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## **An Existential-Humanistic Perspective on Elite Athlete Lifestyle Support**

### **Abstract**

This study aims to highlight how an existential-humanistic perspective can inform athlete support and in doing so, emphasise the importance of explicating the philosophical underpinnings of athlete lifestyle support. Drawing on applied experience with elite youth cricketers over a twelve-month period, ethnographic data was collected through the observation, maintenance of case notes and a practitioner reflective diary. Based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we created three non-fictional vignettes that we use to illustrate how existential-humanistic theorising can inform lifestyle support. We discuss the implications of this professional philosophy in terms of considerations for performance and talent development programmes and how holistic support for athletes is positioned. We also discuss implications for athlete lifestyle and performance psychology practitioners, with regard to training, underpinning theoretical grounding of support and the strategic positioning of their practitioner roles.

*Keywords: sport psychology, lifestyle, applied, philosophy of practice, autoethnography*

### 23 **An Existential-Humanistic Perspective on Elite Athlete Lifestyle Support**

24 The field of sport psychology has endured ongoing debate regarding the role and  
25 responsibilities of applied practitioners (see Anderson, 2009; Brady & Maynard, 2010). The  
26 debate has focused on the degree to which sport psychologists have an exclusive  
27 responsibility to enhance performance, or whether there ought to be a broader remit to ensure  
28 that athlete wellbeing and personal development are catered for through carrying out more of  
29 a ‘caring’ role (Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006, Kerr, Stirling &  
30 Macpherson, 2017). Some authors have suggested that these two agendas need not be  
31 dichotomised and in fact, can go hand in hand with mental skills training and counselling  
32 approaches applied in harmony (Corlett, 1996a; Ravizza, 2002; Nesti, 2010). The assumption  
33 of a more inclusive approach to athlete support is based on the argument that there is no such  
34 thing as a non-performance element of holistic athlete support.

35 Alongside this debate, athlete lifestyle programmes and the role of lifestyle  
36 practitioners who deliver them have been developed within the athlete support infrastructure.  
37 This development was initially in response to research findings of elite athletes struggling to  
38 come to terms with athletic retirement (for a review, see Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). One  
39 early example in the USA, the Career Assistance Programme for Athletes (CAPA) (Petitpas,  
40 Danish, McKelvain & Murphy, 1992) aimed to introduce athletes to retirement concerns  
41 early in their career in order to alleviate the anxiety regarding their future after professional  
42 sport and thus prepare them for a smoother transition during retirement. Later programmes  
43 included but were not limited to the United States Olympic Education Centre (USOEC) and  
44 the Australian Athlete Career and Education (ACE) programme. Today, the England Institute  
45 of Sport (EIS) delivers the Performance Lifestyle programme to Olympic sports and some  
46 professional sports in the UK. Other professional sporting bodies have also developed

47 similarly aligned support services. These include the England and Wales Cricket Board's  
48 Personal Development and Welfare Programme.

49 Despite the growth of applied athlete lifestyle programme, there remains a lack of  
50 academic literature which has explicitly focused on the nature of support provided by  
51 lifestyle programmes. Stambulova and Ryba (2014) acknowledged that there is great  
52 diversity in the “more than 60” (lifestyle or similar) programmes that they identified  
53 worldwide (p. 7). Almost all of these programmes adopt “preventative/educational, ‘whole  
54 career’, ‘whole person’, and ecological perspectives” to athlete welfare. They suggest that  
55 sport psychology personnel deliver these programmes with a primary focus on providing  
56 education, guidance and skills to help athletes prepare for life after sport and to manage  
57 demands outside of their sport. More recently, Stambulova et al. (2020) cited Torregrossa,  
58 Regüela, and Mateos’ (2020) taxonomy of CAPs as

59 Consisting of holistic CAPs for elite athletes focusing on sport, education, work, and  
60 personal growth, sport specific CAPs for professional athletes helping with business,  
61 legal, financial and mental health issues, and dual career CAPs for student-athletes  
62 facilitating their sport-study combination” (Stambulova et al. 2020, p-6)

63 There have been various accounts of what lifestyle support should look like  
64 (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2020; Wylleman, Alferman & Lavalley,  
65 2004), yet, there is a paucity of literature to describe what practitioners actually do in  
66 practice. The ECB’s Personal Development and Welfare Programme is officially described as  
67 providing “integrated, impartial support to players and the team environment, to develop  
68 resilience in and out of cricket as a personalized service within the three areas of wellbeing,  
69 lifestyle and personal development” (ECB, 2017; also see EIS, 2017). This appears to  
70 promote a more immersed, relational, psychologically informed and performance-oriented

71 provision of support than is described in the academic literature. Moreover, across  
72 institutions, lifestyle support is not necessarily the exclusive preserve of the sport  
73 psychologist but might be facilitated and/or delivered by a practitioner who might have  
74 education, training or experience in a non-sport or non-psychology related field, for example,  
75 career advisors or former athletes (Devaney, 2019; Torregrossa et al., 2020). Despite the  
76 diversity that exists across sporting organisations and practitioners, the most relevant guiding  
77 literature for lifestyle support has been carried out from a sport psychology perspective. This  
78 confusion has created a lack of role clarity for both lifestyle practitioners and the sport  
79 psychology practitioners regarding the specific support they are required to provide. It  
80 appears that ambiguity and potential confusion exists with regards to how athlete lifestyle  
81 practitioners actually support athletes and what their purpose as part of a multi-disciplinary  
82 team is (Devaney et al., 2018).

