



Navigating athlete development in elite sport: Understanding the barriers to the provision of performance lifestyle service in England

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ABSTRACT

The English Performance Lifestyle (PL) service is a Career Assistance Program that aims to support British elite athletes in their holistic development throughout their time in elite sport to support their mental health and career prospects during and following their careers as athletes. Yet, despite the widespread existence and significant funding dedicated to this service, researchers have identified how it is often not fully embedded or used by sport organizations. Therefore, the aim of this study was to extend previous research by understanding the barriers to the provision of the PL service. Underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological constructivism, 25 Performance Lifestyle Practitioners (PLPs) working in elite sport participated in a qualitative survey and focus groups. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes were developed: *There's a Mountain to Climb*, *It's a Crowded Train*, *You Need an Elevator Pitch* and *A Seat at the Performance Table*. These themes highlight the barriers PLPs face in supporting athletes with their growth and development during their athletic career. The results offer unique insight into PLPs' roles and the challenges they encounter. As such, we offer practical implications including the importance of organizational support, encouraging athletes to develop a multidimensional identity and a variety of narratives that would offer athletes and practitioners another way to be in elite sport. We also offer recommendations for future research aimed at advancing the practice of PLPs to optimize support for elite athletes, such as including diverse perspectives and including both athlete and practitioner voice in the development of Career Assistance Programs.

1. Introduction

Early Career Assistance Programs (CAPs) emerged in the latter half of the 20th Century and were designed to support athletes with their education, career development and retirement from sport (Anderson & Morris, 2000). CAPs have evolved from this early work and now support athlete career termination, life skills programs, often incorporate a multidimensional, integrated and whole person approach that exist within the sports environment (Thomas et al., 2018), to support individuals to thrive in all aspects of their lives. Stambulova and Ryba, 2013; Stambulova and Ryba, 2013 suggested there are approximately 60 programs operating globally, that provide support to athletes to manage various athletic and non-athletic demands. More recently, Hong and Minikin, 2024 conducted an international analysis of 23 CAPs and found a range of support foci. The areas of support provided to athletes

included: transitions, career development, financial literacy, taxation, brand management, mental health, life skills, sustainability/environmental issues, academic and vocational support. Moreover, the authors noted a range of delivery mechanisms were used, including: workshops, one to one coaching, and counselling. The evolution of CAPs over the last 20 years has seen an expansion of frameworks to guide practice. Given the global appeal, Stambulova and Ryba, 2013; Stambulova and Ryba, 2013, 2014) developed a new paradigm termed *cultural praxis of athlete's careers*, highlighting the importance of culturally informed research and practice, guiding researchers and practitioners to consider their work reflexively within their sociocultural contexts. Yet, while there has been increased research attention in this field and the construction of professional practice services across the globe, the uptake of this service remains marginal as it is yet to be fully embedded in elite sport.

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One potential reason for the limited uptake of this service provision across the globe is the dominant performance narrative in elite sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006). A performance narrative describes the “value of single-minded dedication to sport and prioritization of winning above all other areas of life” (Douglas & Carless, 2009, p. 6). The singular focus by athletes on medals and performance outcomes can lead to a relegation of other areas of their life such as personal relationships or preparing for their next career (Douglas & Carless, 2016). Moreover, athletes who invest all their time and energy into their sport, often neglect to explore other areas of life and can impede the development of a well-rounded self-identity (Brown et al., 2000). Indeed, Petitpas and France (2012) suggested that the psychological and social aspects of sport might significantly contribute to the development of identity foreclosure among athletes. Athletic identity foreclosure has been defined by Brewer and Petitpas (2017) as the “commitment to the athlete role in the absence of exploration of occupational or ideological alternatives” (p. 118). The risks of identity foreclosure can lead to challenges in adapting to life after sport, difficulties in coping with injury (Myer et al., 2015), and increased vulnerability to mental health issues due to the lack of alternative roles or identities to draw upon when the athletic career ends, (Voorheis et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of encouraging athletes to develop diverse interests and explore different aspects of their identity to ensure a more balanced sense of self.

