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"It's the people that make the difference": Understanding the significance of psychosocial support for professional athletes

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explores the importance of psychosocial support within professional sporting organizations and its impact on athlete wellbeing.
Methods: Seventeen participants, including current and retired athletes, coaches, and support staff from an Australian professional sporting organization, were interviewed as part of this study. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to psychosocial support and athlete wellbeing.
Results: Findings highlight the diverse roles that staff play in athletes' psychosocial support networks, with relational trust emerging as a crucial factor in promoting wellbeing and encouraging help-seeking behavior.
Conclusion: The study recommends a holistic approach to athlete wellbeing, incorporating clear guidelines for staff on responding to athletes' help-seeking behaviors, along with sport-specific mental health literacy training to enhance the effectiveness of the support provided.

1. Introduction

It is widely regarded that an athletic career in contemporary professional sport offers numerous privileges; however, alongside these benefits, athletes face a complex array of demands and challenges throughout their sporting journey. Unlike the physical impact of sport—such as injuries, which are readily acknowledged—mental health impacts and the help-seeking behaviors of professional athletes are less understood (Rice et al., 2016). Research shows that athletes are disproportionately affected by mental health issues, including higher rates of depression and anxiety (Du Preez et al., 2017), particularly during transitions out of sport (Park, Tod & Lavallee, 2012). Conversely, maintaining mental health and wellbeing has been shown to enhance performance, reduce the risks of long-term psychological harm, promote life satisfaction, and help athletes navigate both their sporting careers and transitions (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012). In response to these risk and protective factors, evidence-based supports for athlete wellbeing have become well-established within contemporary elite sporting organizations.

Recent approaches to athlete wellbeing emphasize the humanistic aspects of care, with a focus on psychosocial support as a key strategy for early intervention and prevention (Gouttebarge & Sluiter, 2015; Jowett & Lavallee, 2007; Purcell et al., 2019; Rees et al., 2015). Psychosocial support operates at the relational level, characterized by the "connectivity" and "influence that members have on each other" (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2013, p. 3), facilitating the "exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or recipient to be intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient" (Sheridan, Coffee & Lavallee, 2014, p. 198). O'Connor and Cavanagh (2013) argue that psychosocial support is the most significant protective factor shaping an athlete's wellbeing experiences during and after their sporting careers.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the significance of psychosocial support within professional sports organizations. It recognizes the vital role of nurturing supportive relationships for athlete wellbeing while also addressing the challenges inherent in implementing holistic approaches in these settings. Specifically, the study explores athletes' tendencies to seek help from various members within sporting organizations and investigates how these members perceive and manage their roles within athletes' psychosocial support networks. It discusses the complexities these relationships, particularly where performance-driven objectives intersect or conflict with the interpersonal support provided for athlete wellbeing. The following literature review establishes the context of the study by outlining landscape of athlete wellbeing support systems commonly found in Australian professional sporting organizations.

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2. Literature review

Mental health and wellbeing are critical aspects of an athlete's career, influencing them during and after their time in sports. Athletes face unique challenges, including intense training programs, frequent travel, contract uncertainties, the short-lived nature of professional sports, and constant media scrutiny, combining to create a unique wellbeing experience for athletes (Kuettel & Larsen, 2020). The 2020 consensus statement on enhancing the mental health of athletes (Henriksen et al., 2020) emphasizes these sport-specific stressors can increase vulnerability to mental health and wellbeing issues. A systematic review by Rice and colleagues' (2016) further highlights these vulnerabilities, revealing a heightened risk of mental health challenges, particularly during retirement transitions (Park, Lavallee & Todd, 2013), periods of injury (Appaneal et al., 2009), and following performance setbacks (Dessauvagie, 2018). In response to these risks, a range of structured mental health supports for athletes has been developed. The following sub-section outlines these supports.