83         The ambiguity and confusion is not helped by the lack of explicit lifestyle-focused  
84 research. It could be argued that these shortcomings are the result of the lack of gravity  
85 afforded to lifestyle concerns. As a result, 'lifestyle' concerns have often been broadly  
86 categorised as off-field personal factors (Dorfmann, 1990), personal issues that interfere with  
87 performance (Ravizza, 1990), or issues of a more general nature related to athlete wellbeing  
88 (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). Relying on broad descriptions makes it  
89 difficult to theorise the issues at hand, and understand the nature of support which is required.  
90 This leaves lifestyle practitioners with minimal academic grounding and guidance for their  
91 work in the field. However, in an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Priestley (2008) provided  
92 some guidance, suggesting that lifestyle programmes would be found wanting if they  
93 continued to rely on a culture of workshop delivery as opposed to the earning and building of  
94 trusting relationships. He highlighted the potential value of lifestyle practitioners embracing  
95 more ongoing and long-term, practitioner-focused and counselling psychology-based

96 approaches as a grounded framework from which to support the lifestyle-based needs of  
97 athletes.

98         The lack of insight into how athlete lifestyle practitioners support athletes combined  
99 with the potential overlap and/or confusion with the role of performance psychologists, as  
100 well as the need for theoretical grounding of lifestyle support, has created an opportunity for  
101 knowledge advancement. This ethnographic study aims to start filling these gaps in the  
102 literature and draws on the 1<sup>st</sup> author's applied experiences of working as a lifestyle  
103 practitioner with elite youth cricketers in a national talent development programme. These  
104 experiences allow for the theorising of players' concerns and an understanding of how  
105 support was provided whilst drawing upon an existential-humanistic approach. An  
106 existential-humanistic approach aligns with Priestley's (2008) call for long-term, practitioner-  
107 focused counselling psychology-based approaches; furthermore, it emphasises meaning,  
108 values, responsibility and situated freedom which aligns with the recommendation of  
109 Stambulova and Ryba (2014) and Torregrossa et al. (2020) to adopt a whole person approach  
110 to athlete support that embraces personal growth.

111         To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first to theorise lifestyle support  
112 provision and highlights the importance of explicating the philosophical underpinnings of this  
113 work. In our previous study (reference masked) we identified the lifestyle concerns that the  
114 youth cricketers sought support for. The objective of this study was to analyse the first  
115 author's applied experiences to theorise the lifestyle support within an existential-humanistic  
116 framework. It is hoped that this account can offer practitioners in the field insight as to how  
117 an existential-humanistic perspective can effectively underpin the support provision of an  
118 athlete lifestyle practitioner. In doing so, this research also aims to highlight the importance  
119 of lifestyle practitioners having a philosophical underpinning for the support they provide.

120

## Methodology

### 121 **Existential-humanistic approach: basic assumptions**

122 An existential approach is based on a human science conception of psychology that is  
123 focused on understanding the meaning assigned to the ‘lived experience’ (Giorgi, 1970) as  
124 opposed to natural scientific perspectives which have been criticised for reducing human  
125 beings to functional machines (Cooper, 2003). Cooper (2003) outlined how existentialist  
126 thinkers embrace the uniqueness and complexity of each human life as it is lived and  
127 maintain that human beings are more than a sum of their components. Existential thought  
128 generally subscribes to ontological realism; an assumption that there is a reality that is  
129 independent of our perspectives on it (Cooper, 2003). Therefore, existential psychology  
130 differs from social constructionist approaches which have become more visible in sport  
131 psychology and which generally subscribe to ontological relativism. However, an existential  
132 epistemology aligns with constructivism in asserting that our knowledge is always situated  
133 and partial (Richert, 2010). In contrast to an idea of a fixed inner core, Kierkegaard  
134 (1849/1983, p. 13) articulated the existential, anti-essentialist notion of the self as “a relation  
135 that relates itself to itself”, thus suggesting that the self does not lie in a fixed entity, but in  
136 the changing, complex and reflexive relationship that human beings have with their being  
137 (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). Essentially, human beings are ‘thrown’ into an existence in the  
138 world that is not of their choice, but are in possession of agency and are therefore not  
139 determined or totally constituted by their external conditions and culture (Ronkainen &  
140 Nesti, 2017).

141 Yalom (1980) suggested that the human condition is characterised by four “givens”:  
142 death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. Through acknowledging that we are on a  
143 unique journey towards death, we become responsible for our lives and decisions (Cooper,  
144 2003). This responsibility highlights the importance of making choices and taking actions

145 which are authentic. That is, we are called to make conscious decisions knowing that we are  
146 finite beings and by choosing one option we simultaneously abandon other possibilities.  
147 Existential psychologists discuss freedom in the sense that human beings are responsible for  
148 their own world. Freedom implies a great responsibility on the individual to make choices  
149 and take action, a responsibility which leads to normal (existential) anxiety (May, 1983).  
150 Isolation as a given refers to the fact that although we can form close relationships, each of us  
151 is always alone in their reflective consciousness. Finally, existential psychologists maintain  
152 that the search for meaning is a fundamental motive in human life. Our being is an issue for  
153 us (Heidegger, 1962), and we are thrown into the world to look for meaning in what some  
154 existential psychologists see as an inherently meaningless world (Yalom, 1980). However,  
155 not all existential psychologists conceive meaning as something to be simply created (from  
156 nowhere), but rather as something hidden but already there to be discovered (Frankl, 1963).

157       Existential psychology is founded on the grounding assumption that the fundamental  
158 aim of psychology is to understand and embrace the complexities of human life, not to fix or  
159 conquer it (van Deurzen, 2002). Nesti and Ronkainen (2020) described this work in sport as  
160 helping athletes to clarify what they are struggling with, identifying sources of meaning,  
161 authentic goals and values, helping athletes make conscious decisions and accepting  
162 responsibility for one's career life trajectory and relationships.

