

Position Paper: Rationale for a Focused Attention on Mental Health of High-Performance Sports Coaches

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High-performance (HP) coaching has been described as “a complex, social, and dynamic activity that is not easily represented as a set of tangible and predictable processes.” Coaches are not only responsible for extensive planning, monitoring, and leadership in a dynamic and complex environment but also have responsibility for supporting athlete development and safeguarding their athletes’ overall health, well-being, and psychological and physiological safety. However, HP coaching is often considered an unsustainable profession, due to the levels of stress and subsequent mental health challenges that are frequently part of the role. Therefore, this position paper will focus on the concerns, challenges, and resources needed to prevent and manage mental ill-being and support the mental well-being of sport coaching professionals in HP sport, and provide recommendations for individuals, systems, and organizations that work with HP sport coaches.

Keywords: well-being, ill-being, stress, sustainability

Sport coaching is still a somewhat blurred profession grounded in teaching praxis and the development of relationships. At the core, coaches are responsible for supporting athlete development and sport performance as well as safeguarding their athletes’ overall health, well-being, and psychological and physiological safety (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Across all levels of competitive sport, the demands and expectations on coaches from the sport culture, various stakeholders, organizations, entourage members, and highly committed athletes have been steadily increasing. Altogether, this pressure is particularly intense on coaches in high-performance (HP) sport settings since competitive demands and several stressors peak at this level. Thus, a growing attention has been placed on coach stress and burnout within the coaching literature (e.g., Norris et al., 2017; Olusoga et al., 2019; Potts et al., 2021). However, the broader topics of mental ill-being¹ and well-being within the sport coaching profession have, until recently (e.g., Pilkington et al.,

2022; Smith & Runswick, 2020), been largely overlooked in research, practice, and within the profession itself.

HP coaches are typically engaged in professional, semiprofessional, and Olympic sports and receive an income for their work (Mallett, 2010). While coaches in many contexts, including collegiate and high school coaches, might well be considered “high-performance,” we tentatively adopt Grey et al.’s (2020) conceptualization of the HP coach as one who leads athletes and teams

who are either officially Olympic or world championship qualified (i.e., who reach stringent qualifying standards) or who play in elite professional leagues around the world in culturally significant sports . . . High-performance coaches are positioned at one extremity of the performance-coaching spectrum and are typically tasked with leading athletes and/or teams to success at the highest levels. (pp. 344–345)

HP coaching has been described as “a complex, social, and dynamic activity that is not easily represented as a set of tangible and predictable processes” (Mallett, 2007, p. 419). The work of HP coaches involves many elements, including extensive planning, monitoring, leadership, and management of people and resources in a dynamic and complex environment (Mallett, 2010). However, HP coaching is often considered an unsustainable profession, due to the levels of stress and subsequent mental health challenges that are frequently part of the role (Hägglund et al., 2022). More specifically, when costs outweigh benefits, this will typically, over time, have a detrimental impact on mental health, performance, and motivation, and ultimately lead to burnout and withdrawal (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

Arguably, the absence of conversation around coach mental ill-being and well-being becomes even more prominent when considering a recent review of papers regarding mental health in sports,

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including 13 papers published between 2017 and 2020 (Vella et al., 2021). Only two of the papers included in the review (Breslin et al., 2019; Van Slingerland et al., 2019) explicitly addressed the mental health concerns of coaches. However, Breslin et al. (2019) directed attention toward *all* participants in sports with a focus on nonelite participants, and Van Slingerland et al. (2019) only briefly acknowledged the need to also consider the coach. Therefore, this position paper will focus on the concerns, challenges, and resources needed to prevent and manage mental ill-being and support the mental well-being of sport coaching professionals in HP sport, and provide recommendations for individuals, systems, and organizations that work with HP sport coaches.

Mental Health Covers a Continuum From Ill-Being to Well-Being

Despite a growing conversation around topics like mindfulness and well-being in coaching populations (e.g., Hägglund et al., 2022; Longshore & Sachs, 2015; Pawsey et al., 2021), these topics are often still clouded by cultural stigmas, misunderstandings, and misconceptions. From an organizational perspective developing HP coaches is a high-cost investment that also requires extensive experience; however, resources and education to support sustainable well-being are not offered and well-being issues are often not discussed until there is a visible problem. Indeed, the pressures and expectations in HP settings can create a difficult and psychologically unsafe space for coaches (Bentzen, Kenttä, Richter, & Lemyre, 2020).

