

## **Sustainable High-Performance Coaching: Recommendations from an International Expert Round- Table Summit**

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# **Sustainable High-Performance Coaching: Recommendations from an International Expert**

## **Round-Table Summit**

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### **Abstract (200 words)**

High-performance (HP) coaching has been described as a potentially unsustainable profession. Limited research has explored the potential benefits of well-being and stress management interventions aimed at the individual coach level, but there is a lack of guidance within the literature on *how* to support and enhance the sustainability of the HP coaching profession. To address this, we gathered a panel of 14 international experts (i.e., the authors, including Olympic and Paralympic coaches, performance directors, program directors, and scholars with extensive research and practice experience) for a two-day round-table summit to discuss, reflect on, and co-create recommendations on how to develop programs to support high-performance coaches (HPCs) to be more sustainable and successful in terms of performance, well-being, and engagement. Data from the summit included audio recordings and field notes collected from whole- and small-group conversations and presentations, and were analyzed and organized into themes representing recommendations for future program content (*understanding the coaching context; self-awareness, self-care, and self-compassion; establishing values and committed actions*) and program delivery (*logistics and delivery; creative and flexible resources; organizational responsibility; hoping to perform versus prepared to perform*). Sport psychology practitioners, program directors, coach educators and developers, and coaches can benefit from considering these recommendations when creating programs aimed at well-being and sustainability in HP coaching.

**Keywords:** Coach development, Intervention, Think tank, Elite Sports, Well-being

#### Disclosure Statement

*The authors report there are no competing interests to declare*

#### Data Availability Statement

*The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research and the positions that participants currently hold within sport organizations, supporting data is not available.*

#### Ethics/Consent

*Since this paper does not report a live research study with human participants, it is exempt from ethics review. However, participants gave consent for identifying information to be included in the manuscript.*

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## **Sustainable High-Performance Coaching: Recommendations from an International Expert Round-Table Summit**

The stressful nature of high-performance (HP) coaching has been well-documented (Norris et al., 2017), and the HP coaching profession itself has been described as potentially “unsustainable” due to the challenges often experienced by coaches (Hägglund, Kenttä et al., 2024). The impact of complex demands on HP coaches' well-being and mental health outcomes have also been clearly highlighted in the literature (Kenttä et al., 2024; Pilkington et al., 2022). Moreover, a recent surge in research addressing the unsustainable nature of HP coaching (e.g., Higham et al., 2024; Kenttä et al., 2024; Simova et al., 2024) has prompted calls for organizations to enact their duty of care to their employees to prioritize coach well-being and create sustainable work conditions (see Kenttä et al., 2024).

While the extensive literature base on stress and burnout in sports coaching calls for the prioritization of coach well-being and coach mental health (see Olusoga et al., 2019), there is perhaps less clarity over *how* practitioners and organizations might seek to support and enhance the sustainability of the HP coaching profession. A limited number of studies has provided some direction, with researchers pointing to mindfulness, self-awareness, self-compassion, and vulnerability (Hägglund, Kenttä et al., 2024), exploration and negotiation of personal values and identity (Simova et al., 2024), and recovery (Eccles et al., 2023, Higham et al., 2024), as potential “intervention” strategies. Altogether, these interventions are largely coach-focused (although the role of organizations is also highlighted), target only a limited portion of the challenges coaches encounter, and tend to insufficiently consider the feasibility and longevity of intervention delivery in fast-paced, results-oriented, HP contexts. To elaborate, these individual-level “interventions” aim to equip coaches with important skills to manage stress and practice self-care in the HP environment, yet going forward more systemic, organizational-level approaches to enhancing and maintaining coach well-being are also

needed. For example, Kenttä et al. (2024) argued that, (a) systems-led approaches should aim to reduce the stigma associated with poor mental health and acknowledge the demands of job-insecurity, work-home interference, career transitions, and minority stress, and, (b) that the education of other key stakeholders (e.g., coach educators, coach developers, organizational leaders) should be an essential part of programs aimed at supporting HPCs