2.1. Structured supports

- Psychological Support: Research highlights the vital role of psychological support services in helping athletes to manage the pressures and stressors they face in and out of sport. Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012 have emphasize the importance of mental health programs, counseling services, and access to sports psychologists as essential components of athletes' holistic wellbeing. These services provide important protective resources to athletes for coping with the unique demands of sport, enhancing mental resilience, and fostering long-term mental health (Rice et al., 2016).
- Transition and Post-Retirement Support: Park, Lavallee and Todd (2013) discuss the significance of post-retirement support programs, career transition assistance, and mental health services during athletes' transition into life after sport. Key strategies for supporting athletes' transitions include pre-retirement planning initiatives, such as financial and career guidance, as well as academic and vocational support (Stambulova et al., 2009).
- Financial and Career Guidance: Wylleman and colleagues (2013) highlight the importance of financial literacy, career planning, and post-retirement support as critical protective factors for athletes. Career guidance programs that incorporate resume building, networking, and the development of transferrable skills have also been found to ease the transition into retirement (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).
- *Academic and Vocational Support:* These programs often include flexible scheduling, learning assistance, and financial aid for education and training expenses. Cosh and Tully (2015) provide examples of athletes who have successfully pursued higher education while balancing their sporting commitments. Lane et al. (2020) highlight the importance of collaborative efforts between professional sporting organizations and educational institutions, allowing athletes to pursue academic goals without compromising their sporting careers.

To facilitate the implementation of these supports, player development managers typically assume a leading role within professional sporting organizations. Stansen and Chambers (2019), in their comprehensive evaluation of the player development manager role within Australian professional sports, identify these managers as the crucial practitioners in promoting athlete wellbeing and education. Categorized as both personal and professional support, this role can be understood through various dimensions, including athlete issues (personalized support, family relocation, facilitating life balance, etc.), support processes (referrals to mental health professionals, financial guidance, etc.), advocacy (internally and externally on behalf of athletes' needs and wishes), and stages of support (enrolling in education and vocational training programs, pre-retirement planning, career transition guidance, etc.; Stansen & Chambers, 2019). As one interview participant in Stansen and Chambers' research described, player development managers serve as "a career counsellor (…) a life coach, they are a friend, they are a listener, a problem-solver" (2019, p. 157).

2.2. Psychosocial support

In addition to structured supports, psychosocial support for professional athletes has gained significant attention in sports psychology and related fields over recent decades. Referring to the emotional, informational, and practical assistance provided by individuals within an athlete's network, psychosocial support is crucial for fostering resilience, protective resources, and coping mechanisms among professional athletes (Lane, 2024; Reardon & Factor, 2010; Rice et al., 2016). Park, Lavallee and Tod (2013, p. 39) define psychosocial support in professional sports as encompassing both sporting figures (coaches, trainers, teammates) and non-sporting individuals (spouses, family, friends, significant others) who provide support in various ways. This support includes emotional reinforcement, boosting self-esteem, providing information, and tangible assistance, all aimed at enhancing an athlete's wellbeing resources. Critically, studies have shown a positive correlation between psychosocial support and several outcomes, including improved performance (Schinke et al., 2021), reduced burnout rates (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), lower risk of mental health issues (Beable et al., 2017), and better preparation for navigating the challenges associated with career transitions (Hanton et al., 2005).

Psychosocial support leverages a diverse array of protective interpersonal factors, including the need for supportive relationships, proximity to role models, support for both sporting and non-sporting goals, and the effective integration of multidisciplinary professionals (Henriksen, Stambulova & Roessler, 2010). Key predictors in this regard encompass mental health literacy (Breslin et al., 2017; Gorczynski et al., 2019; Lane, 2024), trust in help-seeking (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Lane, Hall & Gower, 2023), and the nature of social supports within the sport context (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014). Sporting organizations play a pivotal role in developing and implementing effective psychosocial support systems within the sporting environment (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). This involves tailoring programs to enhance athletes' access to, and the quality of, psychosocial support. Examples include mental health literacy training and mentorship initiatives, which improve communication and avenues for seeking help (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Ravulo, 2015; Reardon & Factor, 2010). Moreover, Wagstaff et al. (2016) emphasize the critical role of coaches and organizational leaders in cultivating positive wellbeing cultures. By prioritizing open communication, emphasizing psychological support, and embracing cultural diversity, they can significantly contribute to creating an environment that prioritizes the holistic wellbeing of professional athletes (Keung, 2018; Ravulo, 2022).

