



Mental Well-being and Help-seeking in High-Performance Sports Coaching

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Mental Well-being and Help-seeking in High-Performance Sports Coaching

Marketa Simova

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of

Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2025

Candidate Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. I have not been enrolled for another award of the University, or other academic or professional organisation, whilst undertaking my research degree.
2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.
3. I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.
4. The work undertaken towards the thesis has been conducted in accordance with the SHU Principles of Integrity in Research and the SHU Research Ethics Policy.
5. The word count of the thesis is 60943.

Signature:

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Abstract

This thesis explores mental well-being and subsequent help-seeking of high-performance coaches, and concludes with specific coach well-being recommendations. **Chapter 1** briefly introduced the context of high-performance sport and the overall structure of the research programme. **Chapter 2** (the literature review) scrutinised the nature of high-performance sport as well as specific challenges coaches faced in their roles. It discussed existing disagreement around the concept of well-being and emphasised the importance of contextual, ecological understanding of coaches' experiences. **Chapter 3** discussed the overall methodological approach behind this research programme – pragmatism. It showed how pragmatism informed individual empirical studies and drove the research programme towards a practical objective. **Chapter 4** (study 1) explored coaches' views and experiences of well-being in the context of high-performance sport using constructivist grounded theory. Rather than employing the established grand theories of well-being (e.g., hedonia and eudaimonia), this study aimed to capture the process of well-being with appreciation of nuances that high-performance sport and coaching brings. This would allow for a more realistic view of well-being, grounded in coaches' experience. **Chapter 5** (study 2) advanced findings of the literature review and study 1 by investigating coaches' views and experiences of help-seeking for well-being. Facing numerous, frequent stressors could leave coaches at risk of burnout and impaired well-being, hence study 2 used a mixed-method qualitative design to understand what, if anything, coaches might do to deal with possible signs of ill-being. It delved into barriers and facilitators of the help-seeking process and reiterated the relevance of contextual, ecological understanding. It also presented a bridge between theoretical explorations of coaches' well-being (study 1) and more practical, tangible product of this project – study 3. **Chapter 6** depicted this tangible product and showed the specific well-being recommendations that stemmed from this research programme. To embrace the ecological outlook, these recommendations targeted individual coaches, but also practitioners that do/should work with coaches, and organisations as whole. **Chapter 7** (study 3) then aimed to assess these recommendations in terms of their relevance, clarity, and practicality to coaches' well-being. A modified Delphi method was used to get ratings and feedback from a variety of key stakeholders. **Chapter 8** consisted of a general discussion of the empirical findings of this research programme in relation to existing literature. Suggestions for future research/practice and personal reflections were provided to further align with pragmatism. This chapter brought a conclusion to this research programme considering both its strengths and areas for development.

Acknowledgments

It seems surreal that the time of writing acknowledgments has actually come. Many people impacted this journey, and it could be easy to write a novel to express my gratitude and thoughts. However, the key lesson many has tried to teach me throughout my life (I cannot say that entirely successfully) is to get to the point and stop “waffling”. So, this will be my attempt to be concise, clear, and to speak from the heart.

The first thank-you needs to go to my supervisory team – Dr Peter Olusoga and Dr Christopher Brown. No one can deny your professional expertise which guided me throughout this process and allowed me to get to this point. Although, I’m extremely grateful for it, I would like to move beyond the research support and specifically thank you for something else. It is something that has been on my mind ever since I knew I would be writing this section; actually, it is two things. First, I would like to thank you for taking the time to learn about me as a person - for understanding how to deliver feedback in a way I could understand/utilise, for building my confidence when I often questioned myself, for taking the extra time to support my academic English and pointing out any progress I made. Second, and I can’t stress this enough, thank you for being authentic. I appreciate you sharing your honest views and opinions (on the subject but also academic life) as it made me feel less lonely and it normalised this journey. Thank you for holding me accountable in practising what I preach in this thesis – actually living life and experiencing well-being. I always felt that I could openly share anything, and I was confident that you would push me to critically consider what truly mattered.

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Research Outputs During Scholarship

Thesis Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles:

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Presentations and Conference Proceedings:

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Simova M., Olusoga, P., & Brown, C. J. (2024). Help-Seeking for Well-Being in High-Performance Coaches [Conference Presentation]. BPS DSEP, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Simpson, R. A. C., & Simova, M. (2022, 29 November). *In Pursuit of the 'Good Life': Concerns, Considerations, and Choices in the Exploration of Psychological Well-Being in Sport* [Conference Presentation]. BPS DSEP, Swansea, UK.

Practical Research Outputs (Media, Workshops, Resources):

Abrahams, D., (Host), Simova, M. "Guest", & Simpson, R. "Guest" (October, 2022). Well-Being: One Size Does Not Fit All (No. 210) [Audio Podcast Episode]. *In The Sport Psych Show*. <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/210-marketa-simova-richard-simpson-well-being-one-size/id1434313037?i=1000582845931>

Fullarton B., (Host), Capasso, A., (Host), & Simova, M. "Guest". (November, 2024). Supporting the Wellbeing of Olympians (No. 7) [Audio Podcast Episode]. *In Young Player Wellbeing Podcast*. <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/s4-e07-supporting-the-wellbeing-of-olympians/id1678303711?i=1000678181753>

Simova, M., & Olusoga, P. (2023). *Exploring Integrated Well-Being*. Coaching in High-Performance Sport Workshop. UK Coaching, Manchester.

Simova, M. (ongoing, 2025). *Seeking Help in High-Performance Sport* [Educational Materials]. Coach Well-Being Hub. Sport Northern Ireland.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Well-Being in Sport

High-performance sports represent the peak of human performance and the pinnacle of sporting events. It is an industry with global outreach and the power to drive social change (Deloitte, 2024). In 2023, its estimated worth was \$484 billion, and its growth is predicted to \$651 billion by 2028 (The Business Research Company, 2024). The sports industry has become a global phenomenon that connects countries and is followed by a wide, international audience. The Paris Olympic Games set a new record for the most watched Olympiad in history, with estimates of nearly 5 billion viewers tuning in throughout (International Olympic Committee, IOC, 2024). This number represents 84% of the potential global audience and in context means that more than half of the world watched at least some part of The Games. Public investment in sports, their performances, and the individuals behind them is evident. This connection moves beyond viewership (on screens or in person) and includes engagement on social media (Filo et al., 2015). The popularity of sport and the closeness of the audience bring advantages such as economic growth, increased funding, and atmosphere around performances (Vale & Fernandes, 2017), but it also comes with a price. Expectations of performance and individuals seem to be continuously growing. These expectations often extend beyond athletes and target other key individuals in sport – coaches. Especially when desired results are not achieved, coaches seem to become the object of public scrutiny. It has never been easier for people to comment on performances and even pass personal judgments on individuals and their qualities/skills (Sanderson & Truax, 2014).

“When you lose, it (the selection) was a mistake. When we win, I’m a genius.” (Pep Guardiola for Goal.com, 2021)

As demonstrated in the quote above, external expectations around performances and the general popularity of high-performance sport can accumulate into enormous scrutiny from fans, media, sponsors, internal stakeholders, and even governing bodies (e.g., Lyle, 2024). Being in public eye and facing, at times, personal criticism leaves coaches in extremely challenging and potentially vulnerable positions (Jones, 2006).

Putting performance first is also rooted in the actual culture of high-performance sport. Individuals working in high-performance sport often search for excellence (Hodge et al., 2014), and expect immense levels of sacrifice and dedication (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004). To put simply, high-performance sport is, in many ways, an extreme and intense place. Winning at all costs often seems to be the price to pay for the opportunity to work at the highest level (Chen et al., 2019) and can be a basic expectation among people working in sport as well as the general public. However, this drive for excellence (Zentgraf & Raab, 2023) can possibly turn into unhealthy forms of perfectionism, with the constant push for improvements urging coaches to do more and be better (Vealey et al., 2020) and creating potentially destructive cultures (Feddersen et al., 2020). The constant focus on performance can promote a “hustle and grind” mentality, where coaches might prioritise high-performance sport over other aspects of life, including personal relationships (Brewer & Petipas, 2017). Therefore, high-performance sport might be celebrated and held in high esteem by many, but it could also become a challenging and unsustainable place for coaches working in it. Additionally, the volatile side of high-performance sport has been well-documented in the literature (Baldock et al., 2021, 2022; Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Newman & Rumbold, 2024) and in practice, seen through the cut-throat athlete selections and frequent staff turnovers (LaVoi & Silva-Breen, 2022; Taylor et al., 2019).

Overall, the demands and the “dark side” of high-performance sport have been highlighted in recent years, especially in relation to the negative impact they can have on individuals' well-being and mental health (Grey-Thompson, 2017; Whyte, 2022). High-performance culture shapes coaches' experiences and can present significant obstacles to growth and positive experiences in sport:

“There are also personal and career implications of a culture that sees managers and coaches as disposable...The management and coaching workforce is highly qualified, dedicated and passionate and yet has to operate in an overly volatile and pressurised environment. This has significant consequences on individuals' mental well-being, self-esteem, self-identity and a range of other negative physical and mental health effects, including stress, anxiety, depression, burnout and cardiovascular risk.” (Froston, 2023)

Various position statements (for review see Vella et al., 2021) have called for conscious consideration of well-being in sport, the relevance of the topic to performance, and the general duty of care in sport which should extend beyond athletes to coaches (Australian Institute of Sport, 2025; Grey-Thompson, 2017).

The notion of well-being in sport is highlighted in the UK Sport (2021) current strategy of “keep winning and win well”. The “winning well” part is a crucial improvement as it shows organisational effort to combat the existing performance narrative in high-performance sport and the need to move away from a sole performance focus. It suggests that winning should be done right and not at the expense of unfair practices or more pertinently for the present thesis, the expense of personal well-being. Further building on this, UK Sport and UK Coaching (2023) collaborated on a “Duty to Care” framework that recognises the fundamental importance of well-being and safety of people involved in high-performance sport. The framework calls for a proactive and preventative approach that goes beyond safeguarding to turn high-performance sports into a sustainable, caring culture. Similarly, the IOC (2023) has released a Mental Health Action Plan that presents a roadmap for promoting mental health and well-being in athletes and their entourage. This highlights the importance of culture and leadership that champions well-being and mental health in sport. It calls for more embedded and reliable measures of mental health/well-being and further research in the area overall. Expert-created tools and initiatives are called for to reduce the prevalence of stigma and ill-being

symptoms while promoting well-being among sporting personnel (Purcell et al., 2022). Better care that occurs in psychologically safe environments is deemed essential, and advancements in referral pathways and access to well-being support overall are highlighted.

However, the word “entourage” used by the IOC speaks volumes about the current state of coach well-being research and practice. It shows that coaches might be acknowledged in well-being conversations, but mostly as a secondary thought to athletes (Leprince et al., 2024). Despite some similarities between the challenges athletes and coaches experience, the support available to coaches seems somewhat limited (Kenttä et al., 2024). The commonplace disregard for coaches’ well-being in the context of the demands of the role and high-performance sport tips the scales towards an imbalanced, athlete-centric system that still perpetuates performance above all (directly or indirectly). This also shows when searching online for resources and information on coach well-being support. Most resources comment on coaches’ role in supporting athletes’ mental health and well-being, or portray them as causes of toxic environments and unhealthy attitudes. Their own well-being somehow does not seem to matter.

Before delving into the influence of high-performance sport on coaches’ well-being and critical discussions of the concept itself (Chapter 2), it seems pertinent to clarify how the term well-being is used throughout this thesis. The breadth of the term led to distinct well-being conceptualisations such as subjective (Diener et al., 1999), psychological (Ryff, 1989), or human (Lomas & VanderWeele, 2022); all in order to capture its multifaced nature (Dodge et al., 2012). Within this thesis, the research primarily focused on the *mental/psychological* aspects of well-being (rather than its physical or spiritual domains). This allowed for a wider consideration of existing psychological theories (instead of ascribing to one specific theory) as well as more personalised interpretation and mid-level understanding of the concept (Alexandrova, 2017; more detailed discussions in Chapters 2 and 4).

1.2 Purpose of the Thesis

High-performance coaching has been established as a demanding and stressful occupation (e.g., Bentzen et al., 2020; Carson et al., 2018; Kenttä et al., 2020). Stress can often lead to various negative outcomes, such as burnout (Olusoga et al., 2019), anxiety, and sleep problems (Baumann et al., 2024; Frost et al., 2024; Kegeles et al., 2021). It can prevent coaches from optimally operating in their role, and more importantly, push them out of high-performance sport altogether (Kenttä et al., 2024; Solanas et al., 2021). However, the sports literature remains fairly limited when it comes to coaches' well-being and its management (i.e., help-seeking; Frost et al., 2025). Most existing studies utilised stress theories where well-being is simply considered an outcome of stress transactions, or have applied grand theories of well-being, such as Ryff's (1995) psychological well-being, or hedonic/subjective well-being (Diener, 1984). However, the idea of what it means to "be well" seems to differ among individuals, cultures, and contexts. Therefore, a major purpose of this thesis was to explore the idea of well-being within the specific and unique context of high-performance coaching.

Despite the awareness of environmental demands and their negative consequences on coaches' well-being, relatively little is known about what coaches do/experience when negative impacts occur, when/whether they seek help, and how this ultimately influences their well-being. Conversations around well-being/mental health and help-seeking seem to remain behind closed doors for high-performance coaches. Only recently have some athletes' accounts come up in the media (e.g., Naomi Osaka through her article in Time in 2021, Michael Phelps during his NBC interview in 2024) but for coach disclosure, examples are rarer (e.g., Klopp interview; Carroll, 2024). There is some understanding of the existing stigma surrounding mental health in high-performance sport that might contribute to the absence of disclosures of any experienced challenges (Petersen et al., 2024; Rao & Hong, 2020). However, a full picture of the help-seeking for well-being process in this population is missing, thus, it is vital to provide an in-depth exploration of coaches' views and experiences of help-seeking for their well-being.

Finally, the importance of context, the likelihood of ill-being in coaches, and the possibility of limited well-being resources (individual and organisational) has highlighted the need to provide well-being and help-seeking knowledge that would be useful to the

target population (i.e., coaches), as well as to people who support or manage them. This could present a challenge as the actual application of well-being and help-seeking theory into practice is often complicated and, at times, possibly missed overall (Keegan et al., 2017; Winter & Collins, 2015).

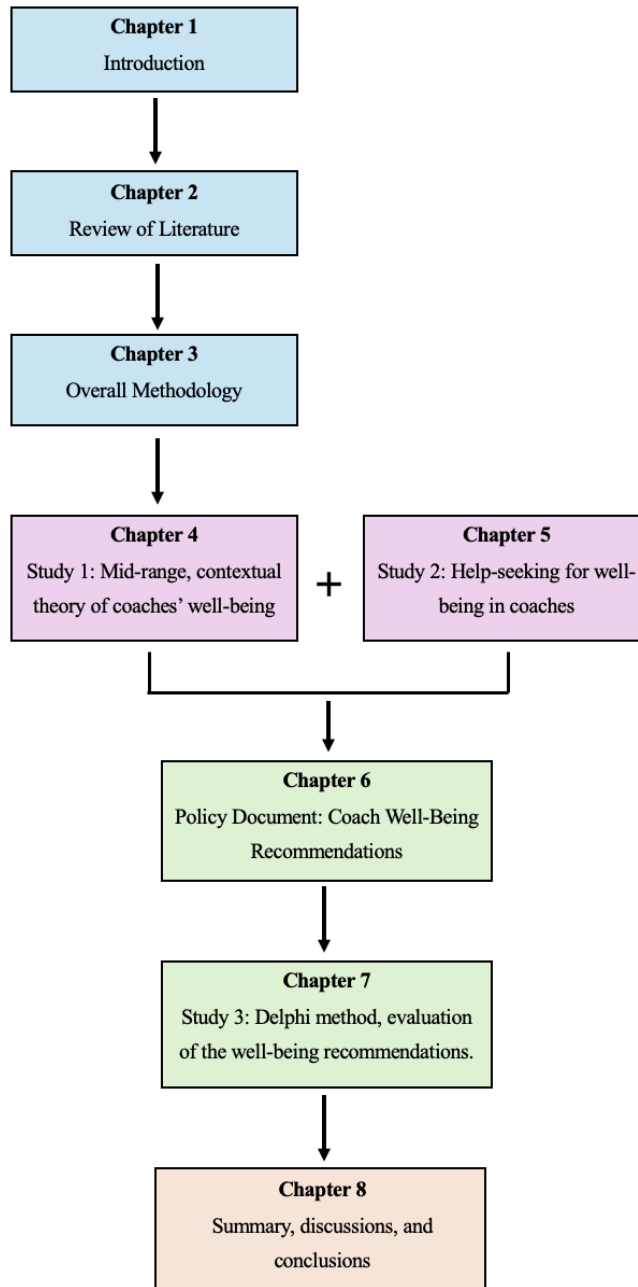
To address this gap and make a difference in practice, the main objective of this thesis was to create coach well-being recommendations rooted in a contextual understanding of well-being and help-seeking, hence reflecting coaches' real experiences and needs. The aim was to provide guidance to organisations and practitioners that when implemented, would lead to high-performance environments that go beyond surviving and support coaches to thrive in their role.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis consists of seven further chapters (Figure 1.1), with brief summaries presented below.

Figure 1.1

Structure of the Thesis



Chapter 2 explores the existing literature on coaches' well-being (and related topics) and creates a theoretical background for the empirical studies (Chapters 4, 5, and 7). Chapter 3 discusses the overarching methodology used in this programme of research and contains personal reflections to frame how the present research developed. Chapter 4 focuses specifically on coaches' well-being and utilises constructivist grounded theory to develop a new mid-range theory embedded in the context of high-performance sport. Utilising mixed methods, Chapter 5 explores coaches' help-seeking for well-being. The complexity of the process and the role of culture (both the culture of high-performance sport and organisational culture) are highlighted. Building on the overall review of literature and the findings from Chapters 4 and 5, Chapter 6 presents a policy document outlining a series of recommendations for coach well-being. Chapter 7 examines these recommendations with relevant stakeholders using a modified Delphi method. Finally, the empirical findings are discussed in relation to the existing literature, practical implications are summarised and areas for future research are proposed in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the existing literature around the concept of well-being, especially within the context of high-performance coaching. High-performance sport is a unique environment characterised by a relentless pursuit of excellence, extreme standards and personal sacrifice (e.g., Feddersen et al., 2020; Schlawe et al., 2025). Its demanding nature is widely accepted, and in some circumstances even celebrated (e.g., Poimann et al., 2022; Gunston, 2025). To better understand what coaches experience (and how that might impact their well-being), it is vital to be clear on what actually constitutes a high-performance culture. Therefore, the first part of this chapter will examine the concept of culture, the nature of high-performance sport, and how culture and well-being link together. Following this, the concept of stress and various related outcomes (e.g., well-/ill-being) will be explored to highlight the existing focus of coaching literature, and to provide clarity on the demands of the coaching role. Finally, the concept of well-being will be discussed. Well-being is quite an elusive term, and our individual conceptualisations can vary greatly. Being well, having a good life, or enjoying one's job might all be thought of as a part of well-being. These distinct ideas depend on perspectives (e.g., positive psychology, philosophy, economics), but also result in a wide range of well-being theories and conceptualisations. The relevance and applicability of these theories is put into question and the case for a contextually based well-being theory is presented.

2.2 Culture

2.2.1. Setting the Scene

“Culture is the creation of meaning in which human beings interpret their experiences and guide their actions”

(Geertz, 1973, p. 145).

In recent years, various governing bodies and federations called for a critical consideration of cultural influences on individuals' performance, identity, and well-being (e.g., Carless & Douglass, 2013; Chroni & Kavoura, 2020; Schinke et al., 2013). Culture frames our lives and identities and directs our meaning (Kitayama & Markus, 2000). For example, training and competing despite injury is frequently normalised in high-performance sport culture (e.g., Madrigal et al., 2016; Roderick et al., 2000). Yet, in other working cultures, going to work when injured would be almost unthinkable. This shows how having cultural frames can modify individuals' attitudes and behaviours and demonstrates the power/role culture has in establishing normality and expectations.

The influence of culture further relates to a wider social science discussion around agency and structure (Archer, 2003). Structure is commonly viewed as an overarching framework for social life (e.g., high-performance sport/organisational culture). It frames an individual's life and exists beyond, and in a way above, the individual. Structure is long standing and well-established, making it fairly resistant to change. Contrastingly, agency usually refers to individuals (e.g., coaches), with their free will, autonomy to make decisions, their subjective experiences, and authenticity. Both structure and agency are interlinked, where structure cannot exist without agency and agency, with its free will, is still constrained within the boundaries of structure (Archer, 2003). This connection will be apparent and embraced throughout this thesis as governing bodies (and generally high-performance sport) could not exist without coaches and concurrently, coaches' attitudes and behaviours might be often dictated or modified by the structure (of high-performance sport as well as organisations).

2.2.2 High-Performance Sport

High-performance sport is an umbrella term that primarily refers to athletes, teams, and relevant personal at the highest level of performance, usually competing at a national or an international level. This area comprises sports that are included in the Olympic and Paralympic schedule, professional sports such as football or baseball, as well as newly emerging sports such as e-sports. According to Sotiriadou and De Bosscher (2017), high-performance sport can be identified by two unique characteristics: 1) the process of attracting, retaining/transitioning, and nourishing the best talent in the discipline; 2) open system reciprocity where high-performance sport is influenced by culture and a wider socio-economic situation in which it exists; reciprocally, it is an environment where individual performances can have an impact on society and decision making around funding (i.e., future operating of the sport). High-performance sport, therefore, could be understood as a complex process which operates and is influenced by macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

Individuals need to be competitive to succeed in the high-performance environment and success itself is always highly valued (often at the cost of anything else; e.g., Kenttä et al., 2024). Success brings sponsorship deals, extends employment contracts, and brings celebration to the individual by the wider public. This drive for success is practically embedded in the culture of sport through the application of tiered-funding (i.e., winners receive a higher amount of resources making performance the driving force behind organisational functioning; Moynihan, 2006). It also provides organisations with clear targets and allows them to hold individuals accountable when it comes to achieving (or failing to achieve) their targets (Sam, 2012). Altogether, this makes high-performance sport a fast-paced, ever-changing, and cut-throat environment that presents constant challenges, and which can impact individuals' well-being (Norris et al., 2017; Bentzen et al., 2016; Olusoga et al., 2009). The aforementioned competitive nature of high-performance sport is evident not only when it comes to performance itself, but also in terms of the limited number of available roles and the subsequent competition for employment. The challenge is that the constant boundary push and extreme mentality can turn high-performance environments, and specifically high-performance coaching into an

unsustainable, well-being threatening experience (e.g., Potrac et al., 2012; Purdy & Potrac, 2016).

The challenge of high-performance sport is that it operates in its own unique way, often separate from other societal systems or organisations (Brackenridge, 1994). It can push or even create its own boundaries when it comes to what is acceptable or normal (for the good and the bad of the industry; Lindfelt, 2010). Not only this, but as pointed out by Schein (1999), high-performance environments tend to be resistant to change, making it rather difficult to point out or challenge unhealthy practices. Consequently, understanding the nature of high-performance sport and how it possibly impacts individuals' experiences (e.g., of well-being and help-seeking) is key, not only for theoretical research, but also for the adequate practice and support of sports performers.

2.2.3 Performance Narrative

Performance is in the heart of everything in high-performance sport. Performing to the best of one's abilities is the key focus of both athletes and support staff (i.e., coaches), as well as a driving factor for organisational funding, hence a determinant of organisational survival (Bostock et al., 2018). The cultural preoccupation with results is mostly emphasised through language – i.e., a performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006). The performance narrative can be seen as a wider psychosocial phenomenon through which individuals, as well as organisations, can perpetuate the “all or nothing” mentality (Mountjoy et al., 2018). It is an outcome of the cultural fixation on results, success, and subsequent funding (Bostock, 2013; Houlihan & Green, 2009).

A performance narrative dehumanises individuals involved in high-performance sport. When success is the only thing that matters, there is no space for personal needs or aspects of life outside of sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Individuals are expected to dedicate everything to their quest for success. A performance narrative can narrow an individual's sense of identity or, rather, blur the boundaries between sport and other identities (Sparkes, 1998), leading to an actual embodiment of the performance narrative where one's self-worth is tied to success (Douglas & Carless, 2009). This is potentially problematic for high-performance coaches. Identity foreclosure has been conceptualised as a commitment to a specific role that leads individuals to avoid exploring any alternative occupational avenues or other aspects of life (Brewer & Petipas, 2017). It appears to be

linked with premature decision-making and is typified by a lack of compromise around decisions (e.g., Erickson, 1968). It can lead individuals to bet everything on one specific domain at the expense of other parts of life, for example, dedicating all their time and effort to succeeding in high-performance sport. Unsurprisingly, identity foreclosure has been linked with mental health issues in athletes (DeFreese & Shannon, 2021) and it is likely that similar could occur in coaches. Therefore, overly focusing or even prioritising success and a coaching role might be more to coaches' detriment rather than something to be supported or even celebrated.

The pre-occupation with success can be especially challenging in the context of high-performance coaching where success is measured in alignment with athletic, rather than coaches' own performance. Multiple uncontrollable factors (e.g., athlete injury or personal circumstances) can influence performance yet, the performance narrative and business-like approach to high-performance sport clearly dictates that results matter, and so, to a certain degree, coaches perhaps have less control over their career future than other professions. For example, in the English Football League, during the 2024/2025 season, both Leicester City and Southampton FC had three different managers with many other clubs having at least one managerial change (Premier League, 2025). These quick coaching changes (mostly driven by the sport culture need for results) might be quite short-sighted. Turnover periods have been shown to be costly for the organisations (White, 2017) and to possibly have a negative impact on organisational functioning (Mohr et al., 2012). Therefore, one could presume that it is in organisation's best interest to develop/support rather than dismiss existing staff and to generally find more appropriate ways of measuring coaching success. The organisational impact is one thing, but further attention must be given to the experience of the individual.

The preoccupation with results in sport seems to further drive individuals' attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Ronkainen et al., 2016a). It creates a framework as well as a standard according to which employees, and coaches in particular, attempt to navigate their environment. The caveat is that these unique sport standards might not be acceptable in other industries (i.e., moral isolation - Brackenridge, 1994). Instead, they might allow and even normalise unhealthy practices as a regular part of operating in sport (Brackenridge et al., 2005). Research in the past decade has shed some light on the darker

side of high-performance sport and various malpractices that commonly seem to occur within it. For example, British gymnastics, swimming, and Premier League football clubs have all faced allegations linked to abuse and bullying within their organisations (e.g., Parmenter, 2022; Woods, 2023). As suggested by Papaefstathiou and colleagues (2013), the issue of abuse and bullying in sport is so extensive that it occasionally becomes normalised as a rite of passage within the environment. In the above scenarios, coaches might not have been the target of malpractice, but it is worth acknowledging that they still have to operate in such environments which might shape their experiences further.

The challenge of toxic environments can be further perpetuated by a culture of silence which occurs when employees find it difficult or even futile to express personal opinions (Brown & Coupland, 2005). This is usually due to fear of damaging their career progression or their reputation within the organisation (Piderit & Ashford, 2003). If organisational leaders ignore coaches' voices or meet their feedback with hostility, it perpetuates a culture of silence, discouraging employees from any future attempts for communication (Morrison & Miliken, 2000). Argyris (1977) suggested that a culture of silence can be bolstered through the values of the environment/organisation. That is, a generic acceptance of organisational values and adherence to them can result in coaches silencing their opinions (especially if organisational values contradict those opinions). Blackman and Sadler-Smith (2009) also suggested that a culture of silence is more likely in individualistic and competitive environments, making the presence of a culture of silence in high-performance sport perhaps unsurprising (e.g., Mountjoy, 2019).

A culture of silence could also perpetuate possible barriers to disclosures around ill-being or mental health due to normalisation of unhealthy practices in high-performance sport (e.g., overworking or burnout as a badge of honour; Borrueco et al., 2023; Roderick et al., 2000) and individuals' inability to flag these with the wider sporting system. Only relatively recently have athletes started speaking up about their experiences around well-being and mental health (e.g., Simone Biles - Bregman, 2024; Naomi Osaka - Carayol, 2021). These accounts mostly show the challenging nature of high-performance sport, and the difficulties athletes meet when considering (or attempting) to seek help for their well-being, including their worries about speaking up and sharing. Despite these valuable

athletes' disclosures, relatively few accounts of help-seeking or general well-being conversations can be found from the coaching population.

2.2.4 The Sport Ethic

Related to the performance narrative, yet distinct, is the idea of sport ethic. The Sport Ethic commonly depicts the ideal picture of an athlete which is rooted in the cultural context of high-performance sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) but its conceptualisation and underpinning narrative can be applied to coaches as well. The Sport Ethic consists of four key concepts: dedication to the game, striving for distinction, accepting risk, and not accepting potential obstacles (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). These concepts stand for what is deemed advantageous by the high-performance sport environment and at their core essentially stand for what is good, desirable in terms of attitudes and behaviours. When it comes to coaches' own perceptions of important qualities (i.e., a coaching sport ethic), research is mostly incomplete or rather lacking a specific conceptualisation (Jacobs et al., 2016). The ideal of a perfect coach seems to remain highly individualised (Cushion, 2010) perhaps because of how complex the role itself is (Jones, 2006). Nevertheless, literature points to some commonalities in coaches' attitudes and behaviours such as prioritising their athletes, and an acceptance of extremely challenging working conditions as precursors of operating in high-performance sport (e.g., Simpson et al., 2024). Coaches are often portrayed as stoic, in control of their emotions and almost unshakable entities within the environment (Roberts et al., 2019). This further aligns with a "Superhero Complex" identified by Olusoga and Kenttä (2017), where coaches have a sense of duty to constantly take care of everything without reaching out for help. These concepts provide only a brief insight into the representation of the "ideal coach," and further research is necessary to fully understand what the key characteristics actually are and how they play into coaches' well-being experiences.

The sport ethic (in athlete contexts as well as a wider coaching ones) matters as it sets a benchmark for ideal behaviours and attitudes. However, as pointed out by Hughes and Coakley (1991), there is a possible danger of individuals overconforming with presented values at a cost of personal well-being. A specific example could be a high-performance coach who overidentifies with the idea of caring for athletes. Doing so, could result in them prioritising athletes at the expense of personal life and well-being. The

overidentification might lead coach to miss out on important life events or even lose significant connections outside of sport, as care for athletes takes up all of their time (e.g., Kaski & Kinnunen, 2020; Lumpkin & Anshel, 2012). As suggested by Nixon (1994), high-performance sport is an environment full of contradictions, where on one side individuals are encouraged to look after themselves to perform to their full potential, yet concurrently are expected to power through injuries and ill-being. This duality highlights the importance of critical considerations when it comes to high-performance sport research and practice. It shows the risk of accepting environmental standards and expectations at a face value, and points to the danger that certain narratives in high-performance sport can present.

2.2.5 Organisational Culture

The nature of high-performance sport provides a useful overarching framework to our understanding of coaches' experiences. However, as highlighted by Feddersen and colleagues (2020), various subcultures tend to consider their sport (and its culture) unique and incomparable to other sports. Consequently, to better comprehend coaches' experiences, research inquiry needs to move beyond the general sporting culture and take into account organisational culture as well.

In the simplest way, organisational culture has been described as 'the way we do things around here' (Lundy & Cowling, 1996, p. 168). The interest in organisational culture generally stems from organisational psychology (Bal et al., 2019), which investigates individuals' behaviour and experiences within a workplace. It explores concepts unique for a work environment such as absenteeism, turnover rates, and productivity, and also considers stress and well-being related to the specific workplace (Wagstaff, 2016; Wagstaff & Lerner, 2015). Exploring these allows for a better understanding of what makes individuals happy in their workplace, and what could encourage them to stay in their roles longer and perform to the best of their abilities. It could also guide organisations towards more effective functioning (e.g., Biggio & Cortese, 2013; Johnson et al., 2018). Organisational culture is a complex phenomenon that builds on a range of symbols, stories, and myths (Alvesson, 2004; Slack & Parent, 2006). These value-laden narratives develop and modify with time based on various external/internal influences (Martin, 1992; Schein, 1992) and their purpose is to demonstrate how things

are done within the business (Deal & Kennedy, 1999; McAleese & Hargie, 2004). Within high-performance coaching, typical organisational practices could include being “always on” and available to athletes, frequent international travel and camps (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2015; Cushion, 2006; Fletcher & Arnold, 2016).

The extent to which employees identify and embrace the organisational culture can impact their performance and well-being (e.g., Egan et al., 2004; Goffee & Jones, 1996). Organisational culture seems to inform individuals’ attitudes and behaviours (for example, working overtime) as it modifies their perceptions of what is expected, and considered normal (Dixon & Bruening, 2005). Thus, certain attitudes and behaviours (e.g., well-being management, help-seeking) might be reflections of organisational standards rather than individual choices (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Therefore, research exploring well-being from a broader organisational perspective could allow for a more grounded, tailored approach to understanding coaches’ experiences and result in more practical recommendations in the future. It could aid a better understanding of organisational cultural norms (from emotional expression to possible help-seeking; e.g., Parham, 2016) but also help uncover possible stereotypes and generalisations linked to individuals’ identities (Parham, 2016; Terry, 2009).

From a practical perspective, the influence of culture (high-performance sport and organisational) becomes extremely noticeable when exploring the organisational distribution of resources (financial and personal) and general focus of organisational interests (e.g., performance vs. well-being). As many sport organisations in the UK rely heavily on public funding/grants that award “winners” (Moynihan, 2006), the distribution of resources mostly goes to supporting athletes. This example shows how the power of organisational culture extends beyond shaping practices and behaviours but also might impact the availability of resources and support for individual performers. Indeed, Purcell et al. (2022) highlighted how outcome orientations cultivate cultures in sport where individuals’ mental health and well-being can be easily ignored. Recent calls, however, point to the importance of supporting sporting personal such as coaches in high-performance environments (e.g., DeWolfe & Dithurbide, 2022; Hill et al., 2021; Purcell et al, 2022).

2.2.6 Section Summary

High-performance sport is unique and demanding (Mallett, 2007). The performance narrative seeps into various aspects of individuals' experiences as well as general organisational functioning. It can dictate organisational practices, skew what is considered acceptable, and practically drive where attention is paid. Moreover, the way organisations operate in high-performance sport is underpinned by their specific culture which in turn shapes individuals' views and experiences (including their comprehension of well-being; Ryff et al., 2014). Consequently, understanding high-performance sport and organisational culture presents a useful departure point for a better comprehension of what is actually meaningful and challenging for individuals (Gadamer, 2013).

As high-performance sport is established first and foremost on performance and related results (Cruikshank & Collins, 2012), athletes have been understandably at the forefront of research and practices. However, as highlighted by Grey-Thompson (2017), sport organisations have duty of care not only towards athletes, but also towards other supporting personnel, including high-performance coaches. Coaches are performers in their own right (Gould et al., 2002) and are key personnel in high-performance sport systems (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Mallett, 2011). Understanding their experiences (including relevant work challenges) is therefore a vital step forward in improving the culture of high-performance sport and the support of coaches' well-being (e.g., Leprince et al., 2024; Pilkington et al., 2022; Potts et al., 2023). Research into coaches' well-being has primarily explored the topic through stress experiences and, quite often, through the related concept of burnout. Consequently, the following section will explore the distinct challenges coaches face in their role, as well as the possible impacts these might have on their well-/ill-being.

2.3 Coach Well-Being

2.3.1 Stress Research in High-Performance Coaching

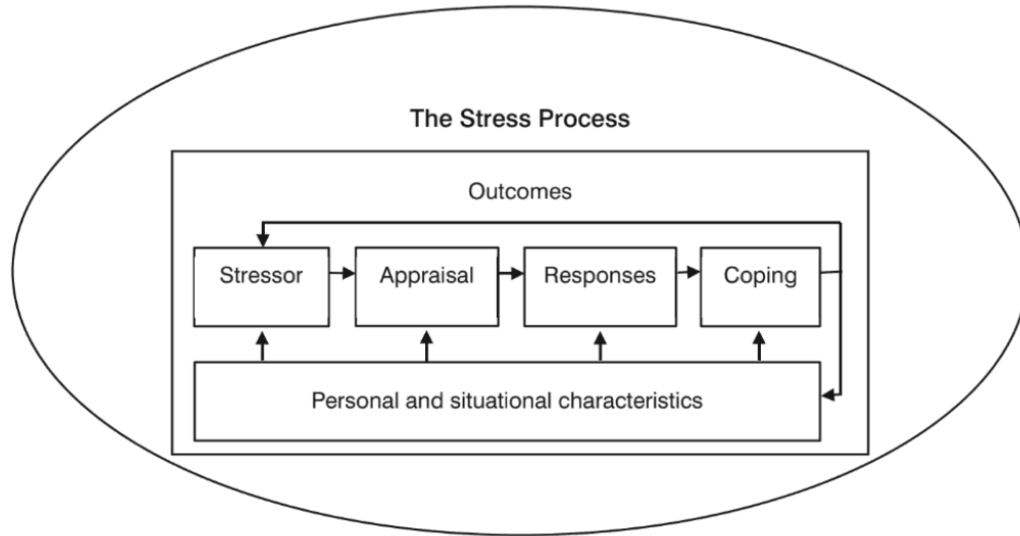
The high-performance sport environment has been described as immensely demanding (Arnold & Fletcher, 2021) with the ability to challenge performers' experiences and even pose a threat to their well-being (Olusoga & Thelwell, 2016; Didymus, 2017). Consequently, understanding individuals' experience of stress and its management has been an important area of focus in the sport psychology literature. Research into coach stress has been largely underpinned by transactional theories of stress (and its alterations; e.g., Fletcher et al., 2006; Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In line with transactional approaches, stress is most commonly defined as “*an ongoing process that involves individuals transacting with their environments, making appraisals of the situations they find themselves in, and endeavouring to cope with any issues that may arise*” (Fletcher et al., 2006; p. 329). Transactional theories embrace the idea of resources and challenges where their imbalance can lead to strain (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; McGrath, 1971). The focus is on individuals' cognitive processes (i.e., appraisal and coping), and their role in the person-environment transaction. Rather than being a “spectator”, individuals play an active role in how they perceive and deal with environmental challenges by ascribing meaning to them and utilising various strategies to face possible imbalances (Lazarus, 2006). This meaning then dictates the emotions that individuals experience (i.e., a cognitive-motivational-relational theory of stress and emotion - CMRT), further creating a link with subjective well-being (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus, 2000). Additionally, CMRT comments on the environmental antecedents (e.g., situational properties of the stressors such as imminence, duration, or uncertainty), as well as personal qualities (e.g., goals, beliefs) that might impact the stress transaction.

Overall, transactional theories of stress embrace the interactions between individuals, their environments, and various outcomes (Figure 2.1; Fletcher & Arnold, 2016). To provide further context to this thesis, the following section will briefly explore the nature of coaches' stressors, their appraisal, coping strategies, and related stress outcomes (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Neil et al., 2011).

Figure 2.1

A Simplified Meta-Model of Stress, Emotion, and Performance (Fletcher & Arnold, 2016; adapted from Fletcher & Fletcher, 2005; Fletcher et al., 2008)



2.3.1.1 Coaching Stressors

To comprehend the stress process, initial investigations focused on the origins of stressors (e.g., Olusoga et al., 2009; Thelwell et al., 2008), with stressors being conceptualised as environmental demands or events that are experienced by coaches (Fletcher & Scott, 2010). These explorations showed the sheer number of stressors individuals deal with and presented coaching as a rather demanding occupation (e.g., Chroni et al., 2013; Didymus, 2017; Olusoga et al., 2009, 2012). Because of the number of stressors and perhaps a need for topical clarity, the early investigations also focused on their categorisation (e.g., Taylor, 1992).

One of the common taxonomies of stressors include performance, organisational, and personal stressors (e.g., Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Performance stressors include demands linked to the performance/competition (both of coaches themselves and their athletes) and inside and out of training (Chroni et al., 2013). Organisational stressors incorporate demands stemming from the organisational culture, as well as the requirements and expectations connected with a coaching role (e.g., Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Olusoga et al., 2009). Lastly, personal stressors cover areas outside of coaching such as work-family conflict (e.g., Thelwell et al., 2008). For a comprehensive

understanding, Norris and colleagues (2017) conducted a systematic review which emphasised not only the sheer amount of stressors coaches face in their role, but also the dominance of organisational and performance-related stressors (e.g., Chroni et al., 2013; Didymus, 2017; Olusoga et al., 2012, 2009; Rhind et al., 2013). This aligns with the previously discussed need for the inclusion of organisational considerations when exploring coaches' stress and well-being.

2.3.1.2 Performance-Related Stressors

Coaches have reported the challenge of helping athletes achieving their full potential, but also the possibility of athletes underperforming either in a training or a competition (Frey, 2007; Olusoga et al., 2009; Thelwell, 2008). The performance preoccupation is unsurprising as coaches' own success and possible career prospects are usually reliant on athletic results (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), with athletes' poor performance potentially leading to the termination of a coach's contract (Lyle, 2024).

Coaches also discussed injury, the pressure created when athletes trained *despite* their injury but also the subsequent impact of injury on future performances (Didymus, 2017). This example shows how high-performance sport/organisational culture can present challenges to coaches through establishing contradicting norms and narratives. It highlights how a rational approach to performance (i.e., recovering from an injury in order to be able to fully perform) can be overridden by environmental narratives of winning at all cost (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012), leaving coaches in a rather challenging position when managing athletes and possibly their own integrity (Higham et al., 2023).

Unrealistically high expectations towards oneself and increased levels of criticism (Chroni et al., 2013) have also been highlighted as performance-related stressors, particularly among women coaches who discussed the need to exceed the expectations of their male counterparts in order to prove their quality and expertise (Duran-Bush et al., 2012; Higham et al., 2024). Generally, these high standards manifest in coaches' self-expectations of constant nurturing of athletes, and creation of a joyful environment (Durand-Bush et al., 2012). Vealey et al. (2020) further linked the extreme, unrealistic expectations to maladaptive forms of perfectionism in coaches which is concerning given its potential connection to burnout (Tashman et al., 2010).

Decision making and the communication of those decisions (e.g., Collins & Collins, 2021; Chroni et al., 2013), media attention (e.g., Durand-Bush et al., 2012), and the need to protect athletes from media attention (e.g., Higham et al., 2021) are all further performance-related stressors that have been highlighted in research, yet are only part of the demands that coaches face.

2.3.1.3 Organisational Stressors

Organisational stressors incorporate challenges arising from the sport organisations (Fletcher et al., 2006). Coaches have highlighted the extensive workload (e.g., Levy et al., 2009; Olusoga et al., 2009; Thelwell et al., 2008) and significant time required to fulfil their tasks (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). This was even more prominent in female coaches who talked about the potential difficulties of aligning their career with motherhood, and the insufficiency of relevant organisational policies (Boswell & Cavallerio, 2022; Porter et al., 2024), potentially offering further insights the “whys” behind the male dominance in high-performance coaching (e.g., Trussell et al., 2024) and points to the importance of specific minoritised group considerations when creating organisational policies (e.g., Bentzen et al., 2020; Carson et al., 2018; Cunningham, 2020).

Coaches also reported a lack of resources, years of experience in the role, and high competition with short-term contracts as organisational stressors that further fed to challenges around job security (Frey, 2007; Robbins et al., 2015). This is problematic as job insecurity has been linked with increased levels of anxiety, lower self-esteem, depression and burnout (Bentzen et al., 2020; Kinnunen et al., 2003; Mohr, 2000).

The job competition can also manifest through poor organisational relationships, feelings of isolation and conflict with others (Didymus et al., 2021; Knight & Harwood, 2009; Olusoga et al., 2009). In one recent study, coaches discussed how the cut-throat nature of sport often led them to rely solely on oneself and in turn become quite lonely (Higham et al., 2021). Yet, having connections and social support have been associated with alleviated levels of stress where coaches utilised the resources for information seeking, feedback, and new job opportunities, which further improved their performance and well-being (Norris et al., 2020, 2022). Nevertheless, quality relationships can extend beyond organisations to coaches’ personal life.

2.3.1.4 Personal Stressors

Personal stressors include challenges associated with life outside of sport. Compared to performance and organisational stressors, their examples are limited in the coaching literature. The noticeable contrast might be due to their subjective nature but also the dominance of performance/organisational stressors which could shift any conversations with coaches towards the occupational domain (Norris et al., 2017).

The most noticeable personal stressor relates to work-home interference (e.g., Dixon & Bruening, 2005; Lundkvist et al., 2016). This is perhaps unsurprising given the long working hours and international travel coaches commonly deal with (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Graham & Smith, 2022). However, the interference extends beyond the available time coaches have to spend at home. It also encapsulates the spill-over of tasks where coaches bring their work home, as well as the emotional spill-over with coaches carrying over their work frustrations (Davis et al., 2024). Coaches shared the pressure around family/home responsibilities (e.g., childcare) especially when their energy levels were depleted (Joncheray et al., 2019). Being frequently absent from home, put an emotional but also practical pressure on coaches and their partners when managing their relationships (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2023; Sisjord et al., 2022), supporting the common narratives around high divorce rates (Joncheray et al., 2019).

Additionally, coaches reported high-performance sport itself being a significant stressor (Potts et al., 2019). Coaches often strive to create a perfect environment for their athletes' development, but this goal is rarely attainable given the number of interfering factors that are out of coaches' control; factors that place additional pressure on coaches to produce results while sacrificing their personal life. The need for perfection is often connected with a controlling tendency in coaches and heavily contributes to the "Superhero Complex" introduced by Olusoga and Kenttä (2017).

2.3.1.5 Stressors Summary

Coaches experience a wide range of stressors that relate to the organisational environment, performance expectations, and personal challenges. Many of these are interlinked so exploring them in isolation might offer only limited insights into coaches' experiences (Baldock et al., 2021). Overall, the sheer number of stressors and their frequency can present a challenge to coaches' well-being, but further explorations

(beyond stressors identification) are vital in order to develop a full understanding of coaches' well-being experiences and the processes underpinning them.

2.3.1.6 Appraisal

Stressors are not inherently negative, and in some circumstances, they can actually have an energising effect on coaches (Didymus, 2017). What determines how one perceives stressor is appraising - a cognitive process where individuals evaluate their transaction with an environment. They consider the relevance of what is happening, the implications it might have for their well-being, and what can be done about it (Fletcher et al., 2006). Appraising consists of two separate, yet inter-dependent processes – primary and secondary appraising (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1966).