Existing science-practice recommendations for practitioners working with coaches are largely research driven (i.e., derived from academic research into coaching stress, burnout, and well-being), rather than being initiated by coaches and/or being coach-led. While we value these research driven recommendations, we also argue that it is coaches who are experts in their profession and in navigating the high-performance coaching context, and so collaborative work is essential. Specifically, to achieve a more significant impact (e.g., making a difference in sports and coaching settings) when conducting coach research, it has been argued that scientists should pay attention to needs assessment and contextual constraints (Gould, 2016). Ensuring that programs targeting coach well-being and sustainability are evidence-based is fundamental, yet co-creation with end-users and stakeholders can provide different perspectives that have the potential to better meet context specific needs. Hence, as authors, we argue for the importance of co-creating recommendations with joint input from coaches, practitioners, researchers, and performance directors/organizational leaders. Working collaboratively in this way will be vital in creating programs that are acceptable and relevant to the coach, comprehensive, practical, feasible, sustainable, and effective. In line with the opportunities offered through co-creation, and in line with the approach taken by Henriksen et al. (2024), we gathered 14 expert participants (five women and nine men from multiple countries) for a two-day round-table summit in Stockholm, Sweden, focused on how to develop programs<sup>1</sup> to best support HPCs to be more

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<sup>1</sup> Any intervention, community of practice, educational program, or system change designed to support HPCs

sustainable and successful in terms of performance, well-being, and engagement, and by whom such programs can be facilitated. Our approach to co-creation was underpinned by principles aligned with integrated knowledge translation, a process which addresses the “know-do gap” by actively involving researchers and end users in the creation and production of knowledge (Leggat et al., 2023). Seven participants had extensive coaching experience from the Olympic and Paralympic Games (e.g., current/former head-coaches, performance scientist coach, head of winter sport, sport and development director, head of coach development program at the National Olympic Committee) and seven were scholars with extensive experience from both research and applied practice with HP sport coaches and mental health (See Table 1). It is important to note that our backgrounds (i.e., although working internationally, the authors of this paper originate from and predominantly work in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) regions) might shape our individual and collective perspectives on the current topic.

The round-table summit, comprised two distinct “phases.” Specifically, we focused first on content (e.g., skills, competencies, knowledge that might support sustainability) and second on delivery format (e.g., how might the previously discussed content be learned/acquired/developed during a HP coaching career). Participants worked variously in pairs and small groups, presented ideas to each other and engaged in critical discussions in small- and whole-group settings. With consent, audio recordings and field notes were gathered, transcribed, and analyzed by the first, second, and last (co-ordinating) authors, and the data were organized into themes from the two phases of the expert round-table summit. These themes represented the recommendations of the expert panel and were circulated to the whole group for feedback. Several minor revisions were made before the authors reached consensus on the final set of recommendations presented below.

### **Recommendations and Key Conclusions from the Expert Summit**

The analysis is reported using two headings, “Recommendations for Program Content” and “Recommendations for Program Delivery.” Under each heading, themes reflecting the essence of the expert discussions are presented. Addressing limitations of previous literature in this area, the panel considered the range of coach-focused and organisational challenges faced, and the feasibility and practicality of intervention delivery in high-performance contexts. As such, while, the two overarching themes are presented separately, it is important to consider them (and sub-themes) as interdependent, informing one another as key elements of a holistic approach to sustainable HP coaching.

### ***Recommendations for Program Content***

**Understanding the HP coaching context: “You have to sit in the dark for a while to enjoy the summer.”** Across the whole expert panel there was consensus that awareness of the HP context stood out as fundamental to understanding challenges related to sustainable high-performance coaching. Thus, we propose that an important first step in any program aimed at supporting sustainability in the coaching profession is to address the realities of the HP coaching context. However, rather than merely exploring the typical personal and organizational demands of HP coaching, we suggest openly addressing the pervasive demands and stressors that can often lead to differentiated experiences of suffering and mental health challenges among HPCs. This is not to normalize ill-being as a necessary part of the coaching role, but rather to validate suffering, mental health challenges, and ill-being (i.e., “you have to sit in the dark”) and to emphasize the value of opening up conversations about vulnerability and responding to ill-being in an appropriate and timely manner. Challenging the extant stigma relating to mental health and help-seeking in coaching was discussed as one of the most important but difficult aspects of fostering sustainable HPC well-being. Thus, the dominant performance narratives and the proclivity to adopt a “Superhero Complex” (i.e., an unhealthy sense of responsibility, lack of self-care, and masking emotions, Olusoga & Kenttä,



2017) should be discussed and challenged, along with education on the compatibility of recovery, vulnerability, and performance within HP environments.