At the Athens Games in 1996, Team GB finished 36th in the medal table. Twenty-five years later, at the Tokyo Games, they finished 4th, winning 64 medals. From 2004, UK Sport, the Government agency responsible for investing in Olympic and Paralympic sport in the UK, adopted a so-called “No Compromise” performance-driven approach that focused on “rewarding excellence, supporting talent and rejecting mediocrity” (Whyte, 2022, p. 205). After the Rio Games, there has been a notable change in the UK’s high-performance landscape, with increasing scrutiny (McDonald et al., 2022) and several welfare issues being raised by athletes. A Duty of Care report in 2017 was instigated by the UK Government, with the aim of ensuring athletes in the UK high-performance sport system are “protected, free from harm, bullying, harassment and discrimination” (Grey Thompson, 2017, p. 4). During the Paris Olympiad cycle, UK Sport unveiled a new strategic direction to reflect an approach guided by “medals and more” and “winning well.” While National Governing Bodies (NGB’s) still have clearly defined medal targets, there is less clarity with regards to athlete development (Poucher et al., 2021).

Further to the research on the emergence of CAPs, researchers have begun to explore the challenges of “the team behind the team” (Arnold et al., 2019) to gain a more in-depth understanding of the work of support staff in elite sport environments. To elaborate, Wagstaff (2017) noted the complex social and organizational environments that influence athletes coupled with a rapid expansion of sport science, medicine and technology support teams and disciplines, each of whom are performers in their own right within the elite sport context. As such, Performance Support Teams (PST) in elite sport now frequently consist of sport science practitioners (e.g., physiologists, nutritionist psychologists, performance analysts, performance data, strength and conditioning, performance lifestyle), sports medicine practitioners (e.g., physicians, physiotherapists, soft tissue therapists, athlete health) and a range of other support staff and consultants (e.g., engineers, innovation specialists, financial advisers, legal advisers, and branding specialists).

The Performance Lifestyle (PL) team is the UK Sports Institute’s CAP and was established in 2002, originally under the name of Athlete Career Education program, a title which originated in Australia. The team is centrally funded by UK Sport to ensure all athletes have access to personal development. The team supports athletes with a whole career, whole person approach across the areas of transitions, mental health and well-being, education, career development, financial health and learning and development. The PL service has increased in size over the last two Olympic and Paralympic cycles and now consists of 35

practitioners that support athletes across 40 different sports. Practitioners are supported by a technical leadership team and Head of Service. Poucher et al. (2021) recognized PLPs’ role in supporting an athlete’s growth and development during their athletic career.

While there has been a dearth of research dedicated to the experiences of CAPs practitioners (Day et al., 2018; Stansen & Chambers, 2017), researchers have recently begun to explore the lifestyle provision for elite youth athletes in Australia, suggesting sport organizations attribute greater value to the relational elements of lifestyle support and encourage the embeddedness of practitioners within the performance environment (Devaney, 2019). Chambers and Lim, 2022 provided a contextualized understanding of the role of Player Development Managers in Australian professional sports. Following interviews with 13 Player Development Managers from Australian rules football, cricket and rugby union, those that reported a ‘resistant’ club culture to their support also felt they were not fully embedded or valued within the performance environment. Practitioners from this study also felt that welfare and personal development were deprioritized in these environments, in contrast to performance and coaching. Moreover, where organizational support was lacking, these Player Development Managers felt marginalized in their role in comparison to practitioners who felt they were working in ‘supportive’ club environments, and who felt trusted and valued by coaches and the wider team.

Given previous research has identified the PL services is underused by some athletes (Poucher et al., 2021) and the importance of culturally informed research (Stambulova and Ryba, 2013; Stambulova and Ryba, 2013, 2014), there is a need to gain greater insight into how programs developed to support athletes are embedded and function within elite sport environments. Hence, our aim in the present study was to explore the barriers PLPs experience when supporting athletes within the British high-performance sporting landscape. We have selected a qualitative research approach for this study because it allows for a deep exploration of the complex, nuanced experiences of PLPs as they navigate the challenges of supporting athletes within the elite sports environment. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited to the interpretive nature of this research and capturing the subjective realities and culturally situated practices of PLPs, which are influenced by the broader socio-cultural context of high-performance sports. We believe that such explorations can provide rich contextualized understanding of the barriers PLPs face to inform the development of more effective strategies for embedding PL services within elite sports environments to optimize athlete support and duty of care.

