Sports performers' perspectives on facilitating thriving in professional rugby contexts

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The desire and apparent 'need' to succeed can drive a win-at-all-costs mentality in individuals who operate in sport. This approach has given rise to environments where the pursuit of high-level performance has been at the expense of athlete welfare. To redress this balance and to inform the creation and maintenance of sporting environments that promote both high performance and athlete well-being, we sought to (i) provide an exploration of the environmental factors that may promote player thriving in professional sport, and (ii) offer suggestions for how key stakeholders can support these mechanisms.
Design: A qualitative research methodology underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism.
Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 players from an English professional rugby union club.
Results: Thematic analysis generated thirteen factors that players perceived to promote thriving. These factors were underpinned by two general ideas: (i) Establishing Bonds between Teammates and (ii) Establishing a Connection to the Coaching Staff and the Club.
Conclusions: The findings provide the first insight into the type of environment professional rugby players believe can facilitate their development and sporting success. The factors generated in the analysis highlight the players' desire to operate within an integrated, inclusive, and trusting environment, and a variety of suggestions are forwarded for how this can be achieved. To promote thriving in a professional sport that requires emotion and passion to succeed on the pitch, it appears that rugby union organizations must appeal to the sensitivities and welfare of players off it.

1. Introduction

The desire and apparent 'need' to succeed can drive a win-at-all-costs mentality in individuals who operate in sport (see, e.g., Dodge & Robertson, 2004; Duda, Olson, & Templin, 1991; Hardy et al., 2017). This mentality may be reflected, for example, in the ruthless and selfish attitudes held by some of the most decorated sports performers (see, Hardy et al., 2017), in the overly authoritative and uncompromising management styles adopted by some coaches (see, for a review, Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009), or in the critical behaviors displayed by some parents of talented young athletes (see, e.g., Tamminen, Poucher, & Povilaitis, 2017). Although there are some examples that demonstrate sporting success can be achieved in the potentially hostile and unpleasant environments created by enacting this mentality (see, e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2015), it has

become increasingly apparent that these may come at the cost of athlete welfare (see, e.g., BBC Sport, 2017; Roan, 2017; Wolff, 2015). Indeed, within the United Kingdom, repeated revelations regarding the poor duty of care shown towards elite athletes in world class programs has led to a comprehensive review into sustainable high performance winning cultures (see, Grey-Thompson, 2017; Nicholl & Price, 2017). Moving forward and in line with these observations, it appears essential that research helps to inform the creation and maintenance of sporting environments that promote both high performance and athlete well-being.

Within the academic literature, a substantial body of work exists informing the creation of optimal psychosocial environments in sport settings (see, for example reviews, Fransen, Boen, Stouten, Cotterill, & Vande Broek, 2017; Harwood, Keegan, Smith, & Raine, 2015; Martin, Bruner, Eys, & Spink, 2014). This work has ranged from motivational

climates in youth sport (see, e.g., O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2014), establishing a team culture in professional sport (see, e.g., Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2015), to creating a team identity in Olympic national teams (see, e.g., Slater, Barker, Coffee, & Jones, 2015). Moreover, understanding and facilitating performance and well-being outcomes in sporting environments has represented a core theme of interest for scholars studying sport for decades (see, e.g., Nideffer & Deckner, 1970; Snyder & Kivlin, 1975). Within this work, researchers have examined the influence of various predictor variables (e.g., basic psychological need satisfaction and frustration, personal resilient qualities, social support, stress appraisal) on athletes' performance and well-being, and much is now known about the effects of such variables (see, e.g., Bijleveld & Veling, 2014; Boat & Taylor, 2015; Cheval, Chalabaev, Quested, Courvoisier, & Sarrazin, 2017; Lu et al., 2016; Nicholls, Polman, & Levy, 2012; Verner-Filion, Vallerand, Amiot, & Mocanu, 2017). Despite these advances, research has tended to focus either on facilitating performance *or* facilitating well-being; thus, limited knowledge exists on creating environments that foster both components concurrently.

An emerging line of research that may be helpful in bridging this gap, is that on the topic of thriving. Broadly defined as "the joint experience of development and success" (D. J. Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, & Standage, 2017, p. 168), thriving describes the experience where humans are making progressive enhancements that may be either physical, psychological, or social in nature (e.g., learning adaptive coping styles), whilst also simultaneously displaying success through temporally and contextually relevant outcomes (e.g., attainment scores). Within an athletic context, thriving in elite sport performers was recently found to be characterized by dimensions of well-being (e.g., being focussed and in control, having a sense of belonging) and the perception of sustained high-level performance (D. J. Brown, Arnold, Reid, & Roberts, 2018). These findings are in-line with the suggestion that thriving is akin to being fully functioning, wherein individuals can fully access and exercise their human capacities, experience vitality, and display signs of happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The sport-based thriving characteristics are also similar to some of the indices used to measure thriving in other contexts where, for example, thriving at work is determined by levels of vitality and learning (see, Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). However, differences also exist between these conceptualizations with performance considered to be a core component of thriving in sport (D. J. Brown et al., 2018; D. J. Brown, Arnold, Standage, & Fletcher, 2017), but an outcome of thriving at work (Paterson, Luthans, & Jeung, 2014; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). It therefore appears important that scholars draw on context-appropriate conceptualizations in their work.

In addition to characterizing thriving in elite sport, Brown, Arnold, et al. (2018) reported 16 factors that were considered by participants to facilitate thriving including both personal characteristics (e.g., desire and motivation, self-belief) and contextual features (e.g., competitive training partners, high quality relationships). Although these groupings were consistent with thriving research conducted in other populations (e.g., adolescents, Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; employees, Spreitzer et al., 2005), a number of the identified "enablers" of thriving (e.g., support staff) were new to the literature. Of the two types of enablers, Spreitzer et al. (2005) previously argued that greater contributions to theory and knowledge can be generated from "understanding the contexts that enable thriving" (p. 539) compared to studying individual traits, given Ryan and Deci's (2000) suggestion that an individual's success in fulfilling his or her predisposition for growth is contingent on the features of the environments in which he or she act. Perhaps, therefore, enhancing understanding of the sporting environment and the roles played by social agents within it should be a pressing priority for facilitating thriving in sport.