This study examines the role of psychosocial support within professional sporting organizations and how it influences athlete wellbeing. Using a phenomenological approach to semi-structured interviews, it captures the lived experiences of athletes and their support networks, focusing on the complex dynamics between relational trust, interpersonal support, and organizational practices. The research provides an in-depth analysis of how athletes seek help within their organizations and the nuanced roles that staff play in fostering athlete wellbeing, particularly in contexts where performance pressures and personal support may conflict.

3. Research context and ethics

The research project was conducted at a de-identified professional sporting organization based in Sydney, Australia. The author had no prior relationship with the club before starting the study. This article draws on data from doctoral research examining the wellbeing

experiences of professional athletes and the support systems available to them. The thesis was submitted for examination in 2022 and approved in 2023. Human Research Ethics Approval (HREA) Code: H13172.

4. Theoretical framework

Phenomenology emphasizes the importance of lived experiences as the foundation of factual knowledge. It prioritizes understanding participants' conscious experiences and the contexts in which they exist (O'Leary, 2004; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In phenomenological research, researchers investigate individual experiences by exploring opinions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, as well as ideas, ideologies, and constructs that frame an understanding of self and others. This process involves iterative dialogue with participants, often integrating qualitative data collection with thematic analysis to inductively capture common experiences (Van Manen, 2007).

Phenomenology acknowledges the presence of subjective variations among individual experiences while also recognizing the existence of objective consistencies. For instance, it allows for understanding the interplay among the structural aspects that serve as support systems for athletes within the sporting environment, the cultural dynamics that influence athletes' interactions with these systems, and the distinct patterns of athletes' help-seeking behaviors as expressions of their autonomy. By integrating phenomenological inquiry with qualitative data analysis techniques, this methodological approach has facilitated the generation of valuable insights into the support networks of professional athletes, which carry significant implications for the design and implementation of targeted interventions aimed at enhancing psychosocial support within professional sports settings.

5. Methodology

All members of the sporting organization were invited to voluntarily participate in the research. Seventeen individuals took part in interviews lasting between 60 and 90 min, conducted privately at the training facilities. The sample included current and retired athletes, player development managers, athlete wellbeing and education managers, a strength and conditioning coach, career coach, house parent, program facilitator, and head coach. All participants have been de-identified to protect their privacy and maintain ethical standards.

While this research does not aim to provide a representative sample of all stakeholders within the organization, it offers valuable exploratory insights into the diverse perspectives and experiences related to athlete wellbeing. The qualitative nature of the interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, contributing to a richer understanding of the factors influencing athlete support systems and wellbeing within the sporting context.

5.1. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews offer a collaborative process (similar to that of an open-ended conversation) between interviewer and interviewee that produces a co-constructed dialogue set for analysis and theory development. It is one of the most common and effective forms of qualitative data collection in the social sciences (O'Leary, 2004). Punch (1998) describes this format of interviewing as having standardized qualities in the form of a general question guide, whilst maintaining a flexible structure that allows the participant to dictate the flow and direction of discussion.

As a qualitative data collection method, semi-structured interviews enable the identification and exploration shared and common knowledge within a specific context or cohort (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As Jones (1985, p. 45) suggests:

> In order to understand another person's constructions of reality, we would do well to ask them, and to ask them in such a way that they can tell us in their terms (rather than those imposed rigidly and a priori by ourselves) and in a depth which addresses the rich context that is the substance of their meanings.