2. Methodology

2.1. Philosophical beliefs and sampling

This study was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, characterized by a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology (Manning, 1997). Such a philosophical foundation recognizes that knowledge is not objective but rather constructed through the interactions between researchers and participants. As a result, the research process was inherently subjective, with knowledge being understood as contextually situated and co-constructed. Following ethical approval from the First Author’s institution, participants were recruited through criterion-based sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) to ensure rich, contextually relevant data with individuals that were deeply immersed within the UK High Performance system. This method of sampling was used to recruit participants who were currently PLPs and immersed within elite sport (Olympic and Paralympic programs). By elite sport, we mean working in environments where athletes are performing at the highest level in their sport (i.e., Olympics, Paralympics; Swann et al., 2015). The First Author invited all 35 members of the UK Sports Institute PL Team to participate in the study, with the aim of capturing a diverse range of experiences and aligning with the co-constructive nature of the research. Twenty-five PLPs accepted our invitation and completed written

informed consent, the age ranged from 26 to 55 years of age and consisted of 21 females and 4 males. This participant group's PLP professional experiences ranged from 3 months to 20 years, with an average of 4.8 years at this performance level. Examples of the participants' experiences included preparing athletes and working with them at six Olympic and Paralympic Games (i.e., Beijing 2008; Vancouver 2010; London 2012; Sochi 2014; Rio de Janeiro 2016; PyeongChang 2018; Tokyo 2020). The sports that the participants worked with spanned 35 men's and women's, team and individual sports, winter and summer Olympiads. To preserve the anonymity of individual participants, specific sports are not identified. The First Author was a Senior PLP within the PL leadership group and worked with two main sports over a 15-year period. At the point of data collection, the First Author technically lead two participants, and they were offered an alternative meeting with another member of the research team. Although these participants chose to proceed with the original arrangement, the offer of an alternative was a precautionary measure to uphold the integrity of the research process. The other three authors had worked extensively in or with the UK High Performance system as practitioners and researchers and two of them had previously held leadership positions within this system, neither of which were in the PL service.

2.2. Procedure

Following a conversation with the Head of Service of Performance Lifestyle and the leadership group at the UK Sports Institute, a qualitative online survey was chosen as an initial insight-capturing method due to its broad scope and potential to capture a breadth of PLPs' experiences of working in elite sport (Terry & Braun, 2017). A total of 21 PLPs completed nine questions of an online survey. Example questions from the survey included: "What does a typical day look like for you?", "What works well for you?", "What are the main barriers when supporting athletes?", "What are the next steps to improving your own practice and the service?". To build on this *breadth* of experiences from the survey, it was decided that semi-structured focus groups would provide the most suitable method to add *depth* and richness to the qualitative dataset. Focus groups provided the participants with the freedom to collectively discuss their experiences, while allowing the first author the opportunity to explore further any areas of interest which were identified from the survey (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Indeed, focus groups have been shown to encourage disclosure and elicit a wide variety of different views, which was likely given the diverse sports within which the participants worked and the different regions across the UK (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In total, four online focus groups were conducted over a three-week period, consisting of a northern group ($n = 7$), midlands ($n = 7$) and two groups in the south ($n = 5$, $n = 6$) geographic regions of England. The live encounters and discussions that occur during focus groups create more in-depth data that extends beyond surface explanations (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). The questions in the focus groups were developed with the intention of enriching initial findings from the survey data, namely: "What does engagement mean to you?", "What are your biggest challenges?" and "How do you have impact?". Using two different methods of data collection can provide a deeper insight (Patton, 1999).

2.3. Data analysis

Our philosophical approach accepts the existence of multiple realities that are shaped by individual experiences and knowledge is cocreated between participant and researcher. This approach informed our use of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as described by Braun and Clarke (2019), ensuring that the analysis was embedded with our onto-epistemological stance. The analysis was iterative, with researchers engaging in reflective practices to ensure that the interpretations were grounded in the participants' perspectives while recognizing the First Author's role in shaping these interpretations that