Ryan and Deci's (2000) position on the role of social agents on thriving is encapsulated in their self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan &

Deci, 2017). SDT is constructed from five mini-theories and, of particular relevance to thriving, is the mini-theory labelled basic psychological needs theory (BPNT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to BPNT, humans can achieve thriving (or full functioning) through the satisfaction of three basic and universal needs for autonomy (i.e., desire to feel volitional), competence (i.e., feelings of effectance), and relatedness (i.e., desire to feel connected to others). Moreover, the satisfaction of these needs can be nurtured and maintained via environments that are needs supportive and can be frustrated via environments that are controlling or need thwarting (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Within sporting contexts, an array of studies have been conducted that substantiate the suggested sequential relationships between need supportive/thwarting environments, need satisfaction/frustration, and well-being and performance outcomes (see, e.g., Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012; Balaguer et al., 2012; Carpentier & Mageau, 2013; Fransen, Boen, Vansteenkiste, Mertens, & Vande Broek, 2018; Gillet, Vallerand, Amoura, & Baldes, 2010; Kipp & Weiss, 2015).[1] In addition, scholars have forwarded strategies for supporting need satisfaction (see, for a review, Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), and attempts have been made to design and empirically test BPNT-informed interventions in sport (see, e.g., Cheon, Reeve, Lee, & Lee, 2015; Mahoney, Ntoumanis, Gucciardi, Mallett, & Stebbings, 2016). Yet, despite the abundance of sport-based research informed by SDT, only two studies (viz. D. J. Brown, Arnold, Standage, et al., 2017; Gucciardi, Stamatis, & Ntoumanis, 2017) exist that have explicitly examined proponents of BPNT and thriving. Drawing on a conceptualization of thriving from the work literature (see, Spreitzer et al., 2005), Gucciardi et al. (2017) found that controlling coach behaviors (e.g., controlled use of rewards, negative conditional regard) were inversely related with experiences of vitality and learning. Using an alternative conceptualization where thriving was indexed by levels of subjective performance and well-being (see, D. J. Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, et al., 2017), D. J. Brown, Arnold, Standage, et al. (2017) found higher levels of basic psychological need satisfaction predicted athlete membership to a thriving class, but identified no predictive effects for social support, coach need support, or coach need thwart variables. Although these studies have begun to examine the motivational mechanism through which thriving may be facilitated or hindered by social agents, inconsistency in the studies' findings suggests that further exploration of environmental factors and thriving is warranted.

When considering the role that environmental factors play in promoting thriving in sport, it will be important to recognize that variations exist in the nature of settings (e.g., clubs at different competition standards). For example, when relocating as part of earning a professional contract with a club, a young player will move from a familiar setting where he or she will have established support networks to one where he or she may need to create and access new social connections in order to thrive (Harris, Myhill, & Walker, 2012a; 2012b). The potential variation across environments motivates dedicated study into specific contexts to enable elucidation of the idiosyncrasies within each setting. For the current study, the decision was made to delimit the scope of inquiry to thriving in a professional sport setting. To date, researchers have examined the stressors encountered by professional sportsmen and women in their environments (see, e.g., Arnold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2016; Nicholls, Backhouse, Polman, & McKenna, 2009), the coping strategies used by performers to overcome these demands (see, e.g., Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts, 2012; Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & Bloomfield, 2006), and the possible negative outcomes experienced if coping is ineffective (see, e.g., Cresswell & Eklund, 2005, 2006). However, research is yet to explore how to promote thriving in

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[1] It is important to highlight that some evidence also exists to suggest reciprocity in the relationships between need support, need satisfaction/frustration, motivation, and well-being (see, Martinent, Guillet-Descas, & Moiret, 2015; Stenling, Lindwall, & Hassmén, 2015).

these professional sporting contexts. Given their highly pressurized nature and the amount of time professional athletes spend operating within them, understanding how these environments can be shaped to facilitate both performance and well-being outcomes represents an important area of inquiry. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to (i) provide an exploration of the environmental factors that may promote player thriving in professional sport, and (ii) offer suggestions for how key stakeholders (e.g., organizations, coaches, and sport medicine practitioners) can support these mechanisms. In recognition of the potential psychosocial differences arising across professional sports organizations (see, e.g., Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2017), we focused this study on the experiences of professional athletes from one club.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

A qualitative research methodology was selected since it was deemed most appropriate for addressing the purpose of this study. Specifically, qualitative research enables scholars to study things in their natural settings and interpret phenomena by the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). It is important to acknowledge the underlying paradigmatic assumptions of a study, as ontology (i.e., the nature of reality) and epistemology (i.e., how reality is known to us) inform what is examined in research and how data are interpreted (Lincoln, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). It was assumed in this study that multiple and subjective realities existed and that participants' knowledge was subjective and constructive; thus, the study is underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

2.2. Participants

Eighteen male professional rugby union players formed the sample for this study. At the time of interview, all participants held full-time paid contracts at the same rugby union club whose first team squad participated in the Aviva Premiership and various Cup competitions. The participants represented either the first team squad ($n = 16$) or the academy squad ($n = 2$), with the participants including both newer members of the squad and seasoned international players. Participants had been representing the rugby club for between 0 and 12 seasons ($M = 5.42$ seasons, $SD = 3.80$). Eighteen was considered an appropriate sample size for this study, since the participants began to recall similar vignettes during the interviews; thus, data saturation was claimed as no new information was arising from the interviews and no new codes or themes could be constructed from the data (Bowen, 2008; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013).

2.3. Data collection

The authors initially met with the Director of Performance (DoP) at the rugby club to discuss the proposed research. The DoP was enthusiastic for the study to occur at the club given its alignment with their vision and aims. Therefore, following institutional ethical approval, the study was introduced via a group presentation to players in the first team and academy squads at the club. Members of the squads were also given an information sheet which further outlined the study, what it involved, and ethical rights (e.g., confidentiality, anonymity, right to withdraw). If interested to participate, the players were asked to sign a consent form, and convenient dates and times for the interviews were arranged. Interviews took place in a private meeting room at the club and occurred on a 1:1 basis (i.e., one member of the research team and one player). The interviews lasted between 21 and 72 min ($M = 42$ min 51 s, $SD = 13$ min 31 s), were digitally recorded in their entirety, and transcribed verbatim.

At the start of the interviews, the researcher defined thriving (cf. D.

J. Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, et al., 2017) and discussed this with the interviewee to ensure that both were reflecting on the same term for the remainder of the interview (cf. D. J. Brown et al., 2018). A semi-structured interview format was adopted so that an interview guide could be used to direct the discussions; however, its open-ended questions enabled the players to freely express their opinions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Interview questions were broad in their scope to enable the players to fully share their views and centered on the player's perceptions of what environmental factors enabled thriving in the professional rugby context (e.g., *What are the contextual/environmental factors that you think help you cope with the demands you experience and can enable you to thrive? How have these changed during your time at [club name]?*) and how they could be optimally promoted (e.g., *Based on your experiences, how do you think [club name] could increase thriving in their players? Do you think these changes would influence all players equally?*). The players were asked to respond in relation to thriving as an individual (i.e., a player), rather than as a collective (i.e., the team), as this study was targeted at facilitating performance and well-being in individual players operating within a team sport environment. However, we recognized that it was likely players would discuss themes pertinent to both individual- and group-level experiences, given the difficulty of disentangling the individual from the group with team sport settings (see, e.g., Wolf, Harenberg, Tamminen, & Schmitz, 2018). As both authors were involved in conducting interviews for the study, field notes and initial thoughts were recorded by each interviewer and discussed between the authors after each interview. This process not only enabled the authors to collectively reflect on their interview techniques, but also facilitated the discussion of initial concepts raised which could be explored in further detail with subsequent participants.

2.4. Data analysis

To identify patterns of meaning across the dataset, Braun, Clarke, and Weate's (2016) six-phase thematic analysis was used. Although the phases are presented here sequentially, in reality the process involved a recursive, reflexive process of moving back and forth between them. The first phase involved the first author immersing himself in the interview transcripts and repeatedly reading them whilst also identifying initial notes of interest. To capture these, the first author developed initial concept maps to identify informal trends and ideas across the data set. The second phase – coding – involved more systematically and thoroughly identifying and labelling analytically relevant aspects of the dataset. This coding was conducted primarily at a semantic level, where participants' explicitly stated ideas and experiences were coded (Braun et al., 2016). In the third phase, the first author clustered these codes into themes which represented higher-level patterns across the data. Themes were separated into two levels in this study: *overarching themes* to organize and structure the analysis and *themes* to report the meaning of the central concepts (Braun et al., 2016). As well as various discussions occurring between the two authors about what was being done in the first three phases of analysis (see below), once the theme levels had been created by the first author, the second author independently scrutinized them and offered feedback. The identified themes were then reviewed in phase four to check that they fitted with the raw dataset and that they coherently addressed the purpose of the study. In phase five, the themes were defined and accompanied by a rich analytic narrative before being written up into the manuscript in the final phase.

2.5. Rigor and trustworthiness

To judge the "quality" of qualitative research, scholars are advised to draw from criteria relevant to their underpinning philosophical assumptions and from an ongoing list of characterizing traits, rather than applying criteria universally (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2014). Taking first the worthiness of the topic, the introduction to this paper illustrates how facilitating thriving in elite sport contexts, that is

creating a culture whereby both performance *and* well-being are prioritized, is of great contemporary interest and value. Credibility and rich rigor were also pursued in this study by (i) interviewing rugby players who had first-hand experience of professional sport contexts, (ii) reporting the procedures comprehensively, which included using an interview guide consistently across interviews, and (iii) generating data that enabled important and meaningful interpretations (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Furthermore, the first author kept a journal to detail reflections and decisions made throughout the data analysis process, which the second author subsequently scrutinized as a "critical friend" to challenge the first author's construction of knowledge and encourage reflexivity (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Finally, the study seeks meaningful coherence and methodological integrity, which relates to the linkages between the goals of the research, the researchers' approach to enquiry, the design and procedures adopted, and the findings (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

3. Results

The analysis process in this study identified two overarching themes relating to the environmental factors that may promote player thriving in professional rugby contexts. The first was labelled "Establishing bonds between teammates" and includes six themes which relate to helping players feel closer and more connected to their teammates to, ultimately, enable them to thrive. The second overarching theme is labelled "Establishing a connection to the coaching staff and club" and includes seven themes which relate to helping players feel more connected to the coaching staff and club to, ultimately, enable them to thrive. Whilst presented as separate overarching themes, it is important to note that some of the actions suggested for facilitating thriving may resonate with both; thus, reflecting the complex and intertwined nature of thriving in professional sport. Each theme is introduced in the following narrative and accompanied with an illustrative data extract; additional quotes are provided in Tables 1 and 2 to offer readers further insight into the participants' voice in the generation of the results.

3.1. Establishing bonds between teammates

This overarching theme consisted of six themes: forming collective goals, decreasing external player recruitment, maintaining equality in the playing squad, creating opportunities for interaction, ensuring effective teammate communication styles, and the senior players offering guidance. Firstly, the participants spoke about forming collective goals to establish and strengthen their team bond since these enabled them to have shared expectations to work hard, show commitment to each other, fight for a common cause, and, ultimately, enable them to thrive. The following quote from one participant illustrates the contagious nature of pursuing a collective goal:

> Once a small group of people are pulling in one direction, it's very difficult to pull them back. So, the initial commitment has to come from the playing squad because, once there are a few boys pulling in the positive direction, it's difficult not to get caught up in it. (Participant 10)

To further establish bonds between teammates, the players spoke about the importance of decreasing external player recruitment. Whilst participants acknowledged the need for some external recruitment, the players suggested that managing the levels of it could help to maintain academy players' motivation and maintain continuity in the playing squad, which were important for thriving. To exemplify, the following quote highlights the importance of this theme in achieving success and growth:

> [Name of club] wanted success straight away. And how do you do that? You buy the best players. They bought the best players but,

guess what? Rugby teams don't win individually. You need this culture…. It takes time for a player to trust another player, and to want to play for another player. It took me a whole year before I wanted to run out there and put my body on the line for someone else…. So continuity brings people together. And it takes time… you bring people in slowly. And then they've got to integrate into what has been formed. The culture that's been formed… to get success, you need to build it from the bottom up. You can't boom, boom, boom, players. Headliners. You need to have a squad. You need to have a strong base. And everything is great right now with that. So we've got the opportunity to grow really fast. (Participant 1)

The third theme identified for establishing bonds between teammates related to maintaining equality in the playing squad. Specifically, this involved providing equality in treatment from coaches, nurturing an environment that caters for all players, and ensuring that all players' views across the squad are represented. Furthermore, players discussed the removal of fear between junior and senior players so that there were no perceived "levels" of the squad, as the following quote highlights:

> Rugby players are the kind of blokes who are normally quite sound people, who come and chat. They don't talk to you as if you're here and they're there. They talk to you on par, which, like I said, whether you're a 14-year-old kid training with [Name of club] for the first time, or one of their superstars. They've all been just the same. That's what's made me feel most welcome. How the internationals came and chatted to me. Made me feel at ease…. I think the big thing here, as well, there's no big cliques. You can go and talk to anyone. If you're having breakfast and you're on your own, you know the next person to come in you're going to get along with. It's not going to be someone who you don't talk to. You can just wait for someone to come along. (Participant 12)

The participants suggested several ways in which opportunities could be created for interaction. These included having: an academy house, training trips away from the main base, coffees together after training, disclosure exercises, situations in which challenge was experienced together, integration in training, team bonding socials, and structures for away matches. The following quote from one player illustrates the importance of such opportunities for interaction to enable success and enjoyment in a professional rugby context:

> It's a tough game, and, you don't go out there and make friends with your teammates. You make friends off [the pitch], and you make bonds. That's where you get to gel. In what you do, that's when you start caring about people. And, in turn, if you've got a good ethos, that foundation, that's where you care about how you're playing. And then when you're pulling the shirt on, you care about each other. And to care about each other, I think, when you then get out there, you naturally are going to give me 100%. I think it's fundamental to what you do. The cohesion - that is where everything comes from for me. When you come in from a weekend when we've all been out together, someone's played up, there's fun, there's laughter… you've done it together and have that enjoyment factor. That will make you thrive. (Participant 6)

The fifth theme for establishing bonds between teammates was ensuring effective teammate communication styles. The players discussed how communication within the team should be positive and constructive rather than negative, and also spoke of the importance of developing each squad members' empathy and willingness to openly share their emotions. The following quote provides an example from one player of what he would like teammate communication to comprise:

> Have the balls to talk man to man conversations with people. Stand up for what you believe. Not be a sell-out. Not being a sell-out is not just agreeing with people. So, if I think something is wrong, I say it…. But speak your mind positively. We don't need negative

energy… it's all about positivity. (Participant 1)

In addition to effective teammate communication, participants suggested that, to ultimately enable thriving, bonds could be established further in the team by the senior players offering guidance. For example, senior players could not only talk to and ask questions of younger players and act as the players' voice between the squad and the club, but they could also role model behaviors and implement a buddy or mentor scheme. The following quote comes from one of the more senior players interviewed and demonstrates some of this guidance in action:

I just concentrate on myself when I play. When I train throughout the week I try and concentrate on everybody else. Make sure everybody else knows their roles. Everybody else is enjoying it so they're not worried, they're not stressed. If you speak to players about me, hopefully they'd say that I always put them first, before myself, because I thrive on learning every position on the pitch, every lineout. So I'll always be saying "You alright? You know your role?", so during the game, people ask me questions and if people ask me questions I know that they're not afraid to ask it. Which is good, because then they're not afraid of making mistakes. Ask questions, make them feel comfortable. Just ask them how their day is going. Small conversation with the young players goes a long way…. Then you create a bond, which then creates respect. Then when you ask them to do something they listen. (Participant 5)

3.2. Establishing a connection to the coaching staff and club

This overarching theme consisted of seven themes: actively nurturing and managing a 'family' club culture, considerately treating non-playing squad members, creating an honest and fear-free environment, facilitating enjoyment, decreasing player turnover rate, establishing a joint team and club goal, and fostering player development. To establish a connection to the coaching staff and club, the players agreed that a 'family' club culture needed to be nurtured. Specifically, this could involve the club encouraging inclusivity of players' families, offering free child care, and ensuring that the coaches "fit" this desired culture. The following quote from one player illustrates what he would like to see in relation to this theme:

I've got two kids now, very young kids. And the pressures of dealing with children, looking after kids … my wife is stressed out because the kids are being a nightmare… it's just full-tilt. The person who, when I get home, relieves most pressure is my wife. So if she's stressed all the time, there's not a lot of pressure relief for me when I get home. I'm as stressed as she is…. You hear stories about other Premiership clubs and how they engage and look after the family… you find out "oh they've got a crèche", "oh they've got a dog kennel", or they organize a dinner out for the wives once a month. Showing that my family is a part of this club, makes this club a part of my family. It's like a two-way street. For me, that would relieve the most stress from my life and allow me to thrive more as a player. (Player 17)

In addition to players' families, the participants also spoke of the importance of considerate treatment for non-playing squad members. It was suggested that this could be done by keeping those on the periphery involved, having integrated training sessions, removing Saturday training, sending players on loan, and making Thursday's training session their game day. The following quote from one participant illustrates how a professional rugby club might look to achieve this theme to, ultimately, make players feel valued and experience improvements:

So it's about keeping the people on the periphery, about keeping them involved as well. To keep them enjoying it, to keep them having fun. They're already annoyed and pissed off that they're not

playing, so then by coming in and getting flogged [on a Saturday], and doing the same session we've been doing anyway. Or to come in when no-one else is there. I think sometimes it needs to be, "Right, you lads have had a hard week, you've been involved, you don't need to come in here, you don't need to do this". They then feel that they're being looked after as well. They just aren't out there being flogged every day. But, instead, when you come to a session, you'll get better and try again to make sure you are progressing. (Participant 6)

The third theme for establishing a connection to the coaching staff and club was creating an honest and fear-free environment. To do this, the participants suggested that coaches needed to: be accessible, allow players to express themselves, show a broader interest in players' lives, understand individual player's reactions, encourage freedom of speech, instill appropriate performance standards in training, and ensure a player focus at all times. In terms of understanding player reactions, the following quote from one participant demonstrates the importance of a coach knowing how best to provide performance feedback to players to create a fear-free environment which enables players to thrive:

[Previously] you were always playing with a fear of a meeting. If you made a mistake, you'd know that it would be punished in the next meeting. And that's what I didn't like. Because when you're on the pitch, you're playing at such a high intensity, mistakes are going to happen. So you can't be fearful of making a mistake, to then get ridiculed or crucified at the meeting. If somebody does something exceptional, praise that. If somebody does something which is not very good, don't call them out in a meeting. Have a one on one with them. Ask them why they did it. Else people are afraid to do stuff, because of that consequence, but have a positive open forum in meetings and you get a better response from players. Then people are like "Oh I did something good at the weekend, do you think they'll pull it up in the meeting?" And then they show it in the meeting and you're like "Okay, cool, they did notice that I did something well". And then I think you thrive when people are excitable to try and do extras again. (Participant 5)

A club that showed trust in players and demonstrated transparency in decisions and processes was also identified as important for promoting an honest and fear-free environment. Over and above coach and club behaviors, there were certain suggestions made relating to processes, policies, and initiatives that could be put in place to further create an honest and fear-free environment to strengthen the connection to the coaching staff and club. Specifically, these included the usage of exit interviews when players left the club, having a fair rule making process and selection policy, creating a leadership group to drive standards, introducing a trusted and reliable intermediary (acting between players and club), and providing a clear, honest, and constructive feedback process.

