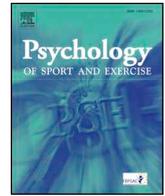




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# Motivational processes affecting the perception of organizational and media stressors among professional football players: A longitudinal mixed methods research study

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study was to examine professional football players' perceptions of organizational and media stressors over a season using Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) as the overarching motivational framework. We elaborated upon the experience of the extant motivational climate and how players perceived and coped with a number of organizational and media stressors during the season.

**Design:** A mixed-methods approach was used in this longitudinal investigation with the quantitative testing of hypotheses (strand I) complemented with interviews (strand II) exploring the perceptions of players of the target variables within their role in the team (captains, starters, and marginal players).

**Method:** 27 players from one men's team in a Scandinavian Premier Division completed a series of questionnaires at ten occasions during the season. We used the Bayesian dynamic *p*-technique analysis to investigate the relationships between AGT constructs and stressors. At the end of the season, 11 players were interviewed. The qualitative data were coded and narratives were used when presenting the findings.

**Results:** The quantitative results showed that a perceived mastery climate created by the coach was associated with low perceived magnitude of organizational stressors. The qualitative results revealed the main categories of organizational stressors were the selected line-up for games, injuries, and losing games. The results for media stressors revealed that task orientation was associated with low perceived magnitude of media stressors the following month, while ego orientation had the opposite relationship. The qualitative findings revealed that injured and marginal players were more sensitive to media questioning in a season where the team was acknowledged for their team performance.

**Conclusions:** There are benefits of being task-involved through task orientation and perception of a mastery climate to combat the quantity, frequency, and/or intensity of the perception of organizational and media stressors in professional football.

Over a season, premier division footballers are exposed to numerous stressful situations due to constant focus on professional and personal developmental issues (Holt & Dunn, 2004b; Kristiansen, Halvari, & Roberts, 2012). Some of the perceived stress is caused by the struggle to achieve their personal and team goals in a normative competitive environment that demands results. It requires mental toughness to excel in such a competitive environment (Gerber et al., 2018). This issue was explored in a recent investigation on players at the elite level in five countries conducted for the international player organization FIFpro in 2015 (Baardsen, 2017) and found that four out of ten players admitted having psychological problems. This is understandable because of the

way players are scrutinised daily with a constant focus on professional and personal achievement behaviour. In addition, the constant turnover of players and coaches at the professional level fosters a changing normative environment. Simply put, the footballers may perceive the daily demands to achieve football excellence and contribute to coaching and personal achievement goals put on them as stressful.

Stress is often defined as an imbalance between the perceived demands in the situation and a person/athlete's resources to meet those demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, the misuse and imprecision of the term has been long debated (McGrath, 1970, 1982), and as a solution to this debate, Fletcher and colleagues suggested that

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stress should be conceptualised by researchers as a process that incorporates stressors, strains, appraisals, and coping responses (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006). In this framework, strain is defined as “an individual’s negative psychological, physical, and behavioural responses to stressors” (p. 329), making strain “the indicators of an individual’s negative evaluation of environmental events, which are more commonly known as stressors” (Fletcher & Arnold, 2017, p. 84). The present study focuses on professional footballers’ perceptions of organizational and media stressors over a season, and the motivational processes that are likely to affect such perception over time.

## 1. Conceptual framework

Elite athletes experience a combination of stressors (competitive, organizational, or personal sources) (Fletcher et al., 2006; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2009). Stressors can also originate from the actual playing environment, including spectator and coach reactions to within game behaviour. In addition to these categories that are inherent to elite competitive sport, it has been established that sports reporting in the media is often an additional environmental stressor for elite athletes (Kristiansen, Abrahamsen, & Pedersen, 2017). Footballers are among the most media-exposed athletes and how such athletes appraise a stressful situation is argued to be via two interdependent processes; *primary* appraisal identifying the situation as harmful, and *secondary* appraisal which the assessment of resources to minimize the impact of the stressor and the magnitude of the stress responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Appraisal is concerned with “goal relevance, congruence and type of ego involvement, and it identifies whether the stressful situation is relevant to one’s well-being, self-beliefs, and personal goals” (Puente-Díaz & Anshel, 2005, p. 431).

According to the transactional theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), there is a “mutually, bi-directional relationship between the person and the environment” (p. 325), and the ongoing appraisal and reappraisal is a dynamic process in the shifting person-environment relationship. This process makes motivational theories that inform the dynamics of the person-environment relationship pertinent to stress-coping research. While motivation may be partially understood in terms of the context (the goals others may have for the person), it is the impact of the environment on personal assessments that is important in this research (Treasure, 2001). With that in mind, the backdrop in this investigation is Achievement Goal Theory (AGT; Ames, 1992; Duda & Hall, 2001; Nicholls, 1984, 1989; Roberts, 2012).

AGT has previously been used successfully on research focusing on coping and stress (e.g., Kim & Duda, 1998; Kristiansen, Halvari, et al., 2012; Ntoumanis, Biddle, & Haddock, 1999) because AGT is based on perceived competence to meet personal and environmental demands. The overall goal is to demonstrate competence and/or avoid demonstrating incompetence (Nicholls, 1984). However, an important feature of AGT is that competence may be defined in two different ways: Competence may be internal and self-referenced, termed task-involved competence; or external and normatively referenced, termed ego-involved competence. Based on this differentiation, it is assumed that players function in a state of task- or ego-involvement. Players become task- or ego-involved because of their personal dispositions to be task- or ego-oriented based on their previous socialization experiences in achievement contexts; or because they perceive the environmental demands to be successful as being task or ego biased. The dispositional factors are termed goal orientations, and these reflect the players’ likelihood to adopt either a task- or an ego-involving criteria of success in achievement tasks. When a player is task-oriented, the focus is on demonstrating mastery of tasks and learning, and the perception of

ability is self-referenced. Conversely, an ego-oriented player is interested in demonstrating superior ability to others and is preoccupied with normative success.