It is vital within programs to explore what sustainability (and therefore also unsustainability) might look like, personally and in a particular HP coaching context. This can be done by discussing and sharing potential “dark” periods in coaching when well-being might suffer (e.g., isolation, performance and motivation dips, misaligned values, work-home interference, post-Olympic blues, and lack of recovery after “major” events), while also highlighting the dangers of glorifying constant struggle. Trying to find out how long one can endure unsustainability may come at a significant cost. HPCs might also benefit from exploring how their own ambitions and investments in coaching change across the lifespan, and how they fit within and shape their own experiences of the contexts they work in.

**Self-awareness, self-care and, self-compassion: “Take care of yourself every day, not one day here and there.”** Self-awareness is a foundational psychological skill for coaches, and programs should support life-long learning and the development of this intra-individual competence that underpins other vital psychological skills (e.g., self-reflection, relations, and coping). In this context, HPCs should be supported to learn how to effectively monitor and reflect on their levels of energy, sleep quality, mood, quality of motivation, their sense of coaching performance, and levels of overall well-being (e.g., via the use of technology). Programs should allow coaches to consider and reflect upon the impacts of significant life events (e.g., starting a family) and career stages (e.g., transitions from aspiring to professional coach) on their demands, responses, strategies for coping, and values, and the subsequent impact on how they approach the role.

Organizations have an ethical duty to care for their HPCs, but part of coaches’ ethical responsibility must be that they care for themselves and take steps to protect their own well-being. Building on self-awareness, coaches should be encouraged and provided the

opportunity to reflect on their own needs (i.e., self-compassion in practice), and to create a periodized plan to maintain well-being. It has been argued that modifying the language of self-compassion and self-care might be appropriate to avoid connotations of weakness or softness in high-performance environments, thus improving engagement in such practices. However, we argue that language has the power to transform culture, and that using accurate language is not only accepted by HPCs, but is important to shape a culture where coaches can understand the link between self-compassion and performance (Hägglund et al., 2025). Programs should engage coaches, leaders of organizations, and professionals working to support coaches, to reflect on everyday habits that might facilitate well-being, rather than focusing on sporadic well-being activities. Importantly, programs should support coaches and organizations to create a healthy and psychologically safe culture where coaches can recognize their vulnerability, disclose any challenges, and practice self-compassion.

**Establishing values and committed actions (setting boundaries): “Medals don’t make up for a lack of joy!”** We argue that the use of values and committed actions and how they are conceptualized within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can support sustainability by promoting behaviour change aligned with personal values. In brief, ACT is about cultivating openness, mindfulness, and engagement to increase psychological flexibility and promote behavior change consistent with personal values (e.g., committed actions aligned with personal values. In this sense, values reflect what is significant and meaningful in one’s life and the type of person one wants to be. Building on self-awareness, programs aimed at facilitating sustainable HP coaching should encourage exploration of values inside and outside of sport (e.g., relationships, health, recreation, professional development, spirituality). We contend that a deepened understanding of values and sources of meaning for coaches allows for more effective prioritization and communication of self-care needs. To thrive in a HP coaching role, and, in turn, to improve the overall quality of coaching, coach-athlete

relationships, and performance, coaches must be enabled to live and work in line with their personal values.

Values misalignment (i.e., a clash between personal values such as athlete development, and organizational or culturally expected values such as winning at all costs) can be a threat to coach well-being (for comprehensive examples of this, see Simova et al., 2024), yet it is also an inherent part of the coaching experience. It is not the sole reserve of the coach to establish and negotiate boundaries. Sustainable coaching programs should engage program leaders, coach developers, and sport psychology professionals, as well as individual coaches, to broaden the overall understanding of the importance of values and the potential negative impacts of value conflict and values being compromised, while acknowledging that the nature of HP sport means that compromises are often required. For coaches, being able to find joy, meaning, and quality of motivation in their everyday work/life is one of the keys to sustainability, so programs should facilitate open, honest, and frank discussion between coaches and organizations, allowing clarity around values negotiations and the mutual establishment and protection of boundaries around work (Hägglund, Kenttä et al., 2024).