are inseparable from their positionality and broader context of the study.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-stage process, the first stage involved data familiarization, achieved through deep immersion. The First Author actively engaged with the four recordings, transcribing and reading them multiple times to internalize participants' realities. During this stage, insights were shared with the research team, facilitating early reflections. In the second stage, we began coding by identifying patterns within the data, leading to initial codes such as "credibility," "access," "positioning within the Performance Support Team," and "data informed." These codes, grounded in participant language and meaning, were iteratively developed, involving critical engagement with the team to maintain alignment with our philosophical stance. In phase three, we moved from initial codes to identifying latent themes that captured the core ideas shared across the dataset. This process was marked by the research team discussions to explore and refine these codes into cohesive themes, ensuring that each theme authentically represented participants' lived experiences. Phase four involved a comprehensive review and development of themes, balancing prevalence with meaningfulness. The First Author revisited the data to develop a richer and nuanced understanding, leading to a more nuanced understanding of complex ideas, such as the "crowded train" metaphor, which extended beyond PST working practices to encompass power relations and systemic tensions. Phase five involved refining the four themes: There's a Mountain to Climb, It's a Crowded Train, You Need an Elevator Pitch and A Seat at the Performance Table. Ensuring the names of these themes were relevant and identifiable by the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2016) and each theme reflected the nuanced story that resonated with the participants' lived experience. The final phase, writing up, was a continuation of the reflexive process, aimed at creating a coherent narrative that honored participants' voices while transparently acknowledging the interpretative role of the researchers. This approach aimed to produce a clear, compelling account of the findings, reflecting the depth and complexity of participants' experiences.

2.4. Methodological rigor

In this study we adopted a relativist approach for judging the rigor of our qualitative research, aligning with the belief that knowledge and truth are not fixed but rather co-constructed and context dependent (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As such, readers are invited to consider the following quality indicators: rich rigor (e.g., appropriate sample and data collection), worthy topic (e.g., relevant and of interest) credibility (e.g., thick description and member reflections) sincerity (e.g., transparency and self-reflexivity) and significant contribution and coherence (Smith & McGannon, 2018). These indicators were addressed using the following three techniques. We maintained sincerity by adopting a self-critical perspective on the research process and delving into the personal impact as an 'insider' and how this positionality inherently shaped the knowledge produced. The First Author maintained a reflexive journal (Braun & Clarke, 2022) that served as a reflective tool for documenting experiences, emotions and deconstructing the researcher's role in this study. This reflective process ensured our interpretations were deeply connected to the participants' perspectives whilst recognizing our own biases. The second technique aligning with a relativist approach was the use of critical friends, as multiple perspectives can provide a deeper understanding. The First Author met at regular intervals with the second and third author, that acted as a sounding board. This process enabled critical dialogue regarding interpretation of data, deeper engagement and reflexivity throughout the study. The final step involved seeking reflections from Lifestyle Practitioners from elite sport who did not participate in the study to ground our findings in the lived realities of those within a similar context. Wadey and Day (2018) defined this process as seeking "external reflections" (p. 253). Four practitioners were contacted (3 female and 1 male) and individual face to face meetings were arranged. The aims of the study were outlined to

these individuals and the themes shared, after which we invited them to share reflections and comment on what stood out for them. All four individuals felt the themes resonated with them in their role and context and felt the findings would make a significant contribution to their practice. By seeking external perspectives to those working in similar context, we aimed to enhance the credibility and relevance of this study. The results are presented according to the four themes we developed.

3. Results

3.1. *There's a mountain to climb*

This theme represents the challenge of continually selling the PL service to athletes, coaches and staff, to achieve better engagement and “buy in” within a performance focused environment that primarily values sporting success and immediate tangible gains (e.g., resistant culture, engagement, tiring, never ending sales). Participants expressed how the dominant performance narrative in elite sport and focus on medal targets was a significant barrier. Participants described continually having to “sell” their service with engagement of athletes feeling like a “full time job” and having to frequently reiterate “the offer” to athletes, coaches and senior leaders. The continual promotion of the PL service reflects the broader sociocultural environment of elite sport where success is defined on performance outcomes and other narratives such as personal development, struggle to gain traction.

The participants described a “lack of space” to engage in meaningful work, creating an anxiety-driven urge to “check in” with athletes on a regular basis to create opportunities to demonstrate credibility and utility. Yet, this drive was stymied as “there never seems to be a good time to engage with a busy athlete” due to their unwavering focus on performance and a common monological athletic identity. Sam expressed their thoughts of engagement:

When I started my role, I planned how I would engage with coaches and athletes. I engaged with athletes first, the initial ‘getting to know you meeting’ and after this stage it’s really lurking with intent, and hearing the moans and groans that can offer an ‘in’ for working with them.