Of particular importance to this investigation is that the perceived motivational climate also affects the perception of the extant criteria of success in the achievement context (Roberts, 2012). AGT stipulates that two distinct motivational climates exist that emphasize task- and/or ego-involving criteria of success and failure. Ames (1992) termed these climates mastery and performance, respectively. A mastery climate nurtures the perception that effort and self-referenced accomplishment are important. Conversely, a performance climate fosters rivalry and normative comparison because the perceived success criteria are to demonstrate superiority to others (Ames, 1992). In this investigation, consistent with AGT environmental research (e.g., Kristiansen et al., 2012), it is assumed that football players constantly assess their personal competence to meet the demands they perceive to be within their environment, whether those demands are placed there by the coach, or deemed to exist because of media coverage. Evidence exists that elite athletes tend to be both highly task- and ego-oriented and ego involvement is fostered by the coach and media focus on normative criteria of success always present in elite sport environments (e.g., Harwood, Hardy & Swain, 2000; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2000). This pattern has led some authors (e.g., Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002) to argue that creating a mastery climate by coaches might be important for elite players to cope with the stress demands of elite sport.

Clearly, the players’ personal beliefs about the demonstration of competence and the perceived motivational climate created by the coaching staff play pertinent roles in how they cope with organizational and media stressors. Evidence exists that demonstrate that being task-involved is an attribute that is associated with adaptive coping strategies (mostly problem-focused) that help the players to overcome distractions and develop the ability to focus on the essential performance aspects of competing successfully (Kim & Duda, 1998; Kristiansen, Roberts, & Abrahamsen, 2008; Ntoumanis et al., 1999; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003). In a study on elite footballers, Kristiansen and Roberts (2011) argued that coaches should focus on creating a mastery climate for elite players in order to reduce stress and increase self-confidence. Such an environment would help the team to keep a task focus and avoid normative comparisons, as much as possible within a competitive sport environment. The evidence suggests that being task involved and focusing on own performance reduces the perceived normative stress of elite athletes. In addition to the mastery climate enhancing normative coping abilities, it also assists in coping with the media coverage of elite sport. More specifically, a mastery climate may protect against the perception of media as being stressful as it helps the athletes to focus on the task at hand and avoid inter- and/or intrateam comparisons with other athletes. In a study into how premier division goalkeepers coped with perceived negative reporting in the media (Kristiansen, Roberts, & Sisjord, 2011), the goalkeepers reported focusing on avoidance coping (avoided buying, reading, or watching news reports, and not giving interviews on match day), focusing on the mastery feedback of the coach (the evaluation of the coach meant more than the game reports printed in the press), social support from fellow elite athletes, and problem-focused strategies (reframing, using one’s own experience). Conversely, being ego-involved may lead to emotional (avoidance) coping (Ntoumanis et al., 1999).

### 1.2. The present investigation

In recent years, it has become more common in sport and exercise psychology research to explore how synergistic combinations of both quantitative and qualitative methods may offer a more nuanced

understanding of a given phenomenon (e.g., Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011; Mallinson-Howard, Knight, Hill, & Hall, 2018; Solstad et al., 2017). However, it is important to acknowledge that the mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods is related to some critical reflections that are required if researchers wish to accomplish a successful and full integration of methods (for details, see Sparkes, 2015). Researchers who plan to conduct mixed-methods research (MMR) should therefore acquire knowledge about the benefits of different MMR designs, thereby combining empirical insights into coherent and plausible explanations (Ivankova, 2014; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015; Tunarosa & Glynn, 2017). Therefore, to develop a greater understanding of professional football players' experiences of organizational and media stressors, we adopted a MMR design. In doing so, we complemented the quantitative strand (i.e., within-person analyses) with the qualitative approach that allows "human beings to be understood from inside their subjective experiences" (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015, p. 92), and consequently combine the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods (Pluye & Hong, 2014).

Longitudinal research with professional football players is difficult to achieve due to restricted access and hectic competition schedules (e.g., Didemys & Fletcher, 2012; Hanton, Wagstaff, & Fletcher, 2012; Holt & Dunn, 2004a). Using the MMR design may help us understand how professional football players experience organizational and media stressors across the competitive season, and subsequently how perceptions of the athletic environment may affect their adopted coping strategies (e.g., Kristiansen et al., 2008; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011). The following research questions were outlined: (1) investigate the within-person relationships among monthly perceptions of the motivational climate, dispositional goal orientations, and organizational and media stressors; and (2) elaborate upon the players' experiences of organizational and media stressors - and if perceptions of the athletic environment affected how they coped with organizational and media stressors during the season.

## 2. Methods and materials

### 2.1. Research design

When given the access to a team over a season, a MMR approach was chosen to provide a more complete view of the conceptual relationships between AGT constructs and organizational and media stressors. A sequential MMR design was applied to combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data (McKim, 2017). Typical of a MMR design is that one research method prominently informs the next (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), and that theory is used in a manner consistent with the component that comes first - which in our case was the quantitative testing of hypotheses (*strand I*). Thus, the interviews (*strand II*) were conducted at the end of the season. More specifically, we used a three-step procedure to ensure the quality of the meta-inferences. The three-step procedure involved the following: (a) selecting a purposeful subset of the questionnaire respondents; (b) using the results from the post-season interviews to elaborate on the quantitative findings; and (c) observing interaction between the quantitative and qualitative findings (for details, see Ivankova, 2014).

### 2.2. Strand 1: quantitative measures

#### 2.2.1. Participants

Participants were 27 elite football players from one men's team in a Premier Division in Scandinavia ranging from 18 to 31 years old ( $M_{age} = 22.26$  years,  $SD = 4.21$ ). The team consisted of national and international players, and many had experience with their respective national teams. A power analysis was performed in *Mplus* using the guidelines from Muthén and Muthén (2002). In this analysis we specified the autoregressive-, correlational-, as well as cross-lagged effects. This analysis showed that 250 data points (i.e., 21 participants

reporting 12 measurement points each) were needed to obtain power above .80. We expected approximately 20% missing data points and, therefore, 27 participants were enrolled into the study.

#### 2.2.2. Procedure

We obtained informed consent from all the participants and the investigation was in accordance with ethical research guidelines. The football players completed a questionnaire package every month after morning practice. With the players' appreciation of the research project, and the assistance of one of the coaches, this procedure was successful. The number and persons who took part in the testing varied (usually 17–18 each time, but changing due to injuries or transfers), and they used approximately 15 min to complete the survey.