In its application to this project, open-ended questions facilitated the exploration of various aspects of athlete wellbeing, including help-seeking behaviors, valuable supports, and risk and protective factors. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexible yet focused discussions, enabling participants to express their perspectives and experiences in their own terms. This approach allowed for a contextually grounded understanding of the factors influencing athlete wellbeing within the organization, aligning with the collaborative and exploratory ethos articulated by Punch (1998) and Jones (1985). The semi-structured interview guide used in this study has been included in the supplementary materials.

5.2. Data analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used method for qualitative data analysis across various disciplines within the social sciences. It involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data, providing a structured approach to summarizing, coding, and conceptualizing data into tangibly discussable themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Walter, 2013). This method is particularly valued for its versatility, allowing researchers to explore, uncover, and interpret insights from their qualitative data sets (Punch, 1998).

In line with Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach to thematic analysis, the process began with data reduction. During this initial stage, data was sorted and grouped into broader conceptual themes based on the shared characteristics of participant feedback. This process consists of two steps: first-order coding, where information is labeled and categorized with descriptive language, and second-order coding, an inferential progression focused on making connections between codes to inform higher-order themes (Punch, 1998). For example, consider the following interview excerpt from this research project:

> Quote: 'I think we're lucky in that, and it does happen in a lot of football teams, where you do become family and look after each other and there is a real camaraderie in it'.
>
> First-order coding: Team unity, support and care, sense of family.
>
> Second-order grouped theme: Psychosocial support.

The thematic analysis was conducted independently; however, to enhance the reliability and rigor of the findings, the results were reviewed and discussed with the author's doctoral supervisors, ensuring a collaborative and thorough validation of the analysis process. This study draws from a subset of data from the broader study, focusing specifically on athletes' experiences with support systems and help-seeking behaviors. While the full thematic analysis includes data from all 17 participants, this study narrows in on interactions between athletes and their support networks within the sporting environment.

The following table provides an overview of the second-order grouped themes utilized for the current study and examples of first-

Table 1
Overview of Thematic Analysis Results.

Second-Cycle Grouped Themes	Examples of First-Cycle Codes
Mental Health & Wellbeing	Coping with injury, mental health stigma, access to mental health resources.
Psychosocial Support	Team unity, peer support, sense of family.
The Athlete Experience	Performance pressure, identity development, role transition.
Domains of Interaction	Work-life balance, dual-career pathways, blending domains (sporting and non-sporting).
Professional Expectations	Reputational management, ambassadorial roles, engaging with media.

order codes. Table 1

6. Results

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the nuanced help-seeking behaviors of athletes and the intricate network of support systems upon which athletes rely, both within and beyond the confines of their sporting environment. The research emphasizes the significant role of informal supports—such as incidental personal assistance—alongside the formal supports mandated by sporting organizations, like education programs and access to sports psychologists.

Notably, the study found that athletes most commonly seek informal support from individuals within their immediate sporting environment, such as coaches, trainers, and teammates. This preference may reflect a cultural inclination within the team setting, where immediate, personal support from familiar figures is perceived as more accessible and relatable than that of external, formal professional supports (McDuff & Garvin, 2016). One athlete succinctly expressed this sentiment:

> Whenever any of us boys need help, it's not just [head coach] that we can go to, it's [assistant coach], it's [assistant coach], it's [strength and conditioning coach] – […] that's how it needs to be.

Another illustrative example involves athletes moving away from home in pursuit of their sporting aspirations. In these cases, their dependence on their immediate sporting environment intensifies, with team-mates typically assuming a crucial roles in the athletes' psychosocial support network due to the time spent together. As a strength and conditioning coach shared:

> When you are living away from home, those key people in your life don't come with you, so the people around you become those people. And who do they spend the most time with? Well, they spend the most time with their football team.