In addition to an honest and fear-free environment, participants suggested that, to ultimately enable thriving, a connection to the coaching staff and club could be strengthened by facilitating enjoyment. Participants suggested that this could be achieved by encouraging and facilitating team socials and ensuring that training was game-oriented, varied, and fun. The below quote provided by one participant shows how enjoyment can be facilitated for thriving benefits:

The enjoyment factor. How do you make people enjoy it? Well it's through those little things, being able to make sure that the schedule isn't monotonous and the same. Making sure we are doing different things. It's not saying you have to fly me to Dubai or Vegas and have a weekend there, it's not that sort of thing. It's not as big as that. It's the little things. An occasion for people to go to, to enjoy it, to have a great time to experience something different, but together. It gives you that to talk about when you come back, and enjoy that. That will make you thrive, I think. (Participant 6)

An additional suggestion for establishing a connection to the coaching staff and club to, ultimately, facilitate thriving was to decrease player turnover rate. Indeed, long-serving squad members were suggested to not only represent a culture and identity of a club, but also trigger enjoyment and performance as the following quote depicts:

> Lads have spent their whole careers here who love the club, and live and breathe the club, and that's what it's about. You need that. If there's nobody that has been here years, you come in and there's no culture there. Because you haven't got those people here who have been here all of those seasons. Been through it all with the club…. And that enjoyment of "Do you know what, we're working hard, and that's fun, because, now, we're going to be right for the weekend". For me, it all fits in. It's like a jigsaw. It all comes together as the big collective. To make you better out there. To make you play and make you care. It goes hand in hand for me. If you care about where you are, then you're going to do everything in your power to make sure you come right, and work hard, and graft. That's what it's about. (Participant 6).

The sixth theme referred to establishing a joint team and club goal. The players recommended that such goals were beneficial as could integrate playing and non-playing staff at the club, provide a stable vision and identity, help to share responsibility, and trigger a fighting for a cause mentality. To elaborate on this mentality and the joint nature of the goals, one player stated:

> I just want to know that what I'm seeing from this club, is the same thing that the guy next to me is seeing. But also, that the kitchen porter and the cleaners also understand what that is about. Because, the cleaner polishing the door knobs, doesn't [make me] better [at doing] my job. But if I see her doing everything that see can, and she sees me [doing everything I can], then we are all on the same page then. (Participant 4)

The final theme that could help to establish a connection to the coaching staff and club was by fostering player development. The participants offered various ways in which this could occur, including the alleviation of trivial decisions for them, employing a psychologist and someone to manage player development, offering flexibility and support, facilitating individualized and open player-coach discussions, utilizing existing relationships with sponsors, and supporting the end of career transition. The following quote exemplifies one players' ideas around how development could be fostered to create thriving:

> I think, helping players to be professional. Helping to alleviate trivial decisions from players. So, things like diet education and more specific personal development. I feel like we should have a more formal process to identify key development areas for every single player in this organization. They could ask "What are you doing outside of the club? Are you doing a course? How can we as an organization help you do that? Have we got sponsors who want to do some stuff with you? Or can we put you in touch and help facilitate that?" I feel like as an organization, we've got so many tools to develop players, in every area, not just trying to get a tiny bit more out of them on a match day. And I think, if we were more proactive, with the whole package, we'd get more on the rugby front. (Participant 17).

4. Discussion

In the present study, we sought to (i) provide an exploration of the environmental factors that may promote player thriving in professional sport, and (ii) offer suggestions for how key stakeholders can support these mechanisms. Analysis of interviews conducted with players from an English professional rugby club generated thirteen factors (labelled as themes) that players perceived to enhance thriving. These factors were underpinned by two general ideas (labelled as overarching

Table 1
Additional data extracts for the establishing bonds between teammates overarching theme.

Forming Collective Goals: I think we need to come together, actually enjoy what we do. And I think if we enjoy what we do, we play better. … I think that's the culture we have to buy into. Let's buy into it, not for the Lions tour, not do it to come 1st, let's just do it for each other. And let's play so that you know the guy next to you can stand with you. (Participant 8)

Decreasing External Player Recruitment: If you want to be something [as a team], you've got to earn it. … You want it to be staggered over time, so that you can maintain forever. [Almost as if] "The squad that have been with us for 5 years, and we're winning every year because the lads love it, they understand it. We've looked after them, they've looked after us. They keep performing." … When you put a load of money to a place, you want results, we all understand that. But, you have to understand that there's 11 other teams in Premiership that want the same thing. Rugby is a type of game where you can have a better team on paper, but you still lose because it doesn't click. (Participant 4)

Maintaining Equality in the Playing Squad: We talk about this player-led environment which I personally, really don't like, because it's not … there's 50 players in the squad, but you listen to the same 8 voices every day for a whole year. And those 8 players, four of them will be internationals, four of them will be senior players, they will all be 25 and above. And in the squad at the moment, you've probably got 25–30 blokes under 25. So how much of what I'm thinking and what I want is being put through? **So some younger representation?** Well change representation. So you get more than just the same input week-in, week-out. So you don't get the same voice, or the same person, being able to dominate a situation, which then goes onto the field. Because that person is so involved in making the game plan, you then can't drop them. … I also think you can have more than one group. So you can have a team for the weekend senior group, and then a squad senior group. So, if we are planning a social, ask the 18 year old what he wants to do. (Participant 8)

Creating Opportunities for Interaction: The social side was pretty much dead last year … we only had probably one night out. So I think that's important. … Generally, most people do get on with each other alright from a professional point of view. But I still think we could know each other better. I think we could mix better with each other. Not more, but better. If you let people in, if you care about people, you do better for them. If you know more about people, you know how to talk to them better, you know what makes them tick, it's different. … We're not deep enough with each other. We don't know each other well enough to know what makes them tick, or to bring the best out of them. (Participant 13)