#### 2.2.3. Measurement

We used two frequently applied scales to measure motivation. The specific questionnaires were Perception of Success Questionnaire (POSQ; Roberts, Treasure, & Balague, 1998) and Perceived Motivational Climate Questionnaire (PMCQ; Seifriz, Duda, & Chi, 1992).

POSQ is a 12-item questionnaire, which measures task (six items) and ego (six items) goal orientations in sport, with phrases such as "I work hard" and "I win" to reflect the criteria of success used by the participants. PMCQ is an 11-item scale where the athletes were told to reflect upon how they experience the climate in their team, and phrases such as "Players feel good when they do better than teammates" and "The coach wants us to try new skills" to reflect the criteria of success the players perceived used by the coach(s). Owing to the high number of different categories of organizational stressors (e.g., Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; McKay, Niven, Lavallee, & White, 2008), the Coach-Athlete Stressors in Football Questionnaire (CASFQ; Kristiansen, Halvari, et al., 2012), was used to assess the coach as a stressor for the footballers and they responded to items such as "The coach and team agree on the strategy for the team", and "The coach is good at communicating with us players". The Media Stressors in Football Questionnaire (MSFQ; Kristiansen, Halvari, et al., 2012) is one questionnaire specifically developed for this context. This is a 6 item questionnaire where MSFQ measures experience of negative media coverage and outcome coverage. Phrases such as "I take what media write about my team and me personally", and "Media create a pressure for winning which I find stressful" captured negative content, while outcome more asked for amount experienced.

All items in the 12-item POSQ, the 11-item PMCQ, the 7-item CASFQ,<sup>1</sup> and the 6-item MSFQ were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The Norwegian versions of all questionnaires have showed high validity in previous studies (e.g., Kristiansen, Halvari, et al., 2012). The average reliability scores (McDonald's  $\omega$ ) for the 10 waves of measures ranged, for the different scales, between 0.77 and 0.89 (task orientation = 0.86; ego orientation = 0.89; mastery climate = 0.83; performance climate = .84; MSFQ = 0.83; CASFQ = 0.77).

#### 2.2.4. Data analyses

We used the Bayesian dynamic p-technique (DPT) analysis to investigate the relationships of goal orientations and perceptions of motivational climate with organizational and media stressors. The rationale for applying the DPT is that this analysis is particularly useful when the objective is to examine relationships between two dynamic constructs over time, especially in studies with small samples (Nelson, Aylward, & Rausch, 2011). The estimation ran using a lagged covariance matrix with both synchronous and time-lagged information included (Little, Bovaird, & Slegers, 2006). Using the DPT analysis, it is possible to address research questions related to: (a) cross-sectional associations; (b)

<sup>1</sup> Higher scores on this measure indicate lower levels of coach-athlete stressors.

autoregressive effects within constructs over time; and (c) cross-lagged effects between different variables over time. In the DPT analysis, results average estimates for each of these three aspects are provided (Nelson et al., 2011).

All analyses were performed in *Mplus* 8.0. We estimated separate models for each relationship between AGT variables (i.e., goal orientation, motivational climate) and stressors (i.e., organizational and media). The reason for estimating models with only two variables at a time was the small number of data points (for larger models more data points would have been needed). For the DPT estimation, we used Markov Chain Monte Carlo simulation procedures with a Gibbs sampler. We estimated all models using 100,000 iterations (50,000 are used as burn-in by default in *Mplus*). A potential scale reduction (PSR) factor around 1 was considered as evidence of convergence (Kaplan & Depaoli, 2012). Model fit was evaluated using the posterior predictive  $p$  (PPp) value and its accompanying 95% confidence interval. “A positive lower limit is in line with a low posterior predictive  $p$  value and indicates poor fit” (Muthén & Asparouhov, 2012, p. 315). For all parameters, we calculated a 95% credibility interval (CI). The 95% CI represents the probability that the parameter of interest, given the data, is placed within the interval. In the present study, we followed the recommendations from Zyphur and Oswald (2015), and rejected the null hypothesis if the 95% CI did not include zero. Because of difficulties to find adequate priors from previous studies, we used the default non-informative prior distribution in *Mplus* (Muthén, 2010).

### 2.3. Strand II: the interviews

#### 2.3.1. Participants

In order to demonstrate how different groups of players are likely to have different experiences of motivation and stress, we selected a purposeful sample of footballers among the questionnaire respondents (Ivankova, 2014) and interviewed players with a different position on the team (captains, starter, marginal players). 11 professional football players were recruited from the team.

#### 2.3.2. Procedure and interview guide

The first author conducted the interviews at the end of the season. Her prolonged engagement as a researcher with the team over three years, was useful for gaining entry, trust, and contextualizing data (Holt & Dunn, 2004a). In addition, she had followed the ups and downs of the team closely for three years, which helped her individualize the interview for each player. The semi-structured in-depth interviews started with: (a) general introduction about the experience of being a professional football player; (b) different stressors perceived during the season (e.g., ups when winning games and downs when injured or being benched); (c) how they perceived the team climate, if any incidents affected it; and finally, (d) how they coped with the mentioned stressors. Questions a-c directly elaborate upon the quantitative findings, and question d added information on coping mechanisms. We wanted the players to mention the stressors they perceived to be the most difficult to cope with that season. Then all interviewees were asked about their perceptions of organizational and media stressors, with follow-up questions to deepen their responses. The interviews were carried out at the player's convenience in different meeting rooms or a cafeteria one week before they played the final game of the season, the Cup Final. As a result of the season's success, all the players were very excited and positive about the season and their own performance. The interviews lasted between 45 and 65 min.

#### 2.3.3. Data analysis and interpretation

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a generic qualitative driven approach (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2017) was conducted for the analyses. The raw data were organised into main categories of stressors, such as line-up selection, injuries, losing games, and media coverage. The stressors were divided into stressors with an organizational origin (McKay et al., 2008) or media origin (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011). These stressors were then linked with the coping strategies that were employed by participants to deal with the specific stressor (Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts, 2012). If the footballers revealed any signs of motivational orientation or climate when being exposed to the stressors in the interview, these were linked to AGT (see Table 2). Finally, the answers were grouped under the headings ‘the team captains’, ‘the starters’, and ‘the marginal players’, which keeps the athletes anonymous.