Primary appraisal is an evaluation of whether a stressor presents 1) a *threat* (potentially damaging) to coaches' goals, values, and commitments, 2) a *challenge* (potential obstacles) to them, or 3) or *harm/loss* (perception that damage has already been done to them). For threat and harm/loss appraisal, coaches perceive stressors as personally relevant, but they might lack coping resources to deal with them which can lead to impaired well-being. For example, in one study, competition results were evaluated as harm/loss by coaches, given their lack of control over them and the possible negative impacts on their career (Chroni et al., 2013). Additionally, balancing multiple agendas and micropolitics have both been appraised as harmful, especially when the requirements contradicted coaches' own agendas without an opportunity to speak up (Potts et al., 2021). In contrast, coaches have described appraising stressors as challenging when they held personal relevance, when coaches had enough coping resources, and when the situation could generally benefit them (Didymus, 2017). When referring to challenge, coaches have reported feelings of happiness and enthusiasm when going to work and dealing with relevant demands (Didymus, 2017), and also reported improved ability to utilise distinct coping resources (Didymus et al., 2021).

If primary appraisal is concerned with the perceived relevance of a stressor, secondary appraisal is concerned with the perceived availability of relevant resources for dealing with it. Literature also suggests that the constant appraisal of one's experiences can become emotionally taxing and subsequently impact coaches' well-being (Lee & Chelladurai, 2018). This means that stressors can threaten coaches not only through their

nature, but also via their constant appraising (Demerouti et al., 2004). Thus, even challenging (energising) appraisals might strain coaches if there are too many. The sustained stress and the need to constantly manage related emotions can result in emotional exhaustion (Alarcon, 2011; Lee & Chelladurai, 2018). Emotional exhaustion has been identified as a core component of burnout, and, thus, presents a significant concern to coaches' well-being (McNeill et al., 2018). Moreover, it can impact coaches' decisions around retirement and general efficiency in the role (Rumbold et al., 2023).

2.3.1.7 Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141) define coping as “*constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person*”. This highlights the deliberate nature of the coping process and points to its main purposes: 1) to regulate one's emotions; and 2) to modify the possibly problematic relationship between the person and their environment (Folkman et al., 1986). Research has shed light on the coping strategies that coaches have used in the high-performance environment. For example, coaches commonly talk about structuring and planning when dealing with their extensive workload (e.g., Olusoga et al., 2009; Olusoga et al., 2012). Specifically, Olusoga et al. (2010) identified how scheduling time off in advance (as a part of wider planning coping strategy) pushed coaches to commit to their plans and follow up on any plans. For emotional management, coaches seem to use a wide range of strategies from positive self-talk (e.g., affirmations) to imagery or goal setting (e.g., Levy et al., 2009; Olusoga et al., 2010; Thelwell et al., 2008). These allow coaches to maintain emotional control and focus, as well as to feel more relaxed during challenging times.

Some studies also reported on various escapism techniques. In Olusoga and colleagues' (2012) study, coaches mentioned alcohol misuse as one of the frequent coping strategies. Coaches have also discussed using alcohol as an escape route from ruminative thoughts and occasionally as an aid in inducing sleep (Bruening & Dixon, 2007). Similarly, some coaches seem to isolate themselves as a way of coping (Didymus et al., 2016; Durand-Bush et al., 2012; Olusoga et al., 2010). In contrast, however, coaches might utilise their social networks to escape the high-performance environment, especially when it comes to seeking guidance and practical tips (e.g., Didymus, 2017; Olusoga et al., 2010).

To sum up, coach stress research highlights the sheer amount of stressors coaches experience in their role, with performance and organisational stressors dominating the findings (Norris et al., 2017). This aligns with the idea of environment (organisational and high-performance sport) playing an inseparable part in coaches' experience (Higham, 2024). Coaches react to these stressors in psychological, behavioural, and physical ways (Olusoga et al., 2010). Literature points to the various ways coaches try to deal with these stressors with some strategies providing more success than others (Didymus, 2017). In summary, coaching stressors and the high-performance environment in general can result in challenging and even psychologically unsafe environment for coaches (Bentzen et al., 2020). While there is extensive research into coaches' stress experiences, it is vital to consider the impacts these can have on well-being.

2.4.1 Stress & Well-being Outcomes

The impacts of stressors have been linked with a range of health-related outcomes, decreased well-being and productivity, as well as increased ill-being symptomatology (e.g., Norris et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2001). Specifically in coaching, the majority of studies have explored topics such as coaches' perceptions of stressors, job strain and turnover (Lee & Chelladurai, 2018), depression and anxiety (Kim et al., 2020; Kegelaers et al., 2021), as well as alcohol misuse and burnout (e.g., Bentzen et al., 2020; Bentzen et al., 2016; Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

2.3.2.1 Burnout

Burnout has been mostly described as “enduring experiential syndrome” (Maslach & Jackson, 1986; Maslach, 1998) with three key components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is key to the concept of burnout and includes a lack of physical as well as psychological resources (McNeill et al., 2018; Raedeke & Kenttä, 2013). Depersonalisation involves the development of a cynical, disinterested approach to the coaching role (Maslach, 1998), which can often incorporate a negative evaluation of one’s competency (McNeill et al., 2018), but also a negative attitude towards athletes (Raedeke & Kenttä, 2013). Reduced personal accomplishment includes feelings of inefficacy or a lack of achievement in the role (Maslach, 1998). Coach burnout has been primarily explained as a result of a prolonged exposure to stress (Olusoga et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it seems that the sheer exposure to stress might not be enough and other influences come into play (Raedeke, 1997; Raedeke et al., 2000). Coakley (1992) proposed the impact of culture on burnout symptoms through the development of a singular sporting identity and a lack of control. Coaches spend a significant amount of time at work which practically prevents any opportunities for identity development outside of their role (Raedeke et al., 2000). To add to the complexity, one of the common pathways into a high-performance coaching role is through a previous athletic career (Chroni et al., 2022; Chroni et al., 2020). In these scenarios, coaches spent a vast majority of their life in an extremely driven, intense environment where dedication is key and the opportunities to develop as a person outside of sport are minimal (DeFreese & Shannon, 2021), hence putting coaches at even bigger risk of burnout. Additionally, some researchers explored burnout from a self-

determination perspective and specifically considered how the lack of autonomous motivation and low need satisfaction can put coaches at risk (e.g., Bentzen et al., 2014; Bentzen et al., 2016; Stebbings et al., 2012). A scoping review by Olusoga et al. (2019) showed shifts in burnout research from sole description of the syndrome (e.g., Altfeld et al., 2015) to its more dynamic understanding (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). Factors such as motivational profiles or work-home interference (e.g., Bentzen et al., 2014, 2016, 2017) are now being explored to better understand how the personal qualities as well as a lack of recovery contribute to the process (Bakker et al., 2011; Demerouti et al., 2004).

Despite the challenges and possible negative consequences of burnout, literature suggests that it is possible to recover from it and continue in a productive, healthy career (e.g., Kenttä et al., 2016). This in itself feels positive as it could aid high-performance organisations to retain their skilled workforce instead of losing coaches if addressed appropriately. However, there is a number of reasons as to why recovery from burnout might prove challenging. First, a culture which prevents coaches from seeking help, second, a lack of understanding around recovery strategies, and third, the potential lack of time available to dedicate to recovery strategies (Hassmén et al., 2019; Lundkvist et al., 2012). Regardless of the reason, it is the levels of stress, lack of recovery, and subsequent challenges that transform coaching into an unsustainable role in the long run (Häggglund et al., 2022) and often lead to withdrawal from sport (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

2.3.2.2 Mental Health and Mental Illness in High Performance Coaching

Despite the uptake of interest in mental health and well-being within high-performance sport, fairly little has been specifically explored in coaches (Baumann et al., 2024; Breslin et al., 2022). Moreover, while talking about well-being/mental health, researchers (and often individuals in high-performance sport) seem to refer to ill-being/mental illness instead. For example, Frost and colleagues' (2024) scoping review explored the mental health of elite coaches, yet the vast majority of the included studies focused on various aspects of mental ill-health rather than capturing the full continuum of mental health with its positive and negative aspects (e.g., flourishing; Keyes, 2002). Given the findings of coaching stress literature (Kegelaers et al., 2021; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016), the preoccupation with negative symptoms is understandable (e.g., Cotton & Hart, 2003; Fletcher & Scott, 2010). However, the lack of considerations of positive

experiences and mental health in coaches represent a significant gap in our understanding. Moreover, it might also lead researchers to unintentionally perpetuate a clinical approach to mental health (Kennedy, 2021; Prior et al., 2024) instead of presenting it as continuum (Keyes, 2002, 2005). Apart from burnout which received considerable attention (for review see Olusoga et al., 2019), researchers have explored anxiety, depression, psychological distress, risky alcohol consumption, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, substance abuse, and gambling in coach population.

Only a small number of studies looked specifically at the prevalence of mental illness in coaching, with a focus primarily on anxiety and depression (Smith et al., 2020). These estimates range from 14% for depressive symptoms (Kim et al., 2020) to 39.5% for a combined depression and anxiety symptoms (Kegelaers et al., 2021), mostly aligning with prevalence in general population. Similarly, Åkesdotter and colleagues (2020) identified that all coaches who were in an outpatient service experienced anxiety disorders and additional 28% of the coaches experienced major depressive disorder. The prevalences resemble numbers in the athletic population (Pilkington et al., 2022), hence present a case for equal interest in and support of coaches. While anxiety has been linked with coping efficacy and goal incongruence (Lee et al., 2021), depressive symptoms have been associated with the frequency of daily challenges and workload (Kim et al., 2020). Considering this in the context of high-performance coaching with its hustle culture (Lumpkin & Anshel, 2012), contrasting agendas (Bentzen et al., 2020), and need for extensive coping resources (Thelwell, 2010), coaches might be at increased risk of these symptoms and the practical as well as academic interest is warranted. This risk can also be enhanced by experienced emotional exhaustion which has been identified as mediator between anxiety, depression, and burnout (Ruddock et al., 2019; Ruddock et al., 2018). Given the likeliness of emotional exhaustion in coaches, this might put coaches at even more risk and further investigations are essential.

Even though, the prevalence of mental health issues might correspond with that of the general population (and contest the urgency for dedicated attention to coaches), the rates should be considered with caution. Given the performance narrative and related discourses around mental toughness in sport (Hägglund et al., 2019; Kenttä et al., 2020), coaches' willingness to disclose any concerns might be limited. This relates to the

persisting stigma around mental health within high-performance sport (e.g., Gucciardi et al., 2017; Rao & Hong, 2020; Petersen et al., 2024), but also potentially lower levels of mental health literacy in this population (Gorczynski et al., 2020; Warden et al., 2024) where coaches might simply lack skills to even recognise or properly communicate if they are/ever have struggled.

Further research has explored substance misuse (specifically alcohol) in coaches, with reported rates ranging between 19.3% and 48.3% (Kegelaers et al., 2021; Pilkington et al., 2022). This relates to anecdotal findings of alcohol misuse as a coping strategy in coaches (Bentzen et al., 2017; Olusoga et al., 2012; Roberts et al., 2018). From the limited literature, it seems that coaches often use alcohol to induce relaxation and to help them sleep, as well as to relief experienced depressive symptoms (Roberts et al., 2019).

Our understanding of coaches' sleep remains fairly limited. The two cross-sectional studies reported similar levels of sleep disturbances with 23.4% of coaches reporting moderate to severe disturbances and 25.2% reporting experience of sleep disturbances in general (Kegelaers et al., 2021; Pilkington et al., 2022). Lastella and colleagues (2017) conducted a case study which showed that on average, coaches seem to sleep fewer hours, wake up earlier, and spend less time in bed compared to their team. Other studies reported connections between sleep disturbances and burnout (Bentzen et al., 2014; Lundkvist et al., 2012; Olusoga et al., 2019) and explored how sleep quality can positively impact coaches' mental well-being (Eccles et al., 2023). Consequently, sleep and sleep quality might therefore be an important area to consider when exploring coaches' well-being.

2.3.2.3 Section Summary

The existing stress literature highlights the amount of stressors coaches experience on daily basis and how these can present challenges to coaches' experiences. Because of the stressors frequency and in some cases inadequacy of coping strategies, coaches might face various negative consequences including decreased well-being. The research into these aspects has gained a momentum in recent years (e.g., Pilkington et al., 2022; Smith & Runswick, 2020), but more investigation is needed to fully understand the concept. Where attention was paid, the focus was primarily on negative aspects of coaches' experiences. This is understandable (given the possible negative consequences to coaches' experience and employment) and perhaps dictated by the framework (i.e., stress process) used to comprehend it. However, it fails to paint a full picture of coaching, what coaches experience, and what helps them thrive in the role. Therefore, further investigations into coaches' *well-being* as well as their *ill-being* is needed.

2.4 Well-Being

The concept of well-being and original questions around the nature of a good life go back to ancient philosophy (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Instinctively, there seems to be a colloquial understanding of what well-being is, but deeper exploration uncovers the challenge that comes with its definition (Dodge et al., 2012), conceptualisation (Mead et al., 2021), general terminology (VanderWeele & Lomas, 2022), and measurement (Ryff et al., 2020). These challenges might be due to the array of fields that have focused on well-being, for example, philosophy (e.g., Bishop, 2015; Prinzing, 2021), economics (Stutzer & Frey, 2010), sociology (e.g., Simon, 2014), and positive psychology (Lambert et al., 2015).

So far, the consensus appears to be that well-being is complex, multi-faced and intangible, and its conceptualisation is likely to differ within disciplines (Dodge et al., 2012; Mead et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Altogether, this raises a question of whether it is possible or even relevant to achieve one universal understanding of well-being (Alexandrova & Fabian, 2022; Lomas & VanderWeele, 2022). Instead, capturing what well-being *means* and how it is *experienced* by individuals in a specific context, might be more appropriate (Trainor & Bundon, 2023).

2.4.1 Conceptualising Well-Being

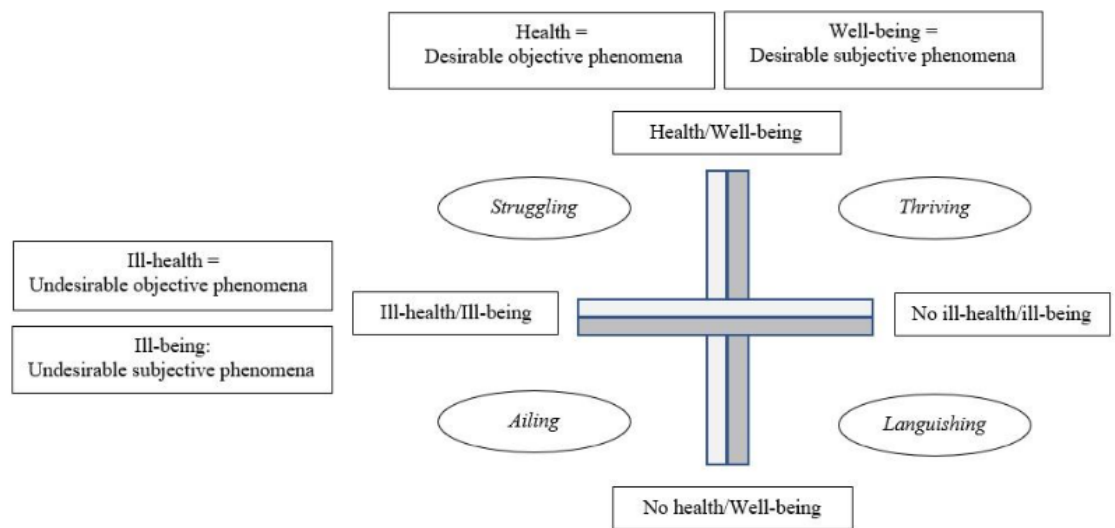
As Gasper (2007) highlighted, well-being can refer both to various individual aspects of life (e.g., mental, physical, social), but also their total sum. Consequently, having one all-encompassing well-being definition requires considerations of a wide breadth of human experiences. A prime example of this attempt is the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) definition of well-being: “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions”. Yet, the challenge of encompassing such breadth is that well-being could become an atheoretical, philosophical concept with no practical application. VanderWeele and Thomas (2023) discussed barriers that specific well-being terminology could create to individuals' help-seeking efforts and self-understanding. Therefore, language is key. As proposed by Summer (1996, pp. 1-4)

“whatever well-being turns out to be, it will be something with great personal and moral significance”.

The issue of breadth and importance of language leads to another significant challenge in the well-being field – number of additional terms used in conjunction with or even as a replacement of well-being (e.g., health, mental health, flourishing, thriving). To follow the call for terminological clarity, it seems important to discuss these (and their connection to well-being). When it comes to practical support and policies, well-being and health seem to go hand in hand. Even the Oxford English Dictionary (2023) defines well-being as: “a state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous”. Lomas et al. (2023, Figure 2.2) created a conceptual framework that looks at the well-being-health relationship and how, despite being linked, the two concepts come from a different perspective.

Figure 2.2

Conceptual Relationships Between Health and Well-Being (Lomas et al., 2023)



While health seems to represent more objective accounts of human experience (e.g., body functioning), well-being refers to more subjective judgments of one’s feelings (Lomas et al., 2023). The subjective/objective outlook can also extend to mental health where it could present a more objective quality evaluation of one’s mental state (Lomas

et al., 2023). The interest in coaches' mental health has noticeably increased in the past few years (Frost et al., 2024; Gorczynski et al., 2020; Pankow et al., 2022). Its role in coaching sustainability also moved it from a theoretical interest to a practical necessity (Kenttä et al., 2024). Moreover, its close connection to well-being becomes apparent in WHO (2022) definition which presents mental health as:

“a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stress of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”

The American Psychological Association (2023) defines mental health as:

“state of mind characterised by emotional well-being, good behavioural adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life.”

Both mental health and well-being can impact each other where mental health contributes to individuals' well-being (and in contrast poor mental health can diminish well-being) and well-being can serve as a protective factor to mental health (Magomedova & Fatima, 2025). They exist on a continuum, with fluctuations over time. The idea of continuum challenges the common dichotomy where individual is either well or ill (Keyes, 2005). Instead, it shows that mental health and well-being fluctuate and move on the continuum based on individuals' experiences and challenges in life. However, as depicted in Figure 2.2 above and works of Keyes' (2002), these fluctuations occur on two (rather than one) continua – 1) mental illness (which ranges from no mental illness to clinically diagnosed mental illness such as depression), and 2) mental health (which ranges from high to low well-being), with their combination creating distinct states. For example, coach can experience no mental illness while being low on mental health (i.e., experience low well-being) because of the various work demands, thus they might languish in their role. Despite their connectedness (and interchangeability in daily conversations), mental health and well-being further differ in their scope and focus. Mental health is mostly concerned with one's psychological and emotional state, the absence of mental illness or distress, and one's ability to cope with stress (WHO, 2022). Well-being, on the other hand, looks at more broader aspects of human's experience such as personal growth and quality of

life. It is more than absence of illness (Weich et al., 2011), it encapsulates positive aspects such as flourishing (Seligman, 2011) and thriving (Brown et al., 2018).

Flourishing captures the state where individuals and their environment are doing well (Vanderweele & Lomas, 2023). Both flourishing and well-being are multidimensional with focus on positive aspects of individuals' lives. To an extent, it could be argued that well-being represents a foundation to flourishing. However, flourishing takes well-being to a next level. It moves beyond simply feeling good. Instead, to flourish, individuals make an active effort to grow, to engage in life to fulfil their potential (Willen et al., 2025). In a way, flourishing represents an optimal state, a peak of well-being (Logan et al., 2023). This tendency to grow also shows in the second closely related concept – thriving. Yet, thriving encapsulates a condition where individuals are doing well despite experiencing various adversities (Brown et al., 2018). Rather than being an optimal state, thriving is more focused on the process and ongoing development (Spreitzer et al., 2017). Both of the concepts might offer some unique insights into well-being but are still relatively broad, lacking specific contextual qualities.

The list of additional terms and concepts used in conjunction with well-being is ongoing and adds to the topic complexity, and possible lack of shared understanding, practicality in the field. Moreover, research seems to use some of these terms to describe/define related concepts; for example, the above definition of mental health uses well-being. Yet, if there is no specific, contextual agreement on what well-being is, it might be misleading or at least insufficient to use it as 'anchor' for defining other concepts. As such, the following section will specifically focus on well-being, its distinct conceptualisations and definitions, starting with the ideas around objectivity and subjectivity.

2.4.1.1 Objective and Subjective Well-Being

The tension between the subjective and objective nature of well-being has led to a wide range of theories and approaches. Gasper (2010) suggested using these individual theories as lenses for our understanding of well-being rather than looking for their strengths and weaknesses. To aid the clarity, Parfit (1984) proposed three key categories of well-being approaches: objective lists (for review see Fletcher, 2013), preference satisfaction (Benjamin et al., 2014; Hausman & McPherson, 2009), and mental states

(sometimes referred to as value-fulfilment theories; Fabian, 2022; Tiberius, 2018), with the latter being commonly introduced in psychological literature as subjective well-being.

Objective lists suggests that all people need to fulfil their core needs in order to thrive (Sen, 1999). There is an underlying idea that certain aspects of human life/particular human needs are inherently good, and consequently their higher satisfaction would lead to higher levels of experienced well-being universally across individuals (Fletcher, 2013; Testoni et al., 2018). These “objectively good” aspects are deemed key, valuable to well-being regardless of whether individuals find them pleasurable or desirable (Parfit, 1984). In a way, objective lists seem to represent a “one size fits all” approach to well-being. For example, Parfit (1984) introduced parenthood and achievement/accomplishment as some of the key, universally relevant objectives for well-being. Based on an objective lists approach, coaches should become parents in order to fulfil this inherently good need and subsequently to achieve higher well-being, while also maintaining their career (i.e., achievement). Yet, literature points to the challenges of combining coaching with parenthood and the negative impact the potential roles tension can have on well-being (Martin & Bowes, 2024; Porter et al., 2024). Therefore, it seems that this uniformed “prescription” of parenthood and achievement as a way to well-being might not be as straight forward (at least for the coaching population). This links to a fundamental critique of objective lists – the imposing of values on individuals. Specifically, questions are raised around who is responsible for deciding what belongs on the objective list in a first place, and whether it is relevant/appropriate to ignore individual preferences, background, and emotions (Tiberius, 2008).

A preference satisfaction approach (i.e., desire-fulfilment or preferentism) addresses the issues around objectivist theories by focusing on individuals’ values (Benjamin et al., 2014; Hausman & McPherson, 2009). The core idea is that people have conscious preferences of certain outcomes, particularly in comparison to others. Therefore, a value of an outcome is reflected by how much an individual wants to achieve it (Testoni et al., 2018). So rather than dictating what well-being is (and disregarding the individual), preference satisfaction approaches consider how much individuals want to achieve something, and these goals are then considered as relevant to well-being (Adler & Posner, 2006). It is worth pointing out that achievement of these goals is what makes up well-

being, not the related feelings. As an example, a coach might desire to win an Olympic gold medal with their athlete, and they manage to achieve this goal. Based on preference satisfaction approaches, it could be argued that the coach would experience well-being. However, the amount of effort and emotional labour that can go into achieving this goal could actually leave the coach feeling drained or even burnt out instead of thriving. The example shows how preference satisfaction approaches might consider the individual to some level but can actually miss various factors (such as mood or prior experience). This makes them inadequate for psychological inquiry and specifically for this thesis (Angner, 2015; Bishop, 2015). Moreover, as well-being is a value-laden concept (Tiberius, 2010), the quest for its objective conceptualisation might be doomed from the start or at least contentious.

Value fulfilment/mental states theories (Parfit, 1984; Fabian, 2022) aim to address this issue by proposing well-being as “... the successful pursuit of a relatively stable set of values that are emotionally, motivationally, and cognitively suited to the person” (Tiberius, 2018, p. 41). Fabian (2022) further elaborated this and suggested value fulfilment as an individual as well as collective process that mirrors inner desires and emotions. This links to the most traditional approach to well-being (especially in the context of social sciences; Huta & Waterman, 2014) which incorporates aspects of hedonia (Diener, 1984) and eudaimonia (Keyes, 1998; Ryff, 1989).

2.4.1.2 Hedonia and Eudaimonia

Hedonic well-being is based on a pursuit of pleasure and happiness. It is often labelled as subjective well-being (Diener & Ryan, 2009; Huta, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2001) but also with other terms such as emotional well-being, happiness or vitality. These different terms aim to highlight specific aspects of hedonia and often address insufficiency of the previous ones. For example, subjective well-being has been used to describe hedonia, but also to describe a more generic, subjective (individual) outlook on well-being in contrast to its objective conceptualisations. Therefore, the terms usually aim to pinpoint a specific aspect of well-being (e.g., positive affect – happiness) in order to clarify research focus and potential transferability of findings.

Hedonia is commonly proposed to consist of three core elements: positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction. These aspects represent emotional responses and

cognitive judgments of what is going on in individuals' lives (Diener, 1984) and are rooted in the idea of 'good life' (Diener et al., 2018). In this sense, a good life becomes a goal or an ideal where individuals compare their current situation and experiences with an ideal set of standards (Diener et al., 2018) and this subjective evaluation further dictates experienced well-being (Diener & Ryan, 2009).

This shows how the three core components (positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction) interlink but also have a unique impact on various life domains (Diener et al., 2017). In a way, the three aspects offer a formula where well-being can be achieved through experiencing high positive affect, low negative affect, and generally high satisfaction in one's life (Kahneman et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff et al., 2021). Hedonic well-being received a considerable attention in research (including sports) and has been linked to various outcomes such as mental health or positive relationships (for a review, see Diener, 2009). However, the preoccupation with positive aspects and pleasure also raised concerns in the research (Ryan & Deci, 2001). There are circumstances when experiencing high positive affect might not necessarily correspond with *being well*. For example, one could argue that experiencing negative affect while going through a bereavement is an actual way of optimal functioning (i.e., being well) over experiencing positive affect. It is this lack of considerations for optimal functioning and the acceptance of high positive and low negative affect as a pre-requisite for well-being that led to discussions around new approaches. Not only this, but focusing solely on high positive affect and low negative affect could create an unachievable (in extreme cases even unhealthy) standard for people rather than a genuine representation of being well in life (van Zyl et al., 2024).

Eudaimonic approaches shift focus to optimal functioning and aligning one's life with core values (Rogers, 1995; Huta & Ryan, 2010). The realisation of one's true nature and fulfilment of one's potential links to the conceptualisation of eudaimonic well-being as an outcome of positive goal pursuits (Ryan et al., 2006). Eudaimonic or "psychological well-being" (as these terms tend to be used interchangeably) is not directly linked to happiness but is rather a "*byproduct of a life that is well-lived*" (Ryff & Singer, 1998, p.5). Therefore, eudaimonia occurs when individuals act in a way congruent with their values

and when fully engaged (Neil et al., 2016). Under these conditions, people feel alive, authentic and show personal expressiveness (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

One of the widely accepted frameworks of eudaimonic well-being is Ryff's (1989) Theory of Human Flourishing. According to Ryff's theory, individuals strive for perfection that represents realisation of their true potential. The human actualisation then comprises of six key dimensions (which at times overlap): self-acceptance, autonomy, personal growth, positive relationships, environmental mastery and purpose in life (Pancheva et al., 2021; Ryff, 2014). In a way, these areas reflect points of tension or challenges that individuals need to overcome in their life in order to achieve their full potential (i.e., *challenged thriving*; Ryff et al., 2021). This approach has received significant attention in sport research while often being referred to as psychological or mental well-being (e.g., Baldock et al., 2021; Potts et al., 2021; Trainor et al., 2020).

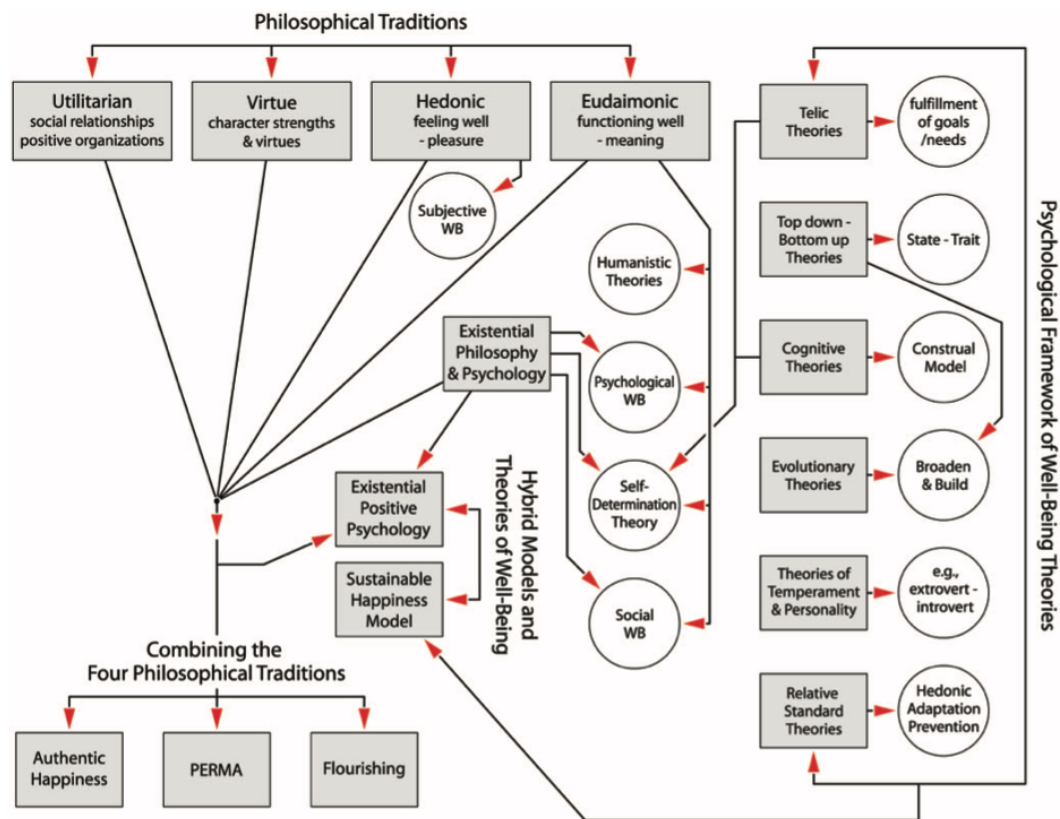
It could be argued that hedonia represents the 'feeling' or emotional part of well-being (e.g., happiness) while eudaimonia covers its 'thinking' aspects (e.g., fulfilment or growth) (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff et al., 2021; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In a way, the two present contrasting approaches to our understanding of well-being. The issue of adopting one over the other is that it can mistakenly encourage exploration of well-being aspects in silos, thus prevent capturing the actual essence of well-being (Dodge et al., 2012; Huppert & So, 2013). One-way researchers have attempted to combat this is by embracing hybrid/combined approaches to well-being. For example, the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) combines distinct philosophical traditions such as hedonia, eudaimonia, and virtues to introduce five core elements of well-being – positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment. When incorporated and embraced in daily life, these elements can contribute to an individual's happiness, resilience, and life satisfaction (Seligman, 2018). This makes well-being more than just absence of negative symptoms or stress, but something that can be achieved through positive experiences.

However, despite the intuitive appeal of hybrid/combined theories, this possibly led to even 'messier' landscape of well-being approaches. To navigate this more easily, Lambert et al. (2015) created a roadmap of well-being considerations with their theoretical underpinnings (Figure 2.3 below). The roadmap provides a more structured understanding of the field and shows how convoluted the topic of well-being can be. It connects

philosophical traditions with psychological frameworks/theories of well-being and depicts relationships amongst distinct well-being constructs. Well-being and related terms can conceptually overlap (e.g., happiness, flourishing), and on surface, can often feel like the same concept. This can result in more confusion in the field and ineffective discussions of well-being where terms are used interchangeably, even when differences exist. Therefore, having a clarity, a map of the foundations of individual concepts can help to illuminate their similarities, differences, but also what research questions should be asked when discussing a specific concept. Doing so will allow for more cohesion in the well-being field which can then drive richer explorations of individuals' well-being experiences.

Figure 2.3

Roadmap of Well-Being Orientations (Lambert et al., 2015)



2.4.2 Well-Being Explorations in Coaching

One of the approaches often adopted for coach well-being research is self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory views individuals as active beings who engage with their environment. This individual-environment interaction can lead to fulfilment or deprivation of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and in turn result in well-/ill-being (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000). As relatively common for well-being research, some theoretical overlap can be identified between the key self-determination theory concepts and previously discussed Ryff's (1989) theory - specifically, competence and environmental mastery, relatedness and positive relationships.

In coaches, Stebbings et al. (2012) connected need thwarting with various indicators of ill-being such as burnout or sleep disturbances. However, it is worth noting that this connection might be moderated by coaches' self-determined motivation (McLean & Mallett, 2012). Similarly, Alcaraz et al. (2015) explored how environmental factors impacted coaches' well-being and linked need-thwarting to possible ill-being. This environment-needs connection points to the role organisations might play in coaches' well-being. As proposed by Ryan and Deci (2001, p.147):

“As such, contextual and cultural, as well as developmental, factors continually influence the modes of expression, the means of satisfaction, and the ambient supports for these needs, and it is because of their effects on need satisfaction that they, in turn, influence growth, integrity, and well-being at both between-person and within-person levels of analysis.”

The challenge here is that despite discussing the environmental impacts on well-being, self-determination theory actually fails to account for these in the framework. For example, as Ryan and Deci (2001, p. 147) admit “self-determination theory does not, however, suggest that the basic needs are equally valued in all families, social groups, or cultures”. This creates a significant disconnect where the impact of culture might be noted yet culture is formulated as a generic external factor rather than force that shapes individual sensemaking (Shweder, 1991). This is further perpetuated by self-determination theory being primarily utilised in more positivist-oriented research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

In addition to self-determination theory, coach well-being research has borrowed from occupational psychology literature (which is understandable given the amount of

time coaches spend in their job), but also the established connections between well-being, turnover rates, and performance (Lundkvist et al., 2016; Wright & Bonett, 2007). For this, coach research often utilises the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R; Demerouti et al., 2001). The core premise of the model is that employee well-being depends on a balance between positive (resources) and negative (demands) aspects of their job (Bauer et al., 2014). Job demands include physical exhaustion, psychological stress, as well as personal and organisational relationships (Kaski & Kinnunen, 2021). If demands exceed the resources, one is expected to experience negative consequences such as strain and burnout. Given what we know about the nature of a coaching role (see section 2.3.1), the required balance might be rather difficult to achieve. This points to the importance of understanding ways of optimising the work environment in order to support coach well-being (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff & Larner, 2015). The nod to the organisational environment is important, yet the process is still considered at an individual level only (Purdy, 2017; Stebbing & Taylor, 2017) leaving questions of the models' applicability beyond an individual level unanswered. The other challenge of JD-R model is its preoccupation with struggling and negative symptoms. As pointed out by Norman and Rankin-Wright (2018) surviving (i.e., managing demands) is not thriving. The absence of burnout or other ill-being symptoms doesn't necessarily correspond with experiencing well-being. There are other aspects of human experience such as flourishing that are entirely missed when solely focusing on one's demands and resources (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2011). Therefore, attempting to understand well-being through the rudimentary demand-resource interaction not only dismisses the person behind the interaction, but also fails to account for well-being as a positive concept.

2.4.2.1 Grand vs. Mid-Range Theories of Well-Being

The approaches discussed above aim to capture different dimensions and conceptions of well-being and, in their own way, offer useful insights into the area, yet because of this specific focus, they might also lack granularity (VanderWeele & Lomas, 2023). Therefore, the effort and purpose of capturing the entirety of multi-faced well-being (and specifically the use of *grand theories* of well-being) should be questioned (Prinzing, 2021). Grand theories can be described as highly abstract, all-encompassing frameworks which focus on capturing and organising theoretical concepts with an aim to

provide universal explanations across society/human experience. They prioritise this over understanding daily experiences or specific contexts (Mills, 1959). The drive for high abstraction can result in grand theories of well-being losing sight of the core aspect of the topic – *being*. Simons and Baldwin (2021) discussed how no part of human experience (e.g., physical, mental, spiritual) can actually exist independently, hence generally exploring well-being through its various prefixes (e.g., emotional – Park et al., 2023; spiritual – Ellison, 1983; physical – Capio et al., 2014) might distort the picture of individuals' experience. To address this challenge, two key things should be considered: 1) the relevance of grand theories of well-being, and 2) the possible consequences of exploring well-being in silos.

The first concern relates to critiques around the lack of normative and descriptive adequacy of well-being theories (Bishop, 2015; Tiberius, 2018) and their detachment from real life and practicality (VanderWeele & Lomas, 2023). The need to shift our focus has been reflected in the recent raise of mid-range theories of well-being which explore well-being within specific groups and contexts (Alexandrova, 2017; Mitchell & Alexandrova, 2021). This allows for more tailored, personalised understanding of well-being including relevant terminology that might be closer to the target audience, hence making the theory more accessible. Mid-range theories might create distinct conceptualisations, but these do not necessarily compete with each other. Instead, they provide useful, practical lenses into specific contexts with the potential to fuel practice (Prinzing, 2021). Accepting that well-being can have a variety of meanings based on an individual's life position, values or experiences (Quartiroli et al., 2022) could be embraced as strength rather than a downfall of well-being exploration. Aligned with these sentiments, most recently Simpson (2023) proposed to use a conceptual engineering approach to study well-being in high-performance sport. Specifically, by embracing a temporal view of well-being, we can focus on practical issues and factors influencing well-being experiences, hence increasing the practical applications of our understanding and research findings. The temporal approach seems to be even more pertinent in high-performance sport with its fast, constantly changing nature (Passaportis et al., 2022). However, the temporality of well-being can move beyond fluctuations of the state (i.e., experiencing high/low well-being) and alter how being well actually looks like in a

specific context or to a particular individual. Consequently, one's own understanding of well-being could differ based on a stage in life where adolescents might prioritise pleasure (e.g., Dustin et al., 2013) while comfort and health management take over for later stages in life (e.g., Graham et al., 2024). But also, in different contexts where being well as a high-performance coach might focus on managing stress and achieving results while being a parent could shift the attention to healthy, positive relationships. It is this temporality that drives the need for a mid-range understanding of well-being.

The call for mid-range theories further aligns with the second challenge above – the isolated explorations of well-being. Mead et al. (2021, p. 2) suggested that “well-being should be conceptualised as a system, within which the interconnectedness of the individual in relation to their communities and environments must be explored while appreciating the impacts of socio-contextual factors (e.g., inequality, culture) that influence wellbeing.” The contextual consideration links with the calls for mid-range theories of well-being and concurrently presents a case for more ecological approaches as well-being always occurs within an environment (Sarvimäki, 2011; Seamon, 2018). The role of context extends beyond facilitating or impairing well-being, it also shapes what one actually considers as ‘well-being’ (Hersch, 2022). Individuals’ narratives, past experiences as well as present/future expectations modify well-being comprehension (Rush & Grouzet, 2012). This highlights how the fundamental judgment of being well (i.e., well-being) is value-laden (Christopher, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2001), with these values stemming from the individual as well the culture they live in (Kitayama & Markus, 2000). This brings us back to the importance of high-performance sport (and organisational) culture when it comes to well-being considerations and the need for its contextual, culturally embedded theory (Christopher, 1999; Diener & Ryan, 2009; Joshanloo et al., 2021). It also corresponds with critiques in the wider well-being research pointing to the ongoing exclusion of cultural considerations in the theories (Trainor & Bundon, 2023), despite the established reciprocal relationship between person and environment/culture (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). In recent years, however, a small number of studies have reported culturally based investigations within sport and more importantly with sport coaches (e.g., Frost et al., 2025; Higham et al., 2024; Leprince et al., 2024).

2.4.2.2 Contextual Well-Being and High-Performance Coaching

Contextually based well-being research in high-performance sport is relatively new, especially when it comes to coaches. There seems to be a level of agreement that well-being is a subjective, dynamic, and complex construct, with a lack of definitional consistency, and a range of indicators (Lundqvist, 2011). Yet, the meaning coaches ascribe to well-being and its specific aspects needs further exploration (Norris et al., 2017). Research in this area often uses proxy indicators of well-being such as happiness or psychological distress (Giles et al., 2020) or generally approaches well-being as a ‘passive’ outcome of some other psychological process (e.g., coping). These individual well-being indicators provide some useful insights but especially when studied in isolation, they can create more conceptual ambiguity and confusion rather than an actual representation of well-being (Giles et al., 2020). They fail to answer the question of *what* well-being is, and how coaches might experience and make sense of it, hence further qualitative based investigations are essential (Hefferon et al., 2017).

In one of the first contextual considerations of well-being in sport, Lundqvist (2011) introduced the idea of global and contextual well-being (e.g., purpose in life and purpose at work). Their proposal was based on the notion that individuals’ evaluation of well-being is commonly influenced by parts of their lives, especially important domains such as family or work (e.g., Diener et al., 2003) which warrant specific attention. Despite the contextual specification, Lundqvist’s approach still aligns with more generic well-being theories (i.e., hedonia and eudaimonia) and so captures the individualistic nature without critically considering the contextual impact. In other words, the context here is an external factor with power to influence pre-determined categories (such as life satisfaction), it is not necessarily a component that would frame the meaning individuals ascribe to their experience and specifically well-being. Because of this, more recent studies have adopted a socio-ecological approach to well-being.

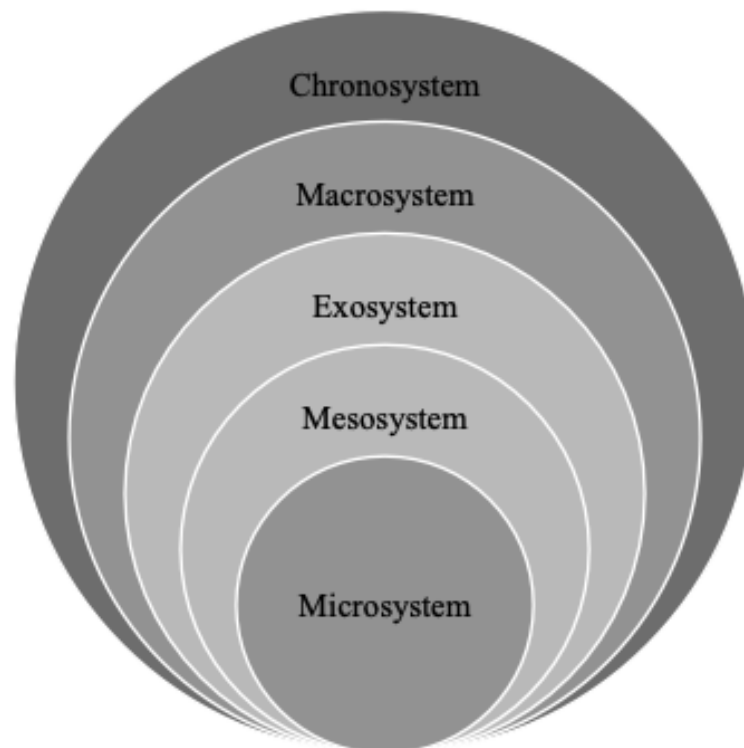
Ecological Approach to Coach Well-Being

This section will provide a brief overview of ecological approaches to well-being (further detailed discussion can be found in Chapter 5). An ecological theory brings to the forefront the importance of environmental considerations and a holistic approach in a psychological inquiry (Figure 2.4; Bronfenbrenner, 1992). It looks beyond coaches

(personal factors) and considers other related factors (such as their environment or societal factors) as well as their interplay. As context can change a whole meaning of a personal experience (Hamling et al., 2020), the need for its inclusion in well-being explorations seems undeniable (Hefferon et al., 2017; Kahneman, 2011; Lomas, 2015). This approach encourages exploration of meaning over assessment of pre-existing ideas (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), thus fits the state of current coaching research. High-performance coaching is a unique occupation with distinct, often challenging experiences. While we have a good knowledge of coaches' stress, high-performance environments and their impact on various outcomes such as mental health and burnout, further investigation is needed in the area of well-being. Specifically, it is important to have a clear conceptual understanding of well-being before making any well-being recommendations.

Figure 2.4

Ecological Systems Theory (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2000)



The ecological approach highlights the distinct, yet interlinked systems that individuals (i.e., coaches) exist within and discuss the possible impacts they can have on their experience. It offers a unique, exciting way of understanding coaches' well-being experiences as they allow us to question what happiness or life satisfaction might look like in the context of high-performance sport. They move the research inquiry from pre-existing ideas of good and bad, and give power to the individuals (i.e., coaches) to establish what good/bad or acceptable is for their well-being in context of the role.

Purcell et al. (2019) developed an ecological framework to understand athletes' mental health, which, in addition to Bronfenbrenner's work, also incorporates a guidance for a mental health promotion, and practical steps for related interventions. Their work shows the importance of including context/wider systems into any recommendations in order to make them embedded and practical. It further highlights how managing well-being is a shared (rather than individual) responsibility, thus challenges the existing attitudes in high-performance sport (Prior et al., 2024). Consequently, being clear and vocal about the impact high-performance/organisational culture can have on coaches' well-being, and the responsibility that comes with it is a vital step forward, especially if the goal is to make the high-performance sport environment more sustainable (whether for athletes or coaches; Jones et al., 2024).

Most recently Higham et al. (2023) embraced the ecological perspective on coaches' well-being. Similarly to the above, the study raised questions around well-being management responsibilities (i.e., coach vs. sporting organisations), but also brought coaches' authenticity and identity into the forefront of well-being discussions. Their findings showed how the interactions between distinct systems (e.g., work, personal life, organisational culture) impact each other and more importantly how they modify coaches' own understanding of their well-being experience (Higham et al., 2023; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Therefore, well-being becomes a more temporal, contextual construct rather than a highly theoretical concept (e.g., happiness) which would commonly fit with the grand theories discussed earlier in the chapter. For example, one study showed coaches comparing being well to "swimming" or rather "not drowning" in the environment, as well as describing it as a phone battery charged above the red zone (Higham et al., 2024). These comparisons speak for the importance of contextual understanding of well-being

as they highlight that, to coaches, being well might mean not burning out, or simply getting by. Therefore, following the traditional conceptualisation of well-being (where in a simplified way being well = being happy) might miss the point or even misguide practice in the context of high-performance coaching.

Moving to more practical realms, Kenttä et al. (2024) published a position paper calling for a focused attention on the mental health and well-being of high-performance coaches. It is the first position statement that is exclusively dedicated to this population and offers practical, specific considerations when it comes to coaching support. The recommendations highlight the need to approach coach well-being as a full mental health continuum rather than exclusively fixating on its negative symptoms such as burnout (Keyes, 2002). Not only this, but they embrace the cultural aspect by extending well-being responsibility beyond coaches to organisations and other personal within. This is a vital step forward as coaches often discuss the absence of available resources when it comes to their well-being (Pilkington et al., 2022) and possible lack of organisational care (Grey-Thompson, 2017). The role of organisational care can range from reviews of working conditions (e.g., managing coaches' excessive workload) to having established referral pathways for help-seeking for mental health/well-being (Kenttä & Hyland, 2021). Nevertheless, further comprehensive understanding and more practical insights are needed in order to adequately support coaches' well-being.