Ensuring Effective Teammate Communication Styles: **You mentioned before about a part of your role going forwards being supporting that whole person, not just the rugby player. What is the intention and why is that important?** I think it's important because we want that connection between the players. So supporting them as people, means that they can develop personally. Allow them to become more confident, trustworthy, trusting each other with their emotions … then things like having a conversation or an argument about a lineout move are going to be easy, because you trust each other on a much more primal level. I find there is a big problem if you don't trust each other, and you don't challenge each other, then you end up with corridor chat [gossip]. (Participant 7)

Senior Players Offering Guidance: When I came here, [player name] and [player name] were ahead of me, and I was the young lad who'd come in, and they helped me a lot. They were great guys, to help me along and always … help me rather than scorn me. It was brilliant learning from them. I'm one of the older ones now, so with the younger lads, [I] help them come through and help them understand. …. And letting your hair down, letting them see me … as the older lads, if you get stuck in, start having a laugh and enjoy it, then everyone else comes along with it. I suppose that's part of being in that leadership role. Making sure that people aren't afraid to come and talk to me. Being respected for the right reasons. Being approachable and the young lads feeling that they can come and talk to me. (Participant 6)

Note. Text in **bold** represents the interviewer's voice.

themes): (i) Establishing Bonds between Teammates and (ii) Establishing a Connection to the Coaching Staff and the Club. The discussion that follows is organized according to these ideas and, given the limited research that exists on thriving in sport, draws reference to topics covered in the wider literature as well at those previously used in relation to thriving.

Six of the themes (viz., forming collective goals, decreasing external player recruitment, maintaining equality in the playing squad, creating opportunities for interaction, ensuring effective communication styles, senior players offering guidance) were underpinned by a common notion of developing and enhancing bonds between teammates. Finding that interpersonal connections between teammates are central to the

Table 2
Additional data extracts for the establishing a connection to the coaching staff and club overarching theme.

Actively Nurturing and Managing a 'Family' Club Culture: You've got to look at outside the bubble. What keeps people happy? Their family, their wives, the children. And if they're all supported, then you're supported. I think that's one thing, here we might be a bit better on, is helping the family outside of us players. Boyfriends, girlfriends, partners, kids … as soon as they're happy, it makes us happy. (Participant 5)

Considerately Treating Non-Playing Squad Members: Obviously only 15 guys can pull the shirt on at the weekend, another 8 on the bench. But if you're not in that 23, you've got to feel that you've got a purpose at this club, in this organization. So obviously that's where you've got to be a bit more creative, with what that purpose it. On a Thursday we go 15 on 15, so when I used to never play, I used to really enjoy being in the 15 that was against the team, and actually trying to beat the team. So maybe, for the younger boys, you make their purpose like 'right, that is your game day. Thursday is your game day. I want you to go out and show up the team, show what you're about.' Because people need something to hang their hat on and to work towards. To strive for. (Participant 16)

Creating an Honest and Fear-Free Environment: I think you've got to look after the individual first. So that they can apply themselves to a group wholeheartedly, and not just pay lip service to it. Or be forced into doing things. So that's definitely where it begins for me, with the individual. **Is that the club looking after the individual?** Yea. So try and alleviate those fears of selection, and new contracts, and things like that. And be honest about where the player sits. Say, worst case, you have to leave a club. It's a lot less scary when that is, at least, put on the cards 12 months before it happens. You can mentally prepare for it, it's either 'shit I need to pull my finger out and change these peoples' minds in the next 3 months', or 'I need to send my agent out for a look. Sort myself out physically, if I've got a particularly niggly injury'. … The whole while contributing positively to the general feeling at the club. (Participant 10)

Facilitating Enjoyment: I think, sometimes, we got caught in the bubble of rugby, rugby, rugby, when, sometimes, taking the team away for a day out, take the team for a social, can be more important than a day's training. I think we've been poor at that. We've been poor at facilitating the time for boys to have time together to have relationships, to build as a team. Because there's not 50 guys who are your mates, they are, but it's not you've picked them to be your mates. You're forced into an environment with 50 other guys, so you're not always going to get on with everyone. So it's important that you give boys time to form those relationships, so that when you demand more of each other as a player, you have that relationship to fall back on. An element of trust. A brotherhood of camaraderie. And I think that's something the club need to be better in terms of facilitating. … Sometimes training is important, but you have to trust that they [the players] know the basics, they know their stuff. But to enjoy each other's company, to have that relationship, to have that trust, is something that's overlooked far too much. **And you think that if the club did that, it would be more likely that you as an individual would thrive?** Yea, because you feel that the club trusts you enough to be professional about it. The whole, play-hard work-hard mentality. You feel rewarded by the club … they appreciate you. So I think, if that happened, we'd feel appreciated by the club. And it would bring us all together, and then, maybe, that would start to build a culture that we want to have. (Participant 2)

Decreasing Player Turnover Rate: Trust is a huge thing between players and the organization. Because if you want to be a [club name] player, you've got to feel that [club name's] got your back, they're behind you 100%. They're looking after your interests, so, guess what, I'm going to put my body on the line for this place. You actually care for the organization. You care for the reputation of the club. You care for the fans. A lot of people do feel like it because they've been here all their life. But when you've got guys coming in and out of the club like we've done in the last couple of years, the turnover rate has been very high, people are here for one year. Where is the love and passion? You can't form love and passion over a year. So a lot of people are individualistic, and if you're individuals, you'll never be a team or a culture. (Participant 1)

Establishing a Joint Team and Club Goal: I think, like I said, you've got to be fighting for a cause. So you've got to have everyone on the page of "We are playing for, not ourselves, we're playing for this club"…. You've got to get people trusting and believing in this place. You can't have fear. They've got to believe that this club has got their best interests, and they'll go out there and put their body on the line. (Participant 1)

Fostering Player Development: **Who do you think could help you thrive, and what could they do to help?** Obviously [coach name] has now taken charge of player development. I could say [coach name], but I'd probably say the players for me. Like [player name], [who plays in] my position. So I'd say, if you had a first team player that was paired with you and you met with them once a week or something, just had a chat. Or you see them out of the club. Obviously I sit down with [coach name] once a week now, and discuss how I'm feeling. How I think the games have gone that I'm playing. (Participant 15)

Note. Text in **bold** represents the interviewer's voice.