In accord with the transactional perspective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), in-depth quotes were included in the presentation and interpretation of the data. Lazarus (1999) advocated the use of narratives to add knowledge and understanding. The voices of all participants will be presented within the categories of team captains, starters, and marginal players. Rigor was demonstrated by use of *member reflection* in order to generate additional data and insight (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

## 3. Results

We will first present the quantitative results with a focus upon the relationship between motivation and organizational and media stressors, before elaborating upon each perceived stressor they had to cope with during the season with the qualitative findings.

### 3.1. Strand I: testing the relationship between AGT constructs and stressors

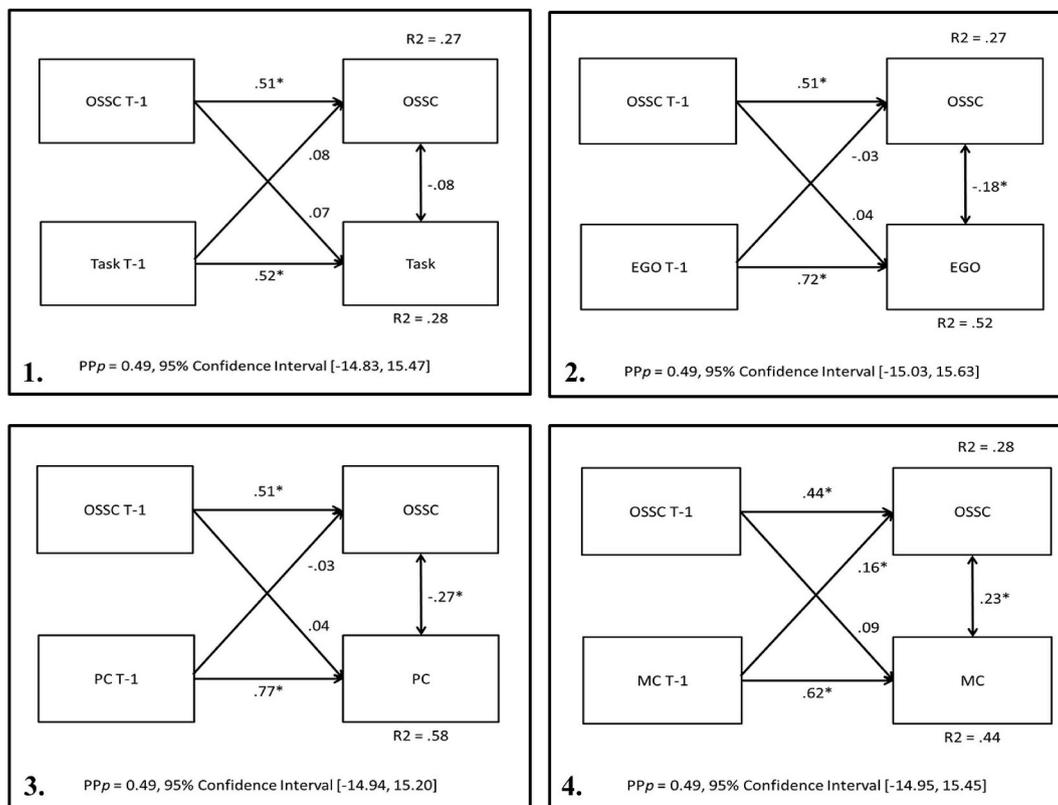
Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. On average the players reported high levels of mastery climate and task orientation.

In the DPT analyses, all models showed good fit to data (PPps ~ 0.49; for information about the specific PPp values, in combination with 95% confidence intervals, see Figs. 1 and 2). The results from the DPT analyses showed that low levels of organizational stressors were associated with low levels of both performance climate ( $r = -0.23$ ), and ego orientation ( $r = -0.18$ ) as well as high levels of mastery climate ( $r = 0.23$ ). In addition, high levels of negative media stressors were associated with high levels of ego orientation ( $r = 0.14$ ).

The autoregressive associations for all variables were credible and strong ( $\beta$ s ranging from 0.44 to 0.77) indicating that the perceptions of the players were relatively stable over time. Concerning the cross-lagged paths, the results showed a credible positive effect of mastery climate on perceived low levels of organizational stressors ( $\beta = 0.16$ ). More specifically, high levels of mastery climate were associated with low levels of organizational stressors the following month. In addition, task orientation had a credible negative effect on negative media

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics.

Variable	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
Ego	3.96 (0.76)	1.50–5.00	–0.54	–0.01
Negative media stressors	2.56 (0.79)	1.00–4.25	–0.46	–0.57
Task	4.54 (0.57)	1.50–5.00	–1.80	4.10
Organizational stressors	4.12 (0.50)	2.29–5.00	–0.75	0.59
Performance climate	3.55 (0.76)	1.67–5.00	–0.32	–0.50
Mastery climate	4.39 (0.58)	2.20–5.00	–1.09	0.82



**Fig. 1.** Standardized estimates for the cross-sectional and cross-lagged effects between organizational stressors and the different motivational variables. Note: \* = the credibility interval does not include zero; OSSC = Organizational stressors; Task = Task orientation; Ego = Ego orientation; PC = Performance climate; MC = Mastery climate.

stressors ( $\beta = -0.11$ ) and ego orientation had a credible positive effect on negative media stressors ( $\beta = 0.10$ ). This result indicates that task orientation was associated with lower levels of media stressors the following month, while ego orientation had the opposite relationship. No other cross-lagged paths showed credible effects.

**3.2. Strand II: perceived stressors among the professional footballers over a season**

As indicated in previous studies, the footballers' relative position on the team (team captain, starter, and marginal player) affected how they coped with the stressors over the season. What has previously been deemed important for team coping is the use of mastery climate criteria by the coach (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011), which was supported in this investigation. This finding reflects that individual coping is not sufficient when an entire team has to cope with organizational and media stressors. Table 2 reveals sample extracts from interviews organised after stressor and dispositional goal orientation and perceived motivational climate.