2.5 Chapter Summary

Taken all together, coaching can be considered as an extremely demanding occupation with potentially negative consequences to well-being. A compelling amount of these challenges appears to stem from the environment and, more specifically, the organisational and wider high-performance sport culture. Although, there seems to be a clear case for the exploration of coaches' well-being, our understanding of the concept within this population is still fairly limited. Until recently, well-being has been solely explored as an individual phenomenon, and mostly an outcome of a stress transaction or in lieu of burnout. This is, however, slowly changing. Coach well-being is being examined as more than the simple absence of ill-being symptoms. The shift further extends to critical

considerations of the role of context (high-performance sport and organisational culture) and conversations about what good/bad means for a specific group (i.e., high-performance coaches) in a specific time and environment. Moreover, some distinct strategies and concepts (e.g., mindfulness – Gibbert et al., 2024; self-compassion - Hägglund et al., 2025; self-awareness – Copley et al., 2020) have been linked with improvements in coaches' well-being and offered initial avenues for future policy recommendations and interventions. Despite this, the need for a really thorough understanding of well-being in the context of high-performance coaching remains. The contextuality is key as the meaning of well-being (i.e., being well) can change with individual experience, environments, and the interactions between them. Therefore, the highly abstract grand theories of well-being become inadequate, while the need for mid-range theories arises.

Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to deepen our understanding of well-being in the context of high-performance coaching. The overall aims are to delve into coaches' well-being experiences, and to explore how they make sense of the concept and what it actually means to be well (Chapter 4). Further, the thesis will explore what, if anything, happens when coaches struggle (i.e., their views and experiences of help-seeking for well-being; Chapter 5). Lastly, given the lack of concrete, coach-specific guidance/support, the aim of this programme of research is to contribute to further practical efforts in making high-performance coaching a more sustainable profession (Chapters 6 and 7).

CHAPTER 3

Overall Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the rationale for the overall methodology that underpinned and shaped the research in this thesis. From the start of the PhD, the main goal was to provide some practical insights into coaches' well-being aiming for a useful, tangible guidance with practical benefits for coaches and sport as whole. This practical focus was based on a research philosophy grounded in pragmatism. Therefore, this chapter will discuss the nature of pragmatism, its impact on the design and delivery of the empirical studies, and ethical and quality considerations. Aligned with this, some personal reflections will be shared to demonstrate how the researcher actively shaped the whole process (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

3.2 Researcher Background and Positioning

The approach to this programme of research was moulded by three aspects of my personal life: my prior experience as a high-performance athlete and a volunteer coach, and my current role as a performance lifestyle advisor within the UK Sports Institute. These experiences guided my choice of philosophical approach, but also the subsequent decisions around key areas of focus, methods, and analysis. They provided me with an 'insider position' within the research. The key strength of my insider position came from understanding the nature of high-performance sport and challenges that might come with operating in it (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Yet, the benefits of an insider position also come with challenges (DeLyser, 2001). The prior environmental knowledge might be useful to build relationships with participants but can also lead to bias and ethical challenges (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Therefore, it is vital to reflect on these possible biases.

Keeping in line with the complexity of the insider/outsider stance, for this programme of research, I embraced a role of 'semi-insider' (someone who understands the high-performance sport but has never worked as a coach within it). Being a semi-

insider often meant negotiating different power dynamics (e.g., being a researcher vs. a performance lifestyle practitioner) and having the partial access to the studied population while dealing with concerns around disclosure (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). My prior athletic experience served as a foundation to the ‘insider’ part. Coming from an aesthetic sport background like gymnastics, with a higher prevalence of mental health challenges (Berengüí et al., 2024), always shaped my academic interests. Especially, it informed my postgraduate studies where most of my works revolved around the area of well-being and mental health in sport. Additionally, working as a volunteer coach gave me a brief insight into the other side of the coin. It allowed me to understand that despite some similarities with athletes' experiences, coaches often face entirely unique challenges. Consequently, developing this programme of research seemed like a fluid alignment of my personal experience and academic interest. It felt like a natural step in my academic journey and a professional career.

Moving from past to present, during this programme of research, I have secured a position of a performance lifestyle advisor in the UK Sports Institute. In a way, this role created a reciprocal relationship between the job and my research. On one side, my own research and studies allowed me to question practices embedded in a variety of sports and utilise my position to make a difference. For example, my studies and research highlighted that coaches and other support staff receive insufficient support around well-being after key competitions (DeWolfe & Dithurbide, 2022). Consequently, in my professional role as a performance lifestyle advisor, I negotiated with the senior leadership team that the decompression offer (i.e., a supportive process of sense-making after an intensive emotional, stressful period) would be extended to staff after the Olympic Games in Paris. Concurrently, my semi-insider position gave me access to various high-performance, organisational cultures. It enabled me to connect with different coaches, hear their stories and observe their work which benefited my research in number of ways. First, it gave me a better understanding of responsibilities and tasks connected with high-performance coaching. Second, it partly allowed me to develop a sport/coaching related vocabulary which helped throughout this programme of research as coaches often didn’t need to explain the specific terminology. Third, it provided a chance to learn the ways of high-

performance sport and dealing with coaches (e.g., be clear and purposeful). Lastly, it uncovered the ‘behind the scenes’ practices, with the good and the bad.

Based on this, one of my key practitioner/researcher reflections is the challenge of applying scientific and theoretical knowledge to high-performance sport. Specifically for well-being, there appears to be a disconnect between research and practice where organisations (and individuals within) often struggle to see its importance and impact on performance. To summarise some feedback from people in high-performance sport, they often found well-being work too abstract, secondary to performance and compared to other disciplines, lacking the clear performance benefit. In their view, well-being conversations could be worthwhile, but more practicality and efficiency are needed. This motivated me to strive for research insights that had tangible benefits for coaches, and which could be successfully integrated into the complex working environments of high-performance sport. This was another reason to select pragmatism as an overarching methodology in this programme of research.

Because of my involvement in high-performance sport and closeness to the overall topic of this programme of research, the need for self-reflection was highlighted (Jamieson et al., 2022). To aid the process, I kept a research diary throughout the studies (Appendix 15). This allowed me to capture some key ideas around research questions and themes but also some reflections of my personal stance (and what it brings to the research). For example, I’ve considered how working in high-performance sport could influence my interpretation of data and how the power dynamics could influence the relationship (e.g., whether to approach coaches from my current sport or not). Additionally, I utilised ‘critical friends’ to enhance my reflexivity (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This was through a supervisory team that checked and challenged on my assumptions and data interpretations, but also through professional networks of other PhD researchers and practitioners who served as a sounding board for ideas.

3.3 Philosophical Underpinning of Pragmatic Inquiry

A researcher's selected paradigm not only influences the overall approach to a study but also guides specific aspects such as the choice of methods and data analysis techniques (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). As such, critically examining the underlying assumptions of a research approach is crucial for ensuring methodological coherence in a programme of research (Poucher et al., 2020). As was highlighted above, the driving force behind this programme of research was to provide some practical insights into coaches' well-being aiming for a useful, tangible guidance with practical benefits for coaches and sport as whole. Consequently, a pragmatic approach to this programme of research was deemed the most suitable.

For pragmatists, 'good knowledge' is knowledge that 'works' and makes a real-life difference to the studied issue (Giacobbi et al., 2005). Rather than being concerned with the nature of truth, pragmatism looks to approaches that are best suited to answer the research question in a real-world setting (Dewey, 2008; Morgan, 2014). Pragmatism aligned with my personal beliefs and experiences where making a difference to the coaching population seemed more pressing to abstract discussions of well-being theory and concepts. It also fitted the nature of high-performance sport with its drive for constant improvements and focus on practical, realistic solutions.

In pragmatism, research inquiry is driven by human experience (their beliefs and actions) in a specific social, historical, and political context (Dewey, 2008; Morgan, 2014). The context (or environment) and individuals (their beliefs) constantly interact with each other (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Individuals reflect on their beliefs to choose specific actions, and these actions subsequently inform further beliefs, thus create an experience (Dewey, 2008). Therefore, for pragmatists, knowledge (i.e., experience) is always social in nature, contextual and temporal (Morgan, 2014). This builds on the critique of the literature review (Chapter 2) emphasising the lack of specific cultural/contextual considerations in coach well-being and help-seeking, and the limited exploration of meanings coaches ascribe to them. Additionally, the research-practice gap pointed out in sport literature (Keegan et al., 2017), combined with a lack of tangible coaching support, aligns with a pragmatic approach that is concerned with real-world issues and practical

solutions. It feeds into the overall goal of this thesis to create practical recommendations for coaches' well-being which would be embedded in their lived experiences.

Pragmatist research starts with an issue that has been identified in a specific context rather than an abstract theory. The focus is on exploring beliefs and experiences around the problem, with the aim of taking concrete action to develop tangible solutions and changes in practice (Dewey, 2008). This makes research and everyday life experiences entwined, in an ever-evolving, context-based process (Hall, 2013). The focus on taking action leads the researcher to consider the utility of research methods and what difference it would make to use one approach or method over another (Morgan, 2014). An appreciation of various methods and the value they can bring to the research inquiry is needed in order to choose the most appropriate method to help achieve the best outcomes (Hall, 2013).

3.4 Mixed Method Research

In the context of the current thesis, the pragmatic approach led to the creation of three distinct but interrelated studies, making it an overall mixed method research. As is typical in pragmatism, these studies vary in their methodological approaches, as methods were selected based on their usefulness to the research question rather than adherence to a specific philosophical tradition (Giacobbi et al., 2005; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Morgan, 2014).

This methodological pluralism often shows in the use of mixed method approaches to the pragmatic research inquiry (Morgan, 2014). From pragmatist perspective, methodological approaches serve as a bridge between the research inquiry and its solutions. The distinct methods are first and foremost seen as tools for action where none is superior to the other, they offer different insights instead (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009; Gillespie et al., 2024). Therefore, mixing methods can offer a deeper, more complex understanding of the researched topic as it utilises the strengths of individual methods, as well as the philosophical paradigms that underpin them (Hall, 2013; Kaushik & Walsch, 2019). Rather than being viewed as contradictory, mixed methods are approached as complementary with a power to offer more impactful insights into the researched area (Sale et al., 2002).

Study 1 (Chapter 4) used a constructivist grounded theory approach because it enabled us to explore coaches' views and experiences of well-being, and to investigate what being well meant to coaches, rather than working with an established framework. This aligned with the pragmatists' call for contextuality of knowledge and search for meaning for the specific community. Study 2 (Chapter 5) used a mixed method qualitative design (survey and mini focus groups) allowing to embrace individual help-seeking experiences while targeting possible barriers around disclosure (i.e., being pragmatic). Embracing a mixed-method approach was useful to gain a richer, more detailed understanding of a studied phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2003; Morse, 2010) and fitted with the nature of pragmatic approach which roots in a belief that at times, more insights combined might better answer the research question (Giacobbi et al., 2005). Study 3 (Chapter 7) utilised a modified Delphi method which allowed us to find consensus around coach well-being recommendations amongst key stakeholders. In line with pragmatism, this study included key stakeholders to drive the research inquiry towards a more contextual, practical solution. More detail on the specific methodological choices (and how these informed the study design) will be presented in the individual empirical chapters. Nevertheless, to fit the pragmatist's idea of ever-evolving knowledge, each study is a natural continuation of the previous one, a next building stone in the enormous topic of coaches' well-being and help-seeking.

3.5 Ethics

Ethical considerations and practices are key aspects of a research inquiry. For the present thesis, institutional ethical approval was gained for all three studies where data was collected (Appendices 1, 5, 10). In practice, this approval and considerations were mirrored in the use of participants' information sheets and consent forms, as well as comprehensive considerations around participant's confidentiality and anonymity.

Aside from the compulsory institutional approval, I had to consider the personal ethical aspects of my research; starting with feelings of responsibility towards coaches and their support, to working in a high-performance sport programme. These considerations can be referred to as “ethics in practice” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) which can most commonly be enhanced through reflexive practices. The main goal is to achieve “aspirational ethics” which has been defined as the highest level of researchers' ethical considerations beyond the traditional minimum requirements (Lahman et al., 2011; Southern et al., 2005). Earlier in this chapter, I presented examples of my reflexive efforts (e.g., use of researcher diary) and I also introduced the thesis' pertaining concern – the idea of finding the right balance between my personal research interests and care for the participants (and their interests). This represents 'culturally responsive, relational, and reflexive ethical stance' (Lahman et al., 2011).

The studies within this thesis target often sensitive or even taboo topics (in the context of high-performance sport) such as well-being or help-seeking (Roderick, 2006; Roderick & Gibbons, 2014). Even though there were some recent public disclosures around these topics, they primarily came from athletes. Coaches seem to stay in the background, possibly lacking role models who would normalise well-being conversations. This made me conscious of the possible reservations coaches might have during the interviews and focus groups. Consequently, before asking the specific research questions, I took the time to explain the purpose of the study, highlighting the practical drive behind it. I tried to convey my care for coaches and genuine interest in their situations and experiences by placing them into the role of expert/teacher. Highlighting my limited experience as a high-performance coach seemed to provide a useful opening whereby coaches felt more in control of the conversation. During these interviews, there were occasional sensitive moments where it was important to reiterate the confidentiality of the

process and offer breaks from the conversation. Additionally, I made sure to ask for feedback at the end of each interview. This was to make sure no important ideas were missed, but also, from an ethical/relational perspective, to ensure that I approached these conversations in the most appropriate, sensitive, comfortable manner.

3.6 Research Quality

In pragmatism, research quality is rooted in its practical consequences and usefulness (Dewey, 2008; James, 1907). To fully assess research quality, Whaley and Davis (2007) proposed key considerations for researchers: 1) whether the topic of research is relevant for the studied stakeholders; 2) who the participants should actually be (including the specified demographics); 3) what implications do the findings have for the specific group; and 4) whether there is an effort to share the findings with relevant stakeholders who could benefit from the knowledge.

The relevance of the topic initially showed in the imbalance between the finite knowledge around coaches' well-being and the frequently discussed negative impacts of the high-performance sport environment (Chapter 2). It was further emphasised in the absence of coach help-seeking literature (Chapter 4) and the limited number of current, coach-specific well-being recommendations (Chapter 7). In practice, the relevance of the topic showed through coaches' disclosures where a lack of research and organisational interest was discussed, and the absence of practical support emphasised. The second quality consideration revolves around the nature of participants. Throughout this research programme, the focus was consistently on high-performance coaches (from a variety of backgrounds) as they have been identified as an at-risk group with a high prevalence of burnout and other well-being concerns (e.g., Altfeld et al., 2018; Kegelaers et al., 2021). Therefore, they represented a group with a real-world issue but also with an insufficient representation in research, thus making their inclusion a pragmatic decision. The third quality consideration addresses the practical implications of the findings to the group. The most pertinent example of this consideration is the creation of comprehensive well-being recommendations for high-performance coaches (Chapter 6). As these were partly based on findings of study 1 and 2 (Chapters 3, 4), they could be considered a culmination of a variety of practical considerations throughout the programme of research. Finally,

consideration of the circulation of the research with key stakeholders was addressed through: 1) the actual research process where the modified Delphi method (Chapter 7) enabled relevant stakeholders to share their views in order to make the recommendations more practical; and 2) through the dissemination of the research findings, formally through a peer-reviewed publication (Simova et al, 2024), conference presentations (Simova et al., 2022; Simpson & Simova, 2022; Simova et al., 2024), and podcasts (Abrahams et al., 2022; Fullarton et al., 2024), or informally through professional conversations and sharing the research where requested. Further discussions of quality of the individual studies will be provided in the empirical chapter of the thesis.

3.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter explored methodological underpinnings in this thesis (and its individual studies). Pragmatism was introduced as the key driving factor behind this thesis where individual research inquiries were rooted in real work-world concerns and shaped to make a practical difference to coaches' well-being and help-seeking experiences. To further embrace the nature of pragmatism, my personal reflections were shared throughout this chapter to provide a more embedded picture of me as a researcher, following my choices and rationale. The drive for pragmatic research came from my personal, lived experience but also calls from wider sporting literature (Chapter 2).

Chapter 4

Study 1

4.1 Introduction

This study builds on the key critiques from the literature review (Chapter 2) and presents the first empirical inquiry in this research programme. High-performance sport can enhance positive emotions and provide a purpose in life for those who participate (McCarthy, 2011; Potts et al., 2021). Coaches often report a deep and enduring passion for their work and see coaching as an enjoyable and rewarding profession (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022). Yet, high-performance sport can also be characterised as fast-paced and ruthless, where individuals must constantly justify their position (Eubank et al., 2014). These stressors, combined with a rigidity and distrust towards outsiders, can feed a culture of insecurity and unpredictability (Bentzen et al., 2020). The win-at-all-cost narrative can create a cultural frame to which individuals try to fit their identity (e.g., masking emotions to appear stoic; Potrac et al., 2017) and where harmful practices go unquestioned (Feddersen et al., 2020). This presents a risk to individuals' performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), but also their well-being (Kenttä et al., 2023).

Coaching has been shown to be a particularly stressful occupation. Coaches face a wide range of organisational, personal, and performance-related stressors (e.g., Didymus, 2017; Kenttä et al., 2020; Norris et al., 2017; Olusoga et al., 2009, 2010). For example, they must address stakeholders' conflicting agendas and deal with isolation due to unsociable working hours, while having their own performance (and often continued employment status) evaluated based on the performances of their athletes. Women coaches face additional unique challenges operating in an environment dominated by men, but the accounts of female coaches are underrepresented in the literature (Kenttä et al., 2020; LaVoi et al., 2019). Overall, the often highly stressful nature of coaching is associated with a high prevalence of burnout in the population (e.g., Olusoga et al., 2019), which calls for a greater consideration of coaches' vulnerable positions and their well-being.

Several position statements have highlighted the need to address mental health and well-being concerns in high-performance sport and have suggested ways of providing support (Vella et al., 2021). Coach well-being, however, remains mainly underexplored as most of the published statements address athletes' well-being exclusively. As coaches have been recognised as performers in their own right, who operate in an environment with discrete challenges (Gould et al., 2002), recommendations for supporting athletes' well-being might be inappropriate or insufficient. As such, more research is needed to understand coaches' well-being, taking into account the multiple and specific demands they face.

Current research within a high-performance context often explores coaches' well-being in connection with stress, either via its negative impact (i.e., coach burnout; Olusoga et al., 2019) or appraisal/coping (e.g., Norris et al., 2017). The focus on burnout is understandable, given its prevalence and negative consequences for coaches (e.g., Kenttä et al., 2020). Yet, as well-being is more than the absence of ill-being, these studies lack a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon. The call for a more balanced understanding of well-being was recently addressed by studies focusing on a positive impact of appraisal/coping (e.g., Baldock et al., 2022; Potts et al., 2019, 2021). However, these studies treat well-being as a goal to achieve within a wider stress process rather than as the core of the examination.

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), specifically its sub-theory of basic psychological needs (Tait et al., 2020), is an additional lens utilised in sport well-being research. Satisfaction of these needs, absence of need-thwarting, and self-determined motivation have all been identified as antecedents of coaches' well-being, with the environment playing a crucial role in the process (e.g., Alcaraz et al., 2015; Stebbings et al., 2015). The environmental impact (including the significant impact of organisational culture) on coach well-being appears to be important (e.g., Chroni et al., 2019; Kaski & Kinnunen, 2021), but again, a deeper exploration of the processes and facets which influence high-performance coaches' well-being is missing, further supporting the need for a context/culturally specific approach.

Culture, or specifically organisational culture, can be viewed from either an objectivist-functionalist (i.e., culture is something organisations *have*) or subjectivist-

interpretivist stance (i.e., culture is something organisations *are*; Alvesson, 1993). The first is pragmatic as it allows for an exploration of the causal relationships between well-being and organisational culture (e.g., Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) with subsequent considerations for performance or work satisfaction (e.g., Cho & Lee, 2020). The second deals with meanings behind membership of organisational group (e.g., beliefs, values, organisational politics, as well as everyday behaviours, interactions, and practices linked with memberships of organisations; Wagstaff & Burton-Wyllie, 2018). As McGannon and Smith (2015, p.79) proposed “culture shapes how we think, feel, and behave; we cannot step outside culture, thus, to ignore it would be to miss a key matter that shapes people’s self-identities and lives.” The role of organisational culture (and indeed broader cultural and contextually specific influences) in supporting or thwarting coach well-being must therefore be considered.

The majority of well-being theories agree that the concept of well-being is complex and multifaced. They relate to two distinct yet interrelated philosophical traditions – hedonia and eudaimonia (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonia is concerned with an individual’s pursuit of happiness, life satisfaction, and avoidance of pain (e.g., Diener’s Tripartite Model of Subjective Well-Being, 1984). In contrast, Ryff’s (1989) Theory of Human Flourishing represents a eudaimonic perspective on well-being, focusing on concepts such as self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, and autonomy as key to well-being. In this view, well-being is an outcome of positive goal pursuits, a “by-product of a life that is well-lived” (Ryff & Singer, 1998, p.5). To an extent, both hedonia and eudaimonia are reflected in the World Health Organisation’s (WHO; 2021, p.16) general definition of well-being as “quality of life, as well as the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world in accordance with a sense of meaning and purpose.”

While these conceptualisations and overarching grand theories (i.e., the highest, most abstract theories; Mills, 1959) of well-being provide a useful frame, they can overlook the specific contexts of unique environments (such as high-performance coaching) and subsequently be insufficient in producing a basis for practical advice (e.g., for coaches or organisations). Moreover, grand theories often present well-being as an individual, psychological phenomenon, and do not sufficiently account for the societal or

cultural process (e.g., social and cultural norms) that may shape coaches' experiences (Simpson et al., 2023). Consequently, as well as utilising a global view on well-being through its grand theories, it is essential to provide more contextually bound considerations (Lundqvist, 2011). In order to fully support coaches' well-being, exploring their experiences within the unique context of high-performance sports is a vital step forward. A mid-range theory based on such work can integrate the day-to-day contextual experience of high-performance coaches and provide a base for future practice (e.g., Merton, 1968).

In this study, we sought to embrace the dynamic process of well-being in the unique context of high-performance coaching (Dodge et al., 2012). The aim of developing a specific mid-range theory of high-performance coaches' well-being is to offer a more detailed, focused understanding of their experience within a unique environment. In turn, this might enable greater understanding of the processes involved in enhancing and maintaining coaches' well-being, the ability to more effectively support them in their roles, and the creation of more sustainable coaching environments within high-performance sport.

4.2 Method

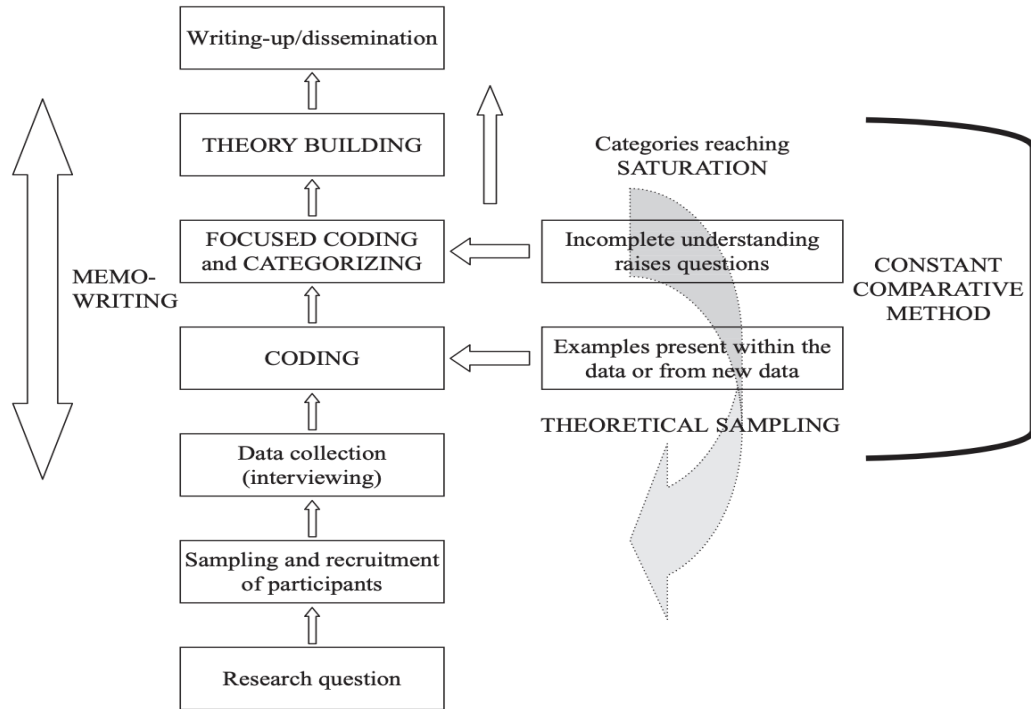
4.2.1 Methodological Assumptions

Given the study's explorative purpose and the need for a context specific approach that accounts for the unique culture of high-performance sport, constructivist grounded theory was adopted as the guiding methodology. This approach aligned with the overall approach of pragmatism that underpins the research in this thesis by providing a flexible yet rigorous framework to generate contextually relevant knowledge. Constructivist grounded theory's emphasis on action, meaning and dynamic social processes supported the processual view of well-being and the thesis' aim to produce practically useful insights grounded in real-world coaching experiences. The calls for cultural considerations of well-being (Ryba et al., 2024) also matched the nature of constructivist grounded theory which embraces knowing and learning as embedded in social life (Charmaz, 2014).

Constructivist grounded theory is based on abductive reasoning (Kelle, 2007) which involves an exploration of tentative conclusions and their reasoning. It follows up on any surprising aspects that cannot be explained by traditional theory and draws conclusions based on best fitting explanations (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory is also characterised by its iterative nature. Specifically, data are collected, analysed, and compared with each other as well as the wider literature in order to refine individual concepts. This refinement then leads to additional data collection and analysis. Because of its nature, we considered pragmatic saturation (e.g., requirements of theory's robustness; Low, 2019) and information power (e.g., adequacy of sample size; Malterud et al., 2016) as suitable indicators of the theory's realisation (see Figure 4.1 for the process).

Figure 4.1

Process of Grounded Theory (Charmaz & Tweed, 2011)



4.2.2 Recruitment & Sampling

With institutional ethics approval (Appendix 1), primary recruitment utilised researchers' existing networks, followed by social media recruitment, and a snowballing technique. The initial recruitment criteria were purposefully broad to ensure a range of experiences (Given, 2008). Coaches had to work full-time at a national and/or international level and be conversational in English/Czech. Theoretical sampling was employed throughout to identify participants with potentially distinct insights into developing findings (tentative categories; Charmaz, 2014). For example, theoretical sampling focused on coaches identifying as women and international coaches to explore any potential coaching issues related to gender identification or organisational cultures.

4.2.2.1 Participants

Overall, 16 coaches (4 identifying as women, 12 identifying as men; $M_{\text{Years of HIGH-PERFORMANCE experience}} = 7.62$; Table 4.1) participated in the study with four engaging in follow-up interviews.

Table 4.1

Sociodemographic Characteristics (participants' names are pseudonyms)

	Identified Gender	Coaching Country	Sport
Dave	Man	UK	Water sports
John	Man	UK	Gymnastics
Mark	Man	Czech	Athletics
Thomas	Man	Canada	Athletics
Ali	Man	UK	Judo
Cameron	Man	Greece	Football
Ellie	Woman	UK	Basketball
Emma	Woman	UK	Snowsport
Andy	Man	UK	Rugby
Louise	Woman	UK	Athletics
Chris	Man	UK	Golf
Matt	Man	Sweden	Snowsport
Theo	Man	Norway	Snowsport
Harry	Man	Australia	Snowsport
Sophie	Woman	UK	Hockey

4.2.3 Data Collection & Analysis

Initially, a flexible interview guide (Appendix 4) was created based on sensitising concepts (starting ideas around the topic, Charmaz, 2014) from coaching literature (e.g., daily stressors, sources of happiness at work; Olusoga et al., 2009; Potts et al., 2021). Three pilot interviews produced feedback on the interview guide's functionality and clarity. Afterwards, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore coaches' experiences and conceptualisations of well-being. Interviews took place online via video conferencing software and were recorded. Aligned with constructivist grounded theory, a flexible interview guide was essential in order to elicit meaningful responses but also to follow up on new lines of inquiry as the theory develops (i.e., the refinement of

tentative categories; Charmaz, 2014). The data analysis commenced immediately after a completion of each interview, with subsequent occasional refinements of the interview guide. For example, the initial interview guide focused generally on coaches' views of well-being (e.g., "What does well-being mean to you?"), yet as analysis progressed, a refined guide incorporated the idea of organisational culture as potential influencing factor (e.g., "How does your organisation address well-being?"). Throughout the process, the main researcher kept a methodological journal (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This supported the analysis as various coding nuances that could influence the final theory were noted, and constant reflection was encouraged. The journal was also used immediately after interviews to capture any fleeting ideas, overall impressions or relevant contextual factors.

All interview transcripts were analysed using line-by-line, focused, and theoretical coding with constant movement between each (Weed, 2009), and in vivo codes were used to preserve participants' meanings. The initial coding consisted of naming each section of data while remaining open to any theoretical directions. Aligned with Charmaz (2014), the initial codes were purposely close to the original material and focused on actions. For example, this quote from coach Ellie: "you do a good job, but you still think you should have done more" was coded as "constant questioning of one's efforts." During focused coding, we synthesised existing codes and progressed with the theoretical direction of the study. This stage identified gaps in the well-being understanding, which then led to a creation of additional questions for research inquiry (e.g., "What makes you stay in the role despite experiencing all the challenges?"). As the analysis continued, some of the focused codes were elevated to theoretical codes as we realised their importance in the process of coaches' well-being. For example, 'coach comes last' became 'extreme selflessness' which related to the lack of boundaries and its negative impact on coaches' well-being. We then explored the individual relationships between the theoretical categories.

4.2.3.1 Research Quality

Research reflexivity was an important strategy used to support methodological rigour, conceptual clarity of the findings and the overall quality of the study. The researcher kept a diary log throughout process (examples in Appendix 15) to capture theme development, but also to note any fleeting ideas, as well as potential biases. For

example, one of the early diary logs notes the impression that: “happiness in coaching is not a priority, instead purpose is everything, and sacrificing oneself for this purpose is a gold standard.” This initially fleeting idea eventually developed into the concept of ‘coaching is a dream’. In addition to diary log, critical friends (supervisory team and other academics) were approached throughout this process to encourage self-reflection but also to critically discuss developing theory and related concepts (Stolle & Frambaugh-Kritzer, 2022).

The evaluation of the methodological rigour of the present study should be based on its originality, usefulness, credibility, and resonance (Charmaz, 2014). Originality was achieved by providing a new perspective on high-performance coaches’ well-being with an under-researched group within the well-being literature. Usefulness was achieved by creating a mid-range theory which captured what being well means in the context of high-performance sport. Embracing the nuance of the environment portrayed coaches’ well-being more realistically and led to more practical insights into the phenomena (Charmaz, 2014) that had potential to guide coaches’ reflections. Therefore, this study addresses a real-life problem and offers some initial solutions/points for future developments (Morgan, 2014). The credibility of findings is enhanced by use of coaches from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., different sports, nationalities, length of career). We suggest that the depth of discussion and the breadth of the sample reflects more than just the participants’ views. Instead, it can resonate with a wider coaching audience. The involvement of coaches in the creation of the mid-range theory allowed for a critical reflection of the knowledge construction and supported the notion of credibility (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

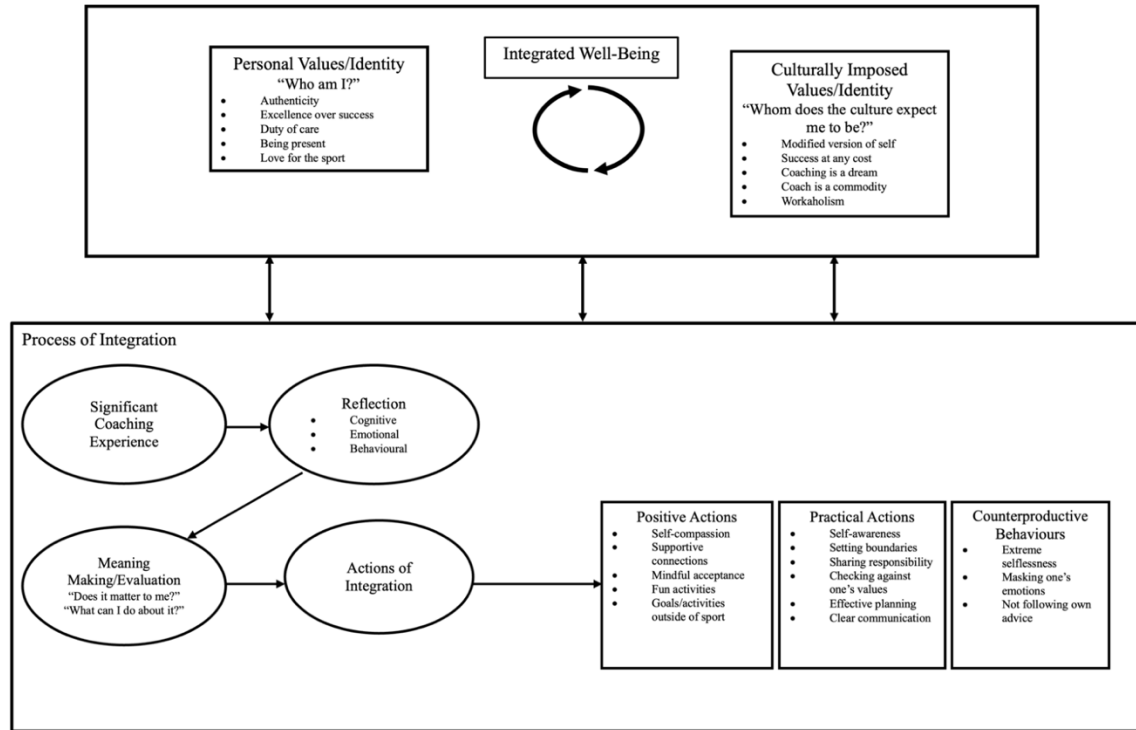
4.3 Results

The purpose of the study was to create a mid-range grounded theory of high-performance coaches' well-being (Figure 4.2, page 69). The theory suggests that well-being might be found via negotiation between coaches' idealistic version of well-being ('Personal Values/Identity') and the reality of their experience ('Culturally Imposed Values/Identity'). Personal Values/Identity reflects an ideal coaching experience and shapes the way coaches engage in their practice. These values represent the version of the self that coaches strive to be, undisturbed by the demands of high-performance/organisational culture. Yet, coaches do not operate in a social vacuum. As such, Culturally Imposed Values/Identity captures these influences and refers to the values/expectations placed on coaches. In turn, these result in a coaching identity driven by high-performance sport as well as organisational culture. Although depicted separately, well-being involves a constant, dynamic negotiation between the two aspects. This process is depicted by 'Integrated Well-Being', such that aspects of the coaching environment are incorporated into a coach's self-concept in a way that allows a degree of harmony between personal and culturally imposed values. It is about finding ways to integrate oneself within the culture, but also modify the culture based on personal values.

In order to attain this harmony, coaches engage in the process of integration, starting with a significant coaching experience. The experience yields a discrepancy between personal and culturally prescribed values and can be either positively or negatively valenced (e.g., wholesome weekend with a family, loss of a dream opportunity). It leads coaches to reflect, evaluate or make meaning of the experience, and depending on its importance, undertake in various acts of integration. Our theory highlights the constant fluctuation and movements between "ideal" and culturally prescribed identities and embraces the idea of well-being as something constantly evolving.

Figure 4.2

Mid-Range Grounded Theory of High-Performance Coaches' Well-Being



4.3.1 Personal Values/Identity

Coaches have various values related to their personal and professional life. These are core to who they are and, in an ideal world, would be reflected in their everyday experience. Living according to these values would lead coaches to feel positive and content, support their development, and improve relationships. These values often serve as justifications for embarking on a coaching career. Coaches mentioned authenticity, self-worth, excellence over success, being present, duty of care, and loving their sport as particularly important. Knowing their values served as a guiding principle informing professional (e.g., athletes' support), and personal (e.g., retirement) decisions.

One of the key values that appears to be an important aspect of well-being for coaches was authenticity (Knoll et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2008). This theme captured coaches' desires to be true to themselves and embrace their uniqueness. Coaches

discussed this in the context of their relationships, practice sessions, but also displaying their own emotions. Authenticity allowed them to establish supportive, ‘real’ relationships, encouraged vulnerability, and decreased unrealistic expectations of constant control. Coach Chris talked about the benefits of showing vulnerability:

“I suppose, being vulnerable, it’s not comfortable for anybody, but it’s important. I want the person in front of me to be able to come and say they’re struggling so we do something, and that puts them in a vulnerable position. So, I think it’s understanding that I’ve got to show it to get it back.”

The importance of authenticity was accentuated in coach Emma’s experience. To her, authenticity meant freely expressing herself and prioritising enjoyment over results. She described her experience of protecting her authenticity when joining a governing body:

“We didn’t want to align with a conventional national team, didn’t want to be told what to do, we didn’t want to be part of a uniform team ... and they (governing body) did. We were very much used to our free sports environment and already had existing sponsors and backers and identities as part of a professional career.”

Another key value for coaches was being present, and its implication for work-life balance. Being present encapsulated a conscious decision, effort to focus on a concrete activity. Consequently, coaches felt connected, energised, and better equipped to face challenges.

“I make the choice of when to be present, in which domain ... it needs to make sense to me, life’s in flux but I need to pick up and pull on the right threads at the right time. When I’m with my children, I work hard to be present. If I know there’s a period coming when I’ll be away, I’ll connect with my athletes and explain (my present focus) ... they understand.”
(coach Dave)

Coaches understood that traditional work-life balance recommendations (Amstad et al., 2011) were unrealistic. Described as a “useless HR term” (coach Dave), seeing work and life as two distinct spheres, created constant tensions and feelings of guilt when coaches missed out on either part of their life. Therefore, coaches suggested removing the distinction and prioritising being present.

Coaches' love for the sport (personal value) helped them to appraise difficult situations as challenges rather than threats and was a reminder of the original drive for getting into coaching.

“I just absolutely love it. It's such a big part of my life. I did stop for a short while and it felt like a loss. I felt like there's something missing and even though I had this extra free time, I didn't want it, I wanted to be back.”
(coach John)

Coaches also recalled their love for sport as a reason for a career return after burnout. The distance from a toxic high-performance culture yielded a new perspective and restored the original value.

“... I've returned to just doing the sport and enjoying it again, and so really love the sport. Both times I've returned to just coaching, that took a real soul searching. Like, what is it I actually enjoy here you know ... what do I love doing? And I think every single time I've gone back to my personal values.” (coach Ali)

Overall, personal values served as driving factors for coaches' attitudes and behaviours. They were linked with the idea of a great coach, unmodified by cultural expectations. Coaching identity, rooted in these values, allowed for personal development. When embracing personal values, coaches felt authentic, fulfilled, and were better equipped to deal with demands of their role.

4.3.2 Culturally Imposed Values/Identity

‘Culturally Imposed Values/Identity’ come from narratives shared across the high-performance sport/organisational culture and manifest in expectations placed on coaches. They centre around being “always on”, hyper-masculinity, and performing despite adversities - all commonly noted as well-being impediments in wider research (e.g., Avanzi et al., 2012). Here, coaches discussed concepts such as modified version of the self, coaching as a dream, and the coach as a commodity. The concepts represent a version of a coach embracing and internalising the cultural requirements, and to some extent distinct to a coaching identity based on personal values. However, this internalisation might be harmful especially for a prolonged period. Coach Dave shared his experience of embracing high-performance sport values and its impact on relationships with athletes.

“I think I was putting on a front, trying to act beyond authenticity and be this kind of neutral emotional figure. Subsequently I found that I was, you know, not being authentic, I would be setting a benchmark that didn't give permission to communicate with emotion, to communicate freely around adversity or challenge.”

The extent to which organisations imposed their values on coaches varied according to the country and sport. Some coaches discussed their experience of more personal-values-supportive organisational cultures while others talked about rigidity and difficulties of fitting in.

“They (governing body) felt they needed to take a one size fits all approach to the culture. And the one size fits all approach to the culture was taken from (governing body) or from the dominant narrative in high performance sport. Anything that was intentionally different from that narrative didn't fit very well anymore, so got lost. So, we went from having a very strong social identity (within her discipline) to having a much weaker social identity as part of a massive organisation, with many other disciplines who have very different needs.” (coach Emma)

One of the common culturally prescribed values was the notion that coaching is a dream. This value embraced the idea that coaching is something special, hardly achievable. Coaching was the desired goal after an arduous journey through high-performance sport ranks. Presenting coaching as a dream, gave organisations licence to continually demand more from coaches; it became a bargaining tool:

“... that was making me chuckle that coaching is a dream ... anytime you sort of hint at mentioning money or pay rise, you quickly get reminded that you are in the dream role, be thankful, shut up basically.” (coach Dave)

Coaches also perpetuated this narrative by rationalising work-related sacrifices and putting coaching duties on a pedestal over any other area of life. This resulted in difficulties in maintaining a sense of well-being by creating unrealistic lenses.

Closely related was the concept of the coach as a commodity. Treating coaches as a commodity left them feeling dehumanized, like easily replaceable commodities only worth having while performing well. This, combined with the fierce competition for the role, created a lonely environment, which had a detrimental impact on coaches' well-being (Higham et al., 2021). It impacted coaches' self-worth and resulted in general dislike/distrust towards their organisations.

“... I do not think they've done anything to support my well-being or, I'd go as far to say, even cared about it. So, it was very much about the organisation, about sort of, you know, what it takes to win Olympic medals.” (coach John)

4.3.3 Process of Integration & Integrated Well-Being

The process of integration starts with a significant coaching experience. Coaches discussed relationships, physical/mental illness, or unhealthy work environments. Coach Ali shared his key moment when coming home from another practice:

“... my eldest son, I heard him in a different room saying: “my dad isn’t home much because he doesn’t really like coming home and be with us”, I just took that in and was like... I couldn’t leave before the Olympics”.

When discrepancy between personal and culturally prescribed values occurred, coaches reflected on the significant experience. Their reflections depended on the level of self-awareness, where better self-awareness contributed to smoother, more frequent integrating efforts. Knowing their “red flags” (e.g., sleep disturbances or emotional shutdown) provided a daily benchmark for the reflections and subsequently, decreased the need for extreme prompts as in the example above.

After reflecting, coaches discussed evaluating a possible discrepancy between their personal and culturally prescribed values (Park, 2010). They consider the meaning of the experience and evaluate it against a base line of what they are not willing to compromise on. This part of the process makes coaches question what personally matters to them. It highlights the subjective nature of their well-being where the same experience might result in distinct outcomes based on personal significance. During this stage, coaches also consider what, if anything, can be done to resolve the potential imbalance. Consequently, depending on the extent, or rather importance of the discrepancy, coaches can engage in various actions of integration. These behaviours represent an active component of the coach well-being process. Through various education, coaches gained a good understanding of what should be done to support their well-being, but often did not follow up on it. Alcohol consumption was a prime example. Rationally, coaches viewed alcohol as a dysfunctional coping strategy, but often turned to it as an escape.

“... (after stressful day) I have a few glasses of wine. You know, I do that instead of doing something healthy. I would not suggest this to athletes, to go and have a few glasses of wine. So why am I doing it?” (coach John)

Actions of integration were categorised as positive, practical, and counterproductive behaviours. The first two aided the well-being integration process while the last led coaches to embrace unhealthy cultural norms and generally had a detrimental impact on their well-being. Positive actions brought joy and often a broader, compassionate view of life by helping coaches align with personal values; with both joy and self-compassion being previously linked to well-being (Neff, 2011). Coach Sophie talked about being present, but also finding meaningful activities to maintain perspective healthy relationships and creating a protective barrier for coping.

“I’m not very good at switching off. ... I find doing something like boxing easy (compared to mindfulness) because I’m talking to someone, having a laugh, exercising. I don’t have the space to drift or think about anything else. So, I think that I need to find things that are almost distracting me from being able to think about work... if I don’t switch off or take myself away from work, the quality of work definitely diminishes, and you start to lose perspective.”

Practical actions incorporated behaviours that were not necessarily joyful, but were essential to the integration process regardless (e.g., work-stressors management). To prevent another burnout, coach Ali incorporated personal values exercise into his work: ‘I created a decision-making framework of key values that should be considered when making decisions. That was useful to check myself.’

Counterproductive behaviours made it more difficult for coaches to achieve well-being integration. These behaviours aligned with the cultural demands and included masking one’s emotions or extreme selflessness. They were entwined with what was deemed essential for coaching success. All coaches engaged in these behaviours in their careers. Coach Chris, for example, admitted struggling with setting boundaries.

“... if they (athletes) phone you up at 8pm on a Saturday night, it’s not great not to pick up the phone, even though that might be family time, because there’s going to be an expectation. I suppose you could set boundaries when you start working with them, but I think if you were to set boundaries like that, your experience, reputation, and qualifications as a coach would have to be pretty high.”

Because of their link with culturally prescribed values, these behaviours, for instance, the cultural expectations of being constantly available and putting their athletes first at any

cost, can be difficult to recognise and avoid as they might be praised as essential to good coaching. A shift in these behaviours was more likely to occur later in coaches' careers, usually following a breaking point in life (e.g., family issues) or occasionally after achieving "sufficient prestige" (coach Ben).

It seems that the dynamic process of integration results in '*Integrated Well-Being*'. Integrated well-being represents a more realistic, practical version of well-being which stems from a harmony between personal and high-performance/organisational values. Integrating culture into the self and self into the culture is a constant, reflective process requiring a range of skills. Coach Chris talked about finding a fit between his identity and the organisational culture.

"I've tried to work on my coaching identity, and this is who I am and I'm far more comfortable with why I'm like this, this is what I do and if it doesn't fit you, then that's fine. That's just the nature of human beings, and I think it's interesting the (governing body) have a one of their little slogans – 'right coach, right place, right time' and I think it's probably one of the best things I've ever heard."

Regardless of coaches' own integrating efforts, a supportive environment was needed to facilitate the process. There were some differences in organisational approaches to these efforts, with trust and autonomy aiding the process (i.e., satisfying coaches' basic psychological needs; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Colleagues would allow coaches to be themselves and embrace their contributions, thus creating a space for coaches' integration. In her prior role, coach Sophie was the only woman coach and experienced pressure on accepting the organisational values. She contrasted this with her current employer:

"We just talked about ourselves, what our strengths are. We were open around what we need and what's important and one of the things I brought up was feeling trusted ... One of my strengths is that I have a unique ability to exist strongly in a staff group as well as the athlete group and it's the first time where someone saw this as a real strength, as opposed to feeling like they don't like that."