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promotion of thriving in professional sport in the present study, resonates with conclusions drawn previously in elite sport (e.g., D. J. Brown et al., 2018), and with the roles of colleagues in teacher thriving (e.g., Sumsion, 2004) and across the Dutch workforce (e.g., Bakker, van Veldhoven, & Xanthopoulou, 2010). Moreover, this aligns with Feeney and Collins' (2015) conceptual suggestion that humans can thrive through close and caring relationships. In relation to the findings of the present study, a number of mechanisms may help explain why enhancing bonds between teammates would enable individual player thriving. First, participants described that relationships built on trust, respect, and shared expectations, would generate a willingness to 'put their body on the line' for another player. Given the physical and attritional nature of a sport such as rugby union (see, e.g., Williams et al., 2017) and the intertwinned nature of players operating as individuals and as a collective in a team sport environment (see, e.g., Wolf et al., 2018), establishing unwavering commitment across the playing squad is likely to be important for concurrently achieving high-level individual and team performance, success and, ultimately, thriving. Second, players discussed how establishing bonds with their teammates can bring enjoyment, as well as a sense of belonging and feeling valued. These accounts appear to reflect the experience of relatedness satisfaction (cf. Deci & Ryan, 2000), which scholars have previously suggested to be one of the three basic psychological needs required for thriving (Ryan & Deci, 2017; see also,; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

When considering how to create bonds between teammates, two approaches appear to underscore the factors described in the analysis: (i) providing opportunities for high-quality interactions between players and (ii) establishing a collective and shared 'voice'. With regards to providing opportunities for interaction, participants described how both large occasions (e.g., organized team socials, away training trips) and smaller contacts (e.g., discussions over breakfast, seating in team meetings) afforded opportunities for interaction between players. These exchanges encouraged players to engage with those outside of their 'typical' group, which created greater familiarity across the entire squad, prevented individuals feeling isolated, and was considered to attenuate the possible formation and divisive effect of cliques (cf. Wagstaff, Martin, & Thelwell, 2017). In addition, players considered the experience of collective difficulty either on the sports field or as part of a team bonding exercise to support the development of bonds; this suggestion aligns with previous research that has demonstrated the shared experience of stressful events can enhance team cohesion (see, e.g., Bartone, Johnsen, Eid, Brun, & Laberg, 2002). When encouraging interaction between team members, it appeared important that these exchanges were of a 'high-quality'; that is, they were open and honest, parity existed between members, and communication styles were empathetic and constructive. Exchanges of this nature are likely to support expansive emotional spaces, generate trusting relationships, and facilitate thriving (see, D. J. Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, et al., 2017; Losada & Heaphy, 2004). Lastly, when considering these suggestions, it may be important to reflect on the influence exerted by external player recruitment. More specifically, the upheaval and unfamiliarity created by altering squad composition requires players to establish new, trusting bonds and to integrate new members of the team into the team culture, which may temporally preclude individual and team performing (cf. Tuckman, 1965) and, therefore, individual player thriving.

Turning to the development of a collective and shared voice, this suggestion considers how player thriving can be facilitated through the formation of collective goals within the playing squad, ensuring that views across the squad are equally represented, and the shared voice of the squad being presented to the club by the senior players. Encouraging team members to have an active role in generating and developing a clear collective goal/vision can create mutual understanding of, and investment in, what the team is trying to achieve (see, e.g., Webster, Hardy, & Hardy, 2017), increase team cohesion (see, e.g., Senécal, Loughead, & Bloom, 2008), and encourage teamwork (see, for a review, McEwan & Beauchamp, 2014). In addition to sharing their

views on the goals to be set for their team, all players should feel like their opinions and roles are well regarded by the group. This approach may not only enhance team performance (see, Sherf, Sinha, Tangirala, & Awasty, 2018), but also by perceiving other group members to be intrinsically interested to hear, acknowledge, and represent personal views, members will likely feel more related to each other and have greater motivation towards the collective cause which may lead to them thriving (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2017). In these circumstances, senior players can play a significant role in ensuring that the voices of those with a perceived lower standing in the playing squad are heard within the group, and that the opinions of the playing squad are being recognized in the broader organization. To enact these benevolent and prosocial behaviors, it is important that team members act empathetically (cf. Hoffman, 1991).

The second overarching theme that underpinned the remaining seven themes to promote thriving (viz., actively nurturing and managing a 'family' club culture, considerately treating non-playing squad members, creating an honest and fear-free environment, facilitating enjoyment, decreasing player turnover rate, establishing a joint team and club goal, and fostering player development), was establishing a connection between the players, the coaching staff and the club. Previous research from Brown, Arnold, et al. (2018) and Gucciardi et al. (2017) has highlighted the importance of coach support and coach behaviors with regards athlete thriving; however, the present study is the first to emphasize players' connections to the club/organization. One mechanism that may explain why these relationships promote thriving is the trust created by the bonds (see, Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009). To elaborate, players thought that establishing these bonds would mean that the club trusted the players in their ability to perform and in their capacity to make correct decisions (e.g., degree of professionalism). These perceptions would enhance players' own belief in performing at the required level and offer discretion over the choices they made, thereby satisfying their basic psychological needs of competence and autonomy (see, Deci & Ryan, 2000). Moreover, if individuals reciprocated the trusting relationship (i.e., they trusted that the organization would do right by them), then this would increase the closeness they felt to the organization and their perceptions of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as well as their propensity to thrive (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009). A second mechanism that may result from players feeling connected to the coaching staff and the club is all squad members perceiving that they are valued members of the organization. Feeling trusted and valued by an organization has been suggested to foster a willingness to cooperate and attend to other team members, which can then promote thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005). In addition to being willing to cooperate with others, participants spoke of being more willing to commit and fight for the collective cause if they perceived that the club was investing in them (e.g., supported their professional development). Taken collectively, these suggestions appear to support the role that the organization can play in supporting basic psychological need satisfaction, and, ultimately, thriving.

A number of suggestions emerged for facilitating connections between the players, the coaching staff, and the club. These include: establishing a club collective identity, creating a climate of transparency and fairness, and investing in the players and their family. For individuals to feel close to, and commit to an organization, they need to understand what the organization stands for (i.e., its values) and if congruence exists between theirs' and the organizations' values and objectives (see, e.g., Amos & Weathington, 2008; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Within a rugby union context, the players suggested that the values underpinning the identity and culture of the club were upheld and epitomized in the attitudes and behaviors of long serving squad members and, therefore, ensuring continuity in the playing squad was considered to help other members understand and connect to a club. This finding represents a shift in focus to previous work that has typically centered on the role of the performance directors and coaches in establishing a club collective identity (see, e.g.,

Nissen, 2017), but perhaps reflects the increasingly volatile nature of professional sport whereby players may remain at clubs longer than the head coach and management (see, Wagstaff, Gilmore, & Thelwell, 2016).