### 163 **An Ethnographic research approach**

164       The current study adopted an ethnographic approach to the research process.  
165 According to Peters, McAllister and Rubinstein (2001), the primary strength of an  
166 ethnography is its holistic approach and respect for the empirical world – that is, the everyday  
167 lived experience of people. They highlighted how this creates the potential for developing  
168 knowledge of human life and activities in their naturally occurring settings. Atkinson and  
169 Hammersley (1998, p. 110) outlined the following generic features of ethnographic research:



- 170 (1) A strong emphasis on exploring the nature of the particular social phenomenon,  
171 rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them
- 172 (2) A tendency to work primarily with unstructured data (i.e., that have not been  
173 coded at the point of collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories)
- 174 (3) Investigation of a small number of cases, perhaps just one, in detail
- 175 (4) Analysis of data that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions  
176 of human actions, the product of which usually takes the form of verbal descriptions  
177 and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate  
178 role at best

179 It is important to acknowledge, that the study also embraced elements of  
180 autoethnography, in that my (1<sup>st</sup> author's) practitioner reflections on providing support were  
181 important in answering the research question. Autoethnography, the study of one's own  
182 culture and oneself as part of that culture, allows researchers to use their own experiences to  
183 garner insights into the larger culture or sub-culture that they are a part of (Patton, 2015).

#### 184 **The participants**

185 The talent development programme we examined consisted of two squads of players  
186 between the age of 15 and 19 who had been selected as players with the highest potential  
187 nationally within their respective skill areas. The participants in the study were members of  
188 one of these squads. At the beginning of the research, there were 16 players in the squad, 12  
189 of whom were on their second year on the programme, and four were in their first year. After  
190 nine months, four players were deselected from the match playing squad, and four new  
191 players joined the programme. As such, members of the setting over the course of the  
192 research included 20 players selected from their First Class Counties (professional clubs  
193 playing the national domestic game who are awarded First Class status). Membership of the

194 programme involved attendance at residential domestic training camps, overseas competitive  
195 and non-competitive tours and home competitive tours. Of the 20 players involved in this  
196 study, 16 were in full-time secondary education throughout data collection.

### 197 **The researcher**

198         Foley (2002) suggested that if the researcher is to produce a more defensible  
199 interpretation of their fieldwork then there is a requirement to explore the “self” and the “other”  
200 relationship. This is particularly important within the current study given the co-creation of  
201 findings from within the practitioner-client relationship. At this juncture, it is also appropriate  
202 to share here the biographical information that formed the first author’s perceptual lens.

203         I (the first author) worked as a personal development and welfare (PDW) coach with a  
204 national cricket talent development programme, supporting male cricketers under the age of 19  
205 over a four year period. The Personal Development and Welfare role delivers the England and  
206 Wales Cricket board’s athlete lifestyle programme. Given the wide variety of backgrounds  
207 from which lifestyle practitioners appear to enter the field, it is important to state my training  
208 background and approach to supporting players. I have completed a BSc in Psychology and an  
209 MSc in Sport Psychology. As a result, I was effectively a trainee sport psychologist carrying  
210 out the role of athlete lifestyle practitioner. My philosophy of practice assumes a holistic  
211 counselling approach and is based on the existential-humanistic approach outlined previously.  
212 This professional philosophy recognises my belief in developing a meaningful relationship  
213 with those with whom I work with first and foremost and the value I place on rigorous personal  
214 examination and improved knowledge of self (Corlett, 1996a). Throughout the manuscript, the  
215 use of “I”, “me” or “my” will refer to the first author, whilst “we” will denote the research  
216 team.

### 217 **Data collection**

218 Data was collected over twelve months carrying out the role of PDW coach within a  
219 national cricket talent development programme. This twelve-month period included  
220 attendance and delivery at 10 training camps, one three-week overseas tour and one three-  
221 week home tour with occasional support delivered away from these structured programme  
222 periods, for example, when players were at home or school, or during the domestic cricket  
223 season. Data collection involved observation, the maintenance of player case notes that  
224 attempted to capture (as best possible) the conversations, challenges discussed, and  
225 interventions delivered in supporting players. The first author also kept a diary of practitioner  
226 reflections and discussed his thoughts and ideas throughout the process with the research  
227 team. These reflections allowed the authors to explore different interpretations of the events  
228 and experiences, and make theoretical links from the data to the existential-humanistic  
229 perspective. The novel approach to this study, using the first author's applied experiences  
230 meant that the maintenance of a reflective diary and the contributions of critical friends  
231 (Sparkes & Smith, 2002) held great value. This process allowed the research team to develop  
232 reflexivity (Brewer, 2000; Day, 2012), and, acknowledge, challenge and understand the first  
233 author's practitioner-researcher role. It was decided that data collection should follow  
234 ethnographic guidelines of notes never (normally) being written up more than 24 hours after  
235 the original engagement (Krane & Baird, 2005). These entries were then supplemented by  
236 practitioner reflective diary entries, during which I could attempt to make sense of my  
237 interactions with players and staff (Krane & Baird, 2005).

### 238 **Data analysis and representation**

239 A thematic analysis was carried out in alignment with Braun and Clarke's (2006)  
240 guidance. We recognise that Braun and Clarke have subsequently developed their approach  
241 to thematic analysis, most recently by describing it as reflexive thematic analysis embedded  
242 within the so-called 'big Q' qualitative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). However, we have

243 used their early framing of thematic analysis because it was conceived as “essentially  
244 independent of theory and epistemology” (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as opposed to their later  
245 versions of thematic analysis which they have described as incompatible with research  
246 drawing on realist ontological position (which informs this study). In drawing on the  
247 guidelines from their 2006 article, the steps of our analysis included (1) Familiarisation  
248 through repeated reading of the data whilst searching for meaning and patterns amongst the  
249 data, (2) Generating initial codes and organising data into meaningful groups, (3) Sorting  
250 different codes into potential themes and collating extracts from the data into themed groups,  
251 (4) Reviewing themes in line with Patton’s (1990) dual criteria of internal homogeneity and  
252 external heterogeneity, (5) Defining and naming the themes before (6) being prepared to use  
253 data extracts to prepare the report. This allowed us to recognise those challenges which  
254 appeared most common and most pertinent to the lives of these players during significant  
255 moments of the first authors applied one-to-one support. These moments allowed for insight  
256 into the broad range of support provided, whilst also providing examples of how an  
257 existential-humanistic perspective informed athlete lifestyle support.