4.4 Discussion

This study explored high-performance coaches' experiences of well-being, which were used to develop a mid-range theory. Using Constructivist Grounded Theory enabled us to produce an understanding of well-being grounded in the unique context of high-performance sport; emphasising a dynamic, process-focussed view of well-being which moves beyond the well-/ill-being dichotomy (McCuaig & Quennerstedt, 2018). It shows coaches, their environment (high-performance/organisational culture) and their mutual interaction as equally important parts of the well-being process (Antonovsky, 1996).

Our theory depicts coach well-being as a dynamic interplay of integration between coaches' personal and cultural values (identities), where coaches play an active role rather than reacting to the imposed cultural and organisational demands. This approach advances understanding of coaches' well-being by moving beyond the ideas of 'optimal' well-being found in existing theories and conceptualisations. It captures the everyday efforts that go into managing the fluctuating demands of a high-performance environment. Our approach to well-being addresses some critiques of positive psychology, specifically its possible preoccupation with optimal functioning and flourishing (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Galderisi et al., 2015). The focus on experiencing positive emotions might set very high expectations around what well-being should look like. Yet, constant striving towards experiencing positive emotions overlooks the fact that well-being lies in the non-judgemental experiencing of a full range of emotions, including those that might be considered neutral or even negative (Wong, 2011). The emotional breadth is key as well-being transforms with individual's life experience (Quartiroli et al., 2022). As well as confronting the positive well-being preoccupation within general literature, our findings challenge the focus on negative consequences of ill-being, such as burnout (Olusoga et al., 2019). Instead, they offer a practical insight into coaches' well-being, prompting new discussions and informing guidance for potential intervention.

The unique nature of high-performance sport, and indeed, individual organisational cultures, means a one-size-fits-all approach to well-being is inappropriate. Our theory therefore placed cultural practices at the heart of the well-being process. This enabled contextual views of coaches' experience, grounded in their unique environments

(Lundqvist, 2021). In our view, the process of well-being transforms from ideals such as happiness/goodness in life (e.g., Diener, 1984; Ryff, 1989) to a practical act of integrating both high-performance sport and organisational culture with personal values. High-performance/organisational culture becomes an active component in the well-being process, shifting the responsibility for promoting well-being solely from coaches to sport organisations and stakeholders within.

Within our study, a prime example of the discrepancy between personal and cultural (high-performance/organisational) values was coaches' focus on excellence over results. Coaches saw their purpose in developing individuals through sport, with performance success as by-product (Miller & Kerr, 2002). The focus on growth provided them with a purpose (Houltberg et al., 2018). Yet, the high-performance/organisational cultural demand for results was more prominent, often pushing coaches into choosing between personal values and maintaining their job (Potrac et al., 2012). These discrepancies seem frequent and could be problematic for coaches. Based on our findings, coaches might try to address the conflict of personal and culturally defined values by a) embracing personal values despite the culture, b) embracing the cultural values while compromising aspects of their core self-concept, or c) finding a way to integrate their own values into the organisational culture they are operating in.

Research on 'value identities' (Gecas, 2000) suggests that adhering to strongly held personal values can contribute to a unified personal identity which gives us purpose in life. Value identity is entwined with a wider cultural/organisational context rather than fixated on a particular role (fitting our notion of culturally vs. personally prescribed identity). It impacts individuals' feelings of authenticity while contributing to a purpose in life and subsequent individuals' well-being (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998; Särvimäki, 2006). Coaches adhering to their personal values, regardless of the high-performance/organisational values, is theoretically advisable as it prevents fragmentation of the self, and helps coaches maintain their well-being (Särvimäki, 2006). However, in practice, disregarding high-performance/organisational values can turn coaches into outsiders who face prejudice from other group members, as well as a lack of any career prospects or supportive relationships (Turner et al., 1979).

Prior research within organisational psychology suggests that when employees identify with organisational values (i.e., alignment of personal identity with organisational values; Dutton et al., 1994), their work satisfaction, relationships, and well-being should improve through social cohesion (van Dick & Haslam, 2012). Embracing cultural values should therefore lead coaches to feel as more valued, with a stronger connection to their organisation/environment, which in turn, should support and increase their well-being (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, within our study, coaches highlighted the negative effects of organisational identification on their well-being. It often led them to work-related sacrifices and distorted their view of what was personally meaningful (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022). For example, some coaches discussed missing important family events to catch up with their workload. They considered it an imminent part of their job and were concurrently praised for their action. It took some time and critical reflecting for coaches to realise that their personal values defied the environmental expectations and their own behaviour.

The contradiction of our findings and previous research on identification with organisational values likely arises because of the difference in the culture and environment of the organisations in question. For example, well-being supportive organisational cultures prioritise values such as tolerance or optimism and reflect these in actions (e.g., by enabling employees' work-life balance). These positive values then lead to a higher job satisfaction/happiness and subsequent employees' identification (Kossek et al., 2014). The values of the broader high-performance sport culture, however, have been described as destructive, allowing abuse (e.g., Feddersen et al., 2020) and impairing individuals' well-being (Cho & Lee, 2022). To add to the complexity, even values which could be deemed as positive (e.g., mental toughness, hardworking) can serve as positive labels for adverse practices (Gucciardi et al., 2017). Extreme identification, or over-identification with organisational values (Avanzi et al., 2012) has been linked with workaholism, ill-health, and group membership prioritisation, all of which have been previously identified in coaches (e.g., Norris et al., 2017) and present a significant risk to their well-being. Mid-range theories of well-being that include contextual considerations are therefore vital in aiding our understanding of well-being in specific contexts.

Our findings suggest that the choice between adhering to personal values and adopting those of high-performance sport/organisations is not black or white. If coaches choose to remain completely true to their personal values, it could compromise their well-being because they risk being rejected by their social group and could ultimately cost them their jobs. Equally, fully adhering to the values of high-performance culture can compromise their well-being because it forces them to adopt what they perceived to be negative practice of high-performance sport (e.g., seeing coaching as a dream worth sacrificing everything) and undermines deeply held beliefs that support their sense of self. Consequently, coaches need to be clear on their personal values (through self-reflection) and find ways to implement these into their environment – integration between personal and culturally prescribed values with their cohesion ('Integrated Well-Being') as a goal. It is about diminishing discrepancies between values and in turn bringing meaning and understanding to coaches' life.

This aligns with research by Kunda (1992) who saw self as a concept derived from individuals' harmonising and/or rejecting efforts, especially in the context of personal and environmental values (e.g., organisational ideology). Moreover, it corresponds with findings of narrative studies in sport which showed how cultural values shape development of athletes' identity but also how athletes might resist the dominant narratives to mitigate their risk with ensuing impact on well-being (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2013; Ronkainen et al., 2016). These studies, as well as our findings, point to a need for coherent values (i.e., identity as a values-laden concept; Hitlin, 2003). Originally proposed by Erikson (1968), coherent identity refers to a stable, consistent sense of self which evolved from roles and related values. In addition, Budd (1993) introduced the idea of self-coherence as individuals' goal when possible environmental tensions occur (i.e., misalignment of personal and cultural values). In coaching, Higham et al. (2023) discussed the need for harmonious identities as key for coaches' perceived purpose and overall well-being. Within our study, coach Dave talked about how introducing his family to athletes helped establish boundaries around out-of-hours working. Dave did not change the high-performance sport culture of being constantly available, instead he managed to integrate his personal value into it. It created an atmosphere of trust, where he could rely

on athletes to contact him in emergencies only while still demonstrating his care for his athletes.

4.4.1 Practical Applications

The need for a pragmatic, contextually bound view of well-being partly stems from the existing practice-research gap which has been emphasised by the coaches in our study as well as wider literature (Williams & Kendall, 2007). Because of the significant impact of organisational culture on coaches' integrating well-being efforts, it is essential to view well-being as a shared responsibility rather than a problem for the individual. Consequently, the following section offers insights for organisations to create integration-promoting culture.

Organisations should create a safe environment for coaches' integrating efforts. This corresponds with discussions around psychological safety framed by beliefs around available support and free expression while being accepted and respected. The exclusive focus on the relational aspect differs our approach from the original conceptualisation proposing psychological safety as one's willingness to take an interpersonal risk (Edmondson, 1999; Vella et al., 2022). As risk taking is not always advantageous in high-performance sport, caution should be taken and specific contextual needs should be considered when discussing psychological safety (Taylor et al., 2022). It appears that psychological safety has a positive impact on vitality and flourishing (Kark & Carmeli, 2009), hence psychologically safe environments offer a practical opportunity to improve well-being by enabling coaches' integrating efforts.

When it comes to practical policies, the coaches in our study discussed the non-existence or inefficiency of the organisational support. Any well-being related efforts were mostly sourced from a wider occupational literature and were incompatible with the requirements of a coaching role. For example, coaches were urged to take time off for a better work-life balance yet had to always be present when athletes entered the premises. Coaches got stuck between HR requirements and addressing complaints from unhappy athletes, feeling discouraged and frustrated. Consequently, when implementing organisational policies, it would be advisable to run focus groups to gain direct feedback from coaches regarding the practicality of the new policies.

4.4.2 Limitations & Future Research

Our findings should be considered in alignment with the theory's strength as well as weaknesses. Even though our theory highlighted the influence of high-performance sport and organisational culture on well-being, it is unable to explain the mechanism behind the creation of these cultural values. Therefore, future research should aim to explore distinct organisational practices and focus on the attributes of well-being supportive environments. Our findings of disparate organisational cultures suggest that improvements are possible and highlight the need to learn from each other. Additionally, conversations with stakeholders should be held regarding their understanding of coaches' well-being and plans for its support. The discussed discrepancies are not only within high-performance sport/organisational cultures but also between coaches and the cultures. Therefore, dyadic interviews between coaches and particular stakeholders could highlight the actual practicality of the discussed policies (Simpson et al., 2021). It is important that future research focuses on the cultural/organisational environments and what can be done to support coaches.

To conclude, this study created a mid-range theory of high-performance coaches' well-being offering a new perspective for researchers, coaches, and others who work to support the coach within high-performance sport. Identity is proposed as a key component in the process of coaches' well-being, and the incorporation of personal, as well as cultural influences, enabled us to gain a more realistic insight into the area. We embraced the contextual nature of well-being and raised the idea of integrating efforts for identity cohesion. Introducing well-being as a process allowed us to see it as a constantly evolving, dynamic concept where coaches as well as organisation have influence over its results. As the connection of identity and well-being is underexplored in the coaching population, our mid-range theory could provide a new lens to explore coaches' well-being.

Additionally, insights from this study bring to the forefront the influence of high-performance/organisational culture and its role in coaches' well-being. The findings highlight the difficulties coaches might experience when fully, uncritically embracing cultural values as these often prioritise performance over well-being. Concurrently, coaches might have to deal with obstacles when attempting to find a harmony between cultural and personal values. Some aspects/values of high-performance sport might never

change, thus finding ways of staying authentic and looking after oneself becomes key for coaches. The nature of the environment, and the challenges that may come with it, raised the question of what happens when coaches' well-being is threatened, what actions coaches take when they need support, and what the role of organisational and high-performance culture is. Consequently, study 2 of this research programme explored coaches' views and experiences of help-seeking for well-being within the context of high-performance sport.

CHAPTER 5

Study 2

5.1 Introduction

In study 1 (Chapter 4) of the thesis, the coach-environment interaction was found to play an active, vital role in the well-being process for coaches. Specifically, aligning and integrating coaches' personal and culturally prescribed values required effort (in thesis referred to as 'integrating efforts', Chapter 4). For these integrating efforts, the importance of psychologically safe environments was highlighted, but the potential lack of available organisational support that might hinder the well-being process was also noted. Consequently, questions arose regarding how coaches respond when their well-being is impaired, who they reach out to (inside and outside of work), what forms of support they find helpful, and what might discourage them from seeking help.

Aligned with the findings of the literature review (Chapter 2), the pressure coaches deal with on a daily basis can be significant, with their well-being arguably under threat (Didymus et al., 2018; Olusoga & Thelwell, 2016). These stressors are well documented (for a review, see Norris et al., 2017), with their negative impact reflected in the high prevalence of burnout (scoping review by Olusoga et al., 2019), as well as other mental health difficulties such as sleep disturbances, anxiety, and depression (Pilkington et al., 2022). Despite some initial explorations of coaches' coping efforts (e.g., Potts et al., 2019), relatively little is known about how coaches access, negotiate, and utilise sources of support (i.e., how the help-seeking process occurs in this population). This presents a significant gap in knowledge of coaches' help-seeking experiences and raises practical questions regarding relevant support for their well-being. This issue is pressing, especially as the highest-risk individuals have been identified as those who seek help the least (i.e., help-negation effect; Wilson & Deane, 2010). For example, Pilkington et al. (2022) found that more than 40% of high-performance coaches reported various mental health symptoms that would require professional treatment, yet only 6% reported seeking help. Therefore, to successfully support coaches' well-being, a more in-depth exploration of

their help-seeking experiences and behaviours, including individual, cultural, and environmental barriers and facilitators, is essential (Gorczyński et al., 2021).

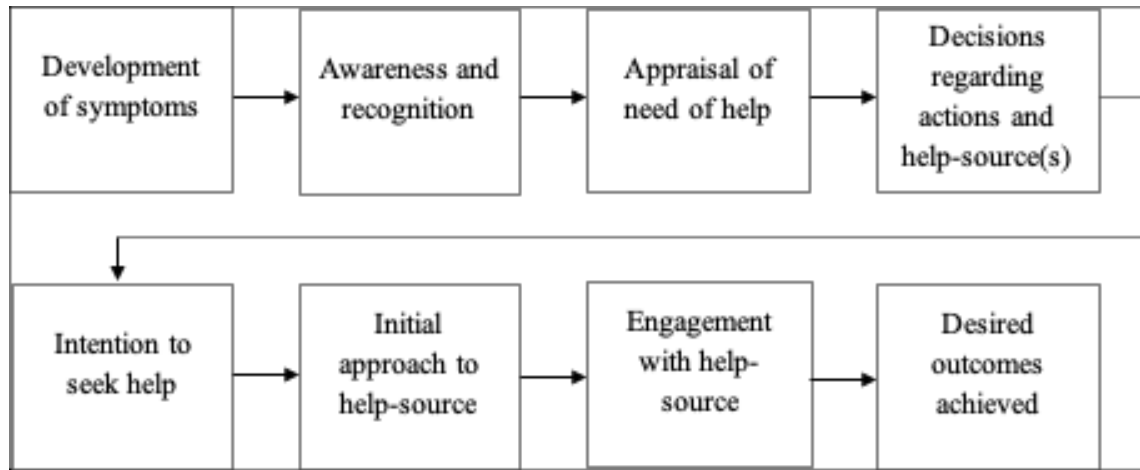
5.1.1 Process of Help-Seeking

Help-seeking refers to a behaviour in which individuals express a need for help by approaching formal or informal sources (Rickwood et al., 2005). It is an active, problem-focused coping strategy (Rickwood, 2022). The process itself is complex, and even though there appears to be a shared, face-value understanding of what help-seeking consists of, a comprehensive definition is still missing (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). For help-seeking, the literature asserts that: 1) it is a dynamic process (Cornally & McCarthy, 2011); 2) there are distinct sources of help (Riedel-Heller et al., 2005); and 3) it can differ based on the type of problem (i.e., focus on well-being in general vs. dealing with burnout; Yonemoto & Kawashima, 2022).

Rickwood's (2022) conceptualisation of the help-seeking process (Figure 5.1) consists of eight distinct stages, ranging from the recognition of the need for help to considerations around approaches to potential supporters, and the actual interpersonal behaviour of help-seeking. Following this, the help-seeking process begins with the development of specific symptoms. In the case of high-performance coaches, these might include low energy, irritability, or cynicism, as in the case of burnout (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). Awareness and recognition of these symptoms are key for individuals to continue the help-seeking process. After identifying the experienced symptoms, individuals appraise their severity and evaluate whether it is worth their efforts to reach out for help. These appraisals inform help-seeking decisions and, in turn, determine the next stage of the help-seeking process: the *intention* to seek help. From this point, the help-seeking process involves other individuals as it consists of the initial approach to the source of help and engagement with the source of help. The final step in the help-seeking process is when the desired outcomes (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, which can improve coping skills and emotional regulation, or reduced personal stigma; Kuang & Wang, 2024; Xu et al., 2018) are achieved.

Figure 5.1

The Help-Seeking Process (adapted from Rickwood, 2022)



5.1.2 Barriers and Facilitators of Help-Seeking in Sport

Each stage of the help-seeking process can be influenced by a complex array of intra and interpersonal factors, such as individuals' appraisals, attitudes, intentions, as well as their psychological and interpersonal skills. The interaction and negotiation of these complex factors have the power to create noticeable barriers (or contrastingly facilitators) to individuals' help-seeking efforts that can compromise their ability to find and maintain support for their well-being (Rickwood et al., 2005).

Previous research has begun to establish barriers and facilitators to help-seeking in high-performance sport. These include internalised beliefs around masculine norms, stigma around asking for help, and a lack of organisational support. The culture of high-performance sport has been described as ruthless and results-driven, where typical masculine attributes and behaviours (e.g., performing despite injury, stoicism) are deemed as key to success. This, however, can create a significant barrier for help-seeking by reinforcing traditional masculine roles (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In turn, a higher conformity to masculine norms has been linked to increased psychological distress and problematic behaviours (e.g., Syzdek & Addis, 2010) and was suggested to prevent effective help-seeking (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Moreover, in the general population, men have been identified as less likely to seek help than women (Liddon et al., 2018) and since high-performance coaching is still primarily a male-dominant occupation, coaches

are automatically a higher-risk population. Yet, female coaches are not immune to the requirements of high-performance sport either and face additional challenges (Carson et al., 2018). Female coaches reported compromising their own values to conform to typical masculine norms in order to establish themselves in high-performance sport (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). This forced hyper-masculinity creates an extremely ambiguous, treacherous environment for female coaches where any sign of weakness (i.e., seeking help for well-being issues) is amplified with a possible loss of career (Norman, 2010). Therefore, female coaches might avoid help-seeking as much as their male counterparts, especially if their prominent coaching identity is characterised by its masculine “qualities.” These unrealistic assumptions around masculine roles (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2010; Steinfeldt et al., 2012) are perhaps linked with a considerable stigma surrounding help-seeking (e.g., Ramaeker & Petrie, 2019; Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

Stigma encapsulates the beliefs of individuals that seeking help could be perceived as weakness (e.g., one’s inability to deal with the demands) and lead to negative consequences such as a loss of status or job (e.g., Greene-Shortridge et al., 2007; Hoge et al., 2004). Two main types of stigma are identified in the research literature - public and self-stigma (Corrigan, 2004). Public stigma refers to a societal belief that seeking help for mental health problems is undesirable and individuals who seek help are socially unacceptable. An internalisation of public stigma then characterises self-stigma. Sport-based research in the area is scarce but generally suggests that organisations might negatively shape coaches’ help-seeking behaviour by reinforcing specific values and beliefs. For example, by promoting an overly simplified view of a “toughness” mentality (i.e., mental toughness seen as sheer will power; Clark et al., 2023; Courtney et al., 2024), coaches might feel the need to preserve a mask of an unshakable stoic and prioritise mental toughness at any cost (Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016). This might sometimes occur at the expense of honest considerations of well-being needs and inauthentic behaviours (Potrac et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2018) where help-seeking could have been beneficial. Generally, in the context of coaching populations, stigma has been linked with negative attitudes to help-seeking and presented as a mediator between psychological safety and burnout, where stigma exacerbated burnout symptoms in psychologically unsafe environments (Slowiak et al., 2024).

Understandings of psychological concepts grounded in masculine norms, such as mental toughness, represents a frequently discussed barrier in the help-seeking literature - insufficient mental health literacy (Coyle et al., 2017). Mental health literacy has been defined as “*knowledge and beliefs about mental health disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention*” (Jorm et al., 1997, p.182). Initially created as a reactive approach, mental health literacy now focuses on proactive practices which would allow for positive changes on an individual as well as systematic (e.g., organisational) level (Moore et al., 2022). Mental health literacy consists of several interrelated components (understanding mental health and mental illness, symptoms recognition, knowledge of risk factors and causes, help-seeking knowledge, self-help strategies, reduction of stigma; Gorczynski & Baron, 2024; Gorczynski et al., 2021; Gorczynski et al., 2019; Vella et al., 2020). Literature further proposes that individuals with higher mental health literacy are more likely to utilise support services (Jung et al., 2016) and it has been linked with decrease in stigma around mental health (Jung et al., 2016).

In a BASES expert statement, Gorczynski et al. (2019) suggested that improving the levels of mental health literacy in sport could result in lower levels of perceived stigma and subsequently encourage individuals to seek out help when needed. Yet mental health literacy is context specific (Kutcher et al., 2016) and seems to be influenced by various demographic factors such as gender, educational level, or even the type of mental health problem being experienced (Kim et al., 2015), with less experienced coaches reporting higher mental health literacy compared to their elite counterparts (Sullivan et al., 2019). This highlights the need to specifically explore coaches’ understanding and experiences of help-seeking for well-being in high-performance sport.

Mental health literacy is clearly an important part of the help-seeking process, however, in sporting contexts, solely focusing on mental health literacy has been insufficient in addressing the complex challenge of stigma and has not increased overall help-seeking behaviour (Bu et al., 2020; Poucher et al., 2021). Indeed, mental health literacy is only one part of a complex help-seeking process (e.g., outlined above) and there is a need to consider the multiple inspecting factors that may drive help-seeking behaviour in high-performance coaching.

A key point to highlight on help-seeking, that is often underappreciated in sport research, is that it is largely an interpersonal process that involves individuals interacting with their environment (Cornally & McCarthy, 2011). For example, it is not enough for coaches to recognise issues, they must then feel confident that they can access the support they need from their social networks in order to engage in help-seeking process. In this respect, it's important to consider the characteristics in coaches' social environment that support help-seeking for well-being, with psychological safety being frequently raised in sport psychology literature. Psychologically safe environments have been described by freedom to authentically express oneself without a fear of repercussions, by respect and inclusion of diversity and opportunities to voice concerns (Vella et al., 2024), thus decreasing stigma around mental health in sport (Vella et al., 2022). Developing psychologically safe environments was also one of the key suggestions in the Study 1 of this thesis (Chapter 4) where psychologically safe environments would allow coaches to be authentic rather than masking their emotions and playing into the culturally dictated vision of a coach.

Psychological safety is a culturally-driven concept that requires organisations to take a proactive stance on well-being (and ill-being) through facilitating open and honest discussions around the challenges of high-performance coaching rather than hiding from the conversations (Kenttä et al., 2024). This emphasises key themes discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2) around culturally embedded practices around well-being (e.g., Gorczynski et al., 2021; Ryba et al., 2013), and the relevance of socioecological approaches to well-being and mental health (e.g., Chrétien et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2021; Walton et al., 2024). Moreover, the findings of study 1 (Chapter 4) of the thesis where coaches highlighted the importance of culture (high-performance sport and organisational) and its role in their well-being further strengthens the rationale for conceptualising help-seeking as a social process. This shifts the perspective on help-seeking from an individual concept (with the coach as a driving force) to a coach-culture (high-performance/organisational) phenomenon. Therefore, more complex, contextual understandings of coaches' views and experiences of help-seeking is essential in order to capture these environmental nuances, barriers, and facilitators of help-seeking. The proposed coach-culture view of help-seeking presents a case for the use of more holistic

approaches such as ecological framework (e.g., Zinzow et al., 2022) to explore help-seeking behaviour. Ecological frameworks suggests that it takes a combination of both individual and environmental factors (and their interaction) to understand and subsequently support positive health behaviours. Following this approach, help-seeking could then be explored/understood from five interlinked levels.

The core of ecological frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) focuses on the individual, characterised by their biological, psychological, and behavioural systems. For example, this could be coaches' knowledge and beliefs around mental health or even their confidence to deal with experienced ill-being symptoms. The individual sits within interconnected 'layers' of a relational and social systems. The first layer represents the microsystem which incorporates the individual's closest relations, for example, those with whom coaches might interact with on daily basis (colleagues, family, partners), as well, as the institutions coaches operate in (organisational culture). The second layer is the mesosystem which covers the interactions amongst the distinct aspects of microsystem. For example, the interaction between coaches' personal and work life. The third level, the exosystem, covers contextual factors impacting the individual such as organisational policies, or funding. The fourth level is the macrosystem, which consists of societal and cultural ideals such as gender stereotypes. For example, the cultural expectation on coaches to maintain the stoic demeanour regardless of experienced pressures. The fifth layer is the chronosystem which captures various changes and transitions over time, both at an individual and environmental level. For coaches, this could be experiencing a divorce or a transition from an athletic career to a coaching position. These layers of a coaches' ecological system are important not only to scope the individual factors/systems coaches operate in, but also to examine how these distinct systems influence and interact with each other (Kilanowski, 2017). Thus, presenting help-seeking as a wider interplay of personal attributes (e.g., coaches' knowledge, previous experience), context (e.g., organisational/high-performance culture), time (e.g., significant life changes), with proximal processes in-between (i.e., prolonged interactions with an environment) is important because it could shift the understanding of the concept from an individual perspective to a wider, more complex issue (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; DiSanti & Erickson, 2021). Conceptualising help-seeking in this way extends the individual, coach

driven focus of help-seeking in current sport literature and offers several key advantages such as considerations of practical barriers and facilitators within the environment or inclusion of others as a driving force behind help-seeking efforts.

From an ecological perspective, researchers usually focus on the individual level of the system or the microsystem where it differentiates between formal and informal sources of support (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). Formal sources of help might include GPs, psychologists, and other professionally trained individuals who have been proposed as the most appropriate when it comes to mental health issues (Jorm, 2012). Informal sources can include anyone personally relevant to the individual. In the case of high-performance coaches, it could be a family member, a partner or a friend. Most recently, researchers have also suggested semi-formal sources of support (e.g., professionals who are not specifically qualified in providing mental health support such as work supervisors or executive coaches), and have highlighted the potential use of self-help resources (e.g., self-help books or websites where supporters are practically replaced with tangible materialistic assistance; Rickwood & Bradford, 2012).

The preference of a particular source is still unclear with mixed evidence provided by research on athletes (e.g., Bird et al., 2018; Maniar et al., 2001) and no evidence directly linked to high-performance coaches. Nevertheless, it appears that the choice of a particular source shifts based on the nature of the issue, the consequences of approaching a specific source, and the source's appreciation of the unique nature of high-performance sport. For example, Jewett and colleagues (2021) found that athletes approach sport psychologists about issues related to their performance but would not necessarily discuss any personal or well-being related issues. In terms of high-performance coaches, research on help-seeking behaviours and preferred sources of support is missing with ecological approaches to help-seeking being generally scarce in sporting literature. Yet, utilising an ecological framework to understand coaches' help-seeking could lead to a more holistic, multi-level understanding of the topic with more effective findings for practices such as in case of athletic research (e.g., Cosh et al., 2024; Reich et al., 2021).

Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to explore coaches' views and experiences when it comes to help-seeking for their well-being. Given the amount of stressors coaches experience and the negative impact these can have on their well-being,

understanding how coaches think about, access and negotiate support is vital. As the scarce existing research mostly focuses on individual aspects of help-seeking (especially its barriers like stigma or mental health literacy), a broader understanding of the process is warranted. The help-seeking process is complex, multilayered, and can be impacted by the individual as well as external factors. By embracing a more holistic, ecological approach to the concept, the interplay between individual factors can be better noted. It further allows for more culturally embedded findings that reflect the nuances of high-performance sport and related organisations with a power to derive more practical insights and recommendations.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Research Design

An experiential qualitative approach was deemed appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It allowed for a deep exploration of coaches' help-seeking experiences in the context of their ecological systems and concurrently offered a broader scope into the area. The present study used a mixed-method qualitative, sequential design. The first part of the study consisted of an online, anonymous, qualitative survey, the purpose of which was to allow coaches to reflect on their views and experiences of help-seeking for well-being. As the knowledge around coaches' help-seeking is limited, qualitative surveys allowed for a broader, yet still detailed exploration of the topic (Braun et al., 2021; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). Moreover, given the persisting stigma around well-being in the context of high-performance sport (e.g., Cosh et al., 2024; Kenttä et al., 2024; Rao & Hong, 2020; Souter et al., 2018), an anonymous online survey would be a useful method to provide sufficient levels of confidentiality that would allow coaches to share their experiences more openly and comfortably (Braun et al., 2021; Terry & Braun, 2017). The online survey was also deemed appropriate for its practicality. Specifically, literature highlights the limited time coaches have outside of their job (Norris et al., 2017), hence a research method that can be accessed at coaches' convenience was useful, and perhaps a more caring way of showing understanding of the coaching environment.

Survey questions were informed by the distinct levels of ecological systems as well as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and the COM-B Model (Michie et al., 2011). Specifically, questions were designed to explore coaches' attitudes toward help-seeking, their perceptions of subjective norms around help-seeking, as well as their capabilities, opportunities, and motivations for help-seeking (see survey questions in Appendix 9). Moreover, survey questions examined coaches' personal understanding of well-being (with its barriers and facilitators), prior experience of help-seeking for well-being (e.g., source of support, barriers, outcomes), as well as moments when coaches required help but decided not to act on it.

Following the qualitative survey, online mini focus groups were conducted. The mini focus groups were partly informed by findings of the survey (i.e., sequential design) and provided an opportunity to delve into some of the survey topics in more detail. For

example, mini focus groups explored the available organisational support and characteristics of a suitable source of support. The mini focus groups enable these concepts and ideas to be explored in more depth with a selected number of coaches allowing for more detailed experiences to be explored.

The choice for mini focus groups (over traditional focus groups) was also guided by a more practical rationale. Given the sensitivity of the discussed topic, it was unclear how (or whether at all) coaches would feel comfortable and confident to discuss their help-seeking experiences with others from their field. Mini focus groups are a modified version of the traditional focus groups method, and they usually involve much smaller number of participants (3-5 participants). This allows for more detailed, intimate discussions making them useful when exploring sensitive topics and generally more comfortable to participants as the session length tends to be shorter as well (Krueger, 2014). Because of this, mini focus groups seemed to allow for sharing of high-performance sport experiences while maintaining a quiet, intimate, private atmosphere. Working at the highest level in sport often means the talent pool is relatively small, individual coaches know each other (even internationally) and in some instances compete for each other's positions. Inviting coaches to the same focus group could present a significant barrier to disclosure and challenge my relationship with individual coaches in terms of trust and psychological safety. Therefore, the mini focus groups were deliberately constructed with coaches from entirely different sporting backgrounds and different nationalities. This proved to be extremely useful as coaches could draw on their shared experiences when it comes to operating in high-performance sport but at the same time could feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics as there was no previous connection or a chance of professional cross-over/competition. Especially when it comes to the role organisations play in coaches' help-seeking for well-being, having different backgrounds was key for coaches to open up, and the mini-focus groups expanded the data corpus to include shared understandings of help-seeking among coaches, as well as exploring unique, individual experiences.

5.2.2 Participants and Recruitment

Recruitment began following institutional ethics approval (see Appendix 5). For the qualitative survey, participants were 43 high-performance coaches over the age of 18 (31 male, 12 female). The recruitment criteria were purposely broad to capture a wide range of perspective and experiences (Patton, 2002). Participating coaches had to have a full-time contract and perform at a national and/or international level. As prior research (Kenttä et al., 2024; Simova et al., 2023) has suggested possible national/cultural differences in availability of well-being support, we recruited coaches across 23 sporting disciplines and 15 countries (see Table 5.1 for demographic details below). Making use of the researchers' existing networks and social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook posts), purposive sampling was utilised throughout this study. In latter stages, a snowballing technique was required to continue growing the sample. For the mini focus groups, eight coaches were recruited (see Table 5.2 for demographic details below), primarily through their participation in the survey (coaches were asked to share their contact details if they wished to engage further) and additional coaches were approached directly through existing networks. To increase confidentiality and coaches' comfort, the selection for the focus group was based on coaches' sporting and national background with the aim to decrease any possible disciplinary cross-over /previous familiarity between coaches.

Table 5.1*Sociodemographic Characteristics Survey*

Demographic Characteristics		Frequency
Gender	Male	31
	Female	12
Age (years)	24-34	11
	35-44	20
	45-54	8
	55-64	4
Professional Geography	United Kingdom	24
	United States of America	2
	Norway	1
	Sweden	1
	Canada	2
	Italy	2
	Greece	3
	Cyprus	1
Sport	India	1
	Finland	1
	Mexico	1
	Austria	1
	United Arab Emirates	1
	Switzerland	1
	New Zealand	1
	Canoe	4
	Track and Field	3
	Football	8
	Skiing/Park-Pipe	6
	Bobsleigh	1
	Trampolining	1
	Artistic Gymnastics	1
	Volleyball	2
	Netball	1
	Diving	1
	Triathlon	2
	Boxing	2
	Archery	1
	Judo	1
	Sport Climbing	1
	Rowing	2
	Swimming	3
	Cycling	1
	Cricket	1
	Sailing	1

Table 5.2

Sociodemographic Characteristics Mini Focus Groups (participants' names are pseudonyms)

	Identified Gender	Coaching Country	Sport
Mark	Man	Switzerland	Cycling
Thomas	Man	UK	Judo
Steven	Man	Sweden	Snowsports
Andrew	Man	Canada	Snowsports
Alex	Man	UK	Boxing
Henry	Man	UK	Track and Field
Megan	Woman	UK	Canoeing
Jude	Man	Canada	Bobsleigh & Skeleton

5.2.3 Data Collection

Prior to data collection, an initial draft of the survey was created and piloted to six individuals. Three were experienced qualitative researchers with a background in mental health who provided feedback around the structure/flow of the survey. The remaining three were high-performance coaches who offered insight into the clarity of the questions for the targeted population as well as the practicality of the survey.

The online survey was conducted using the Qualtrics Software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). A brief outline of the research was attached to all initial communications, and a full information sheet was shared at the start of the survey. A consent form followed, with an agreement provided by clicking “yes” button at the bottom of the survey. The collected demographics constituted of age, coaching position, sport and country of employment. Coaches had the option to comment further on any other personally relevant information about their role. The survey consisted of three distinct sections, each containing between four and seven questions (see Appendix 8). All questions were open-ended to encourage more detailed responses from coaches and tailored to reflect various stages of the help-seeking process (e.g., barriers/facilitators when reaching out for help, actual behaviour of help-seeking, available sources of support).

The mini focus groups took place online and were recorded via a conferencing software and later transcribed for analysis. At the start, coaches were informed about the aim of the focus group and were provided with details around confidentiality. They were

given the opportunity to introduce themselves, their sporting background and were encouraged to share their experiences with minimal prompts from the main researcher. To start, the conversation touched on coaches' general understanding of well-being and help-seeking and afterwards developed into questions around the impact of organisations/national governing bodies when it comes to coaches' help-seeking for well-being (e.g., "if you were a performance director in your programme, what would you change to address coaches' well-being?"; exemplary interview guide attached as Appendix 9). The focus groups also discussed the nature/qualities of a support provider which might increase the likelihood of coaches reaching out for help (e.g., reflecting on your previous experience, what did you find helpful?").

5.2.4 Data Analysis

This study consisted of two interrelated stages which influenced the process of data analysis. For the initial step, the survey data were downloaded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to capture the key themes across the dataset as whole. These themes provided a wide lens for coaches' help-seeking views/experiences and highlighted key related topics. Survey responses then informed the development of a focus group interview guide for the second step of the research. The same analytical process was utilised during subsequent focus groups analysis, where coaches provided more detailed accounts. Because of the nature of the research question and previous calls for inclusion of cultural influences, a contextualist perspective was adopted during this process (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

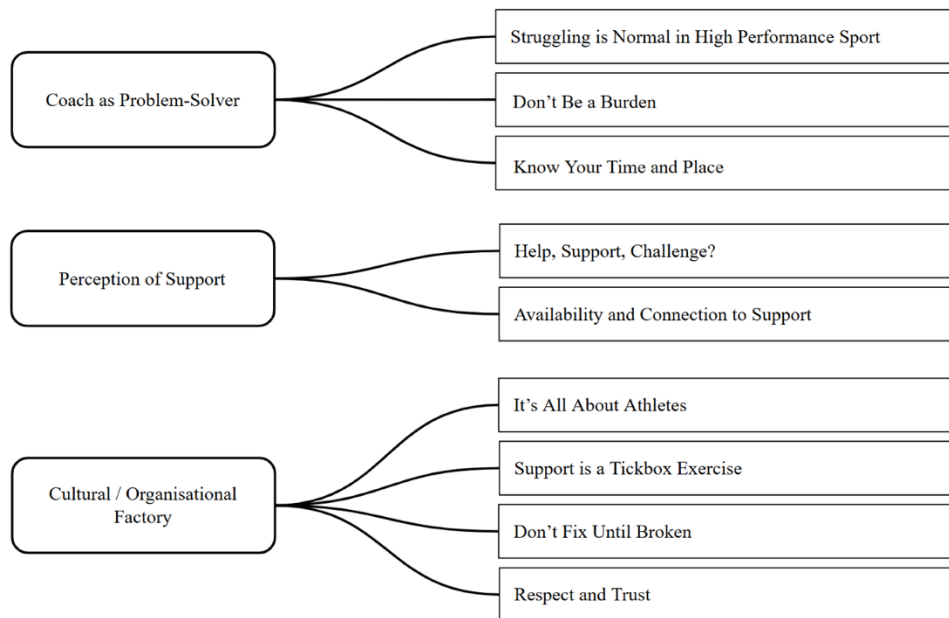
The analytic processes started with familiarisation with data and repeated reading of the transcripts and research notes noticing any details relevant to the research question. Data were then systematically coded and similar codes were merged to create potential themes and subthemes. These were subsequently compared with the survey and all data sets ensuring a relevant construction and capturing of the essence of the experience (following Braun and Clarke's (2019) guidance for theme construction). The final themes were developed by integrating both survey and focus group data sets. Their creation was also based on a constant interplay between the data and researchers' reflections embracing the dynamic nature of reflexive thematic analysis.

The quality of reflexive thematic analysis derives from a level of researchers' engagement with data as well as their reflexive practices (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Consequently, the first author used journaling to note any details regarding the research process and more importantly to capture any personal influences. These included academic background/research interests but also personal values, expectations and pre-conceptions (Trainor & Bundon, 2021), with some of these discussed in the Chapter 3 of the thesis. Additional meetings with the research supervisors provided opportunities for further reflection and discussion around interpretations/data analysis and critical friends (Appleton, 2011) were used to check and challenge any ideas raised from the study.

5.3 Findings

The present findings are structured around three major themes: 1) ‘Coach as Problem Solver’ where seeking help for well-being concerns is seen as a matter of coaches' own responsibility; 2) 'Perception of Help', which concerns the availability of support as well as issues around terminology, specifically how negative connotations of the word *help* influences the help-seeking process; and 3) ‘Cultural/Organisational Factors’ which covers organisational aspects and practices linked to help-seeking in high-performance sport (thematic map of the key themes depicted below, Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2
Thematic Map of Key Themes



5.3.1 Coach as Problem Solver

Throughout the survey and focus groups, coaches raised questions about who was responsible for providing well-being support. The question of whether it was their own personal responsibility or the responsibility of organisations/others persisted throughout the conversations and contributed to the creation of the main theme – coach as problem solver.

Coaches' attitudes towards help-seeking for well-being were based on an internalised, underlying idea of a coach as problem solver. Some of the coaches in this study pointed to the contrast between the nature of their role (e.g., being the caring, unshakable person with all the answers) and reaching out for help. The idea of stability and constant problem-solving was often presented in the context of high-performance sport (i.e., this is who the environment expected coaches to be). Consequently, reaching out to others for help was questioned by the coaches as it contradicted this well-established, carefully curated picture of a “perfect”, often invincible high-performance coach. Coach Andrew shared their experience:

“When you’re a coach to players or athletes, you’re the person that sort of fixes their problems and you’re sort of perceived to be like strong, and balanced, and maybe the connotation, if my players, some of the people I work with thought that I was seeing a psychologist, maybe it switches in your head how they see you, even if they don’t care, but you’re bothered.”

Additionally, coach Steven elaborated:

“... most people in Sweden think that I’m quite tough and hard coach, you know I’m always there every single day, so everyone knows me. I’m there all the time, but if I’m not in one day, there are jokes about me not being there, but maybe I’m not feeling good, but no one would think about that. And sometimes, I’m there, I don’t feel so good but I’m always there and no one asks if you are okay, if something happened.”

The impact of the nature of the coaching role seemed to extend beyond simple stoicism into internalised attitudes related to their own self-care. Seeking external support appeared to clash with coaches' views of themselves as providers of care, and in turn led them to question whether they should seek help in a first place or manage on their own. Guided by the idea of the ideal/correct way of being a high-performance coach, seeking help

seemed to become an undesirable option for coaches in this study. They wanted to manage their own well-being alone and avoid (or at least postpone) seeking help until their personal resources wouldn't suffice.

Coaches often framed self-management of well-being as an extension of their professional strengths, such as problem-solving and emotional control. As problem solvers and carers, managing their well-being was seen as another task to tackle on their own. However, this inner drive could create troubles for coaches as this was often a matter of pride rather than a realistic judgment of their skills and resources. Coach Megan talked about learning from past experiences as a younger coach and how the need to prove herself often misguided her when it came to managing well-being. Specifically, she described how her experience of help-seeking efforts (or rather their avoidance) was driven by ego:

“I think not letting ego say yes to everything. I think for my own well-being that was a massive step, like learning passing the responsibility to others, and asking for help, I'm not that powerful, my ego doesn't need it.”

This extract shows how important it might be for coaches to preserve and perform their culturally defined role of high-performance coach. However, the role itself seemed to bring prestige and often unrealistic expectations that coaches tied to live up to. Coaches felt they needed to be stronger, more resilient, and able to handle everything. In coaches' view, high-performance coaching was often perceived as “making it” in their professional life. It was something others could only dream of and would envy. Therefore, talking about coaching challenges, or worse seeking help for them, was difficult for coaches and they were worried about being seen as ungrateful by others.

Self-awareness was deemed critical for coaches to reach out for support (and engage in self-care strategies). Coaches talked about self-awareness as a resource that would allow them to identify when their well-being was impaired but also helped them understand the most useful ways of managing this. By knowing their signs, coaches could be more proactive in managing their well-being and help-seeking which in turn prevented symptoms build-up – “I think, if I spot the signs early then I don't get into the really tough moments” (coach Jude).

“I have like a self-check process to see if I'm still in the green zone (high well-being). I self-check a lot and I find that if I am not there, I start putting

things in places to help me get my buffer back and I reach out to others, if I can't manage myself.” (coach Megan)

In a way, by being aware of their symptoms and effective ways of managing them, coaches could become problem solvers. Concurrently, it could self-reinforce the maladaptive traits in coaches and actually create a barrier to help-seeking when professional help was required. Within this study, coaches' symptoms recognition primarily focused on various behavioural clues (e.g., disturbed sleep patterns, alcohol misuse, irritated responses within coach-athlete relationships) and mostly fitted symptoms of burnout. However, even when coaches recognised some symptoms of ill-being, they found it difficult to describe them in detail or even simply talk about them. They seemed to search for words, make comparisons, and some even admitted to not having sufficient vocabulary to express their thoughts and experiences. This, in itself, is problematic for help-seeking where coaches are expected to disclose the experienced issue, but it is further enhanced by coaches' desire to be problem solvers. It seems that coaches want to take control and manage their own well-being, yet they might lack understanding of well-being and its importance for mental health, performance, as well as career sustainability. The lack of well-being understanding could also hinder the way coaches manage the help-seeking process.

The coach as problem solver theme was complex and nuanced and reflected how coaches might self-reinforce the cultural stigma where help-seeking is seen as weakness and in turn, be pushed to rely on oneself instead of external resources. These ideas were formed and specifically explored through three subthemes: 1) 'Struggling Is Normal in High-Performance Sport', 2) 'Don't Be a Burden', 3) 'Know Your Time and Place'.

5.3.1.1 Struggling is Normal in High-Performance Sport

Throughout the survey and focus groups, coaches talked about the immense challenges to their well-being from working in high-performance sport. These challenges, and their consequences, were widely accepted as inevitable in the role, and almost a price to pay to succeed in a coaching career. Coach Thomas talked about this as:

“I think, as coaches, we always live with a certain amount of stress or pressure. Sometimes, I guess, it can become almost overbearing for people. I don’t remember a week where I thought, this week is easy.”

However, the acceptance and normalisation of struggles around well-being could present a challenge to coaches’ help-seeking. It could distort coaches’ perception and judgment around the acuteness of their experience and possibly lead them to initially dismiss any experienced concerns and delay help-seeking. For example, coach Alex described his work experiences as: “during the really full-on, heavy, challenging days, when I’m going into reds from self-care perspective, I get a weird, sadistic pleasure from powering through”. This account might suggest that struggling is not only seen as something normal in high-performance coaching but also something to be embraced. From an ecological perspective, it highlights how different systems can interact and impact coaches’ experiences. In this scenario, how the high-performance/organisational culture can inform what is considered ‘normal’ or even desirable – “powering through”. For example, other coaches suggested that conformity to masculine traits and norms can serve as a barrier to coaches’ disclosure of their struggles and prevent them from asking for help. As noted by coach Thomas:

“... just the atmosphere of no communication. There are all kinds of pressures to conform to mistaken stereotypes because you get rewarded for it. And it just becomes one of those things because it’s been such a male dominated, problematic place for so long.”

The above examples of ‘normalisation’ of struggling underpinned by masculine norms can result in help-seeking being seen as an inability to take on what others can do. Because of the acceptance of struggling, coaches who seek help for their well-being concerns could end up standing out. They would become outsiders to what’s widely accepted in the industry.

5.3.1.2 *Don't Be a Burden*

In this study, coaches seemed to view well-being (and related struggles, ill-being) as their own responsibility and their own problem to solve. Because of this, they discussed prioritising various self-management (or self-care) strategies over seeking help. The idea of personal responsibility was further embraced by coaches' fear of burdening others. Coaches discussed seeking help as a burden because it contradicted their daily role of a supportive rock, a problem solver. Given the never-ending demands and pressures that athletes and other personal working in high-performance sport experience, coaches talked about feeling guilty for adding extra pressure on others by seeking help. As described by the participants in this study, coaches were meant to be caring and take pressure away from people (especially athletes), thus asking someone for help was often viewed as unreasonable and went against their ideas of what a coach should be. Essentially, help-seeking contradicted coaches' identity as they saw themselves as “the helpers” not “the helped”. Coach Steven shared a powerful story of experiencing a loss of family members and how despite this traumatic event, reaching out for external help was still not a valid consideration.