**3.2.1. The team captains: important for establishing the team motivational climate**

The captain and the vice-captain were seen as a complementary team by the other players. One of them was the calm positive person with a clear focus on development for the entire team (i.e., task-involved), while the other was more vocal and shouted, blamed others

(i.e., ego-involved), but also encouraged others depending on the situation on the field: “The captain’s role is to talk to everybody and avoid us becoming passive.” However, the two captains approached avoiding passivity differently, the task-involved captain stated that: “I will not yell at anyone – I leave that to the coach. I try to be very constructive when I talk to all the players.” His calm personality contrasted with the ego-involved captain, who believed in yelling in some situations (both constructive and not so constructive instructions): “Some need more yelling than others, yelling is a sign of recognition that you want the best for the team. I yell a lot during the games, we need that in order to not become passive.” To the players that felt they needed a reminder of what is at stake, his exhortations were highly appreciated. To the players who were struggling more to be an integral part of the team (e.g., to consistently become a member of the starting lineup), the different approaches of the two team captains dovetailed to encourage all players to cope with organizational and media stressors. From the interviews, it was clear that the motivational involvement of the captain and vice-captain were clearly in the direction of task and ego, respectively, and they differed in their approach to stressors.

The ‘task-captain’ had several injuries over the season that was a major stressor for him. His personal task orientation was obvious when he explained how he coped with this constant stressor:

I work a lot with my focus when I am injured. I give myself one day to be disappointed, and the next day I have to move on and do what is right for recovery ... I have become much better at setting goals

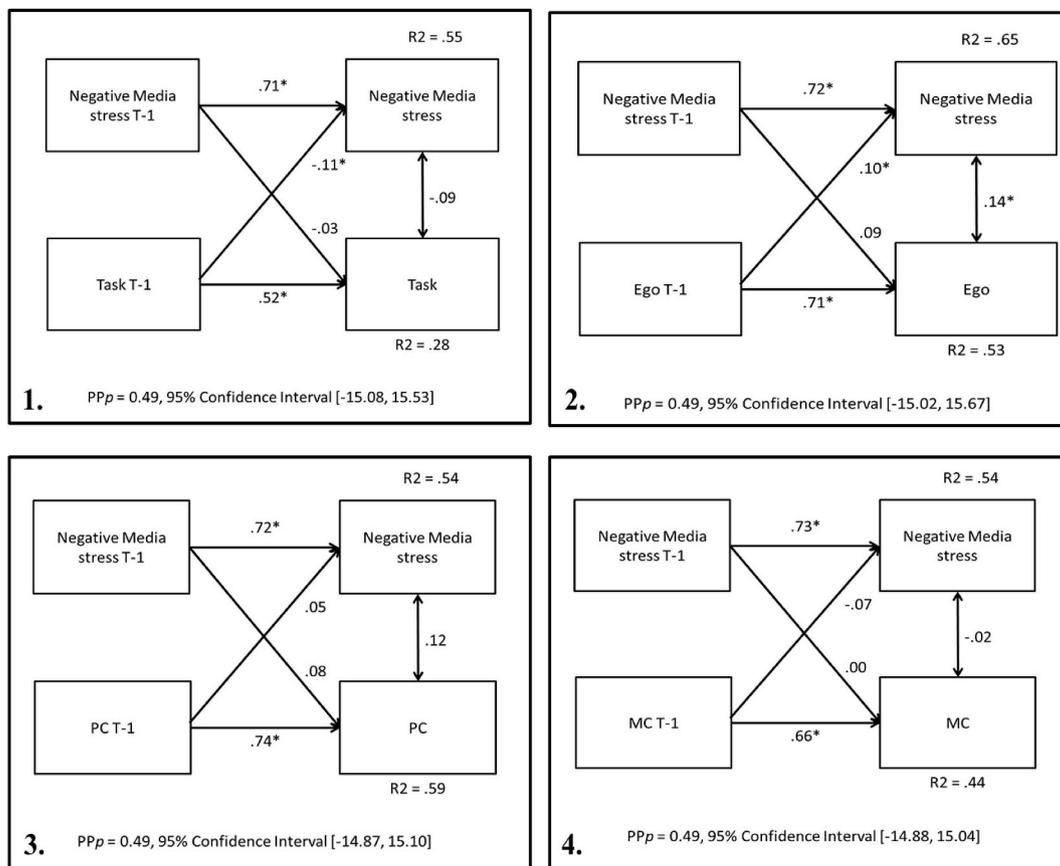


Fig. 2. Standardized estimates for the cross-sectional and cross-lagged effects between negative media stressors and the different motivational variables. Note: \* = the credibility interval does not include zero; Task = Task orientation; Ego = Ego orientation; PC = Performance climate; MC = Mastery climate.

and making plans for getting back: (a) I have to get the correct diagnosis; (b) set up a timeframe and plan for the recovery period; (c) and then just make the best of it. I always tell journalists: “I’ll come back stronger.” Moreover, I believe it too. One can be very disappointed, but it does not help anything.

However, he was “forced” to play a Premier Division game the previous year with a ligament injury, as he explained: “It is hard when both the medical team and your coach request that you play.” That led to additional injuries and some problems during the season of data collection. This organizational request that he play despite an injury may not be a good strategy in the long run, neither for the individual player nor for the overall team performance. Furthermore, the ‘task-captain’ worried more about whether injuries could be career ending than keeping his place in the line-up. This was exacerbated when the possible end of his career was a topic that appeared in the media when he was injured. He perceived the media as a stressor when the topic was his injury, as he was worried and did not know how long it would take to recover.

The ‘ego-captain’ on the other hand, could not remember a game where he had not played in his years in the club. Even though taking the tougher role among the two captains and setting more the tone of a performance climate, the ‘ego-captain’ revealed a more task-involved approach when it came to his own preparation and balancing training and family life: “I feel that I have developed in the things that have been

my main focus this season. As a team, I feel that we have performed beyond our actual capability.” He based this statement on the fact that he played for a relatively minor club with a low budget in the league. Hence, one cannot expect to always win when playing the “better” teams with more resources.