258         The findings are represented as composite vignettes, (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul,  
259 1997; Spalding & Phillips, 2007). The vignettes are used to convey the situations that the first  
260 author encountered within his applied work. They are presented as one player’s experience of  
261 seeking out and engaging with support whilst recognising that as a composite character, this  
262 representation actually highlights the shared experience of several players. The vignettes are  
263 presented to illustrate how an existential-humanistic framework, and its associated concepts,  
264 informed how the first author made sense of the athlete’s situations, what their support needs  
265 where and how he used this to guide his work with the athletes. Vignette one is a case study  
266 of a player’s challenges as they were encountered over a series of interactions. This case  
267 study symbolizes what emerged as a boundary situation (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) for most

268 of the young players I worked with. The case study allows the player's whole situation as  
269 identified through observations and conversations with him and his coaches, to be  
270 appreciated by the reader. For vignettes two and three, individual dialogue extracts were  
271 created from real conversations with players, include player's own words and are presented  
272 as moments of applied work that offer insight into some of the more specific challenges that  
273 players sought support for. These vignettes are theorised drawing on existential-humanistic  
274 perspectives that are consistent with the first author's philosophy of practice. The vignettes  
275 are therefore presented as authentic recollections of the applied support provided, as captured  
276 within the case notes and practitioner reflections based on my work with players. The  
277 creation of composite vignettes allowed for deeply personal moments of player experiences  
278 and applied support to be presented. Further, it allowed for the protection of participant's  
279 ethical right for anonymity whilst maintaining a commitment to representing their words as  
280 well as experiences and their meaning as accurately as possible (Ronkainen, Sleeman &  
281 Richardson, 2019).

## 282 **Ethical Considerations**

283 Ethics can be a complicated subject when conducting ethnographic research  
284 (Goodwin, Pope, Mort & Smith, 2003; Ferdinand, Pearson. Rowe & Worthington, 2007), and  
285 this is especially the case when blending practice and research as in the current study. As a  
286 first step, the research reported here was approved by the University ethics committee. The  
287 Talent Development programme manager, and the first author's line manager (and national  
288 lead for the discipline), were both identified as gatekeepers who could provide access to the  
289 research environment, and provide consent for overt research within the environment.  
290 Research access was further facilitated by the researcher's entry to the program as a new  
291 practitioner within the staff team. All members of the setting (players and staff), were  
292 provided with a verbal briefing of the practitioner's role, the aims of the research and the data

293 collection procedures. All participants were offered assurances regarding anonymity and that  
294 they could opt-out and withdraw from the research at any time (no participants opted to do  
295 so). All players within this study have been anonymised, and anonymity has also been  
296 reinforced by the creation of composite characters blending several participants' experiences  
297 within the results. It was also felt that good ethical practice as a practitioner in the setting did  
298 not compromise, and in fact, enhanced good ethical practice as a researcher, as both demand  
299 responsibility for non-judgemental regard and support and a primary focus on player welfare  
300 and confidentiality.

## 301 Results

### 302 "I just don't know what I am going to do!"

303 *Paul has been a part of the England development programme for three years,*  
304 *making the progression from the National Under-17 squad to the Under-19*  
305 *squad. This progression can be seen as recognition of his positive development by*  
306 *the coaches. In addition, he was selected for the Under-19 world cup during his*  
307 *third year. In describing his abilities, a coach suggested that he is an*  
308 *"outstanding character to have in the team, he is a very good bowler and a very*  
309 *good batsmen. Unfortunately, he is not world-class at either of the two so he*  
310 *sometimes does not get the recognition he deserves." The player came to me*  
311 *faced with a lot of uncertainty regarding his future. He is in the final year of his*  
312 *county academy contract, meaning he will either get a county professional*  
313 *contract or be released. He has enjoyed mixed success when representing his*  
314 *county second team, and he says he feels he has played quite well for the National*  
315 *under-19 side. However, the topic of his contract has so far been completely*  
316 *avoided by the County. Thus, he is very unsure of his future. He is due to finish*  
317 *secondary education and is contemplating university, however, he is unsure if*

318 *he'd suit the university way of life, and is worried about having enough*  
319 *opportunities for cricket development to continue into a professional career. If he*  
320 *does get a professional contract, he is unsure whether or not the coaches would*  
321 *welcome his pursuit of a university place. Unsurprisingly, he is finding it difficult*  
322 *to focus on either his education, in the run up to his exams, or playing cricket at a*  
323 *crucial stage in his cricket career. He is anxious about how to approach the*  
324 *summer and the decisions which have yet to be made."*

325 The first thing that struck me about Paul's case was the sheer complexity involved at  
326 this decisive stage of his career. This included consideration of cultural norms and  
327 expectations regarding cricketers going to University, coach relationships, expectations of  
328 what Paul was required to do to 'earn' a contract, making educational decisions and the  
329 ongoing pressure to perform. Existential psychology provided me with an alternative view of  
330 Paul's anxiety, one that was concerned with Paul's possibilities and limitations rather than  
331 representing an unpleasant pre-competition emotion. Much of the literature discussing  
332 anxiety in sport has focused on competitive anxiety (Mellalieu, Hanton & Fletcher, 2005;  
333 Ford, Ildefonso, Jones & Arvinen-Barrow, 2017), the intensity of the emotion and whether it  
334 is facilitative or debilitating (Jones, Hanton & Swain, 1994). These descriptions of anxiety in  
335 sport do not account for the complexity and meaning of Paul's experience, and ultimately fail  
336 to look beyond the behaviourist or cognitive approaches to anxiety. I found out that Paul's  
337 anxiety was not so much related to his ability to perform, which he felt positive about, rather,  
338 it was a result of the uncertainty of his situation. That is, the potential for him to lose his  
339 status and identity as a county cricketer.