“I have two deaths in my nearest family last week, and do you think I talked to the others (colleagues) – no. I have to stay strong because I don't want them to be sad for me. I want them to concentrate, to work, I don't want them to worry about me.”

Moreover, coaches also talked about this difference when comparing their views around help-seeking with athletes or other coaches. For example, coach Thomas talked about their experience of supporting an individual as an athlete and noticing a shift in his attitude after the athlete transitioned to a coaching role.

“I've helped him in his life as a player, and when he was a player, we used to talk about lots of his life. Whereas now, a lot of my help with him or mentoring with him is around coaching, so it's shifted a bit. Not that I don't care about him as a person but performance management overtook it.”

The above extract shows how coaches engaged with each other from positions within their culturally defined professional identity, where performance conversations are prioritised while well-being and related support might be overlooked. Doing so seems to lead

coaches to develop more superficial relationships with a lack of understanding of the people within their environment. This, in turn, closes down any opportunities to develop supportive networks and can create a barrier to coaches' sharing and possible help-seeking. The discrepancy in coaches' approaches and attitudes towards athletes vs. other coaches suggests a double standard with other external influences (e.g., culture of high-performance sport) coming into place.

5.3.1.3 Know Your Time and Place

Linked with the above idea of burdening others during help-seeking is the concept of knowing your time and place. In the study, coaches discussed help-seeking as something that needed to happen in the right time and place in order not to disrupt the environment. However, rather than focusing on their own needs (the right time and place for the coach), they seemed to be preoccupied with the impact of help-seeking in the context of their wider team and tailoring their help-seeking attempts to the environment.

“The caveat is within the team environment, sometimes you have to just go, do you know what, I might have to hold onto this for a bit because that is going to affect that person. There has to be some self-regulation as sometimes, the goal is more important than the individual and the system is more important than what's going on.” (coach Henry)

The right time and place were often considered in the context of competitive season (e.g., coaches would not consider help-seeking during the peak times of the season or Olympic year, regardless of the severity of their struggles). Coaches scrutinised staff's workload and experienced stress levels to evaluate whether the situation permits any help-seeking efforts. It appears that busy schedules often led coaches to a decision to postpone or even avoid any help-seeking efforts as other things (most often athletes' performance) had to take a priority. Moreover, coaches also considered the impact their help-seeking might have on the group dynamics. In this scenario, coaches seemed to view help-seeking as an emotional offloading rather than a practical solution that would address the experienced concern. Therefore, raising a concern or even challenging the environment to receive help for well-being was seen almost as counterproductive and immature. This theme shows how coaches' own views and experiences of help-seeking might be more than just a matter

of the individual, instead they come from interactions between the distinct layers of ecological systems, this time the individual layer and their microsystem and mesosystem.

The ability to postpone (or appropriately time) help-seeking for well-being was deemed as a fundamental skill for operating in high-performance sport. Some of the coaches described it simply as “being and adult”, hinting at a possible dismissiveness towards help-seeking if done incorrectly (further suggesting potential self-stigma). It appeared that coaches internalised the masculine performance narrative of high-performance sport where performance had to take priority and well-being was seen at best secondary, and where reaching out for help could be considered weakness. Therefore, managing their well-being would become coaches’ own problem to solve.

The overall theme of a coach as problem solver highlighted how coaches seemed to seek help almost as a last resort. Based on the findings, coaches initially evaluated their environment and various criteria needed to be fulfilled to proceed with help-seeking. Coaches considered the time of the season, as well as others’ workload before making a help-seeking attempt. Moreover, this theme showed that self-care and self-regulation might not necessarily be a positive result of coaches’ proactive well-being efforts but rather crucial skills for surviving in high-performance sport. Knowing your time and place emphasised the possible contrast between well-being supportive developments on an individual and organisational level. The practical issue linked with the right timing and place is that there might simply not be a “perfect” time to seek help. This can prolong any ill-being difficulties and potentially lead to more severe, long-term problems such as burnout or depression.

5.3.2 Perception of Support

Coaches' perception of support was an important aspect of their considerations around help-seeking. This relates to the likelihood of receiving support, as well as the actual nature of effective support. In this theme, coaches shifted their outlook from internal experiences to external factors. In relation to the previously discussed ecological framework, this theme considers more external layers – microsystem such as coaches' workplace, mesosystems such as family/work relationships, and exosystem such as provision from governing bodies. It looks at where coaches seek help for their well-being, as well as how they communicate about their well-being challenges. Therefore, this main theme consists of two subthemes: 1) Help, Support, Challenge?, and 2) Availability and Connection to Support.

5.3.2.1 Help, Support, Challenge?

Throughout the surveys and focus groups, there was an ongoing discussion around terminology when it comes to help-seeking. The word 'help' itself seemed to be a barrier to help-seeking because it had connotations of weakness, vulnerability, and one's inability to handle the demands of the environment especially compared to others in sport. It linked to possible stigma around help-seeking where coaches were concerned about others' opinion and how seeking help was considered a consequence to struggling rather than proactive care. Coach Thomas shared their view and concerns around help-seeking as:

“Searching or asking for help as a coach is something that still needs to change within the culture of sports, because few years ago, even athletes, it was such a big thing and seen as a weakness...now, you know, athletes do it to get extra five percent, but I still think it could be viewed as, oh, what's wrong with that coach, are they struggling?”

Following from the quote, help-seeking seemed to evoke more emotionally based views and experience. Rather than getting a competitive advantage or personal growth, coaches usually framed help-seeking as emotional offloading, complaining about their situation, or even whining.

“It’s not always a productive conversation, sometimes it’s just a bit of a bitch and a moan, you know, say what the f*ck they’re (organisations/management) doing this sh*t for...but it doesn’t resolve anything.” (coach Thomas)

Therefore, seeking ‘help’ was often considered by coaches as an unhelpful action. The word ‘help’ seemed to also evoke discomfort around power dynamics. In coaches’ views, receiving help seemed to lead to a shift in power dynamics resulting in coaches passively receiving help rather than being in control of their situation. The notion of a power-dynamics shift might related to the help-seeking stigma in high-performance sport as it perpetuated help-seeking as a sign of weakness.

Some coaches noted the lack of practicality or usefulness when it comes seeking *‘help’*. As seeking external help was already a big step for coaches, they wanted to ensure that their situation would improve. Therefore, coaches themselves started referring to the process of help-seeking as seeking *‘support’* rather than help. The word support evoked more practical view of the process. By reaching out for external ‘support’, rather than ‘help’, coaches could reframe this as a way of finding solutions to their challenges. It was a way to become even stronger rather than a sign of being weak. It also resolved the issues around power dynamics, leaving coaches feeling more in control of their help-seeking experience and overall well-being. From this perspective, seeking ‘help’ was something people do if they had significant mental health issues, and something, coaches possibly didn’t want to be linked with. Reframing as ‘support’ allowed coaches to consider wider aspects of well-/ill-being rather than seeing this from a clinical perspective.

Approaching a source of support seems to align with the overarching idea of coaches as problem solvers. When discussing their experience of help- or rather support-seeking, coach Megan highlighted how coaches often had solutions for their situations but needed an external source to efficiently prompt their thoughts - “I know the questions I should be asking myself but it’s having someone who can actually do that”. Therefore, having someone there to ask the right questions could push coaches to more realistically reflect on their situation and in turn empower them to take action when needed. Concurrently, it might reinforce coaches as problem solvers, thus place the burden on the individual rather than addressing the issue systematically.

Coaches talked about the need to have someone to challenge their views of the challenges they experienced if they decided to reach out for support. Rather than passively receiving help (i.e., have others “resolve” their situation), they seemed to desire support which made them question their current situation and possibly shifted their perspective on potentially unhelpful attitudes/behaviours. In this context, coaches often brought up their coaching identity, and the related tunnel vision that came with it. The tunnel vision stemmed from coaches’ wider macrosystem (i.e., high-performance sport and organisational culture) which often dictated their attitudes/behaviours. At times, it led them to see sport and coaching as the only thing that mattered. Being constantly surrounded by people in sport created an echo-chamber which skewed coaches’ views and experiences of well-being and subsequent help-seeking. It seemed to prevent coaches from judging their experiences and well-being in the wider context of life and personal values. At times, it even precluded them from evaluating possible solutions to the experienced well-being challenges as they could only consider the situation in the context of high-performance sport, not what would be relevant to them as an independent individual. Coach Thomas described this tunnel vision and importance of outside-sport perspective as:

“sometimes, people from outside of the sport can put things in a bit more perspective, because sometimes I do think sh*t, it is still a sport, it’s almost like it becomes life or death for us all.”

Therefore, help-seeking should provide coaches with a broader perspective on difficulties experienced, minimise the sporting tunnel vision. In turn, seeing a bigger picture could energise coaches and bring them a control/resources over the situation (i.e., allow them to self-manage), thus empower them to look after their well-being.

5.3.2.2 Availability and Connection to Support

Throughout the survey and focus groups, there appeared to be no one size fits all when it came to sources of support. Coaches talked about utilising individuals from inside as well as outside of the sport. Coaches discussed approaching their family members/people outside of sport for support when they felt close to them and, more importantly, the lack of sport-related knowledge help to provide a different perspective. By talking to someone outside of the sport environment, coaches were able to put their experience in a wider context of life, making problems related to coaching less severe. Coaches in this study described how this type of sharing allowed them to feel more relaxed as they didn't have to worry about being seen as incompetent or even face any negative consequences to their career. The close, personal connection enabled them to feel safer when reaching out for help and coaches also highlighted the importance of the supporter taking a genuine interest in their well-being. Coach Jude described their experience of receiving help when going through a difficult time:

“I mean, it was just a phone call, just a chat, that was all and that is all it takes sometimes. A general chat about life and everything, that opens the door to some light and everything can start resetting.”

On the other hand, the lack of contextual knowledge from people outside of sport could also serve as a barrier. Suddenly, the “minimising” of coaches’ struggles (e.g., it’s just sport or life as noted in the quote above) was unwelcomed and stopped coaches from sharing well-being concerns. This highlights the complexity of the interpersonal processes involved in seeking and providing support, and the importance of individual considerations for coaches’ help-seeking.

It seems that knowledge of the environment from supporters within sport was especially helpful when coaches required follow-up actions within their job. Coaches in our study suggested that understanding of organisational (and wider high-performance sport) culture could lead to recommendations and guidelines that were more likely to be practical and realistic when it came to supporting them.

Therefore, when seeking help, the choice of a specific person seemed to mostly depend on the nature of the issue and availability of the person rather than a specific personal quality. In other words, it seemed to be the issue that primarily dictated the choice

of supporter, not the source itself. While being away on a training camp, coach Megan shared their experience of using a coach developer (i.e., a professional providing tailored learning and developmental support to coaches) to address high levels of work-related stress:

“They came to see me on the ground during a camp when things got intense, we went on walks in the evening, sometimes to vent, sometimes just to put some thoughts down, ..., just knowing I could call and discuss with someone who’s not as much in it helped.”

Overall, it seems that finding one ideal person (and their characteristics) could be a pointless and perhaps unnecessary inquiry. Instead, coaches considered it more beneficial to have an individual available for each occasion based on the issue they were experiencing, thus specifically match a supporter to an experienced issue. This was noted in coaches' Paul experience who, because of their discipline, spent more than half the year away from the family (usually in a different time zone making family a hard-to-reach source of support). In coach Paul’s experience, they never wanted to rely on one specific person (e.g., partner) for help because of the possible tension it could actually bring on the individual, their relationships, and coach themselves. Consequently, it was crucial for them and other coaches in this study to have an individual they could reach out to in each of the key environments (occupational, personal life) to remove a possible barrier when help was needed and coaches decided to act on it.

“We’re (the team) on the road where we’re living and breathing each other. We have to learn to go to each other because there is nobody else. You know, you’ve got girlfriends or partners back home and obviously you’re phoning, checking in, ..., but we all have identified certain people, like our go-to in different occasions.” (coach Andrew)

Despite wanting to be strategic about their choice of supporter when discussing their experiences and existing support structures, coaches found it difficult to make the right connections and considered themselves lucky to have someone who cares and is willing to help, when they needed support. This was because of the lack of established support mechanisms within their environment, and this often decreased their general expectations around help-seeking and the likelihood of receiving help when needed. The lack of available resources highlighted a practical challenge to coaches' help-seeking for

well-being. Even if coaches decided to seek help, there might be no one actually available to support them. Coach Jude described their experience during key competition event where various issues (logistical as well as athletes' performances) created an extremely challenging environment and presented a significant challenge to their well-being:

“In my own experience, when I did need help, I didn't feel that there was anybody that I could go to, ..., I got completely thrown under the bus and there was no way to deal with it, there was nothing set up to deal with it.”

This quote suggests that even at pre-planned points of tension (i.e., international competitions), the system does not appear to consider coaches' well-being and the need to provide support. To add to the rare/lucky nature of support resources in high-performance sport, coach Thomas talked about their experience of organisational change and how quickly helpful practices could disappear. After changes in key personnel within the senior leadership team, coach Thomas described the shift in supportive organisational attitudes as:

“So basically, management told us, for example, like we can delete the numbers of the sports directors, it is really ridiculous. And they were also like, because they knew people were not happy and they were always saying that if somebody was complaining they need to reach to management, so nobody was talking anymore to each other and there was just an atmosphere of mistrust.”

Aside from the professional help and close family, coaches shared their difficulties of seeking help and voicing potential concerns with other coaches and members of staff. Specifically, coaches pointed out how individuals in sport highlighted the prestige of a coaching position and how this in turn created a barrier to disclosure in itself. When sharing, coaches' concerns seemed to be often dismissed by individuals within their organisation (and sometimes more generally by people within high-performance sport). Being a high-performance coach was viewed as being extremely lucky and often having something others could only dream of. This was previously noted in the coach as problem solver theme as well and suggests the interplay between external views and their internalisation. Presenting coaching as a dream meant that in the eyes of colleagues and other coaches, there didn't seem to be a 'valid' reason for coaches to complain or be dissatisfied. Consequently, even if other staff members or coaches were available for

support, coaches would still question staff's attitudes and could go into help-seeking conversations close-minded and with a sense cynicism. Coach Henry described the challenge of sharing in high-performance coaching as:

“... if I want to grumble to somebody about my job, and of course, when it becomes your job we all have moans and groans about stuff, it can be quite stressful because everyone else thinks we are living the dream.”

This extract shows how the status of high-performance coach could possibly take away the legitimacy of sharing concerns or being unhappy. Some coaches felt that by becoming a high-performance coach, the right to complain is revoked in eyes of some individuals within the sporting system. It possibly suggests that sharing concerns or unhappiness might not be a basic right but rather a sign of ungratefulness on coaches' side, thus presenting an expected, cultural standard of coaches as always grateful and never complaining.

Additionally, coaches frequently discussed their experiences around organisational silencing when it came to sharing their well-being concerns. Many received advice or official note from their organisation not to complain; this goes for practical complaints around the role management but also complaints around personal/well-being struggles. Coach Thomas shared their experience of a shift in organisational culture:

“... suddenly there was basically like created atmosphere of fear and of not really being able to speak up, ..., it was really like a mind f*ck where you were not sure anymore, what are now the needs and problems you're sharing and where you can complain, what you shouldn't do, etc., it was like a really toxic environment and that in itself was a big struggle.”

Sharing or rather help-seeking was often viewed as a form of complaining rather than a proactive care, hence coaches avoided it to fit the silence culture. Yet, the findings also showed that seeing other coaches reaching out for help would possibly encourage them to act if needed. Having someone to break the culture of silence and normalise seeking help over quite suffering could empower coaches to act similarly when needed and could create new standards for well-being practices. Coach Steven pointed to the interest high-performance coaches have in the topic of help-seeking: “A lot of my colleagues, they were really interested about this study here, and they went, oh, this is really what I want to hear

about and the results of it.” This shows the possible appetite for well-being and help-seeking conversations and the further need for an impulse to start these off. The conversation continued with coach Thomas adding: “Yes, and maybe asking for help needs to be like more public, just like some elite coaches, the coach of Bayern Munich for example, he has a mentor he talks to.”

To sum up, the general nature of high-performance sport celebrates moments of overcoming injuries, attributes such as mental toughness and resilience. This seems to feed into the previously discussed idea of managing well-being as a personal responsibility rather than something to share or ask for help with. As discussed by coaches in our study, the default was being able to handle the environmental pressures, it was a way of legitimising one's right to work in high-performance sport. Coaches talked about the enjoyment of overcoming challenge and the subsequent validation they got out of it. They noted the positive (albeit ego-driven) experience it brought which could further perpetuate the possible perception of help-seeking as a sign of weakness (i.e., stigma linked with hyper-masculinity in high-performance sport). The stories of overcoming challenges could play into coaches' ego by providing feelings of rewards and justification. They could encourage coaches to close off, deal with things on their own in order to become a hero after struggling. These narratives may distort coaches' sense of what constitutes normal or acceptable well-being, especially when compared to norms outside elite sport. Consequently, the nature and narratives within sporting organisations (and high-performance sport itself) could shape coaches' views and experiences of help-seeking for well-being, thus supporting the calls for ecological approach to help-seeking investigations.

5.3.3 Cultural/Organisational Factors

This theme comments on potential barriers or facilitators of coaches' help-seeking behaviours and specifically focuses on the nature of high-performance sport, as well as organisational culture of distinct governing bodies. Within this theme, four additional subthemes were identified: 1) It's All About Athletes, 2) Support as Tick Box Exercise, 3) Don't Fix Until Broken, 4) Respect and Trust.

5.3.3.1 It's All About Athletes

Within this subtheme, coaches talked about the preoccupation with winning medals throughout high-performance sport. More specifically, they discussed how sport is mostly approached as a business which heavily relies on a medal delivery for subsequent fundings. Unsurprisingly, to deliver this objective, athletes seem to be always at the centre of attention and care. This leaves a minimal (or none in some cases) space for coaches, their needs and support of their well-being. The contrast between coach and athlete support was further highlighted by experiences of some coaches who transitioned into the coaching role from an athlete and subsequently had an opportunity to experience both sides.

“From personal experience, and talking to colleagues, the biggest change is when you're an athlete, somebody always looks after you, asks you how you doing, they take care of you. Everyone makes sure there are practically no disturbance within your life. That's the biggest change when becoming a coach. Suddenly no you are the person asking and no one actually does it for you in return. You still have problems, thought, feelings but you are on your own.” (coach Mark)

Athlete to coach is a relatively common career trajectory in high-performance sport, thus the discrepancy in support could be experienced by many. The support discrepancy signals that organisations simply value athlete more than coaches and, it could leave many athletes significantly under-prepared for the challenges of high-performance coaching.

To maintain their well-being, athletes have a wide range of support personal (e.g., sport and clinical psychologist, performance lifestyle practitioner, medical team). Yet, coaches seem to have minimal to no pathways to resources. At best, coaches might be able to access a support from a mentor or a coach developer – a connection usually established by coaches themselves rather than official efforts from their organisation.

Coaches in this study viewed these resources as useful but utilised them primarily for work/tactical discussions rather than well-being support. Overall, there appears to be an unspoken expectation in high-performance sport that coaches should self-manage their well-being when the move into a coaching role. This extreme contrast between “athlete cocooning” and the detachment from coaches’ well-being can present a significant barrier especially for newly transitioned coaches. Even worse, it might paint a picture of a wider organisational/high-performance sport disinterest in coaches, their well-being and any support they might require.

5.3.3.2 Support as a Tick Box Exercise

This subtheme closely relates to the absence or insufficiency of organisational resources. Some coaches observed changes in organisational attitudes and mentioned distinct policy statements/guidelines from recent years which advocated for coach well-being. However, in this study, coaches seemed to perceive these as superficial and a tick box exercise rather than a real effort by organisations to support coaches’ well-being and making their role sustainable. They questioned the motivation behind these “improvements”, especially in the light of the contradicting messages from leadership when it comes to well-being (e.g., take the time off but be always available to athletes). Most of coaches showed cynical attitudes towards organisational well-being statements and a lack of serious considerations in terms of using these resources. “None of the coach education stuff is meaningful, ..., like this afternoon we are going to cover this stuff and then the box is ticked and we’re good to go, like what’s the point in that” (coach Jude).

Not only was the idea of support as a tick box exercise mentioned in the context of organisational efforts, but coaches discussed this in relation to individual/peer-support from colleagues (sport psychologists etc.). When inquiring about coaches’ well-being, coaches rarely took the questions for a genuine interest. Instead, they saw these as a habit without any care or intentions to be interested in the coach as a person. Coaches described how the passing comments of “how’re you?” usually led to automatic responses of “fine” rather than honest reflections on how they were doing. Coaches wanted to see a genuine motivation to care, and support in order to open up and engage with the available support. They wanted to stop these automatic exchanges as the lack of genuine care led them to disengage with or dismiss the supporter. To fully engage with support coaches wanted to

move beyond the surface level conversations that could perpetuate the idea of organisational disinterest around well-being.

“You talk to them almost every day, but you don't know their life history, you don't know what problem they have around. We think we know each other but we have no idea what happens when people come home.” (coach Steven)

Following on coach Steven's account, taking time to get to know the person behind coach helped create an atmosphere of care. This was further noted throughout the study where coaches called for being seen as humans with their own problems, agendas, and opinions.

“You're the one taking care of people, asking them how they are doing, how are you feeling, is everything okay, blah, blah, blah. But nobody's actually doing it with you. I think it helps if everybody keeps in mind that we also have our thoughts and problems.” (coach Mark)

In a way, this seems to link with the idea of coach as problem solver as the lack of genuine interest/support of coaches perpetuates the need for them to manage things on their own. Therefore, finding time to actively listen to coaches, reflect on their accounts and probing elaborations could increase trust and respect in the relationship, where both aspects have been identified as key factors in coaches' help-seeking experiences (more details below). Additionally, coaches highlighted how good organisational leaders should show genuine care for coaches and contrasted it to the more common drive for results in high-performance sport.

“People at the top, they're probably not the ones who have always been good at saying like how are things for you, it's more always focused on results... I think the best leaders, they're trying to get to know people or understand the people, that's what good leaders do. It's not just about performance.” (coach Thomas)

This sentiment was further perpetuated by coach Jude who extended the issue of organisational leadership to the organisational culture overall:

“There’s a lot of talk about stuff, but there is actually nothing there (in the organisations) for coaches. There is just no support for individual coaches, there isn’t a structure of helpfulness, there is a box ticking to make sure that UK Sport doesn’t cut anybody off”.

5.3.3.3 Don’t Fix Until Broken

Coaches also talked about the reactive nature of high-performance sport rather than a long-term view of supporting coaches' well-being. Instead of focusing on longevity in the sport by having proactive attitudes to coaches' well-being, organisations often seem to uptake a very short-sighted mentality. Throughout the survey, coaches noted the lack of organisational interest in their well-being and specifically, how the rare support targeted ill-being symptomatology in a very reactive way. This was noticeable in coach Megan’s experience of burnout:

“I had to learn the hard way, (in my previous role) I was clearly burnt out, and I did say it, and I tried to make my boss aware up to the point that after 21 years I said well no, I’m not doing it anymore and I left.”

In this scenario, the organisational solution/fix was to replace coach Megan with two new coaches. The idea of quick fixes and no organisational effort invested in coaches' well-being was further raised by coach Jude: “It’s all about putting down fires rather than watering the garden, they are looking for quick fixed rather than putting the shift in and actually doing it properly”.

Even more concerning were experiences of coaches within the focus groups. Coaches shared how organisations tend to dismiss any well-being concerns until it is too late, and coaches have to leave the sport. Organisations seemed to ask coaches to prioritise their athletes and performance for a season with a promise of self-care and support for the coach once season was over. Yet, as the nature of a coaching role doesn’t allow for much time off even outside of the season (e.g., preparation for the next cycle), coaches are often pushed to their absolute limits. Coaches contrasted this organisational attitude with the desire for results and pointed out how their well-being actually goes in hand with performance rather than takes away from it. “If you don’t look after your coaches, how can they actually perform at their best for athletes? How are we supposed to be there for athletes if we’re struggling?” (coach Megan). Yet, organisations seem to encourage coaches to perform as long as possible with a very limited foresight of the long-term

impacts on coaches' well-being and overall sustainability in the profession. There seems to be a lack of organisational understanding of the benefits of well-being support and how it could generally lead to sustainability in the job but also improved performance.

5.3.3.4 Respect and Trust

One of the key factors which appeared to impact coaches' decision making around help-seeking was trust or rather respect towards the approached individual. This closely links with the previously discussed idea of individuals' motivational considerations but points to factors that encourage coaches to seek help. Rather than closeness in the relationships, coaches seem to evaluate the level of respect they have for the individual. Coach Henry reflected on their experience and highlighted how trusting their performance director would allow them to act authentically and challenge the director for further support despite not having a close connection:

“Our performance director, for example, I don't have a relationship much with him at all, but I trust him, and I feel that I would be able to say, I need this support, can you offer me that? And I think I would get.”

The above example points to the impact of a professional context and how support or help can take different forms for coaches. Moreover, it suggests that coaches could possibly reach out to leadership for help over utilising professionals such as sport psychologists. This seems fitting given the previously discussed coaches' orientation towards self-help over help-seeking and preference of seeking support with contextual understanding when work-related concerns are experienced. By reaching out to their leadership, coaches could keep a level of control over their situation and perhaps gain some useful resources to manage it rather than handing over the responsibility to other individuals. To further elaborate on the idea of trust vs. closeness, coach Henry talked about the importance of respect, especially in terms of professional context and described how a quality relationship might be more than closeness and friendliness for help-seeking to occur:

“it's not always about being in good relationships maybe buddy/buddy kind of thing to help. I think the word that is key for me is trust. I think there are some people, you wouldn't seek to go for a drink with, but if you really trust them in terms of having respect, asking for support might be easier. I think a good relationship for sure, but I think that is too simplistic.”

Additionally, coaches talked about personal as well as professional trust where previous positive experience of being listened to contributed to the overall levels of trust. Organisational openness seemed to play a key part in the process. Coaches discussed this in the context of their direct colleagues but also in relation to organisational management.

“Organisational openness is key for me and that it is conveyed all the way down. Every coach knows that the performance director is open to listening to us. We don’t need to have a good relationship, but they conveyed to us they are open and want to help, that has been a big thing for me.” (coach Alex)

For the open communication channels within the team, coach Henry further elaborated on the importance of active, early communication:

“(as a team) we have the ability to share and speak openly which allows us to deal with stuff that may be building up. We have a little mantra that we don’t allow little frustrations to become big. We just deal with them as early as possible.”

Aligned with the findings, high levels of respect and trust seemed to give coaches confidence to seek help when needed. They allowed them to be authentic and free them from unhealthy, organisational (and wider high-performance sport) expectations.

Altogether, our findings point to help-seeking for well-being as a multi-layered concept where an individual plays only one part in the process. It is also the environment that can shape coaches' views and experiences. It shows the usefulness of more holistic, ecological approaches to help-seeking examinations. Specifically, our findings highlight how the interplay of distinct layers of coaches' ecological system frames their experience, shapes their attitudes and directs their help-seeking behaviours.

5.4 Discussion

This study aimed to explore the views and experiences of help-seeking for well-being within the high-performance coaching context. High-performance coaching has been established as an extremely stressful occupation with significant challenges to coaches' well-being and longevity in the profession (Häggglund et al., 2022; Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). Therefore, understanding what, if anything, coaches do to manage these challenges, and support their well-being is vital. The present findings introduced three main themes depicting the help-seeking process. The first theme represented the concept from an individual perspective and showed how coaches tend to manage their well-being (and related concerns) as a matter of individual responsibility - a problem to solve. This occurred through coaches normalising struggling in sport, raising concerns around burdening others, and purposely timing their help-seeking attempts to fit others' schedule/agenda. Second theme shifted the internal/individual perspective to external aspects/others and revolved around coaches' perception of support. Within this theme, coaches considered the nature of help-seeking and what would be useful, encourage them to seek help (help, support, challenge?). They also highlighted the importance of availability and connections to sources of support during help-seeking (availability and connection to support). Final theme - cultural/organisational factors - moved beyond individuals and coaches' perception of help-seeking and focused on the wider culture of high-performance sport and organisations within it. In this theme, coaches discussed how organisations mostly focused on athletes, with minimal attention being paid to coaches (it's all about athletes). This was further perpetuated by providing at best tokenistic support to coaches (support as tick box exercise) and the general organisational view that support was not needed as long as coaches could get by (don't fix until broken). However, coaches also shared organisational/leadership qualities that could encourage them to seek help – respect and trust.

The holistic view presented in the main themes aligns with an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) where help-seeking for well-being extends beyond individual attitudes and behaviours (e.g., McLeroy et al., 1988) and includes cultural (i.e., high-performance sport) and organisational influences (e.g., Hill et al., 2021). A deeper understanding of the organisational settings and characteristics is important as it shifts the

responsibility for managing well-being (help-seeking being a key strategy) solely from coaches to the whole organisation (Frost et al., 2025; Kenttä et al., 2024).

The ecological approach to coaches' help-seeking showed a more holistic picture of the process and the interplay between individual systems. For example, the lack of organisational care and support leaves coaches with minimal resources to manage any well-being concerns which then encourages them to be self-sufficient and resolve any concerns alone. The systems interplay in this theme presents a lack of supportive structures as a direct barrier to help-seeking but also how their absence can lead coaches to personally re-enforce stigma around help-seeking as the perceived expectation is that they need to manage alone. The potential of ecological approaches in well-being/help-seeking research has been recently raised in the literature (Purcell et al., 2019; Purcell et al., 2022), but this study is first to utilise it while specifically focusing on coaches.

The designated focus on coaches' help-seeking is one of the key strengths of this study as it addressed a compelling gap in the sport literature which tends to prioritise athletes/coaches' role in athletes' help-seeking rather than coaches' own experiences (Leprince et al., 2024). The design of the study further benefited the findings as it allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of the help-seeking process over narrowly focusing on its individual concepts. Moreover, the study's broader scope (embedded in ecological approach) pointed out some contextual nuances that might otherwise stay hidden (e.g., the need for specific vocabulary).

Coach as problem solver uncovered that rather than proactively seeking support to enhance/maintain their well-being, coaches tend to seek help only when their well-being is threatened and, more importantly, when they are unable to find solutions themselves. This was highlighted throughout the present study where coaches viewed help-seeking as the final resort when any other efforts failed. Similar to Rafferty and colleagues' (2019) research into military personnel, the way coaches viewed their need for support determined where, when, and if at all they decide to seek help. Both of the environments can be characterised by masculine norms which can be internalised (i.e., self-stigma) and subsequently create barriers to help-seeking (Clary et al., 2021; Ramaeker et al., 2019). Coaches seem to view help-seeking efforts as a last resort often when on the verge of burnout. This reluctance and avoidance highlight the discomfort and

difficulty coaches experience when it comes to reaching out for help. Additionally, instead of embracing, supporting, or at least actively considering the positive parts of their well-being experience, the focus seems to be on reducing deficiencies only (Kennedy, 2021).

The existing stigma around help-seeking for well-being/mental health within high-performance sport have further pointed towards the “vicious cycle” of help-seeking. For coaches, in order to reach out more, they need to see others utilising support. They ask for visible examples of help-seeking to feel more confident to do so themselves. Having “help-seeking role models” could normalise experiences of well-/ill-being and more importantly seeking support for experienced concerns (Purcell et al., 2020). Yet, the stories of vulnerability (a necessity to openly share) are scarce in high-performance sport (Hägglund et al., 2019; Vella et al., 2022) and especially among coaches (Hägglund et al., 2024). Concurrently, coaches in this study talked about being always happy to support others and valuing the trust others put in them when seeking help. The fact that coaches value well-being (and help-seeking) in others but do not often follow up on it for themselves might suggest a “double standard” mentality and possible self-stigmatising (Corrigan et al., 2006). It could point to the fact that well-being and mental health in sport is being more accepted when it comes to athletes, but not necessarily when it comes to coaches. For coaches (internally but likely also culturally), the idea of seeking help seems to remain clouded by misconceptions, being viewed as a weakness and potentially coaches’ inability to handle the demands of the job rather than a useful way to manage it. Seeking help also might challenge the idea of a coach as someone who cares for others. This was highlighted in study 1 (Chapter 4) and might suggest that improving coaches’ help-seeking could require more than mental health education. Instead, challenging coaches’ existing beliefs around the coaching narratives and how these play into their views on well-being and help-seeking may be required.

Additionally, high-performance sport culture seems to approach managing well-being, and related subsequent help-seeking, as an individual’s responsibility (Prior et al., 2024). Combined with the ever-present masculine norms where preserving the mask of invincibility is key (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2009; Steinfeldt et al., 2012), it is unsurprising that coaches primarily rely on self-help resources. Despite the original conceptualisations of help-seeking (i.e., reaching out to formal/informal sources of support), more recent

literature incorporates self-help (Rickwood & Bradford, 2012) as another avenue. Self-help resources seem to play to coaches' strengths as they are associated with increased self-efficacy but also take away any potential stigma experienced when reaching out (Levin et al., 2018). It is therefore unsurprising that coaches in this study often mentioned self-help resources as a method of help-seeking. For external sources of support, coaches in this study mainly matched the person to the experienced problem (i.e., optimal matching theory; Cutrona, 1990). Additionally, individuals with similar characteristics/roles tend to be useful sources of support due to shared experiences (Thoits, 2021). Yet, coaches in this study pointed out that they often wouldn't feel comfortable to share their struggles with other coaches in their field. This suggests that peer-stigma might play in the process of help-seeking where coaches could be concerned about how their peers perceive them and the consequences it could have to their employment (i.e., someone else taking up the role). It further links with coaches' concerns of being seen as weak - unable to perform in their role, thus giving a competitive advantage to their competitors in the job market.

The findings suggest that coaches found the word 'help' problematic because it contrasted their ability to resolve their struggles alone (i.e., coach as a problem solver). They usually linked it with, in their view, unhelpful behaviours such as moaning or emotional offloading. In this way, the word help seemed to challenge the idea of toughness or invincibility that commonly links with coaching persona (Weinberg et al., 2020). They resorted to other (perhaps more proactive) terms such as support, suggesting potential stigma around help-seeking, aligning with the wider sport literature (e.g., Pilkington et al., 2022). Because of this, terminology might be key to breaking existing barriers around coaches' well-being and help-seeking. More tailored wording could open conversations with a positive spin on reaching out for support over the pre-existing negative connotations of the word 'help'.

The advantage of an ecological approach to help-seeking is that it moves beyond individual blame and instead considers environmental/systematic interplay. This broader comprehension of help-seeking allows us to move away from overly focusing on individual aspects of the help-seeking process, for example stigma or mental health literacy, which are well-documented in research (e.g., Crawford et al., 2023; Gorczynski

et al., 2020; Ramaeker & Petrie, 2019). Instead, it enables us to reflect on calls for more contextuality within sport literature, where understanding organisational structures and the nature of the high-performance environment (with its underlying rules and expectations) is deemed vital to support well-being (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2020).

Considering help-seeking from an ecological perspective also aligns with wider sociological discussions around agency and structure where structure is proposed to be the initiator behind agency (Archer, 2003). Within the high-performance coaching, this would point to the role broader sporting culture and specific organisations play in allowing (or preventing) coaches' help-seeking efforts. In other words, individual coaches' efforts might simply not be enough to manage their well-being, but wider organisational support is needed (Kenttä et al., 2024). Moreover, the present study extends the knowledge by focusing on the under-represented coaching population and providing insights into the experiences of those who are rarely considered in need of support, even more, those who are commonly expected to be the never-ending, stable source of support for everyone else (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

5.4.1 Applied Implications

Based on the findings of the present study, there seems to be a significant lack of established, supportive structures for coaches' well-being in high-performance sport organisations. When it comes to athletes, especially in recent years, the situation has improved noticeably. In regard to professional help, high-performance athletes are able to reach out to their sport psychologists, performance lifestyle practitioners, as well as a wider multidisciplinary team such as clinical psychologists or therapists. Yet, the support offers for coaches seem to remain relatively limited (Kenttä et al., 2024). Based on the accounts in this study, the closest coaches can currently get to a form of professional support is through working with a coach developer, their general practitioner, and possibly sport psychologists. However, as pointed out by Kelly et al. (2018) sport psychologists might often lack a specific coach-training leaving them inadequately prepared to support coaches' well-being. The absence of formally established organisational support pathways is alarming, especially given the well-documented amount of pressure and burnout in the coaching population (e.g., Kenttä et al., 2020; Olusoga et al., 2019) and links between help-seeking and improved well-being in coaches (Gorczynski et al., 2020).

Moreover, the absence of supportive structures has been identified as one of the key barriers to help-seeking (Gorczyński et al., 2021), highlighting the importance of providing opportunities for well-being support internally with embedded practitioners but also externally through referral pathways (Kenttä et al., 2024; Kenttä & Hyland, 2021).

Not only should organisations be clear on pathways for well-being support, but they should also create an environment where well-being and subsequent help-seeking are actively encouraged. Aligned with calls from the wider coaching literature, organisations should aim to establish psychologically safe environments where vulnerability and sharing are encouraged (Kenttä et al., 2024; Simova et al., 2024). Doing so could challenge the culture of silence and hyper-masculinity common in high-performance sport (Manley et al., 2016; Ramaeker et al., 2019) and discussed by coaches in the present study. As some of the coaching challenges are inevitable (and perhaps an undetachable part of high-performance sport), it is important to allow coaches to authentically experience these and deal with them in a healthy, productive manner rather than shying away from them.

The discomfort coaches might experience during help-seeking suggests the persistent view of well-being as secondary to performance and the potential stigma as a result of it. This is worrying and problematic as both well-being and performance have been shown as mutually reinforcing (Didymus et al., 2018; Simpson et al., 2023) and well-being might be one of the key factors playing into the sustainability of the profession (Häggglund et al., 2022; Kenttä et al., 2020; Purcell et al., 2022). Therefore, presenting well-being as a key part of coaches' performance preparation could normalise coaches' self-care and increase organisational uptake in the well-being practices.

5.4.2 Limitations and Future Directions

While providing valuable insights, this research is not without its limitations. Throughout this study, coaches seemed to use terms well-being/ill-being/mental health interchangeably which could present a challenge when considering findings in the context of the wider literature. Therefore, further investigations are needed to fully comprehend the meanings coaches ascribe to these individual concepts and how these independently inform coaches' views and attitudes towards help-seeking.

The interchangeability of terms also meant that coaches seemed to discuss help-seeking for well-being as a process of minimising ill-being symptoms rather than a

positive strategy to maintain well-being or even thriving. This limits the current findings, and future research should aim to explore coaches' views and experiences when seeking support for positive aspects such as personal development.

The impact of masculine norms and subsequent stigma on help-seeking has been shown throughout the findings. Yet, because of the nature of the participant sample (especially in focus groups), the current study might miss the nuances of female coaches' help-seeking and specifically, how, or whether at all, these masculine norms impact their views and experiences. Consequently, more research is needed looking at the interplay and female coaches' help-seeking specifically.

5.4.3 Conclusion

To conclude, the present study showed the benefits and importance of approaching coaches' help-seeking for well-being more holistically and how the process itself might be complex and social in nature rather than exclusively a matter of an individual. Embracing the ecological approach over solely focusing on the coach would allow us to capture the barriers and facilitators that sit within the environment. Doing so shifts the understanding of help-seeking from an individual to a more social process where coaches' knowledge and skills present just one part of a much bigger equation. Combined with the findings of study 1, this study suggests that managing well-being (which help-seeking is undeniably a part of) should be viewed as a shared responsibility by sport organisations (and individuals within). Only then can high-performance sport become psychologically safe space that encourages vulnerability and openness, thus combats the prevailing stigma around well-being and help-seeking in sport (Frost et al., 2025). Therefore, how help-seeking is viewed, discussed, and practiced should also account for those surrounding the coach, including organisational leaders, support staff, family and friends, as well as the broader research community. The imbalance between coaches' well-being challenges and available resources to address them in the sporting systems points to the importance of practical, clear guidance. In the next chapter of this thesis, we consider the consolidation of current knowledge around coaches' well-being and help-seeking and explore what can be recommended to address the existing shortcomings.

CHAPTER 6

Coach Well-Being Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The initial chapters of the thesis highlighted the potentially stressful nature of coaching and its link to various negative outcomes such as impaired well-being and/or ill-being (Chapter 2). Chapter 4 explored what being well actually means to high-performance coaches and found a case for a more contextual, holistic understanding of the concept. Chapter 5 then investigated what coaches do when their well-being is impaired. Taken all together, the work has highlighted the pivotal role high-performance sport and specific organisations play and the sparsity of available support/guidance when it comes to coaches' well-being.

Therefore, this chapter starts with a theoretical background to coach well-being recommendations, why they are necessary and relevant. Following this, a policy document with coach well-being recommendations that target organisations, practitioners (e.g., sport psychologists and performance lifestyle practitioners), and coaches themselves, is presented. This attempts to address the aforementioned gap (in our knowledge and practice) and bring this thesis closer to its overarching objective – practical, tangible support of coaches' well-being.

6.2 Theoretical Background to Well-Being Recommendations

Rising interest in well-being within high-performance sport is reflected in organisational statements and recommendations emphasising that focusing solely on performance is inadequate (for review see Vella et al., 2021). Performance and well-being go hand in hand, they reciprocally impair and support each other (Clowes, 2019). The prioritised performance drive is important and understandable. However, sporting organisations (including individuals operating within the structures) also have a duty of care for their performers (Grey-Thompson, 2017). Acknowledging and supporting the well-being of coaches should therefore be imperative for anyone in high-performance sport.

The focus of existing recommendations related to well-being has been largely on athletes, with little consideration for coaches and the pressure they experience. A recent exception is a position statement by Kenttä and colleagues (2024) who aimed to redress this imbalance by highlighting the specific coaching challenges. Yet, the overall lack of specific coaching guidelines remains problematic as the need for contextual considerations (e.g., the nature of high-performance coaching) has been highlighted as key to adequate practice (e.g., Lundqvist, 2011, Simova et al., 2024).

High-performance coaching has been characterised as a fast-paced, highly pressured, complex social process (Malett, 2007). Coaches face a wide range of frequent stressors that can negatively impact their well-being and overall performance (Didymus, 2017; Olusoga et al., 2009). For example, long working hours, frequent international travel, and being constantly “switched on” can put extreme pressure on coaches' relationships by creating work-home interference, making coaching a lonely position (Kenttä et al., 2024). Organisations can further perpetuate this isolation by creating a competitive atmosphere amongst coaches who might subsequently avoid sharing responsibilities or even struggles (Olusoga et al., 2009). Challenges come in many other forms but overall, coaching stressors are vast, intricate, often entangled, making it an exceptionally demanding role. Inability to effectively deal with these challenges can negatively impact well-being and can often demonstrate in the form of burnout or wider mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety or alcohol misuse (Åkesdotter et al., 2022; Olusoga et al., 2019; Pilkington et al., 2022). Together, these challenges can determine coaches' career prospects and longevity in the role.

Consequently, supporting coaches' well-being is not only a question of duty of care, but also a practical matter for sport organisations. The financial and time commitments linked with recruitment, training, and inclusion of new staff can be costly (O'Connell & Kung, 2007). This makes it more practical to invest into development and support of existing staff, hence accepting well-being as shared rather than individual responsibility. Addressing well-being from both individual and organisational perspectives allows for a more holistic understanding of coaching challenges without systematically pathologising coaches. It enables us to consider possible environmental barriers to coaches' well-being efforts, rather than focusing on individual coping skills. It

acknowledges the role sport organisations can play in creating a positive (or arduous) environment for coaches (Purcell et al., 2019). Tackling coaches' well-being from personal as well as wider organisational perspectives will allow for more embedded, practical care where coaches feel supported, acknowledged, and able to thrive rather than survive in the performance environment (Hill et al., 2021). Consequently, the following coach well-being recommendations are divided into three sections: organisational, professional, individual coaching.

6.3 Organisational Recommendations

6.3.1 Well-being as a Shared Responsibility

General guidelines targeting well-being in high-performance sport highlight the importance of a holistic approach. This includes various cultural and contextual influences on well-being (e.g., ethnicity, religion, age) but also a wider social, organisational stance (e.g., Ryba, 2017). Research has proposed taking an ecological perspective on coaches' well-being (e.g., Higham et al., 2023; Simova et al., 2024) over perpetuating the narrative of well-being as an individual's own responsibility (Prior et al., 2024). As important as it is to educate coaches about well-being management, their efforts might be futile if organisations present obstacles. Well-being has to be seen as a shared responsibility between coaches and sporting organisations for long-term, sustainable improvements to coaches' health, happiness and functioning. This sense of shared well-being responsibility should come from distinct organisational practices but also understanding that specific resources might need to be allocated to accomplish the goal. Without resources, coach well-being (and any related recommendations) might remain a theoretically ideal scenario rather than embedded practice.

To embrace this shared responsibility, organisations should start by learning from coaches, whose expertise and experience is worth preserving and embracing (Evetts, 2011). By including coaches' voices, organisations can become more sensitive to the unique challenges and in turn provide more inclusive, practical leadership (Wilkinson et al., 2014). Being part of the decision-making process allows employees to feel heard and respected (Long, 1979). It can create an environment where coaches feel valued and have

a sense of belonging (Yoerger et al., 2015). Additionally, inclusion in decision making has been connected with improved performance and job satisfaction (Lam et al., 2002).

Suggestions for Practice:

Critically reflecting on the organisational role in coaches' well-being can highlight opportunities for care and support. Understanding the specific demands organisations place on coaches and scrutinising them in detail is a starting point for new policies and guidelines. Organisations should have regular reviews of coaches' working conditions and practices, including their workload and working hours. These reviews could open spaces for conversations around organisational expectations on coaches' availability. Moreover, key points in the season should be identified to allow for more effective planning of support for coaches' time off. These conversations should be subsequently backed with sufficient organisational resources (financial, as well as time-related).

Aligned with this, sport organisations could develop a well-being charter that specifically outlines their commitment to supporting and working with coaches. This charter would include concrete well-being policies and recommendations to clearly present the standard of practice within the organisations. Trying to understand coaches' well-being experiences and the role organisations play can improve coach-stakeholder relationships and increase coaches' interest in the organisation. By taking a lead on well-being supportive practices, organisations show a genuine care for their coaches. This might encourage coaches to view these organisational efforts as genuine rather than tick-box exercise. Considering well-being as an equal part of performance success will highlight its importance and reflect organisational stance around this topic while encouraging coaches towards healthier attitudes and behaviours.