The major stressor for the ‘ego-captain’ was to balance his family life with the life as an elite football player, a personal stressor (Fletcher et al., 2006). Sometimes he had to make sacrifices relative to his family in order to be prepared for games:

You need to perform at your best at every practice; for constant development, you need to plan for every day and be focused. With a family, I must always plan and take my recovery seriously in the season. I have not had an injury in four years, and only missed a few practices. The key is to listen to your body and know your limits.

The ‘ego-captain’ emphasized the importance of the head coach besides the more experienced players to set the tone in the team and make sure that the team collectively “pulls in the same direction.” They were also the ones “who should speak up when necessary, such as last year when the insecure economic situation influenced our performance.”

None of the captains perceived the *media* as a stressor in the coverage of the team results due to the low expectations of them at the beginning of the current season. Instead they noted that the amount of coverage had increased and were “more fair” based on their better than

expected results. However, injury as a personal stressor was perceived as a major stressor for the ‘task-captain’, and this seemed to influence how he perceived organizational and media stressors.

### 3.2.2. The ‘starters’: the footballers playing with security

To be (or not to be) part of the starting line-up defined how the footballers approached the perceived stressors. For the starters in the line-up, injuries were one of the perceived main stressors. When injured, they expressed a need to hear that they are important to the team, and that the organization will give them enough time to heal physically and mentally. To be “benched” after an injury was also a reality for core players, though they emphasized that they coped better with it than they had done earlier in their career:

Earlier when I was replaced after 60 minutes, I would spend a lot longer time to get over it, now I do not worry that much about why ... It is important to get into the mood of the group, and do not complain over your own disappointment or be depressed for two days. If you do that, you lose two more days where you could have improved your play ...

This quote reveals how fragile self-confidence is and how important it is to constantly focus on the next task and your own gradual improvement (task involvement). Such a focus may be easier in a team with a mastery climate, as that might also increase the perception of social support from team mates and the overall coaching staff. In the interviews, it was emphasized that a great coach both individualizes feedback and “sees” all the players on the team. Therefore, it is positive when the coach “comes and asks how things are going and that he would like to have you back again soon.”

The core players also highlighted the importance of playing well within the team and the popularity of the captains in trying to get the best out of every player: “When I do not play well enough, it is okay that I am replaced.” It was emphasized that if performing below expectation, one would be told so. However, this should be an internal evaluation of game performance, and not something shared in public:

The coach should not create a negative atmosphere with public yelling in the newspapers. It is not very constructive and it will not turn the team climate around. That being said, I do not think we care much about what they (the media) write anymore, as we know that they will only publish 10% of a longer statement anyway. We cannot do anything about what the media writes.

This comment reveals that the team players, due to some previous negative experiences, had become more aware of the mechanisms that might help to keep the motivation to play stable. As core players, they also expressed a responsibility to stay positive; “We help and support each other when we lose.” In a previous year, the team lost four games in a row and players became frustrated and resulted in passive play. The media covered this incident extensively, which the starters mentioned and discussed why it was important to stay focused. They also emphasized that it is normal for performance to fluctuate from game to game:

It is natural that your performance fluctuates a little, you cannot be at your best for an entire season ... I believe that during a season, then you never have more than 3–4 games where you are *very good*, the rest is about performing the “best you can.” Then we must work mentally, and be ready to recognize it and pass the ball to the player that is peaking! Naturally, this is easier said than done.

This quote clearly reveals a task-oriented focus (see Table 2), it was among other comments that reflected being task involved is important

for personal and team success: “Everybody was being played and were able to contribute.” It was clear the core players felt a responsibility to monitor the climate and contribute to making it task involving in order to reduce the impact of the perceived stressors for all teammates.

### 3.2.3. The marginal players: fighting for a spot in the line-up

From the interviews, it might be argued that the marginal players were more sensitive to performance cues in the environment than the players with a secure spot on the team. For example, one of the marginal players declared that his goal was to become a *brilliant* player and to “do what I can for the team to get better.” Marginal players more openly expressed ego-oriented statements than other players on the team:

Every day I tell myself that *I am the best*, and when I am not playing a good game I just reframe it, consider the game “a bad day,” and blame it on not doing the right things. Then I review the game and find what I did wrong and improve on it. I made mistakes and it has nothing to do with low self-esteem.

While the others talked about performance slumps for the team, this player expressed how he could have made mistakes in a game without his self-confidence being affected by it. His coping was individual and he used problem-focused strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and was apparently not aware of the resources available to him in the team. Being more aware might have helped him to reduce his perception of stressors. When looking at the whole season, he did not focus on the success of the team, only how he could become part of the starting line-up:

The coach has given me more time to develop myself, even though I would rather play instead! Everyone on a team wants to play, but some are better than others at hiding their feelings and disappointments. I am not one of them! If I am unhappy about a decision, everyone knows it ... It is collective effort that has given us these results and brought us where we are today, there are no stars on this team, but naturally, you feel that you are better than all the others, but actually we are all at the same level.

This quote is in many ways a paradox and underscores the constant flux that players’ thoughts may undergo when coping with organizational stressors and their own development. The perception of a mastery climate and team effort is present, but also that being *the star* is vital for some players (judging their competence in a normative manner). Other marginal players on the team expressed a more task-involved statement:

We had a lot of freedom and at the same time worked together as a team. I firmly believe that this is the major reason why we, a team not expected to win anything, succeeded this season and qualified for the cup final.

The perceived freedom to develop is part of a mastery climate. But the training sessions seemed to include a daily competition to become part of the starting line-up for this group. Training may be perceived differently by players. For the secure core players, training is more task involving, but for the marginal players it was an opportunity to display their relative competence to be part of the starting line-up. For the marginal players every training session included the perception that their performance was being judged as to whether they were to be included in the starting line-up. Naturally, for them every training would be perceived as a significant due to pressure to perform to impress the coaches. However, all the players on the team argued that the training competition did not affect the friendship patterns among the team: “It is

a nice team to be part of because of the coach's personality and the captains. One is straight to the point, while the other one is always calm and in a good mood. I need both of them."

Another player clearly displayed ego involvement when elaborating upon strategies that were his speciality and that could help the team win:

Each team has a player whose job is to set the other team off guard. He will do little things to psych out the other team, and if you manage to "take out" one of the key players of the team, the entire team might collapse. Then you win, I think coaches understand that this is a role on the team as well ... In many ways, the coaches do the same thing in interviews when they say that the other team is the favorite before major games such as the Cup Final [i.e., so the media will focus on them before the game].