This quote underscores the essential role of the sporting environment for athletes who have relocated from their home communities, highlighting how their primary support network shifts to those they interact with daily. The team setting provides opportunities for athletes to seek assistance and support from both their teammates and staff members, as commonly reported by participants.

Another significant finding reflects the distributed nature of support within the team structure, where staff members, in addition to teammates, contribute to an athlete's psychosocial support network. This insight, articulated by the same strength and conditioning coach, emphasizes the collective effort within the sporting environment to ensure athletes receive wellbeing support:

> I think for all our roles, anyone that's interacting with the boys, from the guys that see them a little bit to the guys that see them a lot, if you interact with anyone regularly you're gonna have some input on their wellbeing, aren't you?

This quote highlights the collective responsibility shared by coaches, assistant coaches, and support staff in cultivating a supportive team environment conducive to athletes seeking help. Staff members recognized their pivotal role within the athletes' psychosocial support network, acknowledging that they are all, in essence, "*wellbeing managers*." However, they expressed uncertainty regarding their responsibilities for athlete wellbeing as an informal aspect of their role. While articulating their professional expectations was relatively straightforward, they noted the ambiguity surrounding personal supportive relationships due to a lack of established processes for addressing personal matters.

To illustrate the findings, the roles of the strength and conditioning coach and house parent serve as focal points, providing insight into the practical support structures that contribute to athletes' psychosocial wellbeing. These individuals demonstrate how support mechanisms help athletes navigate personal challenges, particularly in contexts where staff members find themselves balancing the performance-based expectations of their roles with their responsibilities as key figures in athletes' emotional and psychological wellbeing. By focusing on these roles, the findings are contextualized within participants' lived experiences, making the insights tangible to real-world settings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

6.1. Strength & conditioning (S&C) coach

Strength and Conditioning (S&C) coaches are a central figure within professional sports systems, consistently present during training sessions, match days, and periods of injury rehabilitation. Their role encompasses multiple responsibilities aimed at enhancing performance, including managing injuries, improving athletes' fitness, and strength development. While their role is not explicitly focused on wellbeing, S&C coaches routinely collect information on various external factors that impact performance, such as sleep patterns, dietary habits, weight management, hydration levels, muscle fatigue, soreness, and psychological factors such as stress. This data provides them with insights into athletes' overall health, encouraging them to explore aspects of wellbeing and engage initiate discussions regarding an athletes' mental and physical states.

Given their continuous presence within the sporting environment and the nature of their interactions with athletes, S&C coaches often develop personal and supportive relationships with them. One retired athlete described this dynamic:

> Every single player spends time with the S&C's or the physios for at least a week or so of a year, and intensely with them, and they become therapists pretty quickly. I know I've got good relationships with all of my S&C guys and physios because I've felt comfortable enough to sit down with them. They've helped rehab injuries to get me back on the field as best they can and naturally, because it's difficult and what not, it's those times in the physio room or the gym where you share a bit more of what's going on in your life. […] They become therapists pretty quickly.

This reflection emphasizes the depth of personal connections athletes often form with S&C coaches throughout their career. The perspective of the participating S&C coach further highlights how these relationships develop, as they often extend beyond their formal role as a trainer and into discussions about personal wellbeing. The S&C coach shared:

> Out of anyone, I probably have the most contact time with the boys. I see them from the second they walk into training and then all through their time in the gym, everything on the field and through to their recovery. So 'wellbeing' is not in the job description but I definitely think that with the questionnaires, as well as the amount of time you spend with them and the downtime around that, you know, there is that sort of opportunity where they can come and talk to me. I think that's developed after spending more time with them, just being a presence and gaining their trust.

This quote emphasizes how the organic way in which S&C coaches become a key point of contact for athletes seeking support. The frequent, informal interactions build trust, creating opportunities for athletes to share personal concerns. However, as the S&C coach further explained, the absence of formal training or clear processes for addressing help-seeking adds complexity to their role:

> It's not in the job description, in terms of how I'm really there just to prepare them to play football. […] They can rely on each other and on the staff, but at the end of the day, they're still there to get a job done. I think some of them struggle with that.

