieve. Even for age groupers, it is the *world championships* of triathlon racing. Add to that the meaningfulness of having to first qualify for the race and then getting the opportunity to representing the United States of America and it is very easy to assume that these competitors would experience heightened emotion in Auckland. While Pensgaard and Duda (2003) suggested that the more elite athletes may be more attuned to their emotional states than less accomplished competitors, we found the very nature of the *ITU Grand Final* as a world championship event, coupled with the symbols and rituals associated with *Team*

USA membership, provided age group athletes a rare chance to experience similar states. Thus, we contend these emotions procured a unique opportunity for these amateur athletes to participate in the phenomenon of collective effervescence.

Applications in Sport

USA Triathlon is the only known national governing body of sport in the United States that offers its grassroots participant base (age group athletes) the opportunity to participate in international competition while collectively representing the United States of America in the same manner elite athletes do, such as in the *Olympic Games*. In doing so, *USA Triathlon* is able to establish a unique relationship with their grassroots participants. According to *USA Triathlon*'s senior staff, the affordance of such an opportunity can lead to increased support among its base, including in the areas of participation, team building and potentially fundraising. Therefore, other NGBs may choose to consider adopting a similar model.

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