**Communication and connection: “Step away from the fear of sharing.”** Being able to establish, communicate, and negotiate boundaries requires a well-developed and refined set of interpersonal skills/competencies. Programs for sustainable HP coaching might therefore seek to work not only with coaches but again with organizational leaders and other members of sports organizations who might be involved in such discussions on interpersonal and communication strategies. Moving beyond communication as a tool for enhancing coach-athlete relationships and performance, communication in this sense is also about developing coach-coach and coach-leader relationships based on compassion and care. We posit that this will allow for the building and maintenance of a HP-coaching community in which HPCs can embrace vulnerability, move away from the fear of sharing, and lower the threshold for help

seeking. Essentially, emphasis should be placed on how the display of vulnerability may support the process of developing trust within teams. Thus, facilitating a psychologically safe environment where everybody feels they have a voice (and can use it), resulting in enhanced communication and connection. Moreover, coaches should be advised of and resourced with opportunities to develop their own support networks outside of their own sports, which means sport organizations or governing bodies might consider working collaboratively to improve the coaching support they offer.

Consideration should also be given to the potential barriers that high-performance environments pose to trust, openness, and sharing. Highly competitive environments can create an atmosphere of distrust, insecurity, and caution (e.g., absence of psychological safety), especially among coaches who might be in a precarious position, competing for jobs and resources, and these environmental constraints to communication should be acknowledged. In addition, programs should equip HPCs with the skills to be able to effectively organize, manage, and delegate responsibility within their teams (while letting go of unnecessary control and avoiding micro-managing). It should not be assumed that coaches naturally excel at these leadership and management skills, and specific training in these areas might do much to alleviate stressors associated with work overload, help coaches more effectively manage both major and minor crises within the team and media, facilitate the normalization of help-seeking, and reduce the tendency for coaches to develop a “Superhero Complex” (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

**Performance as a coach: “Are you measured in medals or not?”** A truism of HP coaching is that coaches are, more often than not, evaluated, hired, and fired based on someone else’s performance (e.g., their athletes or financial management of their organization). HPCs are judged on how their athletes perform, but programs aimed at facilitating sustainable HP coaching should allow and encourage coaches to explore other

more nuanced factors by which they can monitor and evaluate their own coaching performance beyond win/loss records. In this regard, psychoeducation regarding the complex nature of performance as related to objective (win-loss records) and subjective (coach ratings of own performance), parameters as well as short- and long-term parameters (and sometimes acknowledging a touch of pure luck) might be valuable. In addition to the coach's own exploration of what is important for them in terms of their own performance, programs might also include team-, organization-, or system-wide discussions on appropriate key performance indicators for coaches (e.g., ability to make critical decisions under pressure or create a psychologically safe environment for athletes). Leaders should be involved in collaboratively agreeing on more subjective indicators of coaching performance. A greater balance between the drive and attention for objective success (which is ultimately based on traditional performance outcomes) and the pursuit of a more appropriate performance portfolio that better reflects markers of successful coaching performance, might be important for mitigating the negative effects of coaches' often self-imposed performance pressures.

### ***Recommendations for Program Delivery***

**Logistics and delivery.** One vital aspect of program delivery is to carefully weigh the strengths and weaknesses of online programs against in-person meetings and to explore the possibility of creating hybrid solutions. A hybrid approach can enhance accessibility while also fostering opportunities for face-to-face interactions, which may support psychological safety and encourage sharing among participants. The in-person aspect of creating a psychologically safe space within the group may be even more important if the HPCs do not previously know each other. As such, when deciding on the delivery format, it is important to consider the nature of the groups that will participate (i.e., existing groups of coaches who already work together, groups of coaches unfamiliar with each other at the outset, or a combination).