There is a degree of cynicism in this statement, but it is true that teams often encourage an "enforcer" to destabilize the opposition. That this player focused on the role of enforcer clearly indicated that winning was his primary goal and illustrates his ego involvement in the outcome.

Keeping the team members focused on the roles each was supposed to play was underlined as the role of the captains and core players: "They need to stay alert and not lose their heads during the games." This may be interpreted as keeping the focus on mastery criteria so that each player was encouraged to focus on their assignments within the game. The need for coach support was also an issue, in particular when injured. One injured player stated: "I would really like the coach to talk to me, that he would say something important to me so I could get some positive feedback to help me recover. I really worry about what kind of future he thinks I have." This player was asking for *informational* support (to provide information, advice, and give feedback to the athlete; see Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1982). This type of support helps players to feel more secure and reduce the perceived magnitude of stressors. The coach is critical in this rebuilding of self-confidence to injured and marginal players, as the injured player stated: "I really need to know if he believes in me or not." While the core players talked little about internal competition on the team (intra-team rivalry), the players fighting for a more secure spot on the team recognized this factor as a constant stressor, in addition to the other stressors experienced by the team captains and starters.

#### 4. Discussion

This investigation has followed a relatively minor team in a Scandinavian Premier Division of football. In contrast to the major teams, they had a young coach and a young group of players, with a relatively low budget. After some years of financial strain, the team won the prestigious National Cup the year of data collection. The two different strands of data used were questionnaires and interviews (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), which provided a detailed insight into elite male footballers' perceptions of organizational and media stressors over a season. With this MMR approach, we aimed to further advance our knowledge about footballers' subjective experiences and the complexity of stressors in elite sport (Fletcher & Arnold, 2017; Hardy, 2015). Additionally, from the AGT perspective, the vast majority of former studies have been cross-sectional in nature and only five studies have recruited samples that could be classified as truly elite (for a review, see Harwood, Keegan, Smith, & Raine, 2015). Hence, the present study advances our understanding of motivation and the stress process in elite sport.

##### 4.1. The organizational stressors

The organizational stressors measured quantitatively focused on the coach-athlete relationship, which is crucial for players' perceptions of organizational stressors (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010), as well as the perceived motivational climate (Roberts, 2012). One interesting finding is the cross-lagged association of perceived mastery climate on low perceptions of organizational stressors. Perception of a mastery climate was related to low perception of organizational stressors the next month. Players who perceived a mastery climate indicated the following month that: (a) the coaching staff seemed to be in accord regarding team strategy decisions; (b) the coaching staff seemed to treat the players equally; (c) the team management seemed to be good at communicating with each individual player; (d) the team members were good at solving problems; and (e) they respected the head coach. This is consistent with AGT-based research and illustrates the impact of a mastery climate on important coach to athlete interactions. When a mastery climate becomes the norm in a team, then it may influence the dispositional goal orientations of the players over time.

The qualitative results revealed that the footballers perceived being part of the selected line-up, injuries, and losing games as the main organizational stressors. When we divided the players into the categories of core players (i.e., captains and starters) and marginal players, we found a more nuanced picture as it revealed that injured and marginal players were more sensitive to the performance cues in the environment. The marginal players expressed more explicitly about the daily hassle of practice competition to show their own superiority and be noticed by the coach. Hence, not being part of the starting line-up may be a constant organizational stressor for them.

Typically, the coach-athlete relationship has been among a core group of organizational stressors which belong to leadership issues in Fletcher and Hanton's (2003) terminology. For the players in the present study, the coach-athlete relationship was mentioned as a direct organizational stressor. However, the players stressed that an improved relationship and being noticed by the coach was of importance when coping with not being on the starting line-up (environmental stressors) and when recovering after injuries (personal stressor). The findings from the interviews elaborate upon the importance of the coach-athlete relationship when facing organizational stressors, and additionally reveals that even though a team may have a stable motivational climate over a season (indicated by the strong auto-regressive effects found in the DPT analyses) (Gernigon, d'Arripe-Longueville, Delignieres, & Ninot, 2004; Kristiansen, Halvari, et al., 2012), there will always be players, such as the injured and marginal ones, who need additional support to stay task-involved by feeling included. In that way the players are better able to cope with performance pressure during the season (see Table 2). Hence, the context of elite sport should recognize the situational determinants of task involvement to reduce the potential influence of stressors and facilitate elite athlete development (Roberts, 2012).

Losing games were perceived as a major stressor by the team-captains and starters, more than the marginal players. This is an interesting finding in a winning season. However, all the players had comments in the interviews that the coaching staff encouraged them to find solutions themselves and accept their various roles and the importance of staying together as a team. This reveals a stable mastery climate. The team captains and other core players revealed a perception that it was important to keep the team climate stable with an emphasis on a mastery approach. The younger players also expected the team captains and the

core players to maintain a mastery climate. This is important as players perceived a mastery climate indicating that there was agreement among the coaching staff regarding team strategy decisions and that the coaching staff treated the players equally. Further, all players who were interviewed indicated that they were included in team strategy decisions, which accentuates the feeling of unity. While the starters were not willing to talk about internal competition on the team (or intra-team rivalry), the footballers fighting for a more secure spot admitted that it occurred. For them it was a constant organizational stressor.

#### 4.2. The media as a stressor

The season of investigation was a good season for the team regarding media reporting. The success and lack of public club disagreements kept the media focused on their football performances. The quantitative findings revealed that task orientation had a negative lagged effect on media stressors, while ego orientation had a positive lagged association on the same construct. This means that players who reported high levels of ego orientation (i.e., outperforming teammates by getting the most media attention in the newspapers, see Table 2) were more likely to report that they are concerned about what the media writes about them, felt increased pressure when they received high media coverage, and perceived it as important to be valued as a great football player by the media. Conversely, high levels of task orientation seem to be inversely related to negative media stressors among our sample of elite male football players. When players were task-involved, whether through their personal disposition or perception of a mastery climate, motivation was optimized, and perception of media stressors was less likely to occur. This finding is consistent with general findings in AGT-based research (for details, see Roberts, 2012).