To better address and evolve critical conversations about supporting those within the HP sport coaching workforce, this paper will aim to have a balanced focus on mental health across the continuum from ill-being to well-being. This continuum is typically dynamic and ranges from a high level of mental health and well-being with the absence of mental ill-health symptoms, to mental illness and ill-being, with severe symptoms that typically can be diagnosed with mental health disorders (World Health Organization, 2022).

HP Work Environment

There is no escaping the fact that competitive sport has evolved into a multibillion-dollar global industry, with a “winning at all costs” culture at the highest level. As a natural consequence, the pressure to constantly develop performance and achieve results has intensified across *all* competitive levels of sport, especially evident at the Olympic, Paralympic, and professional levels since funding, resources, and public attention are largely determined by competitive results. Importantly, while it is the athletes who compete under the spotlights, the burden of performance outcomes is shared; coaches, support staff, and other entourage members (e.g., physical trainers, medical staff, sport scientists; International Olympic Committee, 2021) are all under increasing pressure to “perform” in their roles. Thus, it is critical to better understand the complex and unique nature of the HP context and the stressors related to producing HP results (Cruikshank & Collins, 2012). In particular, sports coaching is a highly demanding and oftentimes exhausting profession (Didymus, 2017) where the HP expectations create a work culture in which long hours and singular focus are the norm. This mindset can create a work–home imbalance that can damage personal relationships as well as personal well-being. Indeed, research has highlighted the multifaceted, conflicting, interpersonal, and professional demands that coaches encounter (e.g., Norris et al., 2017; Olusoga et al., 2009; Thelwell et al., 2008), and the impact of such demands on coaches’ personal and professional lives (e.g., Bentzen et al., 2016b; McNeill et al., 2018; Olusoga et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the particular nature of the HP environment seems to present a significant challenge for coaches’ well-being. The coach’s role in HP contexts is constantly evaluated and under threat, with job insecurity, the threat of firing, and potential funding cuts being perennial concerns (Bentzen, Kenttä, & Lemyre, 2020; Bentzen, Kenttä, Richter, & Lemyre, 2020; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016). In addition, the precariousness of coaches’ continued employment is commonly a public rather than a private affair, with their conduct, decisions, team selections, tactics, and the relationships with their athletes under constant media and public scrutiny.

HP sport systems are fast-paced and complex as they reflect the communities in which they operate (DeBosscher et al., 2006). Meeting the high expectations and demands of the coaching profession can create a sense of always being on duty and needing to “take care of everything,” described as a Superhero Complex by Olusoga and Kenttä (2017). This intense coach identity can lead to individuals feeling compelled to work long and irregular hours, with significant periods being spent away from homes and families (Norris et al., 2017). Work–home interference (Bentzen et al., 2016b) and feelings of isolation and loneliness (Olusoga et al., 2009) are both natural consequences but also create further demands on HP coaches. Specific challenges have also been reported by various minority coaching populations, such as novice coaches making the transition from athlete to coach (Chroni et al., 2020), women HP coaches (Carson et al., 2018; Kenttä et al., 2020), coaches of color (Cunningham, 2021), and para coaches (Bentzen et al., 2021).

Finally, the culture of HP sport is typified by constructs such as toughness, strength, grit, and resilience, all generally positive characteristics, but also ones that make showing vulnerability and engaging in help-seeking behavior more challenging. Indeed, in the face of all the challenges described here already, this hypermasculine environment of HP sport can contribute to coaches’ stress and experiences of burnout (Hägglund, et al., 2019; Kenttä et al., 2020), and encourage coaches to mask emotional difficulties to project an outward appearance of stoicism and control under immense stress (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

Personal and Systemic Consequences of Inadequate Professional Support

Unlike coach well-being, the experience of coach burnout has been examined from multiple theoretical frameworks within the literature (Olusoga et al., 2019). The HP work environment previously described (i.e., job insecurity, media scrutiny, work–home interference, high stress, high pressure) has been associated with work-related burnout (Bentzen et al., 2014; Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). Moreover, the experience of burnout can have far-reaching personal and professional consequences for coaches. In addition to the physical and emotional exhaustion that characterizes the burnout experience, coaches have also reported depressive symptoms, sleep disturbance, alcohol-related issues, negative impacts on familial relationships, and ultimately, withdrawal from the coaching profession (Bentzen et al., 2014, 2016a; Kegelaers et al., 2021; Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017; Roberts et al., 2019), all of which can attract media attention and subsequent negative public narratives, placing further stress on coaches.