This quote highlights the tension within the professional sporting environment, where the primary focus is on performance, despite athletes often turning to coaches and staff for personal support. The S&C coach acknowledges the athletes' dependance on both peers and staff for

wellbeing, yet highlights the challenge of balancing these needs with their primary role of preparing athletes for competition. This ambiguity can complicate the help-seeking process, as athletes navigate the dual expectations of performance and wellbeing.

Similar complexities are observed in the role of house parents, who also provide emotional and psychological support while managing the performance demands of their athletes, as explored further in the next section.

6.2. House parent

House parents play a crucial role in managing the host homes of young athletes who have relocated from interstate or overseas. They provide essential psychosocial support as these athletes adjust to their new living situations. Their responsibilities often include transportation to and from training, meal preparation, monitoring curfews, and importantly, offering social and emotional support. One hour parent interviewed for this study explained their duties as follows:

I mean my day-to-day role, 'technically' what the club expects of me, is to just look after the boys in the house. So make sure that the house has got food, that they're home by a certain time, because they actually have a structured contract with the boys and it says you need to abide by x, y and z rules to live in this house. So we have curfews, we have rules and regulations around who can and can't come in the house – things like that.

In this statement, the house parent clearly outlines the technical expectations of their role, referring to a defined professional scope. However, they also discuss the personal and often intimate nature of their environment, which blurs these professional boundaries:

In my role, I find it's on a level where sometimes I think maybe I'm stepping outside of my scope and boundaries because of where I sit. Like I get to know the boys on a real personal level, and then I get to see them on a professional level, so I know the ins and outs of their lives in a way that others don't.

These statements illustrate the house parent's negotiation between the personal and professional aspects of their role, navigating the ambiguous "*scope and boundaries*" that separate these spheres. They face challenges similar to those experienced by S&C coaches, but highlight the added complexity of their position within the liminal space of athletes' personal and professional lives.

This comparison highlights the broader challenges faced by individuals in supportive roles within the sporting environment, where the line between personal support and professional responsibilities often blurs. It reiterates the importance of understanding athletes' nuanced help-seeking behaviors and emphasizes the need to equip support providers with adequate processes and training.

7. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the nuanced help-seeking behaviors of athletes and to identify the critical roles of both formal and informal support systems within the sporting environment. The findings reveal a clear preference among athletes for seeking support from informal networks, particularly coaches, trainers, and teammates. This preferences athletes' inclination to turn to individuals they are familiar with, emphasizing the importance of trust and relatability in their support-seeking behavior.

These findings are consistent with existing literature. O'Connor and Cavanagh (2013) highlight the importance of relational trust and psychosocial support in fostering athlete wellbeing, noting that strong interpersonal connections within sporting organizations positively influence athletes' health and life satisfaction. Similarly, Kuettel and Larsen's (2020) identify organizational culture and sport-specific environmental factors as key determinants of mental health outcomes, highlighting the importance of a supportive environment for athlete wellbeing. Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler's (2010) Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) working model further contextualizes these findings by offering a framework that integrates psychosocial support into the daily operations of sporting organizations. The ATDE model outlines the interlinking spheres surrounding athletes, emphasizing the need for a structured and holistic support system that prioritizes both performance and wellbeing.

The results of this study align with Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler's (2010) perspective, reinforcing the interconnectedness of athletes' personal and professional lives. To support athlete wellbeing effectively, it is essential that sporting organizations bridge these spheres and create environments where psychosocial needs are prioritized alongside performance. In particular, cultivating strong, positive relationships with trainers, support staff, and coaches is crucial. These figures have frequent, direct contact with athletes and are well-positioned to observe behavior or emotional changes, making them key sources of timely support.