During the round-table discussions, the significance of a strong start to a program was seen as crucial for engagement among HPCs. For example, and if feasible, organizing a one-to two-day introductory session, such as a lunch-to-lunch format (i.e., a 24-hour period with opportunities for formal and informal meetings and conversations), might serve to effectively introduce the topics and objectives, and provide time for participants to connect with one another. This initial gathering might also facilitate a sense of connectedness and promote openness among coaches. Another valuable strategy is to begin with an assessment tool (e.g., daily energy and mood assessments, Hägglund, Kenttä et al., 2024) over the course of a week, with the facilitator providing coaches with instant feedback and reflections to enhance engagement on the topic of sustainability. Nevertheless, program developers must remain realistic about the time commitments required from HPCs, considering the employment status of the coach and resources provided. Coaches often value “learning on the job,” and program developers should creatively explore opportunities to integrate these programs into existing coach development activities or coach education, or incorporate components into training camps for coaches already collaborating.

**Creative and flexible resources for learning and development.** As alluded to above, awareness of the HP coaching context is vital to developing a set of skills/competencies that support sustainability, and during the round table discussions, it was illuminated that this sort of knowledge lends itself to a combination of psychoeducation and more experiential learning. To elaborate, program developers might want to consider using creative resources such as cases with dilemmas, video clips, and poems highlighting core themes of navigating the HP coaching context to spark reflections and discussions (Hägglund, Wagstaff et al., 2024). In addition, inviting experienced HPCs to deliver part of the content and share personal narratives of negotiating sustainability throughout their career creates an opportunity for them to mentor and act as role models in these programs. Building further on the value of learning

from other HPCs, the need for peer support was deemed important by the participants in the round-table discussions, and the two most vital tools for this were, (a) creating structured mentorship with a clear focus on growth and sustainability rather than technical expertise, and, (b) the development of communities of practice with coaches aiming to support sustainable coaching.

While we recognize the need for program structure, we also encourage program developers to seek to create opportunities for individually tailored programs. These sorts of bespoke programs could be built by having different modules that could be thought of as a library of resources covering relevant topics that HPCs or teams of HPCs can choose based on their needs and areas that create meaning for them. Also, incorporating the use of sports technology for self-monitoring (e.g., smartwatches with health and well-being apps that might track, for example, Heart Rate Variability or the duration and quality of sleep), has the potential to build a foundation for a coach to build their own program by enhancing self-awareness of mental well-being, identifying needs, and recognizing early signs of negative trends. Finally, it is important to highlight the benefits that co-creation can bring, as feedback from coaches, practitioners, and scientists on the feasibility of programme delivery (at any stage of development) will be impactful. Importantly, this will also support the development of effective programs targeting underrepresented groups among HPCs (e.g., women, coaches of colour, coaches with disabilities) by illuminating cultural norms and structures affecting sustainability among traditionally minoritized groups in elite sports contexts.

**Organizational responsibility.** It is vital that programs targeting the individual do not absolve organizations of their duty of care towards HPCs. Throughout the round-table discussions a significant need was highlighted for organizations and systems to take responsibility and be an active partner in the development and implementation of programs, and essentially lead a cultural shift that promotes sustainability and mental well-being among

HPCs and reduces the dominance of the performance narrative. It is fundamental for organizations to take meaningful action beyond virtue signalling, and instead ensure that there are ring-fenced human and financial resources available to build and support communities of practice that targets well-being and sustainability in the HP coaching profession (see, for a community of practice approach in sport, Culver & Trudel., 2008). Given the notable absence of programs focused on sustainable coaching, and the ethical obligation to advocate for the well-being of all sport performers, it is critical to initiate action and cultivate momentum. Indeed, there was consensus that there is a pressing need to foster a cultural shift towards a more sustainable HP coaching landscape, recognizing the loss of valuable knowledge and expertise when HPCs exit the profession prematurely due to unsustainable work-life harmony, burnout, and/or mental health challenges. In light of this, it is important when developing programs to clarify at the outset who “owns” the program and who is responsible for implementation, evaluations, and updates when those are needed. We argue that this is best achieved through collaboration between HPCs, with the support of coaching and psychology scientist-practitioners, in conjunction with their respective teams, organizations, and systems.