As Sam reflected, PLPs are often “lurking with intent,” leveraging fleeting “corridor conversations” to build rapport in an environment where formalized personal development conversations are sidelined. This informal engagement strategy reflects the sociocultural reality of elite sport, where non-performance pursuits are often relegated. These tactics highlight the lack of designated time with athletes for some PLPs, who were often not able to make appointment times with athletes and were resolved to merely “catch up when you can” during training camps. The strategic adaptation to power dynamics by PLPs results in them navigating informal spaces where they need to build relationships with athletes and highlights the lack of institutional space, time and priority. One participant outlined their experience of athlete engagement:

I have found with some athletes I have to try and persuade them to engage and challenge the perception that athletes often have which is like ‘I don’t want to think about stuff outside of my sport, so I don’t want to engage.’ (Chris)

Another participant further highlighted the challenge of working within a performance environment with a service that does not directly align with performance, “I worry about if I’m doing enough and think I had better check in with athletes today, knowing that I might end up with 10 more tasks that I can’t fit in, but the sport will still question if you’ve done enough” (Francis). This participant described sensing pressure from their sport to continually drive athlete engagement. The root of this pressure came from senior leaders of World Class Programs frequently asking PLPs to demonstrate their impact that highlights the top-down influence and reinforcement of the performance narrative that influences how a PLP support is perceived and evaluated.

Practitioners felt there was a need to “define engagement” and articulate “what success looks like” in their sports, to reduce the “thoughts and feelings of continually chasing”. A consequence of inadequate engagement is superficial relationships with some athletes and when a challenging situation arises PLPs often have unrealistic pressure placed upon them to resolve the situation, which is not always possible. Participants outlined the main reason for striving for increased engagement was to increase the quality of relationships with athletes. When solid relationships have not been formed, this created a challenging situation during reactive style practice “as soon as you are needed and useful, you are suddenly expected to turn into a firefighter”. Participants reflected the challenge of supporting an athlete in crisis, such as injury or deselection and not always having the “depth” of relationship with them, yet still expected “to go above and beyond to fix the situation”. One participant shared their anxiety about athlete engagement “I’ve accepted I may not be able to deliver high quality support (due to lack of engagement or access) but am I doing the basics to cover the risks”. This participant shared their concerns of the potential risks athletes face when they don’t engage with their personal development, particularly around injury and athletic retirement.

The definition of “success” for PLPs also varies by sport, illustrating how the elite sport expectations are not universally defined but are instead influenced by each sport’s unique social and demographic norms. For instance, PLPs working with younger athletes in sports like diving navigate educational and time-management challenges, reflecting how academic achievements are integrated within the sport’s definition of development. Conversely, in sports like equestrian, where athletes often lead complex human and equine support teams, personal development support might focus more on business management and leadership skills. These differing expectations underscore that the structure of personal development within elite sport is socially constructed and varies according to the values and pressures specific to each sport. Consequently, PLPs are required to continually adapt to each sport’s culturally and contextual environment, constructing their roles in ways that reflect these diverse, yet predominantly performance-focused, environments. This continual adaptation by PLPs requires a high degree of “self-management” and avoiding “getting caught on a drama triangle, where you are everything to everyone” as they balance the varying demands, while trying to uphold their professional boundaries and purpose within the PST.

3.2. *It's a crowded train*

This theme represents PLPs’ experiences of navigating the complex social environment of the PST that has historically prioritized the bio-sciences disciplines. Within the socially constructed PST, power, status and professional boundaries are constantly negotiated. There has been an increase of disciplines within the PST over the last decade (Wagstaff et al., 2015). Nevertheless, a PLP’s position within the PST, specifically their proximity to the coach was seen by participants as an essential component and directly impacted on their ability to support athletes effectively (e.g., space, relationships, positioning, status, power, professional boundaries). In this context, coaches are in a position of power and drive the direction of the PST, as practitioners jostle for position to influence and gain “buy in” from coaches and athletes. Consequently, services that don’t align as closely with performance, can be deprioritized with access to athletes either enabled or restricted and reflects how power is constructed and exercised within the PST.