340 I felt that Paul was faced with a difficult situation and an urgent need to decide a course  
341 of action and take responsibility for those actions. I also felt that I had established a strong  
342 relationship with him throughout the previous six months. During two prolonged one-to-one

343 sessions, I believed that my role was to help him make sense of the challenges he was facing,  
344 and the meaning behind his anxiety, mainly, the major transitions facing him within the next  
345 few months and the uncertainty over his future. During the sessions, the player began to  
346 recognise some of the factors which he could take action on and began to plan for them with  
347 a greater sense of situational awareness, such as establishing targets with his coach and  
348 speaking to the University cricket programme coach. However, it seemed that the primary  
349 impact of our encounters for the player was in recognising the meaning behind his anxieties  
350 and that he would need the courage to face up to these over the coming months if he was  
351 going to earn a contract and achieve his goals. May (1989) recognised this as being central to  
352 the counselling process in helping professions, suggesting the counsellee should leave feeling  
353 more courageous, yet also very aware of the challenges/difficulties that lay ahead.

354

355 *“I don’t know if I can stay here, but, what would the coaches think of me?”*

356 **Me:** *So, how have things been going for you?*

357 **Mark:** *Not that great to be honest. I was quite nervous about boarding school,*  
358 *mostly because I had struggled so much away from home on tour last year. I have*  
359 *found it really tough to be honest.*

360 **Me:** *Can you tell me a bit more about that?*

361 **Mark:** *The difference in schools is just crazy. I was at a state school before, and*  
362 *the expectations of people now are so different. I am not sure I really fit in there*  
363 *or am cut out for boarding at all to be honest. I changed because it is a great*  
364 *school, it is better logistically for everything really in terms of being able to get to*  
365 *my county ground, and I guess it is also a good training environment for my*  
366 *cricket. But I have been missing home a lot and I have not really settled there.*



367 **Me:** *How does that feel?*

368 **Mark:** *It's quite lonely, I miss my friends, and family from home a lot, but also I*  
369 *feel like I don't really get along with the new people. Also for the first term, I*  
370 *don't have any cricket as it only starts after Christmas, so that has made it harder*  
371 *to fit in. This week is the first bit of time off I have had, and I have to spend all of*  
372 *it here on training camp, except for one afternoon at home. Because of that, I am*  
373 *finding it really hard to be here (on a training camp).*

374 **Me:** *I can see that must be quite tough for you. Have you tried to speak to the*  
375 *school to see if you could go home during time off more regularly?*

376 **Mark:** *Well, because of county cricket training at weekends, I am already using*  
377 *up most of my time off. I think I need to go home before the end of this camp*  
378 *because otherwise, I will not get home for a period of three months.*

379 **Me:** *Is that what you want to do?*

380 **Mark:** *I don't know. Last year, when I was really struggling on tour with*  
381 *homesickness, I discussed it with the (previous) PDW that I needed to pre-empt*  
382 *any challenges, and start to get support or help before it became a big issue. I*  
383 *kind of feel that that's what I am doing now. I feel I might really begin to struggle*  
384 *when I go back to school if I don't get time at home now. But I don't know what*  
385 *the coaches will think? It's not really a normal thing to do, to come to an*  
386 *England camp, and not want to be here. I just don't think the coaches would think*  
387 *too much of me if I did leave.*

388 **Me:** *That is a very difficult situation? So where do we need to go from here?*

389           **Mark:** *I am not sure, I think I should see how I feel tomorrow morning and*  
390           *decide then, but maybe it would be good if you spoke to the head coach, to see*  
391           *what he thinks about the idea.*

392           Mark had spent a large part of the previous season injured. He had then received a  
393           scholarship at an elite cricketing school that required him to leave home and begin boarding.  
394           He was also faced with a change of school which has challenged his identity and his ability to  
395           adapt. This has left the player feeling emotionally drained, and not particularly motivated at  
396           the prospect of his time on camp. The coaches had already observed his lack of engagement  
397           and some emotional outbursts from the player, which had drawn some criticism.

398           Drawing on my understanding of the existential counselling approach, with a focus on  
399           freedom of choice and ultimate responsibility for the athlete (Ravizza, 2002). I felt that my  
400           role was to remain non-judgemental and help Mark establish what was in his best interests  
401           whilst challenging him to understand his feelings. It was important to me that any solution to  
402           the problem came from Mark himself. In this sense, my approach was similar to that outlined  
403           by Henriksen, Diment and Hansen (2011) who stated that “elite athletes are motivated and  
404           learn better when they are allowed to think and take responsibility for their own  
405           development” (p. 8).