6.3.2 Promote Thriving in Sport

High-performance sport is primarily a results-driven environment. Success, competitiveness, and high aspirations are ever-present and celebrated not only by the individuals involved, but also by the media and the wider public audience. It is only recently this one-sided focus has started shifting, and stories of impaired well-being and the damage that high-performance sport can cause have begun to emerge (Elsey, 2019; Parrott, 2023). Well-being has become a watchword in sports organisations, yet it seems to be viewed through a clinical lens (Kennedy, 2021). Specifically, the primary goal of organisational efforts is to investigate and minimise possible negative symptoms of ill-being - a reactive style of support where organisations step in if ill-being symptoms are disclosed. This focus is valid and important, but it does not offer a full picture of the well-being experience. Well-being is more than just an absence of ill-being symptoms. Consequently, organisations should aim to promote well-being rather than just eradicating ill-being (Kenttä et al., 2024).

Suggestions for Practice:

To promote thriving in sport, organisations should provide opportunities for coaches to develop an identity and life outside of work. This could be done by providing various benefits such as gym memberships or app subscriptions to a range of job-unrelated courses. Within the UK sporting system, identity development outside of sport is primarily linked with work of performance lifestyle practitioners. These practitioners offer executive coaching to athletes around various areas of life, with an access to additional budget to pursue discussed interests outside of sport. However, for coaches, this support is unavailable. Consequently, organisations should negotiate contracts with performance lifestyle practitioners to extend this support to coaches (including available budget for personal development).

As burnout continues to be a significant issue in high-performance coaching (Olusoga et al., 2019), clear guidance is needed around rest and recovery. Organisations could establish regular, mandatory recovery days and policies around early starts after late nights training or international travel. This, in turn, could promote healthier sleeping habits and recovery in coaches. Given the frequent work-home interference due to international duties and long working hours, it would be beneficial to explore ways of

linking the two areas; for example, by discussing with coaches whether family members might travel to international events with coaches. Supporting coaches beyond the training grounds could promote a more balanced lifestyle with subsequent well-being/performance improvements.

6.3.3 Reduce Stigma and Promote Mental Health Literacy in Coaches

Extensive literature points to existing well-being/ill-being stigma in high-performance sport. Coaches often play the role of “superhero” to fit organisational expectations (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). For example, masking their emotions to appear stoic and often opting out from disclosing well-being related issues is common (Goffman, 2009; Kim & Dawson, 2023). Moreover, mental toughness tends to be seen as a vital characteristic, but performers often misinterpret it as a contrasting point to weakness (i.e., being mentally tough should eliminate the need for help-seeking; Crawford et al., 2023; Gulliver et al., 2012). This narrative might cause coaches to act beyond authenticity further impeding well-being and discouraging them from help-seeking.

Therefore, reducing stigma around mental health is the initial step in supporting coaches' well-being and possible help-seeking (Gorczynski, 2018). Additionally, literature highlights the importance of promoting mental health literacy (knowledge around mental health difficulties, their recognition, management and prevention) in coaches. Higher mental health literacy has been linked with improvements in self-efficacy and use of self-help tools (Jorm, 2018) which is pertinent in the case of high-performance coaches, especially as it has been reported as a key source of coach well-being management (see Chapter 5 of the thesis).

Suggestions for Practice:

Education should be provided to focus on coaches' own well-being, equipping them with skills for symptoms' recognition, vocabulary and confidence to share these. Conversations around well-being and ill-being should be actively encouraged and become a regular part of the working environment rather than something to hide. This will promote openness and possibly lower stigma around disclosure and vulnerability common in high-performance sport (e.g., Hägglund et al., 2024). If coaches were to have well-being related

objectives (as well as performance ones), it would provide a benchmark for evaluating their experience and points for honest discussions.

These educational programmes should be compulsory for coaches, but attendance encouraged with other employees as well. They could incorporate aspects of mental health literacy and also empathy, self-compassion, and counter-stereotyping. Ideally, these programmes would be mostly interactive with real-life examples from sporting contexts to aid the development of socially supportive relationships. As coaches might find it initially difficult to talk and share their well-being concerns amongst colleagues within the same sport, organisations should consider involvement of wider, governing bodies. For example, UK Sports Institute could organise quarterly meetings for coaches from distinct sports. These meetings would allow coaches to share their experiences, struggles and best practices without the fear of negative consequences to their employment. Concurrently, these meetings should be officially endorsed by the specific organisations, with their attendance seen as part of role responsibilities and adequately compensated in regard to time investment on coaches' part. Coaches could also be paired up as 'well-being buddies'. This would allow coaches to have an established connection with others in a similar position to check-in. It would empower coaches to be 'helpers' as well as being helped (Simova et al., 2024).

6.3.4 Establish Coach Specific Support

As previously discussed, well-being is more than the absence of ill-being symptoms. But for those coaches who experience mental health issues, like anxiety and depression, having access to the right support is vital. Available support within the organisation fulfils organisations' duty of care (Kavanagh et al., 2021) and removes one of the main barriers to help-seeking (e.g., Salaheddin & Mason, 2016). Difficulties with accessing support (e.g., specialist not on site or long waiting times) could discourage coaches from seeking help.

High-performance athletes can access support from a wider psychosocial team. Qualified professionals tend to be available on site and offer 1:1 service for a range of issues. However, there currently appears to be a lack of formally established support for coaches. If nothing else, given that coaches and their well-being have a significant impact

on athletic performance, it is in organisations' best interest to look after and support their coaches (Simpson et al., 2023).

Suggestions for Practice:

Having dedicated pathways/personnel to aid coaches who struggle with mental health challenges is vital. This support system should be contextualised which in turn should lead to more effective care for coaches' mental health. A common athletic support (i.e., sport psychologist or performance lifestyle practitioner) should be extended to coaches either through the same staff (if their availability allows) or additional personal such as coach mentors, coach developers or psychologists, lifestyle practitioners with coaching focus.

In addition, creating supportive, mentoring system for coaches could create a safe space for sharing good practice as well as offloading during difficult times (i.e., buddy system). As an employee, organisations could provide time and budget for coaches to attend international conferences or online education, well-being groups to extend their networks and connections.

6.3.5 Promote Psychologically Safe Environments

While including coaches in decision making is vital, organisations must create space where coaches feel able to do so without fear of recrimination. A psychologically safe environment protects employees from psychological harm and promotes well-being by allowing for authenticity and honest communication (Vella et al., 2022; Walton et al., 2024). High-performance coaches often tend to play into the culturally prescribed expectations (e.g., coach is always stoic) leaving a minimal space for authenticity or show of genuine emotions (Higham et al., 2024). To further fit into the cultural idea of the coach (tough, handles everything), coaches seem to evade being perceived as vulnerable making them often opt out from help-seeking efforts (Hägglund et al., 2019; Vella et al., 2022). By creating a psychologically safe environment, organisations can support coaches in staying authentic, which, in turn, might help to dismantle the dominant narratives around staying mentally strong (Gulliver et al., 2012). It shifts the environmental focus from winning-at-all-cost to a perhaps healthier, more sustainable view of high-performance coaching.

Suggestions for Practice:

A crucial aspect of developing a psychologically safe environment is the involvement of organisational leaders (Hägglund et al., 2019). Clear evidence that individuals will not be punished for disclosing challenges or ill-health is essential. This can be done through specific organisational policies but also examples of previously well-handled situations (Walton et al., 2024). Leaders should discuss coaches' well-/ill-being with other members of staff regularly and openly, for example, during review periods. Care for coaches' well-being should be brought up by leaders as important, key topic for organisational improvements and a goal going forward.

Organisational leaders need to cultivate psychological safety by modelling behaviours that encourage coaches' authenticity and vulnerability (Walton et al., 2024). Modelling behaviours could be done informally through openly sharing their thoughts and feelings around organisational practices, work experiences and open-door policy towards feedback. Leading by example can show coaches that learning from mistakes and approaching challenges uniquely enhances growth.

Leaders and coaches should co-create a code of conduct which states how sensitive topics might be best approached, and how opinions might be challenged; all with fairness and compassion in mind for constructive conversations. To aid these discussions, organisations could provide training around respectful listening and collaborative practices.

6.3.6 Making High-Performance Coaching Sustainable

Coaching has been described as an unsustainable profession due to its ever-present challenges (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017; Olusoga et al., 2010). There is also a systematic issue around the longevity where coaches are often treated as an easily replaceable commodity (Krahn, 2024; Simova et al., 2024). The constant drive for success leaves a minimal space for making mistakes or even failing. In a way, it is easier for organisations to replace a coach, as the job market is saturated with new, driven coaches waiting for a chance. Intuitively, replacing an existing coach could lead to a quick fix in performance issues. But as found by Sousa and colleagues (2023), this is a misleading idea. Therefore, supporting existing coaches and creating sustainability in the role is key. It might be impossible or even undesirable to change certain, perhaps challenging, aspects of

coaching (e.g., coaches' preoccupation with welfare of their athletes). However, organisations should still aim to turn coaching into a meaningful, fulfilling occupation (Lara-Bercial et al., 2022). Instead of quick fixes, they should embrace coaches to professionally develop and equip them to deal with challenges (Jones et al., 2023).

Suggestions for Practice:

Organisations should consider how coaches are realistically judged and appraised for their performance. It should be contemplated whether performance results are the only measurement or other aspects come into play. Moreover, it is vital to acknowledge how these can impact coaches' progression and overall future in the role.

Understanding turnover rates in high-performance coaching, as well as specifically within the organisation could provide a more realistic view of the industry. Moreover, exploring the motivations behind the end of employment (voluntary and involuntary) could aid clarity around possible gaps in organisational practices and in turn encourage a positive change to a more sustainable profession. Consequently, organisations should establish exit interviews as a regular part of their practices. During these interviews, coaches would have an opportunity to reflect on their experience and provide valuable feedback for organisations going forward.

6.3.7 Context of High-Performance Coaching Matters (Organisations and Professionals)

Aligned with various policy statements (Vella et al., 2021), contextual considerations are key to effective organisational functioning, professional practice and, more specifically, for tailored well-being support (Purcell et al., 2019; Van Slingerland et al., 2019). Research has indicated the intricate, yet vital, nuance in coaches' stress/well-being experiences (e.g., Olusoga et al., 2009). For example, female coaches face challenges related to working in hyper-masculine environments while younger coaches might be slightly better equipped when it comes to ill-being symptoms recognition (Carson et al., 2018; Gorczynski et al., 2020). However, coaches' well-being experiences move beyond gender or age, and are shaped by the environment coaches operate in (Higham et al., 2023). While the prevalence of disclosed mental health difficulties appears similar to the general population (Åkesdotter et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2024), anecdotal stories of alcohol misuse (Roberts et al., 2019) and sleep problems raise a level of concern

(especially with the possible avoidance of disclosure due to mental health stigma in sport). Therefore, having an understanding of the unique stressors and related issues is vital to enable adequate support.

Suggestions for Practice:

For an effective, practical support, it is crucial to consider contextual factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, and gender. Moreover, being part of a minoritized group can present additional pressure. Understanding the specific demographics within the organisation and linking them with practices can help coaches perform better and make meaningful connections.

To develop a proper understanding of coaches' well-being, organisations could invest into research. Partnering up with universities and relevant organisations such as Mind UK or UK Coaching could provide a valuable opportunity to combine research and practice. Gaining more specific information around coaches' well-being is key in order to tailor practical support and in turn establish professional coaching as a sustainable, rewarding occupation.

Practitioners should be aware of key, challenging points during the competitive season and schedule support sessions as well as further education. Scheduling individual sessions with coaches could create a confidential space for sharing. It would allow practitioners to develop closer relationships where coaching related challenges might be openly discussed, and a range of coping strategies developed. These sessions should be actively supported by the organisations and possibly contracted as a part of coaches' performance targets.

Given the prevalence of clinical issues in high-performance coaching, coaches should have access to internal or at least external clinical guidance and support. This could be done through establishing multidisciplinary meetings of sport and clinical psychologist, and performance lifestyle practitioners with an opportunity to bring individual cases and discuss best practice.

6.4 Professional Recommendations

Embracing the shared responsibility, it is vital to go beyond organisational leaders and look at other embedded professionals who can impact coaches' well-being – the practitioners. Amongst practitioners we can consider sport psychologists, but also performance lifestyle practitioners, coach developers, or other support staff who might work with coaches. These individuals, with their skills and expertise, might be best suited to support coaches on individual bases as well as provide workshops around well-being related topics. These roles might present a bridge between organisation and needed well-being support, hence should align with our previous proposition of well-being as a shared responsibility.

In addition to sharing well-being responsibility, coach support should be holistic. Coaches often present themselves through their job and use it as the main point of conversations (Higham et al., 2024) but to support them adequately, going beyond their role is vital. Practitioners should aim to learn about the coach as a person – for example, their values or aspirations. Doing so, could prevent coaches' identity foreclosure (previously negatively linked with well-being; e.g., Brewer & Petipas, 2017) and also encourage vulnerability and sharing.

6.4.1 Proactive Support with Environmental Awareness

Coaches often seem to prioritise care for athletes over themselves, hence they can miss or choose to ignore telling signs of possible ill-being. Therefore, approaching them proactively could create opportunities for reflections and conversations, while embracing organisational culture of care. The need for a proactive approach (or even organisational involvement in these introductions) is critical as coaches rarely access support of their own accord (North, 2010). Because of the fast-paced, results-driven nature of high-performance sport, most support tends to be reactive rather than proactive. This is understandable yet creates a gap in the holistic work around coaches' well-being.

Additionally, it is vital to acknowledge that this proactive approach needs to be purposeful and might require more tactical tailoring of conversations. Coaches might need a slow build up towards well-being conversations before they feel confident/willing to discuss the topic. Nevertheless, being unable to understand a purpose of a conversation or

specific work has been identified as one of the main barriers in coach-practitioner relationship (North, 2010). This is understandable given the limited amount of time coaches have for personal development and frequent orientation towards performance. The lack of clarity/purpose might discourage coaches from working with practitioners in general.

Suggestions for Practice:

Actively approaching coaches with an offer of support could signal organisational care and encourage them to utilise the professional sources. It could break the contact barrier and normalise help-seeking as a proactive, performance-improving effort rather than a sign of weakness. As coaches might not be used to prioritising self-care or simply making time for themselves, there is only a small window of opportunity to engage them in working with a practitioner. Timing approaches/offers of care clearly signals understanding of the coaching profession as well as increases chances of coaches fully engaging with the practitioner.

Working at a high-performance level, practitioners should acknowledge possible coaches' expectations around sport knowledge and team dynamics. Specifically, taking time to understand the team environment, politics and individual preferences was deemed critical for efficient, tailored practice and generally for coaches' engagement with practitioners (Sharpe & Hodge, 2013). Therefore, spending time on the training grounds, learning from the coach is crucial to become a part of the team (Sharpe & Hodge, 2013).

6.4.2 Start with Performance, Get to Well-Being

The link between well-being and performance has been accepted in the research and professional community. Yet, the organisational hesitation remains, with the performance narrative perpetuated throughout high-performance sport (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Research suggests that high-performance coaches tend to utilise psychological support primarily to manage preparation for competition, but also while dealing with work-related challenges and emotional management (i.e., performance preparation; Gould et al., 2002; Thelwell et al., 2017). This could be a useful stepping stone to reflect and learn about work challenges (Wagstaff, 2016) and could later develop to more proactive work around well-being. Therefore, performance enhancing techniques might present a useful departing point for individual work (and the aforementioned purpose when it comes to proactive work) but should not be the sole focus. Research shows the benefits of counselling and 1:1 approaches when working with coaches (e.g., Eubank et al., 2014; Kelly et al., 2018). This supports our call for an alliance between performance AND well-being and places practitioners as possible spokespeople for well-being related efforts and needs.

Suggestions for Practice:

Presenting well-being as a part of performance, could increase organisational/coaching uptake. Rather than seeing well-being as addition to performance if time allowed, practitioners should incorporate well-being supportive practices into everyday performance preparations. This could be done through various workshops and seminars where coaches would have an opportunity to discuss well-being topics, but also individual work around self-awareness. Doing so could open doors to wider well-being conversations within the organisations and normalise this as a part of high-performance sport.

Familiarity with counselling approaches and frameworks could enhance individual practice and support coaches' well-being where traditional performance techniques might fall behind (Giges et al., 2004; McCarthy & Giges, 2017). Having an awareness of available support resources outside of the organisation could be equally useful as coaches reach out to professional for signposting (North, 2010).

6.4.3 Trust and Confidentiality

The competitive, cut-throat nature of the role can make it difficult for coaches to trust others within the environment, yet, both trust and confidentiality have been identified as key components in help-seeking for well-being related concerns (Rickwood et al., 2007; Vogel et al., 2007). Specifically, worries about a breach of confidentiality and information sharing decrease the likelihood of help-seeking. Coaches seem to avoid disclosing well-being related concerns because of possible consequences to their career. It appears that some might view disclosure as weakness or inability to "handle the coaching role" (Uphill et al., 2016) which could result in a termination of their contract. Yet, seeking help for well-being related issues has been linked with improved well-being (Rickwood et al., 2005).

Suggestions for Practice:

Understanding possible challenges around confidentiality and having clarity of the process can increase coaches' confidence in working with a practitioner. Discussing these in advance or even at the start of every session will provide clarity and contribute to more trusting relationships. Being clear on expectations and guidelines will diminish any insecurity linked with working with a practitioner. When working with a coach for the first time, practitioners should agree a code of conduct which would highlight boundaries of their confidentiality. After each session, practitioners should discuss with coach what/if anything should be shared with a wider team/organisation (where appropriate).

Moreover, to shape the overall guidelines for organisational confidentiality, practitioners should create a focus group with the wider management. In these discussions, practitioners should introduce their personal confidentiality guidelines and discuss how these align with organisational expectations. In some organisations, practitioners might be required to work concurrently with coaches and athletes which could create a significant challenge to confidentiality. If unable to obtain coach/athlete specific support, practitioners need to openly discuss this grey area of confidentiality with the leadership team and explore the best way of practice.

6.4.4 Coaching as a Form of Support

Because of the nature of their role, coaches are used to being problem-solvers. Unsurprisingly, they seem to prioritise self-help resources and talk about receiving “support” rather than help (Simova et al., 2024). Given the sensitivity around the actual terminology of well-being support, a slightly different approach might be more advantageous. Providing executive coaching might be adept in coaches' support as it focuses on individual empowerment (Rogers, 2024). Aligned with findings of Simova and colleagues (2024), coaches often talked about having ‘tunnel vision’ in regard to self-care and well-being. They shared how being challenged on their perspective allowed them to better reflect on well-being-threatening situations and to more effectively adapt to them. Being challenged/coached seemed to be a more acceptable way of seeking support. It was viewed as strength and a way of improving oneself rather than a sign of weakness or one's inability to deal with challenges.

Suggestions for Practice:

Practitioners should consider terminology around well-being support. More empowering terms such as executive coaching, and “coaching the coach” could take the stigma away from these conversations and help coaches be in control of their situation and future development. Coaching around well-being could open discussions around priorities, values, and related behaviours. Barriers to well-being promoting behaviours could be explored with action plans (driven by coaches) implemented. Creating needs analysis with coaches could enable practical conversations and direct the support in more efficient manner. It could lead to exercises around goal setting with regular follow-ups and check-ins from the practitioner. Within multidisciplinary teams, open conversation is needed to explore individual skillsets and who might be better equipped to support coaches' well-being.

6.5 Coach Recommendations

6.5.1 Self-Awareness & Negotiating Boundaries

Research suggests a frequent imbalance between coaches' ability to recognise and self-manage stressors arising within their environment (Carson et al., 2018). Yet, early detection of ill-being symptoms and environmental challenges can aid in reducing their severity or even positively impact coaches' well-being (Haggerty & Mrazek, 1994). The ability to self-monitor has been identified as one of the key competencies for self-regulation and subsequent decreased levels of burnout (McNeill et al., 2019) and therefore presents an opportunity for coaches' personal development. Moreover, self-awareness acts as a predisposition for other self-regulatory behaviours such as strategic planning or task delegation (McNeill et al., 2018, 2019).

Aligning one's decisions and approach to work with personal values appears key to successfully maintaining coaches' well-being (Simova et al., 2024). Consequently, improving self-awareness can promote well-being in reactive but also proactive ways. The first links with recognising signs of threatened well-being (e.g., irritability, decreased sleep quality). The latter is more about aligning decisions and behaviours with the authentic self. To incorporate these in daily life, coaches need to learn how to communicate them with relevant stakeholders as only then do coaches stand a chance to have boundaries respected (Simova et al., 2024).

Suggestions for Practice:

Working with a professional executive coach (e.g., performance lifestyle practitioner) would provide an opportunity to explore distinct areas of life, points of tension as well as priorities for personal development. It would allow coaches to learn about personal triggers and values through positive challenge and give them a space to reflect. Moreover, using reflective diaries or audio recordings can help to promote self-awareness of stressors, stress responses, and effective or non-effective coping efforts if coaches do not have an opportunity to access a professional. Taking the time to reflect upon and write down core values and non-negotiables is vital. Being able to easily draw upon them might aid with making decisions and managing work demands.

6.5.2 Self-Care & Recovery

The coaching profession is inherently linked with extremely long working hours, travel and time spent away from family (Didymus, 2017). Planning ahead and for others leaves a minimal space for coaches to focus on themselves and their present needs (Thelwell et al., 2017). Worrying about the future and things outside of their control can leave coaches feeling anxious and negatively impact their sleep (Assar et al., 2024). Ruminating over work can negatively influence coaches' recovery (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015), leading to feelings of tiredness, decreases in happiness and lower ability to cope with challenges (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). Consequently, being able to create space for oneself and focus on the present is a vital coaching objective.

Mastering effective time management could ensure some personal space for reflections/self-care (Higham, 2024). Time management has been positively linked with performance and well-being (Aeon et al., 2021) while poor time-management skills can lead to increased stress, a lack of purpose (Hawkins & Klas, 1997). By arranging daily/weekly time for recovery (self-care and present focus), coaches can achieve greater emotional stability, decrease their anxiety levels and improve their quality of life while handling difficult situations (Häggglund et al., 2022; Longshore & Sachs, 2015). Various forms of self-care have been identified as key to coaches' resource management and subsequently prevention of burnout. Higham and colleagues (2024) compared this to charging one's phone – activity essential to actually operate the device. Similarly, coaches need to make sure to charge their batteries in order to operate in the environment. With this view, self-care becomes essential rather than luxury.

Additionally, sufficient physical recovery contributes to longevity in the coaching profession and overall performance (cf. Sonnentag et al., 2010). It comes in many forms ranging from healthy diet to getting sufficient exercise and good sleep quality. Yet, despite the clear benefits of recovery, coaches often talk about having meals on go, skipping their exercise, and having issues with insomnia (Kezbers et al., 2021). Aside from the practical benefits of recovery (i.e., improved performance), research also shows clear links with well-being. Specifically, short sleep or insomnia has been linked with lower levels of happiness (Weinberg et al., 2014) and can lead to feelings of tiredness and lower ability to cope with various work challenges (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). Related to the possibly

poor sleep quality, there are ongoing narratives in high-performance sport around coaches' alcohol misuse (Roberts et al., 2019). Alcohol seems to be a coping strategy for many coaches and even a solution to their sleep problems. However, it has been widely established that alcohol has a negative impact on the overall sleep quality as well as serious effect on individual's health (Park et al., 2015).

Suggestions for Practice:

Self-care is vital to effective functioning in high-performance sport. It promotes performance and longevity in the role. Therefore, rather than seeing it as an add-on, coaches should reframe self-care as a part of their performance preparations. Discussing this idea with performance lifestyle practitioner could help coaches explore possible underlying beliefs and limitations around it. Self-care can take many shapes and forms, so making it personally relevant, enjoyable and practical can increase the likelihood of sustaining it during busy periods.

Planning rest and recovery (e.g., exercise, time with family, holidays) into the daily/weekly/yearly calendar makes sticking to that rest more likely. In advance, coaches should explore possible tension points in the competitive season to aid more effective planning. Throughout the season, regular calendar reviews are needed to reflect any changes in the schedule and again, to identify the best time for recovery. Given the limited time for self-care, linking activities together could aid the process (e.g., listening to favourite podcast while commuting). Daily activities such as commuting can become a “third space” (personal, protected space solely for the individual, not a family or work; Higham, 2024) where coaches get the opportunity to process their ruminative thoughts and reflect on their well-being. This space could also be developed as a part of 1:1 work with practitioners.

Establishing effective sleep routine (cold room, quality mattress, minimum hours) and incorporating naps during busy schedule can support coaches' recovery and lead to more effective performance. Because of the frequent international travel, coaches should work closely with medical staff around the best practice for jetlag and managing different time zones.

To aid the work-home transition, coaches should create specific habits which would signify them switching off work. This links with clear boundaries around phone

usage. Coaches should consider when/how they are accessible to athletes (e.g., silencing notifications, answering calls during time off).

6.5.3 Awareness of Support & Connecting with Others

The ability to identify sources of support and understand ways of accessing them is key to coaches' help-seeking and subsequent well-being (Gorzynski et al., 2020). Understanding whom and where to reach can encourage coaches to utilise external support when needed. Support can range from formal sources (e.g., psychologist, GP, therapist) to informal sources such as friends and family. It seems that coaches tend to prioritise professional support when unable to manage challenges on their own or deem their difficulties as severe (Simova et al., 2024). However, coach help-seeking research indicates a lack of professional resources within sporting organisations, and, importantly, awareness around them (Simova et al., 2024). Even when coaches are willing to seek help to support their well-being, they are often unsure who is the most qualified/appropriate person inside as well as outside of the organisations.

Positive relationships with others have been identified as one of the core components of individuals' well-being (Ryff, 1989). They allow for sharing experiences, can help coaches to have experiences beyond sport, but also become sources of support. Despite the frequent work interactions with athletes or other stakeholders, coaching can be an isolating role. In the context of high-performance coaching, it therefore becomes even more important for coaches to invest into their relationships. By connecting with others, individuals get an opportunity to feel supported during tough times which in turn opens pathways to help-seeking.

Suggestions for Practice:

Coaches should learn about available resource for well-being support within their organisation and have a clarity of how to access them. As a first point of contact, a general conversation with a sport psychologist or other relevant professional (coach developer, performance lifestyle advisor) could help coaches to gain relevant knowledge.

Making connections with others and staying in touch within close relationships (i.e., friends and family) can extend the supportive network. It can provide a sounding board and often needed perspective outside of high-performance sport. Coaches might find it beneficial to attend seminars or courses outside of their organisation where they

could access new networks and create connections outside of their sport. However, having connections within the organisation is equally important as it could help coaches feel more connected and provide them with more resources to manage their work.

6.6 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to establish coach well-being recommendations that would utilise and build upon the findings of studies 1 and 2 of this thesis (Chapters 4 and 5). The policy document outlined in this chapter offers more holistic insights into coaches' well-being management and introduces various avenues for support and development. However, to close the gap between research and practice, further investigation is needed to explore the practicality of these research-led recommendations, and to get feedback and guidance from key stakeholders (i.e., coaches, coach educators, sport psychology professionals, performance directors, etc.). Consequently, the following chapter outlines the final study of this thesis, which used a modified Delphi method to evaluate and refine the policy document for coach well-being recommendations.

CHAPTER 7

Study 3

7.1 Introduction

As discussed throughout this thesis, the ultimate goal of the research programme was to create something useful and tangible that would aid coaches' well-being. Consequently, the final study of this project utilises the coach well-being recommendations presented in the policy document (Chapter 6). Specifically, the aims of this study were to explore the quality and practicality of the recommendations for coaches and those working with coaches in high-performance environments.

This chapter starts with a discussion around the existing research-practice gap in sport psychology, how this relates to the thesis, and considerations for well-being policies. Following this, the benefits and opportunities of well-being recommendations are explored. Finally, in order to move the well-being recommendations from theory to practice, the findings of a modified Delphi study (which assessed the Chapter 6 recommendations) are presented, along with their potential implications for future research and practice.

7.2 The Problem of Research-Practice Gap

If the goal of this research programme is to create practical outcomes, the existing research-practice gap needs to be acknowledged and considered (Hassmén et al., 2016; Hutter et al., 2017; Norman, 2010). As Vealey (2006) suggested: “research is viewed as incomprehensible, pointless and boring, while practice is viewed as pseudoscientific and ineffective. [We should be] asking real world questions, with an eye on the person in context, aiming for practical theory... not theoretical practice” (p.148).

Instead of collaborating with the practical field, to some degree, researchers still seem to work in silos and prioritise staying relevant for academic audience over being useful to those whom it targets (in this case high-performance coaches; Rynes et al., 2018). The research-practice gap shows in many different forms and can result in fragmented knowledge. From a researcher perspective, the disconnect from the practical field can cause omission of the real-world barriers and challenges that might significantly impact

the studied theory. Within this thesis a prime example would be the issues of work-life balance (a theoretically established factor contributing to employees' well-being; e.g., Gröpel & Kuhl, 2009) where coaches highlighted the impracticality of the idea and how, despite being theoretically plausible, it had a minimal relevance to their day-to-day experience (see Chapter 5). The “short sightedness” of researchers has been also pointed out by Ely et al. (2021) who suggested that current intervention-based studies might contribute to this research-practice gap through their extremely complex rigour, where subsequent findings (and even practical recommendations) are impossible to replicate in practical settings. This is further bolstered by the use of the often-inaccessible scientific terminology (Sallee & Flood, 2012).

The lack of shared vocabulary between researchers and practitioners/coaches might lead to the misinterpretation of scientific research, thus misguided practice, but also to a general disconnect or dismissiveness towards the scientific field (Keegan et al., 2017). Therefore, practitioners are left with inaccessible tips or recommendations that are potentially beyond scope of their work, their skillset, and the environment itself. Research and theory should be understandable to others, not just its creators (Adams, 2016). It should extend beyond the research community and ideally include relevant stakeholders as key, equal drivers of the knowledge and change (Keegan et al., 2017). Consequently, this guided the design and the choice of method of the study outlined in this chapter and further fitted the overall pragmatic approach of this research programme.

7.3 Coach Well-Being Recommendations – Importance and Challenges

The well-being recommendations in Chapter 6 consider what organisations, relevant practitioners, and coaches themselves could do to better manage coaches' well-being. These recommendations are based on the findings of studies 1 and 2 of the thesis (Chapters 4 and 5), as well as existing literature (Chapter 3), where coaches have discussed the lack of available support for their well-being and the frequent dismissiveness of the high-performance environment when it comes to the topic. Put in contrast to coaching demands, there appears to be an imbalance between the well-being needs of coaches and the resources available to manage these.

The problem of imbalance extends beyond the coach-organisation interaction. So far, research has established high-performance coaching as a stressful occupation that can lead to various negative outcomes including impaired well-being or mental health concerns (e.g., Hägglund et al., 2019; Olusoga et al., 2019). However, when it comes to guidance for managing these concerns, the literature is limited. On an individual level (addressing the coach), some interventional studies can be identified. They mostly explore the effects of mindfulness techniques, and other related components such as vulnerability, on various well-being outcomes (e.g., Hägglund et al., 2019; Longshore & Sachs, 2015; Lundqvist et al., 2018; Pawsey et al., 2021). These studies are useful in extending our understanding of the concepts in the coaching population and perhaps in offering an initial theoretical avenue for practice. However, intervention studies can accentuate the research-practice gap as they often serve the objectives of researchers only and use inaccessible language or unrealistic conditions (Ely et al., 2021). Moreover, the intervention-based studies mostly look at the individual level of support (i.e., what coaches should do) rather than providing more comprehensive guidance that would include environmental influences. The absence of broader, contextualised recommendations is further noticeable throughout various policy documents and statements. Vella et al. (2021) identified 13 distinct position statements addressing mental health in high-performance sport, yet out of these, only two actually commented on coaches. Since then, more work has occurred (e.g., Kenttä et al., 2024; Leprince et al., 2024) in order to highlight and rectify the issue, but the imbalance mostly remains, suggesting a need for further efforts.

Aligned with this, Purcell and colleagues (2022) proposed that clear institutional guidelines are needed to support coaches' well-being. However, coaches exist within a broader social/sporting context which can directly and/or indirectly impact their experiences of well-being and ill-being. Therefore, the development of these guidelines needs to endorse the context as well. By acknowledging the environmental influences, targeted strategies and support systems can be developed, ultimately fostering a healthier and more sustainable coaching environment. Therefore, specific recommendations need to target the individual (i.e., coach) but also contextual and systematic needs (Rice et al., 2020). They need to embrace the challenging nature of high-performance sport, including its preoccupation with performance and winning-at-all-cost (Douglas & Carless, 2009) and mostly clinical approach to well-being (i.e., dominant focus on eradicating negative symptoms; Prior, 2025). The organisational impact on coaches' well-being is significant as organisations (and wider governing bodies) are embedded and concurrently form the wider culture of high-performance sport. They have the power to influence narratives around mental health and well-being as well as practically shape individuals' behaviours when it comes to seeking help or self-care.

This organisational power comes with a duty of care which has been examined and highlighted on multiple occasions. In their review, Grey-Thompson (2017) discussed the importance of caring for sporting personnel as well as the extensive shortcomings of the current high-performance sport system (indirectly linking to the absence of policies/recommendations around well-being). One of the key messages outlined by Grey-Thompson was the need to open up pathways to mental health resources, as well as the value of including relevant stakeholders' voice when it comes to decision making in high-performance sport. Despite its gravity and urgency, since the report's publication in 2017, more allegations and concerns around well-being have been highlighted in high-performance sport (Scott, 2020), with The Whyte Review (2022) as probably the most prominent example. Therefore, pointing out the importance of caring for individuals within sport and the deficiencies of the current system might simply not be enough. More practical, actionable recommendations are called for to address the specific needs of individuals involved (e.g., coaches). Not only this but given the potential organisational reluctance to change (displayed in the above example of British Gymnastics), more

holistic cultural approaches are needed to support the industry, and coaches specifically, towards healthier, sustainable sport, and specifically their well-being.

The drive for change towards a well-being supporting environment should be a combined effort between research and practice. The purpose of the recommendations conferred in the previous chapter was to present the most relevant, holistic points that would address coaches' well-being at individual as well as at practitioner and organisational levels. Yet, to move them closer to the practice, it was essential to explore their relevance and practicality with pertinent stakeholders. The goal for these recommendations is to serve as an initial guidance for specific well-being policy development embedded within sporting organisations. That is, the theory (i.e., research evidence) is translated into actionable points that can be evaluated and their impact further measured (Cabinet Office, 2016; Schulte et al., 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain insights and consensus from relevant stakeholders around the provided well-being recommendations. Given the potential shortcomings in the coaching field regarding theory to practice mentioned above, the choice of design and method of the final study was based on two important factors. First, the need for practical research (rather than research for practice), hence the inclusion of relevant stakeholders in the field, and second, the current absence of specific recommendations for coaches' well-being which could drive the development of specific well-being policies and contribute towards more practical rather than theoretical knowledge.

7.4 Method

7.4.1 Design

Given the aims of this study, a modified Delphi approach was used. The Delphi approach has been defined as “a unique method of eliciting and refining group judgment based on the rationale that a group of experts is better than one expert when exact knowledge is not available” (Kaynak & Macauley, 1984; p. 90). Rather than seeking individual, detailed accounts, the Delphi method stems from the need for consensus on a key topic of interest (Quartiroli et al., 2022). It is an interactive, flexible, multi-round method that seeks consensus on subjects with limited knowledge (Efstathiou et al., 2011; Fink et al., 1984; Hazelbaker, 2013), and in which presented material is adjusted throughout, based on participants’ scores and comments, making it a highly iterative process (Cuhls, 2023; Keeney et al., 2011). Rowe and Wright (1999) highlighted four key strengths of the Delphi method: 1) *anonymity* where individual participants have an equal opportunity to express their opinion without possible group influences, 2) *feedback* where the expert panel has an opportunity to clarify discussed concepts, 3) *iteration* as a direct result of feedback where changes are made based on participants’ responses, and 4) *statistical analysis* of responses. Moreover, the Delphi method allows for access to a variety of participants from multicultural backgrounds (Quartiroli et al., 2019, 2021).

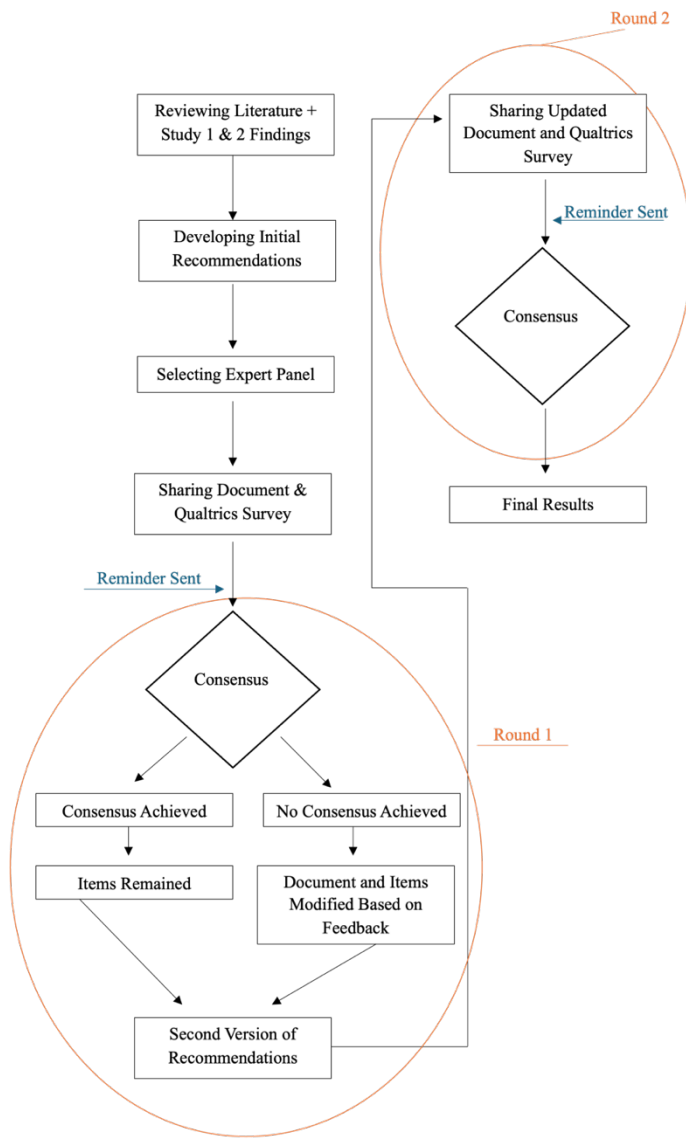
7.4.2 The Delphi Process

The aim of the Delphi method is to achieve a consensus between a group of experts on a specific topic (Fink et al., 1984). The process consists of at least two rounds of data collection (Quartiroli, 2024). Commonly, the first stage revolves around the creation of the assessed material, with following stages focusing on experts’ feedback/consensus regarding the material (most commonly in terms of its relevance). The current study used a *modified* version of Delphi which eliminates the initial creative stage (typical for a traditional Delphi study) and progresses immediately to seeking consensus (Sandrey & Bulger, 2008). Previous literature, and the findings of study 1 (Simova et al., 2024) and 2 informed the development of the recommendations, and so the initial creative stage was not required in this case. The search for consensus is usually done through Likert-type scales and supplementary qualitative feedback. The responses are analysed to assess the

level of consensus amongst the participants and, where needed, modifications to the original material are implemented. This process is repeated until consensus is achieved or the pre-determined number of rounds is conducted. This choice tends to be discretionary to the research team as a wider research agreement is missing (Quartiroli, 2024). The specific nature of the Delphi process in this study is depicted in Figure 7.1 below and following sections will elaborate on its individual aspects.

Figure 7.1

Flowchart of the Delphi Process



7.4.2.1 Development of Well-Being Recommendations and the Survey

The Delphi process starts with the identification of key concepts (in this case the policy document recommendations presented in Chapter 6) followed by their evaluation by a panel of experts, and their refinement until a sufficient level of consensus is achieved on a specific set of criteria (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). Each of the recommendations outlined in the policy document was accompanied by a brief rationale which provided a further context (see Chapter 6). Participants were asked to assess the theoretical, research-based justification underpinning the recommendations, their relevance to coaches' well-being, their clarity, and the practicality of implementing them. Relevance pointed to the significance of the recommendation in the context of coaches' well-being and helped established the importance of the specific recommendation. Clarity of the recommendations aimed to address the previously discussed language inaccessibility, thus make the recommendations comprehensible to the target population beyond research. Finally, the practicality inquiry was based on the pragmatic nature of this thesis.

7.4.2.2 Establishing Consensus

As the Delphi approach is about achieving a *consensus*, it seems vital to define the concept as well as the way it could be achieved. Generally, consensus relates to a *level* of agreement amongst the participants throughout the rounds. Despite being the key aspect of the method, there is still no agreement on what constitutes "achieving consensus" (e.g., Barrios et al., 2021; Boukdedid et al., 2011; Diamond et al., 2014; Foth et al., 2016). The decision of achieving consensus is commonly based on either researcher's subjective decisions, descriptive statistics, or inferential statistics (von der Gracht, 2012), with most studies leaning towards percentual agreements (Barrios et al., 2021).

Following this, the likelihood of achieving 100% consensus amongst a group of experts is small (Barrett & Heale, 2020), hence some flexibility is required/expected when assessing the responses. In the literature, this flexibility usually ranges from 50-80% (Hasson et al., 2000) depending on the sample and research objectives. A vast majority of Delphi research follows Keeney et al.'s (2011) proposal of 75% threshold as a minimum level for consensus. This threshold is considered high enough to show agreement amongst the stakeholders but not so high that an excessive number of rounds would be necessary to achieve an agreement (Barrios et al., 2021). The number of rounds (as well as the length

of the survey) is an actual concern in a Delphi study because it can lead to participants' fatigue and impact the level of attrition (i.e., number of retained participants between rounds; Gargon et al., 2019; Quartiroli, 2024). This, in turn, can alter the quality of responses and final results. Therefore, the level of consensus was established at 75% for this study.

7.4.2.3 Selecting the Expert Panel

To enhance the rigour of the present Delphi approach, inclusion and exclusion criteria for expert selection and the analytical approach to consensus were agreed in advance of the study (Bahl et al., 2016). These decisions aligned with the overarching methodology of the thesis – pragmatism (Chapter 3). Therefore, our choices were guided by the idea of shared sensemaking, communication challenges (including possible sensitivity of the topic within the population), the practicality of the findings for coaches' well-being experiences, all with consideration for the stakeholders' backgrounds including their busy schedules (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The selection of an expert panel is a key aspect of a Delphi study, hence carefully considered inclusion criteria are key (Sandrey & Bulger, 2008). Consequently, the present study sought participants with professional (and in some cases academic/theoretical) expertise around coaches' well-being and help-seeking, and with a direct connection to coaches' well-being either as a support provider or a stakeholder with a decision-making power over policies and well-being governance. Additionally, participants had to work in a high-performance environment (either in Olympic or professional sport; Swann et al., 2015). This was to increase the level of expertise of the professional panel and to reflect the discussions of specific nature of high-performance sport. Moreover, participants were required to have the willingness and ability to dedicate time to the Delphi study, and sufficient communication skills to provide useful insights (Skulmoski et al., 2007)

7.4.3 Procedures

After receiving institutional ethics approval, purposive and snowballing sampling (Coolican, 2017) were utilised to access the potential expert panel. Twenty possible participants were identified and contacted about the research via email. They were provided with a brief overview of the nature of the study, a participant information sheet, and estimates of time commitments linked with the process (see Appendix 3). Participants were also asked to share the study information amongst their networks. Fourteen participants consented to take part in the study. This was partly expected as selected professionals could be considered a hard to reach group (Eubank et al., 2014). The optimal sample size of Delphi study is debatable as it heavily relies on the purpose of the study and the heterogeneity of the sample (Skulmoski et al., 2007). Nevertheless, it has been argued that 15-20 panel members should commonly represent a sufficient sample (Dalkey et al., 1970; Ludwig, 1997), with smaller samples being still adequate given the need for expert nature of participants (Giannarou & Zervas, 2014).

The selected individuals were invited to represent a wide range of experiences and backgrounds. Table 7.1 highlights the demographic characteristics of the sample. Participants included both men (three) and women (eleven), with years of experience ranging from 4 to 36, with a mean of 12.86. Twelve participants were employed within the high-performance sporting system, specifically working in Olympic programmes. Two participants worked primarily as lecturers with a significant theoretical knowledge of coaches' well-being, as well as experience as applied sport psychologists. Together, participants had experiences of various sports including gymnastics, judo, cycling, taekwondo, swimming, canoeing, and diving. All fourteen (100%) participants took part in the Round 1 of data collection. Thirteen participants completed the second round of the data collection (92.9%).

Table 7.1*Demographic Characteristics of the Panel*

Demographic Characteristics		Frequency
Gender	Male	3
	Female	11
Age (years)	25-34	2
	35-44	6
	45-54	5
	55-64	1
Experience (years)	Range	4-36
	Mean	12.86
Occupation	Coach	3
	Performance Director	1
	Technical Lead	2
	Performance Lifestyle Coach	3
	Sport Psychologist	2
	Lecturer with Applied Practice	2
Professional Geography (Past and Present)	United Kingdom	13
	United States of America	2
	Australia	1
	Switzerland	1

7.4.3.1 Delivering the Survey

Individuals who agreed to participate received an email with detailed instructions about the study, the full well-being-recommendations document (Chapter 6), as well as a link to the Qualtrics survey (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). They were instructed to read through the document first to get a better understanding of the context of and justifications for the recommendations and then work through the online survey alongside the document. Participants were only able to access the full survey after consenting to their participation online.

In Round 1, participants were asked to rate each distinct recommendation on 5-point Likert type scales from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). For each recommendation, participants were asked to rate the *relevance* to coaches' well-being, the *clarity* of wording, and the *practicality* of implementation in the context of high-performance sport. At the end of each section, participants had the opportunity to share more detailed open-ended feedback. This provided a space where participants could

highlight any missing items/ideas that should be included in the well-being recommendations, but also bring more detailed insights that would help to modify the recommendations.

Responses from Round 1 were analysed to establish a level of consensus around each item and to capture any contentious items. Where necessary (i.e., consensus not achieved), amendments were made to individual recommendations as well as the wider document. The updated document was submitted to participants for a second round of reviews. Any changes within the main document or recommendations were highlighted to participants to aid the review process. However, participants were still asked to read through the whole document to understand the context and background to the recommendations. The second round followed the same procedure in terms of ratings and subsequent analysis with the exception that participants were specifically asked to provide detailed feedback if they selected any of the disagree or neutral responses. This was to ensure that any necessary amendments to the recommendations/overall document were based on participants' views and experiences.