A participant who was new to her role shared her early experiences of being in role, “credibility is critical, there is a small window when you start, I think we should have more support in this area when we start because it can make or break your impact in a sport” (Rachel). This reflects the challenge of feeling judged early in a participant’s role and the urgency to gain credibility with those in positions of power such as Performance Directors, Coaches and Head of Performance Support. These gatekeepers who are striving to achieve medal targets can

influence a practitioner's impact and engagement with athletes in a range of ways from the initial introductions with athletes, prioritization of the service and access such as attending at training camps. Participants described their relationship with the coach as "critical" as they "hold the keys to unlocking engagement" and can "make or break" a practitioners' impact and ability to build relationships with athletes. Consequently, the relationships with key gatekeepers (e.g., coaches, Head of Performance Support and Performance Directors) not only affects the practitioner but has wider ramifications for the service and how an athlete interacts with personal development (e.g. if a coach believes working or studying will impact negatively on an athlete's recovery, this could influence an athlete's decision making). There is a tension of aligning with a coach's perspectives and priorities to achieve greater social capital that can be essential in some sports to build effective relationships athletes. A deeper understanding of power relations could support disciplines within the support team that spend considerable time influencing gatekeepers about the impact of their work. A PLP shared athletes often "look to their coach" for "guidance and approval" and if the practitioner is not considered within the "in crowd" of the PST, the opportunity to influence and promote the service is limited. Some of the PLPs in this study noted that, coaches' attitudes and knowledge of athlete development directly affected the ability of the PLP to have influence and have impact. There appears to be a variation of PLPs' experiences in the perceived value of the service across different sports, with some "having a harder job than others (practitioners from other disciplines)" due to the proximity and relationship with the coach and wider cultural influences and policy interpretations within each sport.

An important gatekeeper within many PSTs is the Head of Performance Support, who are the 'conductors' of the crowded train, providing support and direction of work programs. There can be a tension that exists for PLPs, as one participant outlines:

I can come out of one meeting with my technical lead [supervisor] and feel quite positive about holistic development and where I fit and then with the performance focus of the Head of Performance Support and link to medals, I feel like I've completely missed the target. (Robyn)

Some participants described an uneasiness relating to their position within the PST in comparison to professionals from other science and medicine disciplines who may be able to more easily evidence their impact on performance. Sam shared, "I think it's easy for us to look around at other practitioners and the engagement they have and compare that to ourselves and feel inadequate." Some participants expressed their positioning within the PST as "the bottom of the pile" in relation to other disciplines, who can more demonstrably evidence their impact on athletic performance, that is, in comparisons to disciplines that are seen as "harder sciences" (e.g., Performance Analysis, Strength and Conditioning, Biomechanics, and Physiology). One participant shared their thoughts on their position within the PST:

Where a sport views our place, really impacts on how well you get to know the rest of the PST and athletes. I work across two sports and my impact directly hinges on the coach themselves. In one sport I am struggling to keep up with the engagement and athletes are having to wait for appointments and in the other sport I am chasing all the time, or athletes only see me because the coach occasionally tells them too and they don't really want to engage. (Kelly)

The socially constructed hierarchy within the PST is reflective of the value placed on different types of knowledge, this is reinforced by social interactions and common discourses.

There is an area of "crossover" within the domain of psychosocial support that provides the "building blocks" for both PLP and sports psychologists to work effectively. An example of this shared work is supporting an athlete with their personal values and strengths, where there was little communication of boundaries between practitioners, there appears to be replication of work in some instances, with each

practitioner gathering their own information. The effectiveness of these psychosocial relationships appears to be varied and PLP's felt they were fortunate to have a good relationship, it was perceived much harder when psychologists were more "closed off and guarded". Participants also described challenges regarding the clarity of their psychosocial working practices, with Ash sharing, "Psychosocial relationships are pot-luck as to whether they work or not; relationships are often not fantastic". For instance, participants felt that PL were "seen as a competitor" by performance psychologists and vice versa, in such situations it can feel like practitioners are "treading on toes" and fighting for space, especially around the "grey" areas that exist between the two services. In turn, relationships were characterized by a lack of openness and sharing of mutually beneficial, and ultimately, the effectiveness of athlete support was reduced. The ambiguity of boundaries can create a competitive dynamic that potentially goes beyond professional overlap of psychosocial support but highlights the social construction of identity and territory within the PST.