Even though the media was overwhelmingly positive, new

technologies have made it harder for elite football players to hide, escape, or live a life unnoticed (Kristiansen et al., 2017). They are constantly in the spotlight, at least some of them, as it was reported that the media focused on certain players, with the strikers getting more attention than the defensive players. This may have a negative effect on teamwork and may increase the magnitude of the stress responses. The core players may be under more scrutiny, but the marginal players with less coverage may feel undervalued and not being in the spotlight is perceived as being stressful. The more ego involved the player, the more impact the media coverage may have. Certainly, the more positive the media coverage for ego involved players, the more likely they receive a boost in their self-confidence (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011).

Even though the team experienced some team slumps, they were never discussed in public and, therefore, the media did not become a major source of strain (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011). The reason for this may be attributed to the behaviour displayed by the coach in the media, and that the perception of a mastery climate reduces the players perception of media stressors (Kristiansen, Halvari, et al., 2012). As the team had some previous negative experiences a couple of seasons ago, when the manager suddenly went public and stated that he would cut player salaries in the middle of the season (see Table 2), the footballers admitted that they had become better at solving internal issues privately. The interviews also revealed that the task-oriented team captain was a calm and positive person with a clear focus on development for himself and his team mates. His support of the others may easily have contributed to the ability to cope and recover during the season. It is interesting that he found the media reporting of his injury and recovery as a source of strain. One may argue with this team that the perception of a mastery climate emphasized in the interviews (see Table 2), and a winning season, may have protected the players from negative media stressors.

**Table 2**

The athletes ranking of major stressors over the season combined with their perceptions of goal orientations and climate.

Stressor	Task and Ego Orientation (quotes)	Mastery and Performance Climate (quotes)
Line-up	<p>“I want to become a brilliant player – and I tell myself every day that I am the best” (EGO)</p> <p>It is a daily competition to be part of the line-up (EGO)</p> <p>“It is vital for me to hear that I am important to the team” (EGO)</p> <p>“You know, coach has taken me aside right after bad games, and then asked what I think of my play ... You don't have to worry about being replaced; all your focus is on improvement ... Coach support is one of the most important factors to preserve confidence” (TASK)</p> <p>“When XX finally scored, he got better for every game, he finally got the much needed confidence (TASK)</p>	<p>“A coach will always bench a promising junior player and use an expensive senior one. Unfortunately, there are rarely any scientific reasons for a coach decision” (PC)</p> <p>“We compete for the spots on the line-up at every practice” (PC)</p> <p>“Coach yelling at you means that he cares” (PC)</p> <p>“We are a team of young players and no big names on the line-up. But we do not need that on the good days when we pull in the same direction” (MC)</p>
Injuries	<p>“I have not been able to train for a fortnight now; without the daily training you lose the “feeling” you need in order to succeed” (TASK)</p> <p>“I give myself one day to be disappointed, and the next day I have to move on” (TASK)</p>	<p>“It was an important game, and I was forced to play with a ligament injury” (PC)</p> <p>“To get the help I need and have the support of the coach in addition to know that I'm part of the team no matter what ... how long it takes or stuff like that, is also vital” (MC)</p>
Losing games	<p>“I believe during a season then you are never more than 3–4 games where you are very good, the rest is about to perform as best you can. Then we must work mentally, and be ready to sacrifice ourselves for it and send the ball to the one that peaks!” (TASK)</p> <p>I evaluate the performance and think ahead” (TASK)</p>	<p>“A team play better together when everyone accepts their role in the team ... in this team, everybody is being played and are able to contribute. I think that is important for development and self-confidence” (MC).</p> <p>Coach will encourage us to come up with solutions to solve team issues (MC)”</p> <p>“We have been allowed [by coach] to try things and play our game [due to be a ‘young’ team] (MC)</p> <p>“We help and support each other's when we lose” (MC)</p>
Media coverage	<p>“Nobody wants to be the player with the lowest score in the newspapers” (EGO)</p> <p>“I do not worry as much when we lose games and I do not read the papers ... It is okay if the coach criticises us in the media – he has a responsibility towards sponsors and the city” (TASK)</p>	<p>The administration in the club know how to create stress when they cut funding in the middle of the season and everybody starts to worry” (PC)</p>

Note. The stressor and the elaboration of personal orientation split up in task orientation (task), ego orientation (ego) and perceptions of mastery climate (MC) and performance climate (PC).

### 4.3. Limitations

The present investigation has some strengths and limitations. It is problematic to get access to these highly public players for research purposes. Hence, a strong aspect of the present study was that we were able to follow a professional football team over a whole season, and obtain multiple measures from the players. However, to better illustrate the temporal effects between the included variables, future studies could include a space between the measures that are in line with theoretical models that outline the stability and change of psychological constructs (Anusic & Schimmack, 2016; Fraley & Roberts, 2005). With the elaboration on the same variables from the interviews, we were also able to examine in depth the perception of motivation and stressors among professional male footballers. One limitation with the study is the small sample size. To reduce the potential bias of small sample in the quantitative analyses, we used Bayesian statistical methods (Nelson et al., 2011). The Bayesian framework is, in comparison to Frequentist statistical methods, based on different assumptions, but one major advantage with using the Bayesian framework is that it has no restrictive normality assumptions on sampling distributions of estimates. Additionally, it also depends less on asymptotic theory. By using the Bayesian framework, we therefore increased the odds of producing reliable results even if the current sample size is small (Song & Lee, 2012). Another limitation in the quantitative analysis is the use of self-report measures. More specifically, the results from studies using self-report measures might be influenced by common method bias and social desirability responses (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012).

### 5. Conclusion

The paradox of winning is not to focus on it. This is a pragmatic approach to a real world issue and supported from the evidence of this study. The professional football players in this study, in their various roles, revealed that not focusing on winning mitigated the perception of organizational and media stressors. This finding supports the long term benefits of being mastery-involved to combat and reduce the quantity, frequency, and/or intensity of the perception of organizational and media stressors in Scandinavian professional football. Thus, elite-level football coaches are recommended to develop a mastery approach to elite sports coaching to increase the chance of players successfully coping with organizational and media stressors.

### Declarations of interest

None.

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