For each item, participants were also able to see where group consensus was achieved in the previous round, as well as their own responses. This controlled feedback is a common practice within the Delphi method as it allows participants to consider their own responses in regard to the wider group judgment (Nowack et al., 2011). Practically, it helps to indirectly moderate the number of rounds within the study because it can affect the shift in individual's opinion, thus potentially decrease the number of rounds needed to achieve consensus (Barrios et al., 2021). To further ensure the retention of responses and participants throughout the process, each participant received a follow-up email a week before the deadline as a reminder to submit their responses (Chuenjitwongsa, 2017).

7.5 Results

The aim of this two-round, modified Delphi study was to develop guidelines for coach well-being support which were embedded in both research findings and the context of high-performance sport, hence making them theoretically sound as well as practical for the environment.

Each of the recommendations were assessed based on the agreed threshold for consensus (75%), where more than 75% *agreement* led to the recommendations remaining unchanged, more than 75% *disagreement* would result in removal of the recommendations, and anything in-between would lead to modifications based on participants' feedback. Raw response data were analysed descriptively using means, standard deviations, and relative frequencies. Before discussing the specific results, it is worth pointing out that the inclusion of neutral responses presented some challenges for the analysis, as some items did not achieve the required threshold for consensus due to the number of neutral responses rather than a disagreement. To address this, Strafford et al., (2022) suggested exclusion of the neutral responses from analysis so the final consensus would only represent accounts of participants with strong views on the subject. However, neutral responses also carry values and as consensus was specifically defined as *agreement* in this study, it seemed appropriate to include the neutral responses in the analysis and treat them as *not agreement* rather than exclude them overall.

7.5.1 Round 1 Results

Overall, no recommendations had to be removed from the document (i.e., consensus on disagreement), but some contentious items were identified and required modifications between rounds (see Table 7.2 for the breakdown). The following section will discuss individual recommendations, highlight where consensus was achieved, and will provide some examples of participants' feedback. Detailed results breakdowns for each group of recommendations can be found in Appendices 13 and 14.

7.5.1.1 Organisational Recommendations

The panel agreed (consensus >75%) that all organisational recommendations were clear to understand. They also considered a majority of the recommendations (9 out of 10 recommendations - 1.1a, 1.1b, 1.2a, 1.3a, 1.3b, 1.4, 1.5., 1.6., 1.7) relevant to coaches' well-being. In terms of practicality, 3 out of 10 items (1.3a, 1.4, 1.7) achieved the 75% consensus. Altogether, there were three organisational recommendations (1.3a, 1.4, 1.7) that participants agreed on in each aspect of measurements, thus required no further modifications. First, the need for collaboration with external organisations was highlighted in order to support coaches' education around mental health and well-being (clarity – $M = 1.35$; $SD = 0.63$; relevance – $M = 1.35$; $SD = 0.63$; practicality – $M = 1.43$; $SD = 0.65$). Second, experts also agreed on the importance of having established referral pathways and support systems for coaches (clarity – $M = 1.29$; $SD = 0.47$; relevance – $M = 1.07$; $SD = 0.27$; practicality – $M = 1.07$; $SD = 0.27$). Third, contextualised and individualised support of coaches was also deemed a critical objective by the involved stakeholders (clarity – $M = 1.43$; $SD = 0.65$; relevance – $M = 1.36$; $SD = 0.63$; practicality – $M = 1.86$; $SD = 0.95$).

7.5.1.2 Professional Recommendations

Participants found three out of four recommendations (2.1, 2.3., 2.4) clear (consensus >75%). For relevance, two out of four recommendations (2.3, 2.4) achieved the required 75% consensus. Two out of four recommendations (2.3, 2.4) were also agreed on as practical by the participants. Overall, two recommendations (2.3, 2.4) achieved consensus at each aspect of the measurement. The importance of confidentiality guidelines and their clear presentation across organisations fully aligned with the present participants' views (clarity – $M = 1.36$; $SD = 0.84$; relevance – $M = 1.14$; $SD = 0.84$;

practicality – $M = 1.36$; $SD = 0.63$). Stakeholders were also in full agreement on the importance of empowering coaches towards well-being care (clarity – $M = 1.29$; $SD = 0.47$; relevance – $M = 1.21$; $SD = 0.43$; practicality – $M = 1.57$; $SD = 0.85$).

7.5.1.3 Coach Recommendations

Participants agreed (consensus >75%) that all coach recommendations were clear and relevant to coaches' well-being. Additionally, three out of four recommendations (3.1, 3.2, 3.4) were also deemed as practical by the participants. Participants found it important for coaches to actively explore their personal values, boundaries, as well as work-life challenges (clarity – $M = 1.29$; $SD = 0.47$; relevance – $M = 1.29$; $SD = 0.61$; practicality – $M = 1.57$; $SD = 0.76$). The need for inclusion of self-care and recovery into regular coaching preparation and practice gained participant wide agreement (clarity – $M = 1.07$; $SD = 0.27$; relevance – $M = 1.29$; $SD = 0.61$; practicality – $M = 1.57$; $SD = 0.85$). Additionally, coaches' awareness of support and development of connections inside and outside of sporting organisations was also agreed on as crucial (clarity – $M = 1.21$; $SD = 0.58$; relevance – $M = 1.21$; $SD = 0.58$; practicality – $M = 1.21$; $SD = 0.58$).

Table 7.2 below presents specific recommendations which did not achieve consensus in one (or more) of the ratings. These recommendations therefore required some level of modifications for the next round.

Table 7.2*Overview of Items Without Consensus in Round 1*

		Rate
No Consensus Items (Clarity)	2.2 Practitioners should utilise the performance-enhancing angle as an initial stepping stone when working with a coach while later introducing well-being approaches as a regular part of the preparation.	57.1%
No Consensus Items (Relevance)	1.2b Organisations should discuss with coaches possible ways of linking work and personal life (e.g., exploring international travel with family members etc.).	71.4%
	2.1 For effective well-being support, practitioners should approach coaches proactively and with a specific purpose/agenda for each session in mind.	71.4%
	2.2 Practitioners should utilise the performance-enhancing angle as an initial stepping stone when working with a coach while later introducing well-being approaches as a regular part of the preparation.	71.4%
No Consensus Items (Practicality)	1.1a Organisations should have regular reviews of coaches' working conditions and practices, including their workload and working hours.	71.4%
	1.1b Organisations should develop well-being charter outlining its commitment to supporting coaches' well-being with specific policies and recommendations in place.	71.4%
	1.2a Organisations should support coaches in developing their identity outside of sport through various benefits (e.g., courses subscription) and a level of flexibility around scheduling their rest and recovery	57.2%
	1.3b Organisations should have well-being related objectives for coaches.	57.4%
	1.3c Through external provides (e.g., UKSI), organisations should organise regular meetings for coaches from different sports.	64.3%
	1.5 Organisational leaders should model behaviours promoting authenticity and vulnerability (e.g., by openly discussing challenges or failures), and should collaborate with coaches on developing specific well-being guidelines.	71.4%
	1.6 Organisations should critically review current standards of coach-performance evaluations (their implications to career progression) and explore motivations behind end of employment.	64.3%
	2.1 For effective well-being support, practitioners should approach coaches proactively and with a specific purpose/agenda for each session in mind.	57.1%
	2.2 Practitioners should utilise the performance-enhancing angle as an initial stepping stone when working with a coach while later introducing well-being approaches as a regular part of the preparation.	64.3%
	3.1 Coaches should actively work with professionals (e.g., performance lifestyle practitioner, coach developer) to develop effective self-care and recovery routine.	64.3%

Finally, participants had an opportunity to provide additional feedback on any of the recommendations. For the organisational recommendations, participants often commented on the relevance of the recommendations when it comes to coaches' well-being, but they also shared their concerns around their practicality due to a lack of available resources. For example, one of the participants commented:

"I believe that the majority of the points raised are core to coach well-being, however, the practicality of considering and or applying/adopting these within the high-performance culture will be challenging as they will require resourcing".

Another participant stated:

"Pivotal to all of these recommendations is the influence of the sports gatekeepers and whether policy was indeed practiced or the culture felt safe to live these potentially game changing recommendations".

For the professional recommendations, participants seemed to agree that a tailored approach to addressing well-being with individual coaches is necessary and again highlighted the limitations of providing support based on limited resources. For example, one of the technical leads shared:

"Despite a lot of relevant points, practitioner time/support is usually athlete facing. In order for coach support to be put in place, additional investment would likely be needed to ensure it was resourced appropriately with dedicated support personnel and FTE attached to it."

Limited feedback was provided for the coach specific recommendations, but one of the participants mentioned how well-being practices could be presented to coaches as an important part of their role not only for personal benefit but also indirectly for athlete development: "Through these recommendations, coaches can role model the self-care behaviours that we (practitioners) actively work with athletes on".

To sum up, out of 19 items, 14 required some level of modifications (i.e., did not achieve the 75% agreement threshold for either relevance, clarity, or practicality). All the contested items are presented in Table 7.2 above, with full results' breakdown provided in Appendix 13). As highlighted in the above feedback, the most contentious ratings were linked to the practicality aspect of the specific recommendations, with some issues rooted

in the openness to well-being of the high-performance culture and general availability of resources (it being financial or personal).

7.5.2 Round 2 Results

Even though some items did not achieve the required levels of consensus in Round 1 (Table 7.2), there was no disagreement (i.e., no items for which >75% of participants disagreed/strongly disagreed). Consequently, no items were removed and in the final round, participants were presented once again with the full set of recommendations, although 11 had been, to some extent, modified based on participant feedback from Round 1. For consistency, Keeney et al.'s (2011) guidance was followed again; provided are descriptive measures of mean, standard deviation and relative frequencies with 75% agreement amongst participants seen as achieving a consensus.

All submitted recommendations were deemed clear and relevant to coaches' well-being (see Appendix 14 for full results breakdown). In the end, only six of the items did not meet the acceptance threshold for practicality (see Table 7.3 below).

Table 7.3

Overview of Items Without Practical Consensus in Round 2

		Rate
No Consensus Items (Practicality)	1.2b Organisations should discuss with coaches whether they'd like to integrate or maintain separation between work and personal life (e.g., exploring international travel with family members etc.) and if interested, how this could be achieved in relation to available resources.	61.5%
	1.3b Organisations should have well-being related objectives for coaches.	69.2%
	1.3c Through external providers (e.g., UKSI), organisations should organise regular meetings for coaches from different sports.	61.6%
	1.5 Organisational leaders should model behaviours promoting authenticity and vulnerability (e.g., by openly discussing challenges or failures), and should collaborate with coaches on developing specific well-being guidelines.	69.2%
	2.1 For initial well-being support, practitioners should approach coaches proactively, with suggestions for well-being related agenda while respecting coaches' own preferences and directions.	61.5%
	2.2 To ease coaches into conversations, practitioners could start with performance-related topics which could lead to further conversations about the impact of personal well-being on performance (and its importance).	69.2%

7.5.2.1 Organisational Recommendations

All stakeholders agreed that the provided organisational recommendations are understandable and important to coaches' well-being. However, participants generally discussed the openness of the high-performance environment towards well-being policies as a key concern/practical barrier.

Eight out of 13 participants agreed that organisations should discuss with coaches whether they would like to separate their personal and work life or if they would prefer exploring ways of merging the two (recommendation 1.2b; $M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.05$), but the final score (61.55%) did not meet our consensus threshold. One participant commented: “assessing working conditions on trips to facilitate more personal time and space, rather than flying family out for trips.”, suggesting a potential viability for the recommendation but need for further discussion.

Nine out of 13 participants agreed that organisations should have well-being objectives (recommendation 1.3b; $M = 1.77$; $SD = 0.93$), but the final score (69.23%) did not meet our consensus threshold. In this case, four of the participants shared a neutral response which prevented gaining consensus on the recommendation's practicality. Based on the feedback provided, participants hesitated to agree as they worried about the recommendation's possibly negative impact on organisational culture:

“I'm not sure if well-being can be made into an objective – you can actively encourage and create a support system which champions well-being and makes it feel the norm but turning it into a target or KPI to achieve feels like it could be counterproductive.”

Eight out 13 participants agreed that co-operation with external providers could be a useful way to connect coaches from different sports (recommendation 1.3c; $M = 2$; $SD = 1.08$), but the final consensus (61.54%) did not meet the established threshold. Our stakeholders questioned who should be hold accountable for organising and managing these meetings (whether it is a matter of NGBs or UK Sport etc.), as well as coaches' limited availability to engage with these meetings. This highlighted how the idea of shared well-being responsibility extends beyond coaches and specific organisations but also actively involves various governing bodies (both through a provision of financing but also overarching guidance, i.e., setting the standards for practice).

Lastly, nine out of 13 participants agreed that leaders should model behaviours promoting authenticity and vulnerability (recommendation 1.5; $M = 1.92$; $SD = 0.86$), but the final score (69.23%) did not meet the threshold. Here, four participants were unsure about the recommendation and had concerns around the leadership's abilities. For example, one of the participants stated:

“This is important, but I don't know if good role models actually currently exist”, while another stakeholder said: “It depends if leadership have these capabilities? I can think of some I've worked with who wouldn't have this capability.”

Therefore, the present recommendation might eventually be practical, but further work/recommendations are needed to address possible gaps in leaders' skills.

7.5.2.2 Professional Recommendations

Eight out of 13 participants deemed it practical to approach coaches proactively with a set agenda (recommendation 2.1; $M = 2.08$; $SD = 0.95$), but the recommendation did not meet the overall consensus threshold (61.64%). Some of the participants pointed out that conversations should be entirely driven by the coach. This concern, however, seemed to be primarily shared by participants from a performance lifestyle background. As this role is driven by ideas of executive coaching (i.e., clients bringing their own agendas to the session), the participants' concerns over practicality might speak specifically for their own agenda/role rather than the general nature of the recommendation. Additionally, concerns were raised around pre-existing relationships and related issues with confidentiality and power imbalances:

“... if someone new comes into the role, that (the recommendation) would be more powerful. But it is not a role of current practitioners who work with athletes, as there is a power dynamic that needs to be taken into consideration.”

Nine out of 13 participants agreed that it could be useful to start initial conversations with coaches by linking well-being to performance (recommendation 1.2; $M = 2.08$; $SD = 0.95$), but the overall consensus was 69.23% and did not meet the established threshold. Stakeholders often felt that the initial approach should be subjective

and tailored to the individual. However, it is worth pointing out that again this feedback was primarily provided by lifestyle practitioners rather than across the stakeholder group.

“It depends on the individual one is working with. It's about understanding the person one is working with first (what drives them etc, what's a good way in), and it doesn't need to start with a performance angle.”

Moreover, this recommendation was developed to guide practitioners when working with new coaches where prior knowledge of the individual would not be available.

7.5.2.3 Coach Recommendations

All coach recommendations met the consensus threshold for clarity, relevance, as well as practicality. Despite focusing on coaches' specifically, the participants re-enforced their points around the absence of resources and a general lack of supportive systems that would be embedded in organisations to promote coaches' well-being. Insufficient funding and personnel were highlighted when it comes to coaches' seeking professional help and extending their networks.

After Round 2, the relevance of another round of data collection had to be considered. On one side, all recommendations were deemed relevant to coaches' well-being and clear in terms of their meaning. However, there was still a lack of consensus on the practicality of several items. The decision to stop the data collection was made at this point, based on a number of factors: 1) the minimum requirement of two-round data collection was fulfilled (Quartiroli, 2024), 2) Delphi studies primarily focus on relevance of items (for which consensus was achieved), 3), the concern for practicality is rather uncommon and was a choice specifically made due to the nature of the topic, rather than an established convention, 4) as pointed out by Barrios et al. (2021), even if the threshold was specified upfront, the researcher can take a practical, conceptual decision if items are close to the cut-off point, and 5), it was decided that given the multiple different contexts from which the participant sample was drawn, with their different perspectives on working with coaches, financial and resource availability, and priorities, achieving consensus on practicality would be unlikely. Consequently, it was agreed that the items were close enough to the threshold not to raise any significant concerns, and that guided

by pragmatism, participants' availability and research fatigue, data collection should cease at this point.

7.6 Discussion

The aim of this study was to create and evaluate evidence-based coach well-being recommendations that would target organisations, practitioners, and coaches themselves, while being applicable to the environment of high-performance sport. This objective was achieved, and the final version of the policy document was shared in Chapter 6 of the thesis. The modified Delphi method adopted in the present study meant that the recommendations could be seen, discussed, and agreed upon, by a panel of relevant stakeholders. To our knowledge, this is the first study to develop coach well-being recommendations specifically in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. The inclusion of stakeholders through the Delphi method (Quartiroli, 2024) was significant for two reasons. First, given the lack of coach-specific knowledge when it comes to well-being and its management (Kenttä et al., 2024), having a panel of experts on the phenomena enabled us to explore the topic from a variety of differing perspectives, and helped us uncover practical barriers where recommendations might be plausible in theory, but challenging in practice. Not only this, but it enabled a more holistic, contextual approach to coaches' well-being (e.g., Higham et al., 2023, 2024; Leprieux et al., 2024; Simova et al., 2024). Second, this study approached well-being as a matter of shared rather than individual responsibility (Kenttä et al., 2024). As suggested by Simpson et al. (2021), organisations play a vital role in coaches' well-being, that is as a source of challenges (e.g., Hägglund et al., 2022; Norris et al., 2017) as well as a potential resources for their management. Therefore, coaches' well-being, and in particular its management, needs to be embraced by organisations and individuals with positions of leadership within those organisations, in order to see positive changes. The most noticeable trend in the findings was the general consensus on the relevance of recommendations for coaches' well-being, combined with the challenge of putting them into practice. When it comes to relevance and clarity of the recommendations, the key stakeholders agreed on them as whole. This suggested that theoretically the well-being recommendations align with research and knowledge and, in a perfect world, could be easily implemented within the high-

performance environment. This is, however, contrasted with the difficulties in reaching consensus and the participants' comments on the practicality of the recommendations. Including relevant stakeholders in research, allowing them not only to share their experiences but also to shape the research inquiry is a vital step forward and key strength of this research study.

The current state of high-performance sport systems (e.g., routes to funding combined with a focus on athletic performance) was flagged by the stakeholders and pointed out as a key barrier to some of the recommendations. High-performance environments have been previously described as resistant to change (Schein, 2009) and sport specifically as extremely performance-oriented (Cruikshank & Collins, 2012), making these accounts perhaps unsurprising. The nature of high-performance sport highlights the importance of advancements at an organisational level and the key role organisational leaders might play to aid the process of coach well-being inclusion. The impact of organisational leaders has been previously linked with psychological well-being (e.g., Johnson et al., 2018) as well as employee turnover intentions (e.g., Krug et al., 2021). Additionally, Prior et al. (2024) highlighted performance directors' attitudes when it comes to well-being/mental health of athletes and specifically how well-being management was considered an individual responsibility rather than a systemic issue. These findings are alarming for coaches. If athletes, who are normally at the centre of care and attention, are expected to be accountable for their own mental health, one needs to question whether any organisational interest is left for coaches' well-being. And as suggested by findings in the study 2 of this thesis (Chapter 5) there mostly is not. The importance of organisational leaders in coach well-being management is undisputable (Hill et al., 2021). Not only they could be seen as gatekeepers to vital resources but also as role models with power to shape the organisational culture. For example, Swanson et al. (2022) found that servant leadership (i.e., leadership where growth, care and well-being of followers is prioritised) predicted higher life satisfaction and better teamwork in sport settings.

The importance of organisational buy-in aligns with the findings of this study (and especially stakeholders' individual feedback), suggesting that despite recent improvements in the area (i.e., more coach well-being research), high-performance sport

might still have a long way to go before coach well-being support is fully (and more importantly regularly) embedded in the system. Findings point to the contrast between individual (practitioner or coach) understanding of the importance of well-being and openness of the system to put various recommendations in practice. This discrepancy between coach and athlete support is possibly rooted in the nature of the system funding which focuses first and foremost on results and provides for winners (e.g., UK Sport, 2025). Coaches might help to achieve this winning performance, but the medal provision stays with athletes, hence leaving coaches at best second on the funding list of priorities. Yet, as suggested by Carson et al. (2019) the sustainability of working conditions lies with the employer rather than employees. Therefore, turning coaching into a sustainable profession should be a key organisational objective (Cotton & Hart, 2003; Fletcher & Scott, 2010). If not from a duty of care perspective, investing (time, effort, or even finances) into coaches' well-being can provide a competitive advantage to the organisation. Implemented well-being recommendations have been previously linked with increased employees' productivity and performance (Bryson et al., 2017; DiMaria et al., 2020), as well as reduced absenteeism (Medina-Garrido et al., 2020). This suggests that rather than taking away from the performance focus (Passaportis et al., 2024), well-being recommendations can lead to a better performing, productive, and present workforce (i.e., coaches).

The topic of well-being and mental health still seems to be surrounded by stigma within high-performance sport (Petersen et al., 2024; Rao & Hong, 2020) with subsequent negative impacts on help-seeking (Bu et al., 2020; Poucher et al., 2021). The stakeholders in our study agreed with one of the recommendations that more effort needs to be paid to decreasing this stigma but also to developing mental health literacy in coaches (Gorczynski et al., 2021). Specifically, the development of a psychologically safe culture within high-performance sport (Vella et al., 2021) would allow coaches to freely communicate concerns and challenge unhelpful practices, encouraging coaches' to be authentic instead of masking their emotions (Walton et al., 2024) and playing into the role of a superhero (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). Therefore, having specific well-being guidelines would foster a culture of care which can enhance social cohesion and trust amongst individuals (Helliwell et al., 2017; Li & He, 2022). It would contribute to a more

inclusive environment which fosters psychological safety, thus leads to more systemic, long-term change in high-performance sport culture that reduces stigma and normalises vulnerability and openness instead (Schinke et al., 2024).

Even though, the move towards well-being promoting environments is a keyway forward, this might be a long-term goal, and more is needed to support coaches immediately. Implementing short-term strategies through well-being recommendations can provide coaches with useful resources to better manage the demands of high-performance sport (Carson et al., 2019; Frost et al., 2025) while long-term changes run in the background. These strategies can include mental health literacy programmes (Gorczynski et al., 2020), education around mindful practices (Micklitz et al., 2021), or even flexible working arrangements (Ray & Pana-Cryan, 2021). Therefore, to truly address coaches' well-being holistically, it is important to address environmental and individual concerns.

7.6.1 Limitations and Future Directions

As pointed out by Ross et al. (2018), sport science often seems to be preoccupied with efficacy rather than effectiveness, that is, findings tend to provide valuable theoretical insights without accounting for their realistic application in high-performance sport. Consequently, more collaborative, participant-driven approaches are essential in order to uncover well-being barriers in high-performance sport but more importantly what can be done about them. In this study, this was addressed by utilising the modified Delphi method. It allowed for considerations of stakeholders' voices which practically guided this project (through feedback and subsequent iterations of the material) towards the co-creation of well-being policy recommendations. This made the recommendations rooted in theory but also informed by practice/practicality. Additionally, the Delphi method was especially useful given the busy schedules and a range of locations of the study's key stakeholders, as well as the opportunity to access different sports.

Despite the importance of organisations in coach well-being management, fairly little is known about the area. This study aimed to address this gap but faced the challenge of the limited number of organisational leaders (i.e., performance directors who could provide key valuable insights) in the sample. Other performance directors and organisational leaders were approached to participate but declined (often due to time

constraints). As a key stakeholder group, it is vital to gain their insights, especially when aiming for practical research. Therefore, future research should actively focus on organisational leaders and their views on coaches' well-being, but also explore what skills (e.g., active listening) organisational leaders need to have in order to manage the topic efficiently. The call for future research is further supported by the findings of the present study where participants agreed on the importance of modelling well-being promoting behaviours by organisational leaders while also highlighting the current dearth of existing role models. Therefore, deeper understanding of quality sport leadership and the current state of it represents an important avenue to create a well-being promoting environment through quality leadership.

Our recommendations should be considered as an initial starting point for well-being conversations within organisations. As each sport/organisation tends to have a unique culture (Feddersen et al., 2020; Sotiriadou et al., 2014), modifications of the recommendations might be necessary in order to make them more applicable and practical in each specific context. Additionally, despite our efforts to capture the range of needs and challenges regarding coach well-being (and its management), the policy document should not be seen as an exhaustive list. Instead, it is a material that can be considered in conjunction with other statements and policies (e.g., Kenttä et al., 2024) in order to gain more comprehensive picture of the vast landscape of high-performance coaches' well-being.

CHAPTER 8

General Discussion, Summary, and Conclusions

8.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis will provide an overview of the research programme's findings in relation to existing knowledge and practice. Within this thesis, a contextual view of high-performance coaches' well-being and help-seeking was developed which later resulted in the creation of a policy document outlining coach well-being recommendations. This chapter will discuss how these findings advance theoretical knowledge, and inform practice and future directions. Finally, aligning with the pragmatic approach and my position as a 'semi-insider' throughout this thesis, personal observations and critical reflections will also be shared.

8.2 Summary of Key Findings

This programme of research consists of three empirical studies. Study 1 (Chapter 4) used Constructivist Grounded Theory to develop a mid-range theory of high-performance coaches' well-being. The study offered a contextual view of well-being in which coaches attempt to integrate their personal values/identity into culturally prescribed values/identity. It depicts well-being as a dynamic process which is shaped by the high-performance sport culture, as well as culture of specific sporting organisations. The idea of context *shaping* coaches' well-being is key. It highlights that the role of culture (high-performance sport/organisational) goes beyond threatening or facilitating well-being, it forms what being well means to coaches. High-performance culture becomes an inseparable part of coaches' experiences which emphasises the importance of contextual understanding. Study 2 (Chapter 5) built on these findings and used a mixed-methods approach to explore coaches' views and experiences of help-seeking for well-being. The acknowledgment of cultural (high-performance sport/organisational) influences continued as the findings depicted help-seeking as a social process. The benefits of contextual understanding were emphasised by three key themes – coach as a problem solver, perception of help, and cultural/organisational influences. Together, these themes suggest coaches are expected to be self-reliant when it comes to well-being concerns,

partly because help-seeking is presented as weakness in the environment, and partly because of a lack of established systems. The findings highlight that coaches' own beliefs and attitudes towards well-being and help-seeking might not be enough to understand their experiences, and to support them overall. Instead, it is the wider high-performance context that can dictate practices and realistically aid or jeopardise coaches' help-seeking. Study 2 findings show that individual coach support (e.g., mental health education) might be a helpful but rather short-term strategy. Much deeper, systemic changes must occur to make coaching a sustainable profession. The absence of specific support systems for coaches' well-being presented in study 2, led to the development of study 3 of this research programme (Chapters 6 and 7) and resulted in creation of specific recommendations to support coach well-being. These recommendations included a theoretical rationale as well as practical suggestions and were assessed by key stakeholders within the high-performance sport system. The usefulness of contextual understanding and the significance of high-performance culture in coaches' well-being was embodied here as the recommendations targeted not only coaches, but also practitioners, and sporting organisations. This study and research programme overall emphasised that coach well-being is more than individual matter. Accepted, or not, coach well-being is a shared responsibility.

8.3 Theoretical & Methodological Strengths & Contributions

“People and experiences are embedded in a social context”

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.8).

The starting point of this PhD programme was the question of what well-being actually *means* to coaches. Not many constructs share such a wide, colloquial understanding while facing constant research discussions (Jackson et al., 2022). The number of grand theories of well-being (detailed in Chapter 2) is extensive making the landscape difficult to navigate and potentially not practically relevant. This called for attention and the need to re-think how well-being was applied in the field.

The challenge of grand theories is that well-being remains a universal quality that can be *influenced* by the context but is not necessarily *contextual*. As an example, coaching research often utilises stress frameworks to explore how distinct environmental factors, and personal resources can impact well-being (e.g., Baldock et al., 2022; Potts et al., 2021, 2024). In these instances, well-being is still presented through grand theories such as subjective (Diener, 1984) or psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989), thus remains a universally applicable concept influenced by the environment (e.g., Carson et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2022; Lee & Cho, 2021). Yet, the idea of being well is dynamic.

Well-being can mean different things to individuals based on previous experiences but also in relation to the context they are considering their well-being in (Galvin & Todres, 2011; Holst, 2022; Sarvimäki, 2011; Seamon, 2018). Sporting literature has highlighted the need for a greater contextual understanding of well-being (Hamling et al., 2020; Holst, 2022; Trainor & Bundon, 2023) and specifically, the need to focus on coaches (Norris et al., 2017). This thesis contributed towards this objective as study 1 moved away from grand theories of well-being (Ivory & Tiberius, 2022; Tiberius, 2006) and presented a case for a dynamic, temporal, and contextual view of well-being (Alexandrova, 2013; Östlund, 2024) through a specific mid-range theory (Chapter 4). Findings showed that for coaches, well-being was about the possibility of finding a harmony between who they wanted to be (an ideal version of coach) and who they were expected to be by high-performance sport/organisations (a culturally prescribed version

of the coach). In the interviews, coaches seemed to make sense of their well-being in the wider context of high-performance sport, specifically through the process of integration. They reflected on a significant experience, considered whether the experience mattered to them and what, if anything they wanted to do about it. The process of integration highlighted shifts in well-being considerations based on the context and time in life, thus connecting well-being contextuality to its temporality. The idea of temporal process in contextual sense-making and well-being further builds on findings of Higham et al. (2024) who suggested that coaches comprehend their well-being through past experiences, present circumstances, and future anticipations. The findings of study 1 embraced the temporality of well-being by presenting the concept as a *process* rather than a state. The theory's core ideas of constant values comparison and integrating efforts align with proposals of Klausen (2023) who presented well-being as a constant adjustment of personal values, preferences, actions, and emotions. Concurrently, study 1 extends this work by specifically focusing on coaches in high-performance context rather than keeping well-being as a point for general ethical discussions. The key strength of approaching well-being as process is that it can change its narrative from something that “happens” to coaches, (or coaches simply experience) to something that coaches might have a level of control over.

In addition, this research programme extended the current knowledge of well-being for sport coaches by bringing to the forefront discussions of coaching identity. To a degree, the connection between identity and well-being has been previously established in athlete populations (e.g., van Rens et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2024) where identity foreclosure led to a development of burnout, substance misuse, and other mental health difficulties due to insufficient coping resources (Brewer & Petipas, 2017; DeFreese & Shannon, 2021). Yet, until now, the idea was mostly unexplored in coaches. Study 1 shows that identity plays a vital role in coaches' well-being processes. The sense of who coaches are, whom they are expected to be by the high-performance environment, and the tension in-between seem to be representations of distinct, contradicting values in high-performance sport. They illustrate what coaches, and the high-performance environment, might deem normal or even desirable, thus provide a benchmark when making sense of well-being. In turn, these values encourage coaches to ‘perform’ a culturally prescribed

version of their coaching identity. Higham et al. (2023) previously suggested that coaches often engage in impression management to maintain a persona of respect and authority. Similarly, Olusoga and Kenttä (2017) discussed the ‘Superhero Complex’ where coaches felt the need to be ‘always on’, they were reluctant to transfer any duties, thus often felt lonely, exhausted, and at risk of burnout. Study 1 extends this knowledge by bringing the idea of values/identity coaches embrace into the core of well-being process (rather than seeing it as an additional stressor). Aligned with findings of this research programme, it is what coaches value, who they are (either authentically or by playing into the environmental expectations) that dictates what being well is.

The findings of study 1 showed what being well means in the context of high-performance coaching, the role high-performance sport/organisations have in the well-being process, and the difficulties that might come from aligning the distinct values (and) generally operating in the environment. Therefore, study 2 explored what happens when potential well-being challenges arise. The concept of help-seeking has, until now, received a minimal attention within coaching populations, and the research that has been conducted has mostly explored the coaches’ role in athletes’ help-seeking (e.g., Bissett et al., 2020; Mazzer et al., 2015). Limited research has addressed (to some extent) coaches’ own experiences (Gorczyński et al., 2020; Slowiak et al., 2024; Warden et al., 2023), but presented help-seeking as an individual phenomenon, instead of acknowledging the wider role of the high-performance sport and related organisations.

To combat this, study 2 produced an ecological understanding of help-seeking in the under-studied high-performance coaching population. The findings represent coaches’ attitudes and experiences and relate to distinct layers of coaches’ ecological systems. In the findings, coaches are presented as problem solvers who consider well-being management as a matter of individual responsibility. This builds on previous research by Rafferty et al. (2019) who described help-seeking in military veterans as a “crisis driven” event where individuals opt to manage their mental health alone for as long as possible. Coaches in this project also seemed to share this sentiment. The need to control their well-being and subsequent challenges aligned with Visco’s (2009) findings of personal control narratives where mental health was seen as individual’s responsibility compared to physical health which concerned a wider specialist team.

Altogether, study 2 pointed out persisting stigma around coaches' well-being/mental health which mirrors findings of Petersen et al. (2024) in an athletic population. The ideas around masculine norms, and subsequent misinterpretations of toughness are well-established in the literature (e.g., Ramaerker et al., 2019) and supported by this thesis. But the utilised ecological view of help-seeking in this research programme showed that the issue of stigma extends beyond misinterpretations of vulnerability or masculinity. Help-seeking often seemed to contradict coaches' identity (which links to study 1), especially as they saw themselves as providers of care and problem solvers. The ecological approach used in study 2 showed how this idea also develops through interactions with the environment. Coaches discussed the lack of available resources/support within organisations which then pushed them to rely on themselves for any well-being concerns. Coaches interpreted the lack of resources as environmental expectations to be self-reliant which then discouraged them from seeking help when needed. Similarly, understanding the challenges of high-performance sport made coaches feel concerned and responsible for not putting additional pressures on others. In a way, these considerations created/perpetuated a self-stigma around help-seeking for coaches. Therefore, it is not just conversations that can create stigma, it is also specific environmental actions, and the interplay between a coach and their environment.

Coaches in study 2 also discussed the nature of 'help' and language used around help-seeking. The analysis highlighted how different terms (e.g., help vs. support) seemed to draw divergent responses and make coaches less or more open to help-seeking conversations. Coaches seemed to associate word 'help' with unhelpful emotional offloading and preferred to use word 'support' which they found more empowering. Similarly, Prior et al. (2024) discussed how performance directors sanitise language around mental health to make it more palatable and avoid terms such as mental illness. In a way, study 2 extends this understanding by showing that not only can language represent attitudes/beliefs, but it can translate to behaviours where coaches are more likely to engage in support-seeking than help-seeking. A proposition of the language-well-being connection was indirectly introduced by Hägglund et al. (2024) who used the concept of vulnerability to challenge the dominant performance narrative to support coaches' help-seeking and mindfulness. They highlighted the importance of shifting the common

perception of vulnerability as fragility, weakness, or softness (Cormier et al., 2023) to a strength. The need to shift existing narratives and generally wider approach to help-seeking raised in this thesis, matches the sentiments of Frost et al. (2025) who pinpointed lowering stigma and development of psychologically safe organisational culture as a vital, long-term objective in coaching support.

Despite the established demands of high-performance coaching (e.g., Norris et al., 2017) and the vital role coaches play in athletes' development and performances (International Council for Coaching Excellence, 2013), the present research programme (and specifically study 2) exposed the persisting lack of organisational interest and systemic support for coaches' well-being. This reflects concerns of McCullogh and Safai (2023) who discussed the normalisation of overworking in high-performance coaching and the lack of systemic support. Variety of research and statements call for considerations of coaches (Leprince et al., 2024), organisational responsibility for facilitating more sustainable working environments (Carson et al., 2019), and the need to address coaches' well-being holistically, as a matter of a shared responsibility (Kenttä et al., 2024).

In this research programme, a contextual understanding of coaches' well-being and help-seeking was developed. It captured the distinct cultural (high-performance sport and organisational) values, expectations, and norms that frame what well-being and help-seeking mean to high-performance coaches. The contextual understanding is essential for any system-based approaches (e.g., interventions) as it highlights that any changes to support coaches' well-being need to occur at multiple levels (individual, group, policies etc.). This further led to the development of well-being recommendations in study 3 (discussed in more detail below in the context of practical considerations).

The emphasis on context links to another strength of this research programme – a consideration of practice. The research-practice gap is one of the key challenges in sport psychology (Hassmén et al., 2016), with inaccessible language and a lack of contextual understanding (Brown et al., 2005) perpetuating the disconnect. The concern is that this gap can result in misguided practice and overall dismissiveness of research by the key stakeholders (Lyle, 2018). Therefore, bridging this gap became one of the main objectives of the present research programme.

The work in this thesis went beyond mere consideration of the population and used methods that encouraged coaches to actively shape and collaborate in producing the research findings. For example, in study 1, coaches had an opportunity to provide feedback on the developing themes and subsequent well-being theory. In study 3, key stakeholders commented on developing well-being recommendations, ultimately shaping the final document in a way that makes it relevant and useful to them. This sort of collaboration can lead to more practical, meaningful findings (Agnello et al., 2025) thus, addresses the research practice gap. It can also minimise the power differences between the researcher and coaches, so coaches might feel more empowered and engaged with the process (Jansson et al., 2024). The hope was to put duty of care in practice by working *with* coaches rather than solely conducting research *about* them.

The dedicated focus on high-performance coaches, their well-being, and help-seeking is, in itself, a significant contribution of this research programme. High-performance coaches can be considered a hard to reach (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2018) and at-risk population (Kenttä et al., 2020; Olusoga et al., 2019), which makes designated research important, yet difficult to conduct. This further aligns with a limited body of literature that would specifically focus on the topics of well-being and help-seeking in this population.

The challenge of under-representation of coaches and their well-being extends beyond research studies to organisational policies/practices. As pointed out by Kenttä et al. (2024), high-performance coaches are at best mentioned (mostly disregarded) in a vast majority of well-being/mental health statements. Therefore, if coaches' well-being and specific recommendations are under-represented in research, even less might be happening in practice; or the practice is simply not evidence-based (Moore, 2007). With what is known about challenges in high-performance coaching (Chapter 2), it seemed vital to develop a deeper understanding of well-being (study 1), its management (study 2), and ways of supporting it (study 3).

These objectives were achieved through the alignment with the used methods. The constructivist grounded theory (study 1) enabled a creation of coach well-being theory based directly on data rather than pre-existing frameworks (Charmaz, 2017). This then led to more nuanced, contextual views which are generally under-represented in the coach

well-being literature. The method also encouraged the use of more active vocabulary throughout the analysis (Charmaz, 2020) that matched the dynamic, ever-changing nature of well-being (D'Ambrosio & Frick, 2012). The synergy between the analytical approach and the nature of well-being enabled more unique insights. Additionally, the mixed method approach used in study 2 allowed more comprehensive explorations of coaches' help-seeking for well-being (Morse, 2016). The deliberate choice of survey was to provide coaches with an opportunity to share their views and experiences without fear of being recognised, thus addressed concerns around stigma presented in sport psychology literature (Rao & Hong, 2020). Concurrently, the mini focus groups enabled coaches to share their experiences with peers, hence encouraged vulnerability and subsequent disclosures (Krueger, 2014). Finally, the use of modified Delphi method allowed an inclusion of relevant stakeholders when developing specific guidelines, hence provided an opportunity to steer theoretical research towards more practical solutions and enhanced collaboration between the researcher and coaches.

8.4 Practical Considerations & Contributions

The development of practical contributions in this thesis was shaped by a deep contextual understanding of coaches' well-being and the high-performance sport environment. They are guided by a pragmatic approach to knowledge that prioritises practical usefulness, real-world applicability, and solutions that are grounded in the lived experiences and contextual realities of high-performance coaching. This combination enabled the research to remain closely aligned with the real challenges coaches face and the complex demands of their professional context. In response to a clear lack of coach-specific guidance and support (e.g., North et al., 2020), the thesis presents a set of well-being recommendations grounded in an ecological perspective. These are structured across three levels to reflect the interconnected systems surrounding coaches: (1) sport organisations, (2) practitioners working with coaches, and (3) coaches themselves.

The organisational recommendations revolve around well-being as a shared responsibility, promoting thriving, reducing stigma through mental health literacy, establishing coach specific support, promoting psychological safety, making high-performance coaching sustainable, and understanding of high-performance coaching context. The importance of supporting coaches' well-being on a broader, systemic level is emphasised. This point was recently supported by Frost et al. (2025) who highlighted broader cultural influences (such as role instability) as key barriers to coaches' help-seeking efforts and subsequently, proposed the importance of short-term (e.g., mental health literacy interventions) and long-term strategies to support coaches' well-being. The wider systemic support also puts into practice the duty of care which called for organisational responsibility towards safety and mental health of athletes and support staff in sport (Grey-Thompson, 2017) while keeping the unique context of high-performance sport in mind (Purcell et al., 2022). By promoting psychologically safe environments, organisations can decrease the existing stigma around mental health and well-being (Schinke et al., 2024) and encourage coaches to be authentic in their roles (Walton et al., 2024). This can encourage sustainability in the coaching profession by decreasing the levels of burnout experienced (Słowiak et al., 2024). Additionally, organisations need to provide access to relevant, qualified professionals with understanding of the high-performance sport context as well as clinical and sub-clinical issues (Kenttä et al., 2024).

Having established well-being recommendations can therefore become a competitive advantage to high-performance sport organisations as implemented well-being policies have been linked with increased productivity and performance (e.g., DiMaria et al., 2020), reduced absenteeism and presenteeism (e.g., Medina-Garrido et al., 2020), improved employee retention and satisfaction (e.g., Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021), and enhanced organisational reputation (Institute of Government and Public Policy, 2024). Despite the clear benefits and relevance of organisational recommendations, study 3 highlighted some barriers to their implementation. The key issue came from a lack of financial resources that could be invested into coaches' well-being. Winning is what brings more funding in high-performance sport (UK Sport, 2025) hence, performance will invariably be key to organisational survival. As reported in study 3, this creates a chain where athletes always come first, and coaches are often forgotten about. Therefore, stakeholders questioned whether the guidance/requirement of coach well-being support should become mandatory and overhauled by a funding body like UK Sport.

The practitioner recommendations embraced the importance of professional support for coaches' well-being (Giges et al., 2004; Hings et al., 2018). They highlighted the need for practitioners to proactively approach coaches while having a contextual (sport and coaching) understanding, the usefulness of introducing well-being as a part of a regular performance preparation, the importance of trust and confidentiality, and the potential that executive coaching might have in this space. Having practitioner recommendations addresses the existing gap around coach well-being support in sport as it provides clarity and gives practitioners some guidance when engaging with coaches (and theoretical backing when bringing the agenda to organisations). The challenge of putting these recommendations in practice relates to the lack of clarity around professional remits (Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2020). For example, there is no wide agreement whether sport psychologists should address well-being concerns or focus solely on performance (Prior et al., 2025; Quartiroli, 2014). Similarly, sport psychologists and performance lifestyle practitioners might both discuss well-being with coaches, meaning the professional support might entirely depend on individual negotiations rather than clear guidance. The lack of clarity is problematic as it prevents establishing *how* practitioners should look after coaches. At present, there is an agreement around *why* coach well-being

support is important, but the how remains mostly unanswered. As pointed out by Kelly et al. (2018), there is no professional education that would be tailored to coaching support which could present a much deeper, systemic issue. The professional ambiguity can result in a lack of funding and time allocated towards coaches' well-being as suggested by findings in this thesis. Therefore, having clear recommendations for professionals can streamline the process. This thesis highlighted the role organisations (and general high-performance culture) have in supporting coaches' well-being. However, the need for shared well-being responsibility goes beyond coaches' employers and should also involve wider sporting/educational systems. If the topic of coach well-being is not addressed in education, not only professionals might be less equipped to manage these challenges, but the chances of organisational buy-in might also decrease.

The coach specific recommendations addressed ideas around self-awareness and negotiating boundaries, self-care and recovery, awareness of support and connecting with others. As presented by McCulloch & Safai (2023), self-care is a matter of self-preservation to coaches, a professional necessity for a longevity in the role. The need for self-care was highlighted by others. For example, Higham (2024) talked about 'third space' where coaches focused on their own needs rather than fulfilling professional or family duties; a space for self-care, relaxation, and escape from daily pressures (Fly & Boucquey, 2023). The importance of self-care is also reflected in the uptake of mindfulness-based research. Mindful approaches seem to promote coaches' recovery (Lebeau et al., 2024), improve emotional regulation and decrease anxiety (Gibert et al., 2024; Longshore & Sachs, 2015), increase energy levels and mood as well as diminish ruminative thoughts and enhance sleep (Pawsey et al., 2021). Having implemented well-being policies have been previously linked with reduced stress and improved mental health of employees (Griffin & Clarke, 2011; Holman et al., 2018). This was usually done through the provision of various mental health resources such as mindfulness programmes (Micklitz et al., 2021), and some flexible work arrangements (e.g., Ray & Pana-Cryan, 2021). Consequently, having specific well-being recommendations could guide coaches towards healthier practices and provide them with tools to manage the extensive demands of their role (Carson et al., 2019; Higham, 2024) as well as finding ways to balance the personal-work life spillover (Davis et al., 2024). The importance of self-care and recovery is clear,

but as discussed in study 3, self-care needs to be tailored to a coach to be practical, and for coaches to see benefits and engage in it. The challenge that might come with implementing these recommendations, is that struggling tends to be normalised, at times even glamorised in high-performance sport (i.e., performance narrative; Douglas & Carless, 2013). Olusoga and Kenttä (2017) discussed how burnout is normalised as a part of the coaching role and in some instances even valued by the environment. Together, this could put coaches' willingness to engage in self-care in question which then highlights the importance of presenting a strong case for the recommendations' relevance and usefulness. Therefore, generalised recommendations of specific self-care techniques (e.g., mindfulness) should be used with caution and more attention should be paid to coaches understanding themselves, their needs, and what they find helpful. This also links to findings of this programme of research which highlighted coaches' self-awareness as key to managing well-being, from a proactive perspective where understanding one's personal values could direct work/well-being related decisions, but also from a reactive angle where knowing one's own signs of ill-being would encourage coaches towards self-care/help-seeking (Hägglund et al., 2024; Simova et al., 2024).

8.5 Limitations and Future Research

Study 1 offered a new, contextualised understanding high-performance coaches' well-being, with the concept of identity and its underpinning values being brought to the forefront. Yet, knowledge around what it means to be a high-performance coach (personally to coaches but also generally in the context of high-performance sport) remains scarce. To explore the identity-well-being connection in coaches, narrative inquiries and discursive analysis might be an appealing way forward (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Cosh et al., 2013). These explorations could provide additional insights into the *ideal version* of a coach as well as the *culturally dictated* one (Chapter 4). Such research might contribute to a more comprehensive picture of high-performance coaching, with a deeper understanding of how coaches make sense of their experiences.