3.3. *You need an elevator pitch*

This theme explores the tension experienced by practitioners resulting from their perceived obligation to define their role and the value they bring to the PST, athletes, sports, as well as defending the wider PL service within the high-performance system regarding issues of credibility, credentialism, clarity, and professionalization. Participants described that a barrier to service provision was the continual (re) request to explain the service to athletes, practitioners, and coaches. Participants noted the frequent question, "what is PL?" from senior leaders, who also questioned whether PLPs "just chatted with athletes", and was therefore, not performance focused. Participants reflected on the key areas of PL pillars (i.e., education, transitions, financial health, learning and development, career development, and mental health and well-being) created in 2021, "I feel confident in the areas of PL and the service has grown massively and I've seen expertise develop across these areas". While participants expressed confidence in the tenets of the discipline's framework, a number outlined the challenge of articulating what they do "in the moment" to coaches and Heads of Performance Support, one participant shared:

Having a glossy strategy document is great, but when a coach asks you a very simple question, can you give a 15–20 second overview of what you do and if you get that wrong, it's hard to come back from that. (Spencer)

This participant had been in their role for less than six months and outlined the pressure of articulating the PL service in terms of their impact on performance, rather than evidencing their impact relating to the framework and pillars of the service. Several recently appointed PLP's in this study described the difficulty of trying to articulate what they do to coaches and members of the PST.

Participants reflected on the need for the service to have a "stronger identity" and "brand" so this took pressure off the practitioner having to explain the "offering" of the service. The struggle to create a stronger identity reflects the socially constructed nature of professional credibility within the PST. One participant outlined they felt they had great relationships and engagement in their sport but "I'm not sure they are buying into me or the service, I think it's me, which isn't sustainable". Some participants felt they had built strong relationships and felt embedded within their sport but questioned if athletes really understood the service and support, they could offer. One participant suggested "we need to do less and do it better" outlining the importance of clarity of vision and the use of tools to create some standardization for athletes, practitioners and the wider sporting system. Some practitioners expressed athletes had high levels of trust and confidence in them as individuals and would seek out conversations and support, but this was not in a structured way and often didn't lead to action of making progress with their goals outside of sport. This *ad hoc* nature of athlete

interactions experienced by some participant led to a more reactive style of working with them feeling as though some of the fundamental building blocks of the discipline hasn't been experienced by the athletes such as "knowing self" that develops greater self-awareness and understanding of their, personalities, values, strengths and passions. One participant shared an interaction wherein their Head of Performance Support stated:

I probably didn't sell PL to the coaches very well, I told them it was a bit fluffy, so don't think I sold you well' and that wasn't helpful and now I'm in a hard place to gain traction. (Toyin)

The influence of gatekeepers can have a profound effect on a practitioner's ability to engage with athletes and participants highlighted "you need your allies" within the PST that will "promote and signpost" to your service. The undermining of the PLPs efforts and downplaying the value of the PL service is a reflection of the broader social structures and power relations that shape and influence the legitimacy of PL. A participant highlighted a challenging interaction with a coach:

Yesterday I was sat in the gym and the coach decided to say in front of all the athletes 'PLs aren't qualified' and it was like you almost saw the athlete do a double take at me and ask themselves what do you mean and who have I just been talking too for the last hour. (Maya)

This interaction directly focuses on a PLP's professional credentials. Currently there is no regulatory body for athlete development practitioners in the UK, in comparison to other more evolved disciplines that have a scientific approach and are closely aligned with performance. As a result, for some of the participants, this can create confusion of the professional status of a practitioner. The scientific and medical preference of the PST that is more familiar with the utilization of quantitative data that aligns with performance, can result in a "mistrust" of a holistic service. One participant outlined the challenge of not having a direct link to performance and how this potentially influences career progression:

If our success was appreciated for what is, we might get opportunities for promotion and progression. no one from our service that has progressed to a Head of Performance Support role, but all the other services have, and I don't believe it is because no one is capable on our team, [but] rather we are not seen as impactful. (Kate)

Participants felt the "quiet success" and impact was not always visible to others and was detrimental to a practitioner's career progression, with positions of power predominately being taken by science and medicine practitioners. The lack of "role models" result in the participants feeling like they must leave the organization to progress in their careers. Participants highlighted that the lack of career progression was influenced by being part of a team composed of "predominantly women" and shaped by a "massive gender bias." They expressed that, without "systemic leadership change," advancing within their current careers would remain a significant challenge. One participant noted the "paradox" of elite sport, with high levels of innovation with sporting equipment, yet "remaining in the dark ages" in the area of gender equality.