In contrast to the rapidly evolving body of published research on mental health problems and psychiatric disorders for athletes, the same literature on coaches’ mental ill-being beyond stress and burnout is scarce. One study with elite-level coaches in New Zealand reported that 14% of coaches experienced at least moderate symptoms of depression based on conducting a cross-sectional online survey using The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale—Revised

to measure symptoms of depression (Kim et al., 2020). Another cross-sectional online study with elite-level coaches from The Netherlands and Belgium reported symptoms of common mental disorders were prevalent, ranging from 39% for depression/anxiety to 19% for distress and adverse alcohol use. This study measured symptoms of depression/anxiety using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire and alcohol consumption using the three-item Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (Kegelaers et al., 2021). Finally, another cross-sectional online study from Australia found more than 40% of coaches from Olympic sports reported mental health symptoms at a level that would warrant professional treatment, but fewer than 6% reported seeking treatment at the time. In this study, mental health symptoms and probable caseness were measured using the 28-item General Health Questionnaire (Pilkington et al., 2022). To our knowledge, so far only one study has reported psychiatric disorders among HP coaches assessed by a licensed caregiver (Åkesdotter et al., 2022). This study reported that co-occurring affective and anxiety disorders were prevalent in a sample of 34 HP coaches who received treatment for psychiatric disorders, with 91% anxiety disorders and 72% stress-related disorders.

Despite a growing conversation about the requirements and responsibilities of the HP coach (Kegelaers et al., 2021; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016), and the importance of the coach within the HP sport system (International Council for Coaching Excellence, 2013), little is known about how organizations work systematically to improve the unpredictable and often chaotic work life of coaches. Research has, however, pointed to the need for greater awareness and increased responsibility of employers in facilitating a more sustainable work situation within the coaching profession (Carson et al., 2019).

Athlete, and by extension coach performance, is more often than not measured by outcome metrics, such as win-loss record or medal tally, and is a primary marker of “success” in the HP environment. Far exceeding the financial incentive to develop healthy and productive work environments for HP coaches, the sport culture at large and those within it need to recognize the responsibility of the HP system to create a psychologically safe, healthy, and sustainable professional identity for HP coaches through clarity of conversation, education, systemic changes, support, and proactive efforts in HP coach education and development programs. The 2021 Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity’s (2021) Professional Standards for the Coach Developer states that the work of the coach developer should “always be characterized by prioritising the health and well-being of the coach” (p. 4). Ultimately, within the HP environment, a professional culture that fails to adequately prepare and support essential stakeholders, such as the coach, is not only psychologically unhealthy but also less likely to result in sustainable coaching careers (e.g., Cotton & Hart, 2003; Fletcher & Scott, 2010).

Noteworthy, within the context of HP sport, the stressors and pressures experienced by the coach are unlikely to change. Striving for peak performance in highly competitive environments will always require high levels of time, energy, and resource investment. Striving for performance success and surviving in this highly contested and demanding context has demonstrable physical and mental consequences for individual well-being. It seems imperative that concern and caring for HP coaches is prioritized. The following recommendations are offered to support ongoing well-being efforts, manage ill-being concerns, and encourage a shift in culture away from the dominant performance narratives and toward personal growth, more values-based conceptualizations of success, and sustainable mental health in coaching. We argue that a large

part of the responsibility for the following recommendations should be at the organizational level, but all stakeholders and individual members in the HP sport community need to contribute and use their voices. Moreover, we have deliberately chosen not to provide examples that could be considered too specific, since best practice in one context does not necessarily fit across all possible domains. Importantly, we believe that targeting the HP sport community in this paper has the potential to accomplish a meaningful change in stigma, attention, and resources that might also benefit coaches at other levels. This is the case, simply because support systems and good practice at the highest level often lead and influence the development at many other levels in competitive sport.