406           The following morning the player approached me leading to the following brief  
407           interaction:

408           **Me:** *I have spoken with the head coach, and he has remained discreet. He is*  
409           *happy for us to decide whatever we think is best for you. Have you had more time*  
410           *to think about it?*

411           **Mark:** *I think I need to stay. It will be hard, but I think I need to show that I can*  
412           *do it. I think I will let down my teammates and coaches if I do not stay, and I*

413 *think I need to show myself that I can do it, if I am to keep doing it for the rest of*  
414 *the winter.*

415 **Me:** *Ok, I think that is great. I am here to help if you begin to find it tough during*  
416 *the rest of the week, and when you are back at school, do not hesitate to come to*  
417 *me.*

418 Mark was faced with a challenging situation, which could have led to him leaving the camp  
419 and presenting what he felt would be an unfavourable image of himself. Ultimately, my  
420 interpretation was that he needed to become more comfortable with his growing  
421 independence, within a short period of time in order to balance his commitments and busy  
422 schedule. He decided, to accept the uncomfortable moments that this created, understanding  
423 the commitment that was required of him, and face the challenges with my support.

424 In critique of the existing literature on transitions, Nesti and Littlewood (2011)  
425 suggested that the term transitions could be too easily interpreted as something that is rather  
426 smooth, steady and relatively easy to negotiate. They suggested that a more dramatic and  
427 appropriate term to describe these situations for athletes is critical moments. In this sense, it  
428 was not so much the transition itself, but the critical moments, viewed within the context of  
429 these broader transitions that required a response from the player. Critical moments could  
430 “range from something to nothing, could be large or small, intended or unintended and may  
431 have a negative or positive effect on a person’s sense of self (self-awareness and self-  
432 knowledge)” (Nesti, Littlewood, O’Halloran, Eubank & Richardson, 2012, p. 25). In other  
433 words, they are the frequently experienced moments in our lives where we must confront the  
434 anxiety associated with an important change in our identity. Interestingly, Schlossberg’s  
435 (1981) early conceptualisation of transition, which was a dominant feature of early athlete  
436 transition literature (Alfermann & Gross, 1997) and still remains well-cited, discussed the

437 transformation of the self in relation to transitions. However, sport psychologists appear to  
438 have largely ignored this existential dimension of her model, focusing more on coping  
439 resources and barriers related to the broader and more predictable transitions.

440           According to an existential perspective, critical moments will always involve  
441 existential anxiety (Nesti et al., 2012). Mark's anxiety is not simply the result of the  
442 impending need to perform. Like Paul, it is a result of the uncertainty of his current situation,  
443 as well as his responsibility and freedom to act. Existential psychologists contend that there is  
444 a danger in individuals attempting to avoid or remove this normal anxiety by living as though  
445 we have no influence over whom or what we will become. From this perspective, we may  
446 view anxiety as a positive thing, an indication that we value some future enough that we are  
447 ready to commit to it, despite the uncomfortable uncertainty (Nesti & Ronkainen, 2020).  
448 Whilst Mark and Paul accepted the feelings of discomfort, it was suggested that these  
449 feelings when embraced through greater understanding can lead to positive outcomes of  
450 individual growth (Ravizza, 2002) and "courage" development (see Corlett, 1996b).

451           The challenges discussed by Mark and Paul involved a combination of life within and  
452 outside of cricket, suggesting that treating these two as completely separate would be to the  
453 detriment of the support provided. Instead, these discussions related heavily to the players'  
454 sporting life and how this fits in with who they are and who they wanted to become. The  
455 encounters I had with these players appear to reinforce the value of practitioners recognising  
456 the whole person, and not just the athlete (Ravizza, 2002) whilst suggesting that  
457 discriminating between performance and non-performance factors may be misguided.

458 ***"If I am going to improve, they need to know where I am coming from!"***

459           **Me:** *Hi Terry, how are you doing?*

460           **Terry:** *Yeah, mostly ok. Been working hard and been hitting it well; there have  
461 just been one or two things I have struggled with. I have always played the game*

462 *a certain way, very attacking. I tend to take on a lot of big shots, which when it's*  
463 *good it's great, when it goes wrong, your gone. The coaches want me to change*  
464 *the way I play, which means taking fewer risks. But to me it feels so unnatural,*  
465 *it's like, I have to really think to play the game that way, which causes me to*  
466 *make mistakes. I am at my best when it's just natural and I keep it simple. I can*  
467 *see why the coaches want me to become safer, but I just feel like it changes all of*  
468 *the good things I have to offer.*

469 **Me:** *Have you spoken to the coaches about it?*

470 **Terry:** *Well that's the thing, I don't really know if I can? So I thought I should*  
471 *ask you about it first? I don't want to seem like I am being arrogant and just*  
472 *saying I don't want their advice, but at the moment I feel it's making things more*  
473 *complicated. What do you think?*

474 **Me:** *What makes you think that you cannot speak to them about it?*

475 **Terry:** *Well it could seem like I am questioning them, or not showing them*  
476 *respect. I feel like I need to make them think I am improving, and to them, making*  
477 *this change would be improving... or else they won't keep picking me. I get on*  
478 *really well with the coaches, so I want to keep that but I also want to feel better*  
479 *about my batting. So I don't really know what to do?*

480 **Me:** *Well, I would ask why you are here. What are you trying to get from being*  
481 *here?*

482 **Terry:** *Well I am here to improve and eventually play for England. Right now I*  
483 *am here to get better as a player, but I am not sure I am at the moment. So do you*  
484 *think I should speak to the coaches, I am afraid they won't appreciate it?*

485 **Me:** *Well to me, it seems like this current situation is not really good for either of*  
486 *you. Both you and the coaches want to see improvements. What's your view?*

487 *Which of the coaches might you feel most comfortable speaking to?*

488 **Terry:** *I think they need to know why I am struggling. I need to help them*  
489 *understand why I find it tough to change. If I do maybe they can help, or we can*  
490 *work on it together. I think I could speak to Bob, I get on well with him, but it will*  
491 *still be quite difficult to do, and let him know what I am thinking. If I am going to*  
492 *improve, they need to know where I am coming from. Thanks for speaking to me*  
493 *about this.*