**Hoping to perform versus prepared to perform as an HPC: Fostering buy-in.** The motivational factors that will encourage HPCs and other key stakeholders to engage with these sustainability initiatives must be considered. In our round-table discussions, the concept of sustainability literacy emerged, suggesting that the capacity for sustainable practices could be conceptualized as a critical competency within the broader skill set required for effective coaching. To elaborate, instead of “hoping to perform and to survive,” a coach could move towards being “prepared to perform and to sustain,” both over time and at specific major events by learning sustainability skills. Further, the integration of performance planning into coach development curricula can serve to elucidate how attention to personal well-being - through practices such as self-compassion and recovery strategies - can bolster coaching



performance. The fundamental question remains: how can we cultivate buy-in among HPCs that ignites their curiosity regarding a newly developed program? Is the overarching objective to address pressing issues, such as inadequate recovery practices or to better equip coaches to manage stress and mitigate burnout? Alternatively, does the program adopt a proactive stance aimed at enhancing mental well-being and supporting overall performance? While these goals may indeed be interrelated, clarifying the primary goal of the program is crucial. It is imperative to communicate explicitly how the program aligns with beneficial outcomes that can render it a priority for HPCs. Finally, program developers will need to be mindful of *who* delivers these types of programs and ensure that facilitators have credibility among HPCs to create buy-in (e.g., co-delivery utilising the combined skills and experience of coaches, researchers, and practitioners).

## **Conclusion**

In this work, our aim was to engage experts in a round-table summit to discuss and reflect on how to develop programs that might best support HPCs to be more sustainable and successful in terms of performance, well-being, and engagement. To our knowledge this is the first instance of a panel of experts, including coaches, leaders, sport psychology practitioners, and scholars, coming together to agree upon recommendations specifically for sustainable high-performance *coaching*. Based on our experience, we believe that the round-table summit facilitates collaboration and co-creation between key stakeholders and can drive important conversations on important topics. The collective output resulted in recommendations for program content and delivery format, addressing the limitations of previous research, which has somewhat neglected the broad range of challenges faced by coaches *and* organizations when it comes to sustainable coaching, and the logistics of intervention design within high-performance, result-oriented environments. To summarize our recommendations, first, fostering and facilitating self-awareness is vital as it is a foundational skill and a pre-requisite

for exploring the self, values, self-care needs, suffering, vulnerability, and self-compassion. Moreover, understanding the self in relation to others (e.g., athletes, colleagues, and entourage members) in different contexts and systems are core elements in HP coaching. Second, engaging key stakeholders, organizations, and HPCs together in collaborative efforts is invaluable in developing program content and delivery formats that are relevant and adequate for specific contexts and cultures. Third, organizations have a duty of care for HPCs and could benefit from collaboration with scientist-practitioners and professionals in coaching and psychology in efforts to promote programs that aim for more healthy and sustainable high-performance environments. Fourth, regardless of the program content, creating buy-in is vital. Creativity, flexibility, and building communities of practice that facilitate shared and experiential learning in everyday HP coaching is a promising approach.

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Table 1. International expert round-table summit participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Affiliation/Experience</b>
Martina Aronsson	Olympic Head Coach	The Swedish Swim Association
Helge Bartnes	PhD. Student / Olympic Coach/ Former Head of Winter Sport	Norwegian School of Sport Sciences & Norwegian Olympic Training Centre
Marte Bentzen, PhD.	Associate Professor	Norwegian School of Sport Science
Gavin Breslin, PhD.	Senior Lecturer	Queens University Belfast
Stiliani “Ani” Chroni, PhD.	Professor	University of Inland Norway
Johan Flodin	Sports & Development Director / Former Olympic Coach	Swedish Olympic Committee
Karin Häggglund	PhD. Candidate / Former National Coach	The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences
Tommy Karls	Head of Coaching and Sport Psychology / Former Olympic Coach	The Swedish Paralympic Committee
Göran Kenttä, PhD.	Senior Lecturer	The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, University of Ottawa & The Swedish Sport Confederation
Peter Olusoga, PhD.	Senior Lecturer	Centre for Behavioural Science and Applied Psychology, Sheffield Hallam University, UK.
Tom Vandenberghe, PhD.	Performance Scientist Coach	Canadian Sport Institute Pacific, Swimming Canada
Katarina Vangdal	Head of Coach Development Program / Olympic Coach	The Swedish Olympic Committee & The Swedish Golf Association
Chris Wagstaff, PhD.	Professor	University of Portsmouth
Johan Wallberg	PhD. Student/ Olympic Coach	The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences & The Swedish Swim Association