Recommendations

Focus on the Full Mental Health Continuum as a Basis for All Practical Recommendations for HP Coaches

To develop a comprehensive mental health plan for coaches, it is essential to be clear about the purpose and to clearly define mental health. The overall aim should be to increase the attention toward HP coaches and their mental health, while considering the full mental health continuum including well-being and ill-being/mental disorders. Given the focus on athlete mental health within HP contexts, it is important to develop mental health literacy (see) (Gorzynski et al., 2021) that specifically targets coaches and the unique challenges, risk factors, and resources associated with HP coaching. This mental health literacy should be integrated into traditional education and ongoing professional development for coaches and at the organizational/National Governing Body level.

Reducing Stigma Regarding Mental Health Struggles Among (HP) Coaches

Adopting a focus on mental health literacy can enhance mental health knowledge, and help-seeking attitudes and intentions. However, focusing only on mental health literacy has been criticized for failing to address stigma and having a limited effect on lowering the threshold for help-seeking (Bu et al., 2020; Poucher et al., 2021). To reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues, organizations must take a lead and be proactive in creating a culture that is psychologically safe and that facilitates open and honest discussion, where well-being, ill-being, and specific mental health issues are normalized and considered everyday challenges to be addressed rather than problems to hide. A psychologically safe environment refers to shared perceptions that it is safe to show authentic self and psychological health and safety are prioritized in teams and organizations (Vella et al., 2022). This sort of environment would encourage coaches to display vulnerability and let go of their potentially damaging “superhero” identities. An example of how to approach this challenge through a workshop setting is described in a recent paper titled, “Starting a Conversation About Vulnerability in Elite Sport” (Hägglund et al., 2023). Several sport organizations (e.g., UK Sport, National Collegiate Athletic Association, United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, and International Olympic Committee) have issued clear statements regarding their intentions to place athlete mental health high on their agendas. Such statements could be adapted and revised to target the HP coach and thus serve as a valuable starting point. Importantly, all efforts that aim to reduce the stigma around the mental ill-being of coaches

also need to consider additional strategies that lower the threshold for help-seeking for coaches.

Coach Education Should Increase Awareness, Knowledge, and Understanding of Mental Health Resources and the Specific Challenges of HP Coaching

We identified key areas that sport organizations and all others who are engaged in coach education need to consider in designing and delivering professional education content and in providing opportunities to prevent ill-being and support the well-being of sport coaches. It should be noted that our intention is not to disregard the value of experiential and informal learning. For example, informal mentoring could have great value in developing an understanding of specific challenges in coaching, but more systematic and evidence-based mentoring programs that explicitly target coach needs will likely be more effective (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021).

Acknowledge Stress From Job Insecurity, Conflictual Relationships, and Work–Home Interference

It is important to acknowledge that for many coaches, the uncertain, insecure, and precarious nature of employment in HP settings creates a constant strain. As job insecurity is a context-specific stressor, it may also put a strain on their professional relationships. This may be exacerbated by both political and performance pressures that are often beyond a coach's control. The development and communication of clear and transparent policies and expectations that are based upon realistic assessments of resources are essential for creating a professional culture that protects an individual's well-being. While work–home interference has previously been considered an issue affecting predominantly women coaches, it is important to recognize that the challenges of combining HP coaching with family life also have an impact on male HP coaches and their mental health (Sisjord et al., 2022). Coach education and development programs that prepare coaches for specific challenges such as finding a sustainable harmony between their work and home lives, dealing with conflictual relationships, as well as the constant threat of *and the actual reality of* losing their jobs (Bentzen et al., 2020) are needed.

Increase Awareness About Career Transitions

While attention has been paid to the transition out of sport at the end of an athlete's career (see Agnew, 2022), there has been limited focus on the athlete-to-coach transitions within the same sport, particularly within HP sport (Rynne, 2014). The impact and experience of this transition varies and can be influenced by the individual's preparation, access to resources needed to prepare, and the support they receive both to prepare and once in their new role (see Blackett et al., 2018; Chroni et al., 2020). Unfortunately, these transitions are often un- or undersupported, creating additional stress, particularly for novice coaches who lack essential skills and knowledge that would facilitate job satisfaction and performance (Chroni et al., 2020). Organizations and federations need to increase awareness and knowledge regarding strategies that support preparation for going into sport coaching as well as provide education, resources, and ongoing professional development support for transitioning coaches (Chroni & Dieffenbach, 2021).