494 **Me:** *No problem, if you want we can have another chat before you do speak to*  
495 *Bob, and we can plan what you want to say to him?*

496 The final vignette highlights the interpersonal and integrated nature of working within a  
497 performance environment and the position I assumed when remaining non-judgemental and  
498 confidential to support players. Given the recognition that coaches are one of the most  
499 important actors within a youth sport context (Camire, Forneris, Trudel & Bernard, 2011) and  
500 also play a crucial role in determining players' future opportunities in the sport, it is no surprise  
501 that maintaining a positive relationship with their coaches is thought to be highly important for  
502 players. However, like Terry, players could be left wondering who they need to keep happy,  
503 and confused by what could appear to be conflicting messages. The want of players to keep  
504 others happy appeared to present a risk to players as they struggled to maintain a sense of  
505 personal authenticity (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). This could place their identity in a state of  
506 confusion (Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood 2013) and negatively influence their ability to  
507 take responsibility for their own development and future. The influence of the performance  
508 environment, and the key stakeholders within it on Terry's sense of self, meant that he preferred  
509 to have a somewhat impartial practitioner to speak to during the challenging moment.

510 Informed by existential thought and the existential perspective on counselling, I felt  
511 that I had been recognised as that person whose interests lie with Terry's needs, rather than  
512 any form of selection criteria or performance agenda. Nonetheless my work was likely to  
513 have a performance impact, making this support in no way redundant from the performance  
514 goals of the team. The added benefit is that through being immersed within the staff team, I  
515 could understand the context and prove an informative link to the staff, yet provide a non-  
516 judgemental and confidential source of support for the player. The concerns were not directly  
517 relating to performance, yet, I interpreted the primary goal of the work as seeking to improve  
518 coach-athlete relations, the player's ability to take responsibility for his development and  
519 ultimately, performance for the player.

520 Being empowered to perform this role depended on my immersion in the  
521 environment, as it requires developing trusting relationships with players and staff. In  
522 Richardson's (2003) doctoral research investigating the role of heads of education and  
523 welfare within football academies, he found that the practitioners continuously strived to  
524 drive, guide and implement an explicit player support agenda. My experiences align with this  
525 stance. Amidst the highly competitive, performance-driven environment of elite sport, the  
526 needs of the player can easily become a regrettable after-thought when more embedded  
527 consideration could have assisted the development of the player. Gaining trust and buy-in to  
528 perform this role required constantly promoting the synthesis of performance and welfare in  
529 the staff's efforts to help players deal with the demands.

### 530 **Discussion**

531 It seems pertinent to briefly discuss the nature of concerns that players shared as it  
532 adds context to the primary research objective. The players presented concerns which related  
533 to decisions over whether or not they would get a professional contract, deciding whether or  
534 not to go to university, performance anxiety, homesickness, changing school, coach

535 relationships and issues regarding cricket performance and selection. Although players'  
536 concerns originated both in and out of cricket, the players considered these concerns to be  
537 vital to their performance and development within their life. However, previous literature  
538 within sport psychology has been dominated by a focus on the delivery of performance-  
539 focused mental skills training, drawing on a cognitive behavioural perspective. This  
540 dominance has come at a cost of not understanding the broader lives of the whole person and  
541 how this relates to performance; and of there existing limited discussion regarding how other  
542 approaches, for example, an existential-humanistic approach, can underpin effective support.

543         The concerns that players raised were deeply complex and I found that there was a  
544 requirement for a more meaningful understanding of the person and their context when  
545 compared with those described in much of the literature. The issues players raised in this  
546 study were also much more complex than being able to be resolved through the delivery of  
547 mental skills training, or the delivery of education and guidance. The concerns presented  
548 typically required consideration of the whole person, the social context of the concern and the  
549 player's negotiation of their identity. This incongruence between the focus of previous  
550 literature and athletes' actual experience of concerns is problematic for the training and  
551 development of lifestyle practitioners (and sport psychologists), who may remain unaware of  
552 the complexity of players' concerns in practice. It may also act as a barrier to getting holistic  
553 support higher on the agenda of organisations and their support infrastructures, ultimately  
554 limiting the development of athletes and negatively impacting performance.

555         The overarching research objective was to understand how an existential-humanistic  
556 perspective can inform the work of an athlete lifestyle practitioner. In his unpublished work,  
557 Priestley (2008) highlighted the importance of building and earning trusting relationships and  
558 the need for unconditional, non-judgemental, empathic, genuine and congruent support of  
559 players. He suggested that a person-centred approach to counselling could provide an



560 effective blueprint from which advisors could work and seek to develop professionally. These  
561 findings will add to this, by suggesting that an existential-humanistic perspective (Nesti,  
562 2004) may provide an alternative approach that is, at times, more applicable given the nature  
563 of demands facing these young players. According to Nesti and Ronkainen (2020), the goal  
564 of the existential approach when supporting athletes is to help athletes clarify what they are  
565 struggling with and identify their sources of meaning, authentic goals and values, as opposed  
566 to uncritically fulfilling the team's or coach's aspirations and cultural norms. This does not  
567 equate to radical individualism, rather, the ability of players to make conscious decisions and  
568 take responsibility for their own career and development. Many of the elements described by  
569 Priestley (2008) remain important to this process. However, the existential approach suggests  
570 that whilst the "encounter" (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) can be uncomfortable for the athlete,  
571 as embracing the responsibility to act is personally demanding, the normal anxiety associated  
572 with the concerns described by the players above can be viewed as a positive experience.  
573 This is not to say that the situation is simply reframed as a positive one, but that the normal  
574 anxiety indicates that the athlete values some potential version of their future. As a result, the  
575 challenge can lead to the development of a greater sense of self, commitment to pursuing a  
576 specific future, personal growth and courage.

