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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 & Lavallee,
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 (Poczwardowski, 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

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

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

To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first to theorise lifestyle support provision and highlights the importance of explicating the philosophical underpinnings of this work. In our previous study (reference masked) we identified the lifestyle concerns that the youth cricketers sought support for. The objective of this study was to analyse the first author's applied experiences to theorise the lifestyle support within an existential-humanistic framework. It is hoped that this account can offer practitioners in the field insight as to how an existential-humanistic perspective can effectively underpin the support provision of an athlete lifestyle practitioner. In doing so, this research also aims to highlight the importance 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 (1st 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 finding 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 situatons, 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 debilitative (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 awarneess, 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 counselee 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 contect 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" regarless 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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