In addition, the range of within sport transitions (Chroni & Dieffenbach, 2021) from lower to higher levels of competitions (e.g., going from national to international, or junior to senior), from

assistant to head coach, transitions between sports, and ultimately transitions out of sport, also require attention and support (Kenttä et al., 2016). New contexts create new contextual demands for the coach that may require a reassessment and realignment of existing resources for mitigating and managing the stress, or the development of new ones. While the recognition of the contextualized, within-sport transitions coaching professionals experience has been underexamined in the literature to date, an upcoming special edition of the *International Sport Coaching Journal* will present a range of evidence-informed applications and research-based insights regarding both experiences and best practices. Organizations and federations need to develop and provide guidelines for support, education, resources, and mentoring programs that can effectively support these transitions (Bentzen et al., 2014; Lefebvre et al., 2020).

Resources and Support for Coaches From Minoritized Groups

There is evidence that being part of a minoritized group within a system can have a negative impact on well-being and mental ill-health outcomes (Symons et al., 2017). In the HP coaching community, examples of minoritized and marginalized groups include women, coaches of color, coaches with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ coaches. These groups in the vocation of coaching should be acknowledged and appropriately supported at individual and group levels. Research from a minority stress perspective (Meyer, 2003) indicates that support from and connection to social networks can mitigate some of the effects of minority stress on psychological well-being. Coach developers and coach educators should seek to understand the impacts of minority stress as well as the historical barriers to mental health help-seeking among minoritized groups. Organizations and/or National Governing Bodies should also take steps toward providing access to or creating coaching networks for coaches from minoritized and marginalized groups in addition to developing guidelines that strive to increase diversity and inclusion among HP coaches.

Formal Coach Education Has an Important Role

The professional preparation for HP coaches varies to a large extent across organizations, sport cultures, and countries. In some settings, success as an elite athlete is sufficient for the within-sport transition to coaching, while at the other end of the spectrum, academic or specialized degrees are required (e.g., Milistedt et al., 2014). Across most HP sport contexts, however, the professional socialization into sport coaching is commonly experiential rather than formal (Blackett et al., 2020; Rynne, 2014). In settings where formal professional preparation is provided, the traditional emphasis is on the skills and knowledge necessary to support athlete health and development. We argue that it is crucial to also emphasize self-care strategies for the coach and skills to negotiate stress or manage well-being. Professional preparation, whether before hiring or as part of the onboarding process, provides an opportunity not only to support occupational socialization and organizational expectations but also to support the development of inter- and intrapersonal knowledge and competencies (Turnidge & Côté, 2017). These competencies are critical to professional development but also fundamental to self-care and mental health. Finally, a promising line of research that may be adapted to more formal coach education is the use of various mindfulness and self-compassion programs, still predominantly targeting athletes, that aim to build resources valuable for well-being (Cormier et al., 2023).

Provision of Mental Health Care Should Include Screening, Clear Signposting, Treatment, and Prevention

The quality of health care depends on the most appropriate care, individualized, and contextualized in terms of time and place, being provided by appropriately trained providers (Purcell et al., 2019; Van Slingerland et al., 2019). Development of a mental health support system for coaches within the HP context might benefit from being guided in each step by considering the construct of “Appropriateness,” that is, the perceived fit or relevance of a healthcare intervention in a particular context for a particular target audience (Peters et al., 2013).

Create Self-Screening Mental Health Sites for HP Coaches

Once again, efforts in research and practice have focused on developing screening approaches exclusively for athletes (see Gouttebauge et al., 2021) and describing best practice of assessment and treatment of athletes with mental health disorders (Moesch et al., 2018).

The creation of self-screening mental health websites/resources for coaches is of vital importance for the protection and maintenance of coach mental health and well-being. Such self-screening sites should be implemented as an additional service to specialized sports psychological clinics. These sites should have the primary aim to inform and increase knowledge about mental health in the profession and to lower the threshold for help-seeking. Finally, screening is important since the early detection and treatment of psychiatric disorders lead to a better prognosis.