577         In order to support athletes using an existential approach, an athlete lifestyle  
578 practitioner will require buy-in and trust from programme managers, requiring time and  
579 contextual immersion. Practitioners must also develop player's trust through demonstrating  
580 two qualities central to a humanistic and existential approach to counselling; remaining non-  
581 judgemental and maintaining confidentiality. This does not mean that information can never  
582 be shared between practitioner, player and other staff working with the player. For example,  
583 Bickley, Rogers, Bell and Thombs (2016) highlighted that developing a shared understanding  
584 of a player's challenges allows for more effective working as a staff team. However, finding

585 the balance between offering confidentiality to athletes and supporting the broader system of  
586 support staff in their understanding of player needs will require ethical consideration and  
587 appropriate contracting with the player.

### 588 **Limitations**

589 In this study, as in our previous research (reference masked), the practitioner and  
590 researcher roles were symbiotic in their dual-focus on athlete care and wellbeing but did  
591 create a sense of role conflict between an active practitioner and (a more) neutral researcher.  
592 The combination of practice and research does create ambiguity with regard to confidentiality  
593 and anonymity, thus requiring careful management of data and a limited presentation of the  
594 broader lives and backgrounds of participants. Representing participant stories from memory  
595 as opposed to audio recording was also a necessary limitation not to compromise the trust  
596 involved in performing the practitioner-researcher role. However, the practitioner-researcher  
597 approach was considered a major strength of this research as it provided a uniquely applied  
598 insight into the player's experiences. Having the role of the practitioner who was there to  
599 support the players rather than just gather observations facilitated the gathering of rich,  
600 emotional and honest insight into player's lives. The longitudinal nature of immersion also  
601 acted as a strength in terms of the depth of data accrued and researcher credibility, helping to  
602 advance understandings a relatively under-studied topic. Finally, although an existential-  
603 humanistic perspective was highlighted as highly valuable to underpin athlete lifestyle  
604 support, it is important to acknowledge that it is not the only perspective or lens, through  
605 which the support of players in this study could be viewed. However, it is believed to be an  
606 under-represented and valuable perspective upon which practitioners can base their work.  
607 Further, it is hoped that highlighting the value of a single perspective does highlight the  
608 responsibility that practitioners hold to ensure their work is underpinned by an appropriate  
609 theoretical grounding.

**610 Implications**

611           This study has theorised the psychological nature of athlete lifestyle concerns from an  
612 existential-humanistic perspective. It has been argued that this perspective can provide a  
613 sound theoretical grounding for effective lifestyle support and should, therefore, be a more  
614 prominent perspective within the literature when discussing the holistic support of athletes  
615 from either the perspective of athlete lifestyle or sport psychology support. The analysis has  
616 also highlighted the importance of explicating the philosophical underpinnings of lifestyle  
617 support provision. This raises two issues requiring consideration and further discussion  
618 within the industry of athlete lifestyle support. Firstly, do lifestyle practitioners assume a  
619 philosophy of practice in their work, and secondly, how does the lifestyle practitioner role  
620 relate to that of a sport psychologist given both roles will require a strong psychological  
621 underpinning and both roles will seek to provide holistic support for performance and  
622 wellbeing.

623           Although allowing for a wide range of skill sets within the lifestyle support industry,  
624 the diverse backgrounds from which lifestyle practitioners may originate (e.g., sport  
625 management, sport science, career support, teaching, ex-athlete) suggests that many of them  
626 may not have a psychologically informed philosophy of practice through which to ground  
627 their support of players. Perhaps as a result, there remains no literature discussing where  
628 practitioners do seek guidance for their work. This article presents a first attempt at  
629 illuminating one practitioner's theoretical grounding and guidance within their work.  
630 However, some of the content may come as a surprise to others, who have not shared the  
631 same developmental pathway as the first author, making it all the more important for others  
632 to share their theoretical grounding and where they turn to for professional guidance.

633           With regard to the relationship between lifestyle practitioners and sport psychologist,  
634 the findings of this study suggest that it would be ill-guided to consider “on-field” and “off-

635 field” issues as two separate areas to address in isolation. Instead, we suggest that issues  
636 away from sport require careful consideration of sporting elements of the players’ broader  
637 lives, and vice versa. This dispels any notion of the issues being strictly either performance or  
638 non-performance in nature. This is important, as it suggests that truly holistic support of  
639 athletes by performance psychologists and lifestyle practitioners is not simply about dividing  
640 roles and responsibilities into performance and personal concerns, but about understanding  
641 the person and the meaning that they ascribe to their lived experiences. This suggests that the  
642 practitioner’s philosophies of practice and the theoretical underpinnings of support provision  
643 will prove a better guide for practitioner support roles, than dividing or assigning roles and  
644 responsibilities. Otherwise, there may be a situation whereby athletes are not sure who they  
645 should speak to regarding their concerns, or, whereby certain athlete concerns are not being  
646 considered by either practitioner as a necessary element of the support they offer.

647         In order to ensure effective applied psychological support of the whole person, it is  
648 necessary to establish a strong relationship and interrelatedness between the support of the  
649 “on-field” and “off-field” regardless of support infrastructure. This relationship will need to  
650 built upon an understanding of player’s whole lived experiences and the philosophical  
651 underpinnings of each practitioner’s work and their skill sets. However, the important  
652 message for athletes and organisations is that there is a recognised need for the athlete to have  
653 access to a truly holistic support network/package in order to develop personally and as  
654 performers simultaneously and symbiotically. Organisations and programme managers need  
655 to strongly consider the dynamics of training backgrounds and philosophies of practice  
656 involved in the holistic support of athletes in order to help guide both recruitment and the  
657 training and/or development of practitioners.

658

659

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