To build on study 2 findings, future research could also shift the focus from *help-seeking* to *health-seeking*. Where help-seeking relates to searching for external help to manage challenges, health-seeking relates to promoting a more positive, holistic outlook on well-being. The focus on help-seeking in study 2 was a pragmatic decision as our current understanding of coaches' help-seeking is very limited (Frost et al., 2025). Therefore, the exploration of help-seeking seemed a more urgent point of inquiry but also a useful starting point for future research (i.e., investigations into health-seeking). Therefore, future studies could follow two avenues when exploring coaching support: 1. examine individual aspects of help-seeking more closely (e.g., stigma around well-being from coaches' point of view); 2. broaden the scope to more proactive techniques of managing their well-being (i.e., look into coaches' health-seeking).

The use of a modified Delphi could be considered both a strength and a limitation of the present thesis. The elimination of the initial explorative phase (common for traditional Delphi; Sandrey & Bulger, 2008) permitted a level of control as initial recommendations were based on the findings of studies 1 and 2. Indirectly, this also meant that more voices were included in the development of the recommendations than in the actual study 3 sample, as the presented recommendations were based not only on coaching literature but also coaches' own views and experiences of well-being and help-seeking (study 1, 2). Including an explorative phase might have uncovered further areas for well-being recommendations, perhaps specifically those directed towards practitioners.

Because of the wider ecological approach to the recommendations in study 3, it seemed crucial to gain feedback, not only from coaches, but also from key organisational representatives – performance directors. Performance directors often dictate culture and work practices (e.g., budget allocations), hence are likely in power when it comes to implementing well-being policies and support (Lok & Crawford, 2004). However, despite the recruitment efforts, the final sample in study 3 contained only one performance director. The low level of buy-in was worrying as it led to limited insights around the organisational role in coach well-being support. Concurrently, it raised questions of directors’ motivations and attitudes towards coaches’ well-being - if they see any relevance, if they have capacity to care, or the resources to support it. Aligned with this, the involved stakeholders deemed the study 3 recommendations’ relevant and important, but they pointed out the lack of resources to implement these. This raises a question of whether the importance is truly heard in practice (or rather heard by the key decision-makers) and again highlights the issue of a research-practice gap. Thus, more visibility and discussions with individuals in high-performance sport might be needed to “translate” the importance of investing into coaches’ well-being.

Additionally, despite exploring wider ecological systems, the findings of this thesis provided only initial insights into the interplay of coaches and other organisational members/wider systems. Therefore, further explorations are needed to capture perspectives of performance directors and other relevant individuals such as coach developers or a senior leadership team, with dyadic interviewing offering a potential useful avenue. The external considerations should also move beyond the specific organisations and consider the impact of governing bodies such as UK Sport as they dictate the overarching guidance on well-being policies and funding (UK Sport, 2025).

Despite the open recruitment criteria for the studies (i.e., inclusion of Olympic as well as professional sports), the vast majority of the sample represented coaches embedded in NGBs. This could be considered a strength of this programme of research as it provides a more contextual niche. On the other hand, given the popularity and resources of professional sports, a critical sample of coaches might have been missed. Not only this, professional sport systems and their funding could work differently to Olympic sports, hence unique challenges and ways of support might not be captured in this thesis.

As much as this is a limitation, this could also present a future consideration and direction for researchers.

It is also worth noting that the participants in each study of this thesis were from Westernised, individualistic cultures with a high proficiency in English language. Therefore, our understanding of coaches' well-being should be primarily considered in the context of this population. Researchers have identified possible differences in well-being comprehension and experiences (including the language used) between Western and Eastern Societies (Joshani, 2014; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004), with the first focusing more on individual life satisfactions (Andrews et al., 1979) and the second highlighting the importance of external expectations and generally more social-based conceptualisations of well-being (Liu et al., 2017). As sport is an international field and movement of coaches from one country to another is common (Begley & Mashiter, 2024), further research is essential to capture these nuances in order to support coaches in the most effective manner.

8.6 Personal Reflections

When reflecting on the field of well-being and specifically well-being of high-performance coaches, it feels that a lot of has developed since year one of my PhD programme. The drive to understand and approach well-being holistically is more noticeable and research seems to be slowly addressing the calls for explorations of how coaches make sense of their well-being (Norris et al., 2017). More is also being said about the systemic support of high-performance coaches' well-being (e.g., Kenttä et al., 2024; Leprince et al., 2024; Maher, 2022). The pragmatic approach adopted throughout the thesis followed this trend and is one of the key strengths. It allowed me to facilitate studies with a practical goal in mind and eventually resulted in practical recommendations for coaches' well-being.

I believe that my 'semi-insider' position (performance lifestyle practitioner role as well as prior athletic/coaching experience) was one of the strengths of the present programme of research. It gave me the drive to focus on practicality and making a difference and provided me with knowledge of high-performance sport, some of the processes that are behind the scenes and terminology linked with it. This made it easier to build rapport with coaches and to generally engage them in the conversations.

My position also aided the access to the population. High-performance sport can be at times secretive and untrusting towards outsiders, coaches being no exception. This can make it quite difficult to recruit participants for the studies and gain insights into the studied topic (especially when the topic might be potentially surrounded by stigma as in the case of help-seeking for well-being). The difference between being an insider/outsider became prominent when reflecting on my recruitment for studies 1 and 3. During study 1, I worked at the university and had no connections to sports apart from my supervisors' networks. This made the recruitment extremely challenging and was reflected in the time it actually took to complete the study. In comparison, during study 3, I was a full-time NGB employee. Because of this, I gained access to coaches but more importantly to a network of practitioners that could support me with the recruitment. Concurrently, another recruitment reflection is pertinent here. At times, I had been warned by colleagues about the low engagement of performance directors in well-being as whole. Despite years of working in high-performance sport, some of my colleagues had at best superficial relationships with their performance directors and commented on the low buy-in for well-being initiatives, and they advised me to manage my own expectations accordingly. I was warned (and, to an extent, my experience mirrored it) that despite the steady progress around well-being in sport, there are still gatekeepers who will not engage or still need convincing about its relevance.

The timing of my PhD and individual studies proved to be one of the biggest challenges. I started my journey back in 2020, during lockdown and freshly furloughed. Personally, that meant having no support network of fellow PhD students I could share office with, get guidance from and ask the day-to-day questions. Practically, the duration of my PhD involved conducting research in the qualifying year and year of the Olympic Games in Paris. The already limited time availability coaches usually have, became almost non-existing and even if it was not about the time, the energy and focus coaches had left was not meant to be invested into well-being or help-seeking conversations.

This relates to one of the key reflections from this research and my professional experience. There is such thing as *well-being timing* in sport. I first noticed this in the help-seeking study where coaches talked about knowing their time and place when asking for help. Initially, I found this idea challenging. I kept thinking that needing help should

be a bottom line, the non-negotiable in decision making. Yet, coaches mentioned different conditions and considerations (especially making sure that they were not a burden to someone). Slowly, I have started realising that high-performance sport might accept well-being (the improvement and change is noticeable) but they will do so under one condition – the understanding that there is not always a place for well-being and at times, it needs to be just about performance.

This links to another reflection about the readiness of high-performance sport for embracing well-being. There seems to be a discrepancy between the attitudes and approaches of professionals (e.g., sport psychologists and performance lifestyle practitioners) and the actual day to day operating in sport. As practitioners, we seem to understand the importance of well-being - as a duty of care, but also as a way of promoting better performances and sustainability in sport. But the time practitioners can dedicate to well-being (its promotion, relevant conversations or even individual support) will often be dictated by the stage of the Olympic cycle (this might differ in professional sports). The work plans and strategies might drastically differ in year one or two where fewer or smaller performance pressures might open up a space for well-being work, while year three, where qualifications occur, and year four of the “big event” might mean everything non-performance related is put on hold. Therefore, it is vital to look at the current state of well-being practice more critically and have conversations about the next steps in research and applied practice.

8.7 Conclusion

Coaches are the key driving force in sport. They are accountable for athletes' success, deliver their own performances, deal with challenges, and are undeniably a core member of any high-performance team. They are often somewhat parents to athletes, the protective shield and the shoulder to cry on when things do not go as planned. They are expected to know everything that is happening on and off the pitch. They have a lot to deal with, which might come with a cost in terms of their well-being. The deeper, more contextual understanding of coaches' well-being was in the heart of this research programme, as well as further considerations of well-being management in the form of help-seeking and specific well-being recommendations.

This research demonstrated how culture (organisational and high-performance sport one) shapes coaches' views and experiences of well-being and help-seeking. The work significantly progressed the area by focusing on the meaning behind coaches' well-being and its dynamic, temporal nature. Novel insights into coaches' help-seeking experiences were highlighted as was the importance of managing coach well-being as a shared rather than individual responsibility. Apart from theoretical contributions, this research programme echoed the importance of bridging the research-practice gap (common in sport psychology) and resulted in a set of well-being recommendations which target not only coaches, sport psychology practitioners, coach educators and developers, but also sport organisations, and broader sport systems.

The recent advances in coach well-being research are promising but more is needed to support coaches adequately. The potential hesitancy (and barriers) behind the lack of coaching support in sporting organisations warrants further explorations. For this, opinions of relevant stakeholders need to be explored alongside further work dedicated to coaches. Only when the system fully understands and accepts the importance of coaches' well-being, might adequate support be provided, allowing coaches to not only be carers but also those who are sometimes cared for.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Ethics Approval for study 1 (Chapter 4)

Exploring the concept of well-being in elite coaching.

Ethics Review ID: ER32080252

Workflow Status: Application Approved

Type of Ethics Review Template: All other research with human participants

Primary Researcher / Principal Investigator

Marketa Simova
(Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities)

Converis Project Application:

Q1. Is this project ii) Doctoral research

Director of Studies

Peter Olusoga
(Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities)

Supervisory Team

Christopher Brown
(Centre for Behavioural Science and Applied Psychology)

Appendix 2

Participant Information Sheet for Study 1

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF WELL-BEING PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Who are the researchers and what is the research about?

My name is Marketa Simova and I am a PhD researcher at the department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics at Sheffield Hallam University. I would like to invite you to take part in a study exploring the concepts of mental health and well-being in High Performance coaching. This research has been approved by Research Ethics Committee at Sheffield Hallam University.

Why have you asked me to take part?

I have approached you for this project because there is a general lack of understanding of this topic from a coaching perspective. I believe that with your level of experience and expertise, you could share valuable insights with me.

However, there are a couple of general recruitment criteria that you need to meet:

- Be currently active coach, with coaching being your main job
- Coaching at national and/or international level
- Have a high level of spoken English to feel confident to participate in an interview

Where will the study take place and what will I be required to do?

The study will be conducted online so you can be anywhere you feel comfortable and have some privacy to talk. Prior the interview, you will receive an email with a personal link to a Zoom meeting. This link will take you directly to the meeting room, so you won't need any additional passwords or log in details. All our Zoom conversations will be audio-recorded via the Audacity software. This is essential in order to create a transcript of the interview and the follow-up analysis.

You will be asked to take part in one-to-one interview where we will talk about mental health / well-being and the interview should take approximately an hour of your time. I will have a set of questions which I would like to explore with you, but we will be free to explore topics as and when they come up during the interview. You are not obliged to answer all the questions and you can skip any without giving a reason. You can also stop the interview at any point without giving any reason. This interview is about you and what you want and feel comfortable to share with me. In terms of the interview settings, try to find a quiet comfortable place where you cannot be overheard.

After we finish the initial interview, I will reach out to you again. This could be because I would like some further clarification on your statements or maybe explore certain things that were raised in the initial interview that we didn't have time to discuss in more detail. This conversation will likely take place via Zoom again and I will provide you with a new link in advance. Again, this interview will be in your direction but should take approximately an hour.

What if I have questions / concerns regarding my participation?

After reading this information sheet, if you have any unanswered questions, do not hesitate to contact me (the details attached above).

If you change your mind about the participation, you can withdraw your data up to two weeks after the initial interview was conducted without giving any reason. This can be done by contacting me via the email address above. The same process is in the case of any follow up interviews with two weeks deadline.

Are there are any possible risks linked with my participation?

As we will conduct an in-depth interview, we might come across topics that are emotional or sensitive for yourself. As was stated above, you are not obliged to answer any questions, and we will only discuss things that you feel comfortable with.

Will it be possible for anyone to recognize me?

Any potentially identifying information (e.g. your name, location, other people or places that may identify you) will be deleted/modified to ensure your confidentiality.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

By participating in this project, you will have the opportunity to share your view and opinion regarding mental health / well-being. Not only will this further our current knowledge, but it could serve as a base to inform various organisational policies and interventions. This study gives you space to impact and direct research the way you find it crucial because in this study, you are the expert.

What will happen with all my information? Who will have access to it?

All your personal details will be stored in a password-protected secured space which is compliant with UK GDPR guidelines. The only people who will have access to your information and original transcripts are myself and my supervisors (Dr Peter Olusoga, Dr Christopher Brown, Dr Stilian Chroni) who are supporting me with this project. The original and transformed transcripts will be saved at Sheffield Hallam University secured network for the duration of the projects.

As this study is used as a part of a wider PhD project, we may use some direct quotes in papers or presentations. However, all of these will be anonymised.

Thank you for your time and consideration of participating in this research. This study is about you and your perspective so do not hesitate to contact me, or my supervisors in case of any further questions or feedback

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: GENERAL DATA PROTECTION GUIDELINES

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) replaces the Data Protection Act and governs the way that organisations use personal data. Personal data is information relating to an identifiable living individual. Transparency is a key element of the GDPR and this Privacy Notice is designed to inform you:

- how and why the University uses your personal data for research,
- what your rights are under GDPR, and,
- how to contact us if you have questions or concerns about the use of your personal data.

Legal Basis for Research Studies:

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at:

<https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research>

However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Working Group of the Department of Psychology, Sociology & Politics.

Contact Details:

Details of who to contact if you have any concerns or if adverse effects occur after the study are given below:

You should contact the Data Protection Officer if: • you have a query about how your data is used by the University • you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately) • you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data	You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (Professor Ann Macaskill) if: • you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated
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Appendix 3

Consent Form for study 1

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF WELL-BEING:

Please read the points below summarizing the content of your consent. If you agree and are happy to continue with the study, please sign this document and send it across to the researcher on email address above.

- I have been given all the information linked to this project and had an opportunity to ask any questions.
- I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntarily and I can withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal.
- I am aware that I can decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.
- I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.
- I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.
- I agree for the interview to be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.
- I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes.
- I agree that anonymous direct quotes can be included in the write up of the study.
- I agree for the researcher to keep my contact details for any future collaborations (optional).

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Contact details: _____

Researcher's Name (Printed): Marketa Simova

Researcher's Signature: _____

Researcher's contact details:

(Name, address, contact number of investigator)

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

Appendix 4

Exemplar Interview Guide for Study 1

Areas

- D) Meaning of well-being
- D) Coaches' experience of well-being
- D) Where is the focus (coach or athlete)
- D) How much do they understand it

Initial Questions:

- Could you talk me through your coaching role?
- Coaching tend to be described as very stressful and demanding job, what do you think about that?
 - Why is that so?
 - How does it impact you directly?
- Could you give me an example of a good day at work?
 - What do you think contributed to it?
 - Is that quite common?
 - How did it make you feel?

On the other hand, could you give me an example of a bad day at work?

- What do you think contributed to it?
- Is that quite common?
- How did it make you feel?

If you have a hard day, what motivates you to continue?

Describe me more stressful, difficult periods in your career?

- Give me an example
- How did it make you feel?
- What were the circumstances?
- Is it still impacting you?
- Did it change anything for you?

Given these examples, what do you think helped you to deal with it?

- Why do you think is that?

Given these examples, how do you find coaching?

What, if anything, did you know about these challenges in coaching?

- When do you tend to experience them?
- How does it make you feel?

When experiencing these challenges, what do you tend to do?

- Is it helpful?
- How?
- Do you think it's important to deal with them?

What do you like about being a coach?

Taking all this into consideration, how does your role make you feel?

How did you find the postponement of the Olympics?

- How did you cope with it?

If you were to describe coaching to me, what words would you use?

- Why?

Meaning Questions:

When I say mental health / well-being, what does it mean to you as a coach?

- How does it reflect in your career?
- Could you give me an example?

Do you think there's a difference between mental health and mental illness?

- Could you describe it?
- Why is that so?

What do you think is your role as a coach when it comes to mental health?

When you think about your usual work routine, does anything related to well-being come on your mind?

- Under what circumstances?
- How does it work?

Do you talk to your athletes about mental health? If so, what do you talk about? What do you think is important?

Would you be able to notice the difference between the bad day and day when your mental health is impacted?

Do you think gender impacts the way you view mental health?

Where do you think your understanding of mental health came from?

If you give mental health advice to your athlete, does it change to you giving advice to your friend / family member?

- Why?
- Could you give an example?

Appendix 5

Ethics Approval for Study 2 (Chapter 5)

Exploring Help-Seeking Attitudes and Behaviours of High-Performance Coaches

Ethics Review ID: ER41710278

Workflow Status: Application Approved

Type of Ethics Review Template: All other research with human participants

Primary Researcher / Principal Investigator

Marketa Simova
(Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities)

Converis Project Application:

Q1. Is this project ii) Doctoral research

Director of Studies

Peter Olusoga
(Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities)

Supervisory Team

Christopher Brown
(Centre for Behavioural Science and Applied Psychology)

Appendix 6

Participant Information Sheet for Study 2

EXPLORING HELP-SEEKING OF HIGH-PERFORMANCE COACHES

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Who are the researchers and what is the research about?

My name is Marketa Simova and I am a PhD researcher at the department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics at Sheffield Hallam University. I would like to invite you to take part in a study exploring views and experiences of help-seeking in high-performance coaching. This research has been approved by Research Ethics Committee at Sheffield Hallam University.

Why have you asked me to take part?

I have approached you for this project because there is a general lack of understanding of this topic from a coaching perspective. I believe that with your level of experience and expertise, you could share valuable insights with me.

However, there are a couple of general recruitment criteria that you need to meet:

- Be currently active coach, with coaching being your main job
- Coaching at national and/or international level
- Have a high level of English to fill out the questionnaire and attend potential follow-up interview

Where will the study take place and what will I be required to do?

The study will be conducted online so you can be anywhere you feel comfortable and have some privacy. You will be asked to fill out an anonymous Qualtrics questionnaire that will explore your views and experiences when it comes to help-seeking in high-performance sport. This should take approximately 30 minutes of your time. Afterwards, I might potentially contact you again to gain a deeper understanding of your experiences; you will be asked to take part in an online one-to-one interview (as the first part of the study, this is completely voluntary). Prior the interview, you will receive an email with a personal link to a Microsoft Teams meeting. This link will take you directly to the meeting room, so you won't need any additional passwords or log in details. All our Microsoft Teams conversations will be audio-recorded via the Audacity software. This is essential in order to create a transcript of the interview and the follow-up analysis.

What if I have questions / concerns regarding my participation?

After reading this information sheet, if you have any unanswered questions, do not hesitate to contact me (the details attached above).

If you change your mind about the participation, you can withdraw your data up to two weeks after completing the questionnaire and in the same time frame for the potential interview, all without giving any reason. This can be done by contacting me via the email address above.

Are there any possible risks linked with my participation?

The online questionnaire is designed in order to provide a maximum anonymity and gives you an opportunity to share as much or as little as you wish. If you decided to participate further in the project and part-take in the interview section, you should know that we might come across topics that are emotional or sensitive for yourself. However, you will not be obliged to answer any questions and we will only discuss things that you feel comfortable with.

Will it be possible for anyone to recognize me?

The online questionnaire is fully anonymous. In terms of the follow-up interview, any potentially identifying information (e.g., your name, location, other people or places that may identify you) will be deleted/modified to ensure your confidentiality.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

By participating in this project, you will have the opportunity to share your view and opinion regarding help-seeking in high-performance sport. Not only will this further our current knowledge, but it could serve as a base to inform various organisational policies and interventions. This study gives you space to impact and direct research the way you find it crucial because in this study, you are the expert.

What will happen with all my information? Who will have access to it?

All your personal details will be stored in a password-protected secured space which is compliant with UK GDPR guidelines. The only people who will have access to your information and original transcripts are myself and my supervisors (Dr Peter Olusoga, Dr Christopher Brown, Dr Stiliani Chroni) who are supporting me with this project. The original and transformed transcripts will be saved at Sheffield Hallam University secured network for the duration of the projects.

As this study is used as a part of a wider PhD project, we may use some direct quotes in papers or presentations. However, all of these will be anonymised.

Thank you for your time and consideration of participating in this research. This study is about you and your perspective so do not hesitate to contact me, or my supervisors in case of any further questions or feedback.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: GENERAL DATA PROTECTION GUIDELINES

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) replaces the Data Protection Act and governs the way that organisations use personal data. Personal data is information relating to an identifiable living individual. Transparency is a key element of the GDPR and this Privacy Notice is designed to inform you:

- how and why the University uses your personal data for research,
- what your rights are under GDPR, and,
- how to contact us if you have questions or concerns about the use of your personal data.

Legal Basis for Research Studies:

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at:

<https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notice/privacy-notice-for-research>

However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Working Group of the Department of Psychology, Sociology & Politics.

Contact Details:

Details of who to contact if you have any concerns or if adverse effects occur after the study are given below:

You should contact the Data Protection Officer if: • you have a query about how your data is used by the University • you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately) • you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data DPO@shu.ac.uk	You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (Dr Mayur K Ranchordas) if: • you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated m.ranchordas@shu.ac.uk
Postal address: Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WBT Telephone: 0114 225 5555	

Appendix 7

Consent Form for Study 2

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

EXPLORING HELP-SEEKING OF HIGH-PERFORMANCE COACHES:

Please read the points below summarizing the content of your consent. If you agree and are happy to continue with the study, please sign this document and send it across to the researcher on email address above.

- I have been given all the information linked to this project and had an opportunity to ask any questions.
- I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntarily, and I can withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal.
- I am aware that I can decline to answer any questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.
- I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.
- I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.
- I agree for the interview to be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.
- I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study (questionnaire and interview), once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes.
- I agree that anonymous direct quotes can be included in the write up of the study.
- I agree for the researcher to keep my contact details for any future collaborations (optional).

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Contact details: _____

Researcher's Name (Printed): Marketa Simova

Researcher's contact details:

(Name, address, contact number of investigator)

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

Appendix 8

Exemplary Survey Questions for Study 2

The initial open-ended questions for the Qualtrics survey. These questions are based on Theory of Planned Behaviour and COM-B should cover a broader area of orientation, intentions, and behaviours of help-seeking in coaching population.

Part 1

INSTRUCTIONS: This part of the questionnaire contains 5 questions covering your mental health and well-being.

Please read each question carefully and then try to answer with as much detail as you feel comfortable. Be honest - there are no right or wrong answers!

Q1 Please describe your current mental health and well-being (e.g., energy levels, social interactions, how you have been thinking/feeling about yourself, work, etc.)

Q2 What does "good" mental health look like for you (e.g., energy levels, social interactions, how you have been thinking/feeling about yourself, work, etc.)?

Q3 Has there been a time when you have struggled with your mental health and well-being? If so, please give as much information as you can about how you felt, and why you struggled. If you haven't struggled so much, how would you know if you did start to struggle? Is there anything you have done to safeguard / promote your mental health?

Q4 Thinking about a time when your mental health has been worse than desired, how did you know or recognise this was the case (e.g., changes in mood, negative or positive emotions, social interactions, general behaviour etc.)?

Have you ever specifically asked any person you know (e.g., family, friend, colleague) or from an organisation (e.g., GP, psychologist, charity) for help because of concerns about your mental health?

Yes – leads to section 2A below

No – skips to section 2B

Part 2a

INSTRUCTIONS: This part of the questionnaire contains 4 questions around your experience of help-seeking. Please read each question carefully and then try to answer with as much detail as you feel comfortable. Be honest - there are no right or wrong answers!

Q1a Can you describe your experiences when asking for help? Please can you talk about why you reached out, how you initiated the contact, how easy it was to talk to somebody and how you felt sharing your concerns?

Q2a What signs did you have that indicated something was not right? E.g., lack of interest in activities you usually enjoy, lack of concentration, disturbed sleep pattern etc.

Q3a Can you tell us about the person or organisation you talked to (e.g., why you approached them in particular)?

Q4a What was the outcome of asking for help? Did it make your situation / problem better/worse/no change etc.

Part 2b

INSTRUCTIONS: This part of the questionnaire contains 7 questions covering your experience of mental health and possible help-seeking. Please read each question carefully and then try to answer with as much detail as you feel comfortable. Be honest - there are no right or wrong answers!

Q1b Has there ever been a time when you felt you needed help to support your mental health, but did not ask for it? If so, what has prevented you from seeking help?

Q2b Can you describe any situations in which you have discussed your mental health with someone else? Please can you comment on how the conversation(s) arose, what you discussed and with whom, and the outcome of the conversation(s)?

Q3b In general, how comfortable are you talking about your mental health with other people? Please give reasons for your answer.

Q4b In general, how do you feel about how mental health is addressed within your organisation/sport (e.g., do you feel like support is available if you needed to ask for it)? Are there mechanisms and systems of support in place that you can access if needed?

Q5b If you needed help to support your mental health in the future, what support would you access and why? Examples of sources help included family and friends, colleagues, GP, psychologist.

Q6b Are there any factors that would increase the likelihood of you asking for help?

Q7b Are there any factors that would decrease the likelihood of you asking for help?

Page Break

The study consists of two parts - this questionnaire and follow-up one-to-one interview. During the interview, we would discuss your views and experiences around help-seeking in more depth, allowing you to clarify/elaborate any points.

If you are happy to take part in the interview, please leave your email address in the space below. This info will only be used to contact you regarding this study.

If you wouldn't mind being contacted about other coaching research projects in the future, please check the box below.

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Marketa Simova (m.simova@shu.ac.uk).

Appendix 9

Exemplary Guide for Mini Focus Groups in Study 2

Explain purpose of the study, how it relates to the survey and set expectations. Reassure points around confidentiality.

Let coaches introduce themselves.

Introduction:

1. To ease in: How would you describe a good well-being?
2. On the contrary low levels of well-being
3. During your career as a coach, has there been a time when your well-being has been worse than desired?
 - What was happening?
 - How did you know your well-being has worsened (any signs)?
 - Is there anything you specifically did to look after your well-being?
4. When your well-being was worsened, what, if anything, did you find helpful?
5. Have you ever specifically asked any person you know (e.g., family, friend, colleague) or from an organisation (e.g., GP, psychologist, charity) for help because of concerns about your well-being?
 - What qualities did the person have for you to approach them?

Theoretical help-seeking: From the survey, it appears that help-seeking can be quite difficult topic for many coaches, and some opt out from asking for help when needed. Therefore, I was wondering,

6. Has there ever been a time when you felt you needed help to support your well-being, but did not ask for it? If so, what has stopped you from seeking help?
7. How do you feel about talking about your well-being with others (i.e., family members or professionals such as psychologist, GP or someone from your organisation)
8. Can you describe any situations in which you have discussed your well-being with someone else? Please can you comment on how the conversation(s) arose, what you discussed and with whom, and the outcome of the conversation(s)?

- Some coaches in the survey shared their worries over being judged – what do you think about that?

Organisational influence: In our previous study, we established how significant role an organisation plays in well-being and how one's well-being is more than just a responsibility of the individual. Therefore, I would like to bring this conversation to your views and experiences when it comes to your organisations and generally HP sport.

9. Have you received any information or training related to safeguarding your wellbeing and/or asking for help to support your wellbeing from your organisation/sport. If so, can you describe the content and quality of this information/training.
10. In general, how do you feel about how well-being is addressed within your organisation/sport (e.g., do you feel like support is available if you needed to ask for it)?
11. What mechanisms/systems, if any, are in your organisation to support your well-being?
12. If you were a performance director, what would you do to support coaches' well-being?

Appendix 10

Ethics Approval for Study 3 (Chapter 7)

Developing Well-Being Recommendations for High-Performance Coaches

Ethics Review ID: ER68541586

Workflow Status: Application Approved

Type of Ethics Review Template: Very low risk human participants studies

Primary Researcher / Principal Investigator

Marketa Simova
(Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities)

Converis Project Application:

Q1. Is this project ii) Doctoral research

Director of Studies

Peter Olusoga
(Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities)

Supervisory Team

Christopher Brown
(Centre for Behavioural Science and Applied Psychology)

Appendix 11

Participant Information Sheet for Study 3

CREATING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGH-PERFORMANCE COACHES WELL-BEING

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Who are the researchers and what is the research about?

My name is Marketa Simova and I am a PhD researcher at the department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics at Sheffield Hallam University. I would like to invite you to take part in a study aimed to develop well-being recommendations for high-performance coaches

This research has been approved by Research Ethics Committee at Sheffield Hallam University.

Why have you asked me to take part?

I have approached you for this project because I believe that with your level of experience and/or expertise, you could share valuable insights with me in order to develop comprehensive, practical and realistic well-being recommendations.

Where will the study take place and what will I be required to do?

This study uses a Delphi method. You will be asked to read through a policy document outlining evidence-based, research informed coach well-being recommendations and assess the document/recommendations in terms of their usefulness, practicality, clarity, etc. You will also have an opportunity to provide any feedback if you wish to do so.

The study will be conducted online so you can be anywhere you feel comfortable and have some privacy. You will be contacted via email with a link to a survey. It won't be necessary to log into any software and your name will not be associated with either your rating or comments. The study will use pseudonyms and will remove any potentially identifying data.

You will have three weeks to review the document (and any possible modifications) and to submit your ratings and comments with reminders being sent throughout. As the aim of this study is to gain a sufficient level of consensus amongst professionals/practitioners it is likely that various modifications of the recommendations might be necessary. Consequently, you might be contacted again, and you will potentially conduct two or three rounds of the reviews/ratings until there is a broad agreement.

What if I have questions / concerns regarding my participation?

After reading this information sheet, if you have any unanswered questions, do not hesitate to contact me (the details attached above).

If you change your mind about the participation, you can withdraw your data up to a week after you submitted your responses. This can be done by contacting me via the email address above.

Are there are any possible risks linked with my participation?

Rather than sharing personal experiences, this study is looking for a generic consensus and opinions on practicality of the well-being recommendations. Moreover, your responses won't require any identifiables except generic demographics. Therefore, there are no risks linked with the study. If you wish, you have a right to withdraw from the study without stating a reason up to a week after submitting your responses.

Will it be possible for anyone to recognize me?

Any potentially identifying information (e.g. your name, location, other people or places that may identify you) will be deleted/modified to ensure your confidentiality.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

By participating in this project, you will have the opportunity to share your view and opinion regarding well-being recommendations for high-performance coaches. Not only will this further our current knowledge, but it gives you an opportunity to actively shape the landscape of organisational support coaches might require. It will allow for your views and experiences to move from theory to practice and in turn, to create to something tangible.

What will happen with all my information? Who will have access to it?

All your personal details will be stored in a password-protected secured space which is compliant with UK GDPR guidelines. The only people who will have access to your information and original transcripts are myself and my supervisors (Dr Peter Olusoga, Dr Christopher Brown, Dr Stilian Chroni) who are supporting me with this project. The original and transformed transcripts will be saved at Sheffield Hallam University secured network for the duration of the projects.

As this study is used as a part of a wider PhD project, we may use some direct quotes in papers or presentations. However, all of these will be anonymised.

Thank you for your time and consideration of participating in this research. This study is about you and your perspective so do not hesitate to contact me, or my supervisors) in case of any further questions or feedback

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: GENERAL DATA PROTECTION GUIDELINES

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) replaces the Data Protection Act and governs the way that organisations use personal data. Personal data is information relating to an identifiable living individual. Transparency is a key element of the GDPR and this Privacy Notice is designed to inform you:

- how and why the University uses your personal data for research,
- what your rights are under GDPR, and,
- how to contact us if you have questions or concerns about the use of personal data.

Legal Basis for Research Studies:

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at: <https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research>

However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Working Group of the Department of Psychology, Sociology & Politics.

Contact Details:

Details of who to contact if you have any concerns or if adverse effects occur after the study are given below:

You should contact the Data Protection Officer if: • you have a query about how your data is used by the University • you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately) • you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data	You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (Dr Mayur Ranchordas) if: • you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated
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Appendix 12

Consent Form for Study 3

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Creating Recommendations for High-Performance Coaches Well-Being:

Please read the points below summarizing the content of your consent. If you agree and are happy to continue with the study, please sign this document and send it across to the researcher on email address above.

- I have been given all the information linked to this project and had an opportunity to ask any questions.
- I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntarily, and I can withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal.
- I am aware that I can decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.
- I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.
- I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.
- I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes.
- I agree that anonymous direct quotes can be included in the write up of the study.
☐
- I agree for the researcher to keep my contact details for any future collaborations (optional).

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Contact details: Researcher's Name (Printed): Marketa Simova

Researcher's Signature: _____

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

Appendix 13

Study 3 Results Breakdown in Round 1

		Clarity			Relevance			Practicality		
		min-max	Mean (SD)	Consensus	min-max	Mean (SD)	Consensus	min-max	Mean (SD)	Consensus
Organisational Recommendations	1.1.a Organisations should have regular reviews of coaches' working conditions and practices, including their workload and working hours.	1-2	1.36 (0.5)	100.00%	1-2	1.14 (0.36)	92.90%	1-4	2.29 (1.07)	71.40%
	1.1.b Organisations should develop well-being charter outlining its commitment to supporting coaches' well-being with specific policies and recommendations in place.	1-2	1.64 (0.63)	92.90%	1-3	1.57 (0.64)	92.90%	1-4	2.14 (1.03)	71.40%
	1.2.a Organisations should support coaches in developing their identity outside of sport through various benefits (e.g., courses subscription) and a level of flexibility around scheduling their rest and recovery	1-2	1.36 (0.5)	100.00%	1-2	1.57 (0.51)	100.00%	1-5	2.43 (1.02)	57.20%
	1.2.b Organisations should discuss with coaches possible ways of linking work and personal life (e.g., exploring international travel with family members etc.).	1-4	1.64 (0.84)	92.90%	1-4	2 (0.96)	71.40%	1-4	2.79 (1.12)	42.90%
	1.3.a Organisations should collaborate with external organisations (e.g., UK Sports Institute) to provide coaches (and relevant professionals) with education around coaches' well-being and mental health.	1-3	1.36 (0.63)	92.90%	1-2	1.36 (0.63)	92.90%	1-3	1.43 (0.65)	92.90%
	1.3.b Organisations should have well-being related objectives for coaches.	1-4	1.79 (0.97)	78.60%	1-3	1.57 (0.85)	78.60%	1-3	1.93 (1)	57.40%
	1.3.c Through external provides (e.g., UKSI), organisations should organise regular meetings for coaches from different sports.	1-3	1.57 (0.85)	78.60%	1-3	1.64 (0.84)	78.60%	1-3	1.93 (0.92)	64.30%
	1.4. Organisations should have established, clear referral pathways and support systems (e.g., sport/clinical psychologists, performance lifestyle practitioners) dedicated to coaches' well-being.	1-2	1.07 (0.27)	100.00%	1-2	1.07 (0.27)	100.00%	1-2	1.43 (0.51)	100.00%
	1.5. Organisational leaders should model behaviours promoting authenticity and vulnerability (e.g., by openly discussing challenges or failures), and should collaborate with coaches on developing specific well-being guidelines	1-2	1.21 (0.43)	100.00%	1-2	1.36 (0.5)	100.00%	1-3	1.86 (0.86)	71.40%
	1.6 Organisations should critically review current standards of coach-performance evaluations (their implications to career progression) and explore motivations behind end of employment.	1-3	1.71 (0.73)	85.70%	1-3	1.79 (0.8)	78.60%	1-3	2 (0.88)	64.30%
	1.7. Coach well-being support should be contextualised and tailored to the nuances of the role and specific demands of the individual.	1-3	1.43 (0.65)	92.90%	1-3	1.36 (0.63)	92.90%	1-4	1.86 (0.95)	78.60%
Professional Recommendations	2.1. For effective well-being support, practitioners should approach coaches proactively and with a specific purpose/agenda for each session in mind.	1-4	1.86 (1.23)	78.60%	1-4	2 (1.11)	71.40%	1-5	2.36 (1.45)	57.10%
	2.2. Practitioners should utilise the performance-enhancing angle as an initial stepping stone when working with a coach while later introducing well-being approaches as a regular part of the preparation.	1-4	2.21 (1.25)	57.10%	1-4	2.14 (0.86)	71.40%	1-4	2.14 (1.1)	64.30%
	2.3. Practitioners should clearly communicate their confidentiality guidelines with individual coaches as well as specific organisations.	1-4	1.36 (0.84)	92.90%	1-2	1.14 (0.36)	100.00%	1-3	1.36 (0.63)	92.90%
	2.4. Practitioners should consider ways of empowering coaches to take care of their well-being, for example, through executive coaching.	1-2	1.29 (0.47)	100.00%	1-2	1.21 (0.43)	100.00%	1-4	1.57 (0.85)	92.90%
Coach Recommendations	3.1. Coaches should actively explore their personal values, boundaries and work challenges to understand their non-negotiables and possible work/personal challenges.	1-2	1.29 (0.47)	100.00%	1-3	1.29 (0.61)	92.90%	1-3	1.57 (0.76)	85.70%
	3.2.a Coaches should consider self-care and recovery as a fundamental part of their performance preparation including its proactive scheduling.	1-2	1.07 (0.27)	100.00%	1-3	1.29 (0.61)	92.90%	1-4	1.57 (0.85)	92.90%
	3.2.b Coaches should actively work with professional (e.g., performance lifestyle practitioner, coach developer) to develop effective self-care and recovery routine.	1-3	1.57 (0.85)	78.60%	1-4	1.57 (0.94)	85.60%	1-4	2.07 (1.14)	64.30%
	3.3. Coaches should develop connections inside and outside of the organisation and be aware of support available to them.	1-3	1.21 (0.58)	92.90%	1-2	1.21 (0.58)	100.00%	1-3	1.67 (0.65)	92.90%

Appendix 14

Study 3 Results Breakdown Round

		Clarity			Relevance			Practicality		
		min-max	Mean (SD)	Rel. Frequency	min-max	Mean (SD)	Relat. Frequency	min-max	Mean (SD)	Rel. Frequency
Organisational Recommendations	1.1.a Organisations should have regular reviews of coaches' working conditions and practices, including their workload and working hours.	1-2	1.15 (0.38)	100.00%	1-2	1.08 (0.28)	100.00%	1-4	2 (0.82)	84.62%
	1.1.b Organisations should develop well-being charter outlining its commitment to supporting coaches' well-being, including specific policies/recommendations and resources allocated to this area.	1-2	1.46 (0.52)	100.00%	1-4	1.54 (0.88)	92.31%	1-3	1.69 (0.63)	92.31%
	1.2.a Organisations should support coaches in developing their identity outside of sport through various benefits (e.g., courses subscription) and a level of flexibility around scheduling their rest and recovery.	1-2	1.38 (0.51)	100.00%	1-2	1.54 (0.52)	100.00%	1-3	1.85 (0.55)	92.31%
	1.2.b Organisations should discuss with coaches whether they'd like to integrate or maintain separation between work and personal life (e.g., exploring international travel with family members etc.) and if interested, how this could be achieved in relation to available resources.	1-2	1.54 (0.52)	100.00%	1-3	1.77 (0.6)	92.31%	1-4	2.46 (1.05)	61.54%
	1.3.a Organisations should collaborate with external organisations (e.g., UK Sports Institute) to provide coaches (and relevant professionals) with education around coaches' well-being and mental health.	1-3	1.31 (0.63)	92.31%	1-3	1.31 (0.63)	92.31%	1-3	1.38 (0.65)	92.31%
	1.3.b Organisations should have well-being related objectives for coaches.	1-4	1.77 (1.01)	76.92%	1-3	1.69 (0.85)	76.92%	1-3	1.77 (0.93)	69.23%
	1.3.c Through external provides (e.g., UKSI), organisations should organise regular meetings for coaches from different sports.	1-3	1.62 (0.87)	76.92%	1-3	1.69 (0.85)	76.92%	1-4	2 (1.08)	61.64%
	1.4. Organisations should have established, clear referral pathways and support systems (e.g., sport/clinical psychologists, performance lifestyle practitioners) dedicated to coaches' well-being.	1	1 (0)	100.00%	1	1 (0)	100.00%	1-2	1.23 (0.44)	100.00%
	1.5. Organisational leaders should model behaviours promoting authenticity and vulnerability (e.g., by openly discussing challenges or failures), and should collaborate with coaches on developing specific well-being guidelines.	1-2	1.15 (0.38)	100.00%	1-2	1.33 (0.49)	100.00%	1-3	1.92 (0.86)	69.23%
	1.6 Organisations should critically review current standards of coach-performance evaluations (their implications to career progression) and explore motivations behind end of employment.	1-2	1.46 (0.52)	100.00%	1-3	1.62 (0.65)	92.31%	1-3	1.62 (0.77)	84.61%
	1.7. Coach well-being support should be contextualised and tailored to the nuances of the role and specific demands of the individual.	1-2	1.25 (0.45)	100.00%	1-2	1.33 (0.49)	100.00%	1-3	1.58 (0.67)	92.31%
Professional Recommendations	2.1. For initial well-being support, practitioners should approach coaches proactively, with suggestions for well-being related agenda while respecting coaches' own preferences and directions.	1-4	1.62 (0.96)	76.92%	1-4	2 (0.91)	76.92%	1-4	2.15 (1.14)	61.54%
	2.2. To ease coaches into conversations, practitioners could start with performance-related topics which could lead to further conversations about the impact of personal well-being on performance (and its importance).	1-4	1.92 (0.95)	76.92%	1-4	2.15 (0.8)	76.92%	1-4	2.08 (0.95)	69.23%
	2.3. Practitioners should clearly communicate their confidentiality guidelines with individual coaches as well as specific organisations.	1-2	1.15 (0.38)	100.00%	1-2	1.08 (0.28)	100.00%	1-2	1.15 (0.38)	100.00%
	2.4. Practitioners should consider ways of empowering coaches to take care of their well-being, for example, through executive coaching.	1-2	1.23 (0.44)	100.00%	1-2	1.15 (0.38)	100.00%	1-3	1.46 (0.66)	92.31%
Coach Recommendations	3.1. Coaches should actively explore their personal values, boundaries and work challenges to understand their non-negotiables and possible work/personal challenges.	1-2	1.33 (0.49)	100.00%	1-3	1.42 (0.67)	92.31%	1-3	1.58 (0.67)	92.31%
	3.2.a Coaches should consider self-care and recovery as a fundamental part of their performance preparation including its proactive scheduling.	1	1 (0)	100.00%	1-3	1.42 (0.67)	92.31%	1-3	1.5 (0.67)	92.31%
	3.2.b Coaches should actively work with relevant/qualified professional (e.g., performance lifestyle practitioner, coach developer) to develop effective self-care and recovery routine.	1-3	1.25 (0.62)	92.31%	1-3	1.42 (0.67)	92.31%	1-4	1.75 (0.87)	92.31%
	3.3. Coaches should develop connections inside and outside of the organisation and be aware of support available to them.	1-2	1.23 (0.6)	92.31%	1-2	1.23 (0.44)	100.00%	1-3	1.54 (0.66)	92.31%

Appendix 15

Examples from Diary Log

① In 3D, there seems to be polarisation of theory and research accuracy.
 ② happiness is interpreted and purpose is everything - nothing for purpose in the gold standard
 e.g. the bubble culture ...
 ③ Happiness is everything. It's all about being happy and avoiding any difficulties.
 - then among the group A as they feel people don't deserve happiness unless they go through tough times
 ④ It's not generally
 How does identity link with WB?
 What does motivation and ego feel in it?
 ⑤ How does ego link with WB?
 Should we consider in the complex thing?

⑥ Is narrative identity linked with narrative analysis? Can I combine narrative analysis & COTM to develop the framework. It is a methodologically relevant?
 ↓
 ⑦ Should I combine COTM with narrative analysis? Across coaches there seems to be this shared narrative of when you are "waking" to take a break, then after myself. It's the attitude of "sacrifice (especially) in a part of the plan, I need to sacrifice myself in order to be accepted". It's like HPS is some expense, some environmental like a body game where everyone feels so motivated and seemed it be part of that they would do anything to reach in... → NARRATIVE IDENTITY

MEMOS STUDY 1

- environmental seems when individuals are fully engaged with their lives and what they do → coaches often mention not being present as a top problem
- How to make sure that my concepts truly address WB and they're not just anecdotal - as it's my main research enquiries, I need to be careful here
 ⇒ conceptualisation doesn't necessarily mean pure definition, especially within COTM I am looking at the process of how WB was talked about in evidence definition
- Is WB rooted in identity? How? e.g. good coach = caring coach → if unable to care → identity threat → ↓ WB?
- MADE OF INVINCIBILITY: how does it work in relation to others
 - duty of care as a driving factor in terms of athletes
 - how what about wider reorganisation

for their knowledge or memory, I need to make sure to keep my promises, be a back seat to the maximum not to use them, otherwise I'm not much better than the organisations

- Should the study I just end with security I should help feeling as one finds the other it would it be too superficial
- Not worried about the underrepresentation of female coaches in my study
- What relates to them / their identity, who they are could represent WB while others are barrier / prohibitors
- being self-aware = experience WB?
- What if WB is a process and not just it? perhaps it's not that important to define what it is exactly is and we rather need to understand how it works

everything else, suddenly the sacrifices aren't worth it and coaches are left disillusioned and hurt.

⑦ DIX - 348

- What if coaches win all the recognition but not the expected approval and celebration by others creates a "glacier" and makes it seem like it's worth it? And then when the reaction isn't as expected (others are jealous / companies move forward quickly) it leaves the bitter taste it leaves them feeling worthless as all they've done till now wasn't even worth it...

! Coaches want to be celebrated for their sacrifices (sacrifices) (sacrifices) because even when they succeed, when they reach their goal, they're unhappy when others approach it negatively.

⑦ Should I include in individual chapters subchapter about female coaches? It feels personally important to me...

If you read WB from a perspective you tend to focus on the individual, then expand etc., however if you apply a sociological perspective, you'll have to consider the organisation and wider context.

• ⇒ will my topics around organisations WB relate to those WB by Keyes then?

• POTENTIAL NEW QUESTION

- Could you tell me a bit more about being a coach?

- Organisation

How does your organisation support you WB?

- How does it make you feel?
- How do you deal with that?

What does your organisation do to make you feel appreciated?

How would you describe your work environment?

- Red Flags:

Do you have any signals / red flags that shows your WB is serious?

- How does it work?
- How did you learn to recognise these?

- Authenticity:

Can you be yourself at work?

• Why?

Do you think it's important to be authentic?

Do you share a lot with your athletes?

• As most of the coaches did PhD / higher education, it feels like some of their knowledge isn't raw but rather impacted ⇒ is it perhaps not as it shows that education can change understanding and this is what they know now