Provide Clear Signposting and Confidential Referral Pathways/Networks

It is important to provide clear signposting and confidential referral pathways/networks when aiming to lower the threshold for help-seeking. Most specialized sports medicine clinics that currently exist have been developed based on the needs of athletes, and provide few if any resources for coaches. Fortunately, more comprehensive models have begun to emerge, such as those found in Sweden (Stockholm and Malmö) and Canada (Ottawa), that provide psychiatric health care for both coaches and athletes from HP settings (Durand-Bush & Van Slingerland, 2021; Kenttä & Hyland, 2021). Organizations need to consider the value of creating or partnering with programs that have the capacity to provide comprehensive and confidential care for those on the front lines of performance as well as those who support the performers.

Mental Health Professional (Sport Psychology Professional) Treating Mental Struggles Among HP Coaches

Every coach should have access to a sport psychology professional with clinical training. Having access to a mental health provider with contextual knowledge about HP settings will support their ability to relate clinical treatment to performance in sport contexts. More specifically, it is important to choose an appropriate and evidence-based health care intervention that considers the value and importance of contextual knowledge. Appropriateness has been described as the perceived fit of an intervention in a particular context for a particular target audience (Peters et al., 2013). It has been argued that a sport psychologist with a dual competence to work with both clinical treatment and performance enhancement will provide more appropriate and valued support in comparison to caregivers that lack contextual knowledge and experience.

Mental Health Professional (Sport Psych) Preventing Mental Struggles Among HP Coaches

Sports psychology consultants and sports medicine teams should be encouraged and supported in taking a proactive rather than reactive role in dealing with mental health issues among HP coaching staff. Currently, the focus of support teams within athletic settings, including the sports medicine team focus, is on athletes with little to no consideration given to the other central performers in the HP environment, the coaches. Organizational management that supports HP and achievement has been found to be most successful when systems are created that recognize and show interest in those social actors who are central to the system. Additionally, providing coaches with both the skills and opportunities needed to navigate their roles and responsibilities within the context of the organization creates opportunities for proactively and reactively recognizing and managing challenges and threats to well-being (Wagstaff, 2016).

Organizational Responsibility for Supporting Coach Mental Health

The conversation about mental well-being and self-care often focuses on the skills and resources, as well as the responsibility of the individual. However, the organizations and federations that employ coaches need to consider both their obligation and duty to support and protect those who serve and work within the sport system; a responsibility to show they care through policy and actions.

Stakeholders, Policymakers, and Coaching Organizations Should Promote Occupational Well-Being and Consider Working Conditions for Coaching Staff

Coaching groups have an opportunity and an obligation to serve as the voice for the community of coaching professionals and can open essential conversations about working conditions and resource needs that individuals alone often do not have the power or platform to do. Developing and advocating for “labor laws” that address sustainable working conditions for coaches and promoting occupational well-being should be primary goals for the stakeholders, policymakers, organizations, and unions that have the system power to do so. A basic starting point would be to develop guidelines for best practices that target vacation, holiday, and the ability to have sufficient recovery in a culture that often lacks boundaries for work and expects 24/7 engagement.

Sports Organizations and Other Employers Need to Take Responsibility for Occupational Health

Globally, even before the pandemic, conversations about the broader issues related to work–home boundaries and balance can be seen in both the academic literature and public discussions (e.g., Bird, 2016; Kobayashi & Middlemiss, 2009). In response to these concerns and growing cultural expectations and valuations of personal well-being, countries and companies have begun considering and passing laws and mandates to protect workers from exploitation and overwork that damages personal well-being. HP sports settings are not immune from the concerns related to the negative impact of occupational stress on sport coaches and others (e.g., Hanton et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 2021). Further conversations to both raise awareness and discuss leadership responsibilities for supporting and protecting workers are needed within the HP sport settings to reduce sources of organizational stress that have been associated with negative short- and long-term health consequences.