Despite the recognized importance of informal support networks, significant barriers persist in the integration of psychosocial support within professional sporting organizations. A key barrier is the perceived disconnect between the focus on athletic performance and attention to athletes' holistic wellbeing. This disconnect is underpinned by the absence of necessary systems and frameworks to adequately guide staff in responding to athletes' help-seeking behaviors, leaving staff members ill-prepared to offer effective support when athletes need it most. To address these challenges and improve the integration of psychosocial support into professional sports, several practical recommendations are proposed:

1. **Establish Clear Guidelines for Wellbeing Responsibilities:** It is essential to develop and implement formal guidelines that outline the responsibilities of support staff regarding athlete wellbeing. These guidelines should clearly recognize staff's roles in promoting wellbeing and provide detailed referral pathways for directing athletes to formal mental health resources (Bissett, Kroshus & Hebard, 2020). Clear frameworks will ensure athletes are informed about the available services and understand how to access them, effectively bridging the gap between informal and formal support systems during critical help-seeking moments. Research indicates that the absence of structured support systems contributes to challenges in responding to athletes' mental health needs (Henriksen, Stambulova & Roessler, 2010). Formalized responsibilities and communication protocols allow for a more integrated, proactive approach to athlete support (Purcell et al., 2019).
2. **Mental Health Literacy Training**: Athlete-specific mental health literacy training should be implemented for all members of the sporting environment, including coaches, managers, and athletes. These programs should focus on identifying signs and symptoms of common mental health issues, offering effective management strategies, preventative measures, treatment options, crisis response actions, and help-seeking facilitation (Lane, 2024). Enhancing mental health literacy in sports has been proven to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviors (Rice et al., 2016). Tailoring these programs to the unique cultural context of professional sports will improve psychosocial support and foster a more empathetic approach to mental health management (Purcell et al., 2019). Studies have consistently shown that athletes and support staff benefit from mental health education, leading to improved wellbeing and overall performance (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012).

8. Conclusion

The integration of comprehensive psychosocial support systems within professional sporting organizations is crucial for the holistic

development and wellbeing of athletes. While advancements have been made in establishing best-practice standards and frameworks, challenges persist, particularly the disconnect between athletic performance priorities and the meaningful integration of wellbeing into the sporting environment. This disconnect reiterates the need for a more cohesive approach that aligns both performance and wellbeing objectives. Findings from this study highlight the importance of relational trust, effective psychosocial support, and clear organizational practices for the efficacy of psychosocial supports within sporting environments. However, it is essential to recognize the nuanced role of boundaries within these support structures. While establishing clear processes and guidelines can enhance staff confidence and ensure appropriate responses to athletes' needs, an overemphasis on role formalization may inadvertently diminish the spontaneity and trust that come from role ambiguity. Athletes often value the informal, opportunistic moments of support from trusted staff, which can foster a more genuine connection and open dialogue about their concerns. Therefore, a balanced approach is needed—one that provides clarity in wellbeing responsibilities while still allowing for the flexibility that role ambiguity offers. This dual focus can create a robust support system that effectively addresses both the personal and professional dimensions of athletes' lives.

9. Limitations

Several important areas were beyond the scope of this project but are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of athlete wellbeing. These include culturally responsive wellbeing practices, considering the diverse backgrounds of athletes in professional sport, as well as the influence of gender and sexuality, particularly the pressures to conform to hegemonic forms of sporting masculinities. Addressing these domains is essential for developing effective and inclusive support mechanisms. Future research should explore these areas to provide a more holistic view of athlete wellbeing and inform practices that promote inclusive support for all athletes.

Furthermore, this research is limited by its focus on a single professional sporting organization and its qualitative approach. While qualitative insights offer valuable exploratory depth, expanding the research to encompass a wider range of sporting codes, geographic locations, and methodological variety, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of athlete wellbeing.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sam Lane: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.mhp.2024.200364.

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