A second approach that could be used to support players' perceived connection to the coaching staff and the club is to create a climate of transparency and fairness. To elaborate, players thought that it was important for their coaches to be accessible, to communicate openly and honestly to players, and to treat players across the squad with parity. Moreover, it was considered important for players to feel like they could express their views without fear of retribution (e.g., subsequent non-selection). This latter characteristic describes an environment that has psychological safety; that is, an individual perceives they can express themselves "without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). Although this environmental feature has been considered in elite youth sport settings (see, e.g., Strachan, Côté, & Deakin, 2011), it is yet to be examined in elite adult or professional sports settings. Within professional work settings, Frazier and Tupper (2018) suggested that psychologically safe work contexts are need satisfying and found that perceptions of psychological safety predicted employee thriving; thus, psychological safety may prove to be a fruitful future avenue for thriving research in sport. In addition, perceptions of psychological safety have been found to predict individual and team learning from failure (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Edmondson, 1999), so may be of value to sport teams when managing the fluctuations in performance across a season.

To enhance players' perceptions of feeling valued and cared for by the organization, the third suggestion captures the strategies the club could use to 'invest' in the players and their families. Investment here does not necessarily involve financial contributions, rather investment is intended to refer to the effort and support provided in the personal development of players in and out of sport, and in the integration of the players' families into the club. For example, the average playing career of a professional rugby union player has previously been reported to be only 7 years (Rugby Players Ireland, n.d.), and a number of the participants voiced concerns regarding their transition out-of-sport. In addition, the players recognized that club sponsors could provide avenues for post-sport career development (e.g., learning new skills) and encouraged clubs to utilize these arrangements to initiate this process while the players were still playing. Pursing these actions would afford players an alternative skillset outside of sport that could support their post-sport well-being and quality of life (see, e.g., Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2017), and may enhance players' perceptions of feeling cared for, which has been found to be critical to the perceived effectiveness of social support following retirement from sport (see, e.g., C. J. Brown, Webb, Robinson, & Cotgreave, 2018). With regard investing in the players' families, this relates to encouraging inclusivity of players' spouses and children in club activities. As with previous thriving research (see, e.g., D. J. Brown et al., 2018), players perceived their families to be a key source of support; however, critically, they also suggested families impose strain. If clubs can help to alleviate strain arising from difficulties and loneliness when relocating or childcare for away trips for example, this would create a perception that the club was interested in and cared about the players' families which, in turn, may increase players' buy-in to the club.

With increased critical attention placed on the treatment and experience of athletes in highly pressurized elite and professional sporting environments, the present study offers a novel and timely investigation into players' perceptions of how these environments can be shaped to foster thriving in professional sport. Players' voices are represented in multiple raw data extracts and these quotations are used to provide readers with detail on the participants' lives to enable them to consider whether the findings 'ring true' to their own experiences as professional athletes, coaches, or practitioners working in these environments. Furthermore, these data extracts offer readers the opportunity to consider whether the findings are transferable to their experiences of other

sporting environments such as those with elite/funded, individual, or female athletes. We therefore hope that this study achieves naturalistic generalizability and transferability (see, for a discussion, Smith, 2018).

Whilst highlighting these strengths of the study, it is also important to recognize the limitations. First, sole interviews were conducted with each participant and all the interviews took place during a single phase of the season. Thus, the data capture participants' experiences at one-point in time and do not capture changes in the environment or the psychosocial process over the course of the season. To explore these dynamic events in the future, scholars may consider conducting repeat or iterative interviews as the season progresses (see, e.g., Wagstaff et al., 2017). Second, the current study sought to understand how to promote individual player thriving and, therefore, focused the analytical lens on the players' perceptions of factors relative to their own experiences. However, as anticipated, references were made by participants to the interdependency of thriving, which raises questions pertaining to the existence of dyadic or collective thriving in sport (e.g., If one person is thriving in a team, does that impact another player? How many team members need to be thriving for an organization to thrive?) These questions have begun to be answered in work settings (see, e.g., Thompson & Ravlin, 2017; Walumbwa, Muchiri, Misati, Wu, & Meiliani, 2018); however, they go beyond the scope of the data collected in the present study and offer avenues for thriving research in sport in the future. Third, researchers may wish to quantitatively examine the effectiveness and efficacy of the strategies forwarded to assess whether some approaches are more effective for facilitating individual player thriving than others, and whether any suggestions prove counter-productive to others. Fourth, researchers are encouraged to go beyond the environmental factors identified in the present study, and consider the personal enablers that promote thriving in professional sport, and the interactions between personal and contextual enablers. A fifth consideration is the inclusion of distinct, but similar themes (e.g., collective goals) under the two overarching themes. Separating and presenting the data in this way was considered to be the most compelling and coherent way by the study authors (cf. Braun et al., 2016); however, this is not intended to imply a restricted set of mechanisms through which the environmental factors could impact thriving or simplify the complexity of these interactions.

To conclude, we conducted the present study to (i) provide an exploration of the environmental factors that may promote player thriving in professional sport, and (ii) offer suggestions for how key stakeholders can support these mechanisms. Analysis of interviews conducted with players from an English professional rugby club generated thirteen factors that players perceived to enhance thriving. These factors were underpinned by two broad ideas (i) developing and enhancing bonds between teammates, and (ii) establishing a connection between the players, the coaching staff, and the club, and were motivated by the players' desire to operate within an integrated, inclusive, and trusting environment. These findings provide the first insight into the type of environment professional athletes believe can facilitate their development and success, and offer a number of unique suggestions to thriving literature. Significantly, it is suggested that clubs, coaches, and practitioners promote thriving through both overt and substantial gestures (e.g., team socials), and small and subtle interactions with players (e.g., considerate treatment of non-playing members) and their support networks (i.e., families). In closing, it appears that to promote thriving in a professional sport that requires emotion and passion to succeed on the pitch, rugby union organizations must appeal to the sensitivities and welfare of players off it.

Author note

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