Summary

The coach's role, particularly in HP sport, can be extremely demanding, challenging, and stressful. Research has consistently highlighted the multiple, varied, overlapping demands placed on coaches in HP sport, emanating from both the highly charged nature of the performance environment itself and from the culture of HP sport that emphasizes emotional control and resilience at the expense of vulnerability and help-seeking. Research has also clearly highlighted the deleterious impacts of these demands on coach well-being and mental health outcomes, and on the sustainability of coaching as a career.

Coach-level interventions alone can no longer be thought of as a sufficient fix for tackling the complex issue of coach well-being and ill-being. Not only do such interventions, usually aimed at improving stress management, teaching mindfulness, or developing specific psychological "skills," fail to address the systemic, organizational-level factors that underpin poor mental health and ill-being in coaching, we contend that they can exacerbate the problem, by inadvertently blaming the coach for their own lack of self-care ability.

While coach self-care is still an important part of the well-being picture, the responsibility for coach well-being should be shared. Thus, we argue for more systemic, organizational-level approaches to enhancing and maintaining coach mental health and well-being. We emphasize the need for organizational-level interventions to reduce the stigma associated with poor mental health, for coach education to acknowledge the demands of job insecurity, career transitions, and minority stress, and for tangible mental health support in the form of screening and access to appropriate support. Moreover, while we highlight coach education in these areas as crucial, we also emphasize the education of coach educators, coach developers, and other key stakeholders so that they might be better placed to support the coaches for whom they have a duty of care.

We suggest that research is also needed to explore and evaluate organizational-level interventions aimed at improving coach well-being and that funding should be directed toward such research. Studies exploring specific populations such as coaches from minoritized groups or more cross-cultural research might also tease out the nuances of different performance environments and their impacts on coaches mental health and well-being, ultimately leading to a broader understanding and the provision of more bespoke intervention strategies.

This paper serves as a concise summary, not only of the intense nature of HP sport but also of the resultant mental health implications for sport coaches. However, it is imperative to venture beyond individual/coach-level mental health and well-being provision, and the comprehensive set of evidence-based recommendations for systems/organizational-level change provided here is intended to enhance the sustainability of coaching as a profession.

Note

1. The World Health Organization conceptualizes mental health as a continuum from poor mental health to good mental health. This is the most widely adopted conceptualization, used extensively within the extant literature. However, to use language that is explicit and easy to understand by stakeholders, organizations, coaches, and their entourage members, we have deliberately chosen well-being and ill-being as synonyms for good and poor mental health and will use them throughout the remainder of the paper.

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Author Biographies

Göran Kenttä's research is focused on elite sports with special regard to both athletes and elite coaches. His work is primarily aimed at highlighting factors that promote and hinder sustainable performance development and thus sustainable sports careers for coaches and athletes. More specifically, Dr. Kenttä's research has focused on, among other things, mental health/ill-health, the balance between stress and recovery, as well as mindfulness and self-compassion.

Kristen Dieffenbach's areas of educational, research, and consultation concentration include coaching education, professional issues in coaching, ethics in coaching, performance enhancement, athlete talent development, and understanding and preventing under-recovery.

Marte Bentzen works as an associate professor at the Department of Sport and Social Sciences, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, and as an Associate Professor II at the School of Business, University of South-Eastern Norway. Her research is focused on processes related to the enhancement of well-being and prevention of ill-being within occupational psychology in general and among HP sport coaches in particular.

Melissa Thompson is a professor in the School of Kinesiology and Nutrition where she teaches courses in Sport Psychology and Sport Coaching. She is a Certified Mental Performance Consultant through the Association of Applied Sport Psychology as well as a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist. Her primary area of research interest is coach development with specific emphasis on the internship process and the development of coaching ethics.

Jean Côté's research interests focus on the developmental and psychosocial factors that affect sport and physical activity performance and participation. He is interested in the complex interaction of children, parents, and coaches in the development of talent and in the achievement of personal excellence. The purpose of his research is to identify variables and behaviors within families, performers, and coaches that create favorable conditions for excellence and participation in sports.

Cliff Mallett is a leading international scholar in sport psychology and coaching. His program of research has informed both policy and practice in sports coaching, in both the youth development and elite sport sectors—nationally and internationally. He has published extensively in sport psychology and coaching to foster an evidence-based approach to coach learning, development, and subsequent practice to foster positive outcomes for all actors in the sport setting.

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