3.4. A Seat at the Performance Table

This theme represents the "strategic obligation" for PLPs to demonstrate a performance impact, which is not only a professional requirement but a reflection of the cultural values and power dynamics that exist within elite sports environments (e.g., data driven, justifying impact, pressure). PLPs felt there was often a struggle to articulate their performance impact, suggesting "it's different things to different people," while also feeling a conflict with this request to demonstrate performance impact. Evidencing athlete development is considered challenging and can leave practitioners wondering if they have "done a good job". Practitioners shared their own "internal box ticking" to

decide if they have had impact on an athlete. This ranges from athletes "proactively seeking me out" and a "reciprocal relationship where they know I can be of service and support to them." There appears to be an inconsistency of what "success" looks like for participants, this emanates to sports and the wider system with an inconsistency of expectation of the service. Moreover, there exists a drive among senior leaders within sports for "evidencing" holistic support, which was an inherent challenge for PLP's, leaving them uncertain and under pressure to prove their impact.

Participants highlighted the lack of quantitative data within the PL service and felt this was the preferred method of reporting impact to the PST and coaches. One participant highlighted, "It's the scientists around the table who can come with the stats and facts which is more seductive to a coach." (Anna). Historically, in the UK context, elite sport organizations are characterized by cultures that value objectivity, measurable performance progression, and thus, privilege the harder-sciences over psychosocial services. The performance-oriented discourse views impact and success through statistics and tangible outcomes. Yet, there is emerging data within the PL service, such as educational attainment and career preferences:

I showed the PST some pie charts of how many athletes are in education and they were astounded and it put me at the table slightly differently. (Anna)

Anna reflected on a recent PST meeting and felt sharing some basic data insights gave them a stronger voice at the table as she was able to "talk the same language". Participants highlighted the importance of having athlete personal development represented on an athlete's performance plan and that this was seen as "the holy grail" for PLPs. Yet very few participants were able to reach this goal and at the time of data collection, only three sports describing integrated performance and personal development plans. One participant noted "integration of PL into performance plan, gives permission for athlete development to be on the table" in front of the coaches, to have something else in their lives and acknowledging this is not just ok but expected.

Participants question the need for the connection to performance outcomes and medals, "Do we need to have a performance impact? "Medals and More" is great on paper but I'm yet to see or hear any measurables for athlete development area." There appears to be ambiguity regarding how 'medals and more' translates into practice, with sports not having to evidence their support for athlete development. Participants shared their thoughts regarding "direct" and "indirect" impact on performance and expressed a "moral obligation" of the high-performance system to support the person behind the performance. One participant shared her thoughts on the impact of PLPs:

It is often quiet wins that often go unnoticed, such as a breakthrough of "understanding self" or support whilst recovering from injury or retaining them in the sport by developing them as people and working towards their next career. My role is to support the human. We should be more accepting with saying that we don't really have a direct impact on performance but we do help them in multiple aspects of their lives, that can influence their lives beyond sport. (Rachel)

This participant outlines the importance of supporting the growth of the person, beyond their role as an athlete, to encourage a multidimensional identity and greater self-awareness but raises the tension of not having evidence of their "quiet wins" in these personal growth stories. Participants expressed that as part of this moral obligation there should be "mandatory touch points" across the service, as athletes "don't know what they don't know" this suggests a "minimum level of engagement" to ensure each athlete has received some support whilst on a World Class Program. This highlights the need for a more structured and recognized approach to the PL discipline, where the value of holistic support goes beyond performance outcomes and metrics.

4. Discussion

This original and timely study explored the barriers PLPs experience when supporting athletes within the British high-performance sport context. Four themes were identified that encapsulated these barriers: *There's a Mountain to Climb*, *It's a Crowded Train*, *You need an Elevator Pitch*, and *A Seat at the Performance Table*. The first theme “There’s a Mountain to Climb” reflects the barrier of continually having to ‘sell’ the PL service to athletes and the wider team, within a performance focused environment. Participants described a tiring “never ending drive for engagement with athletes” and a perpetual cycle of hard work, marketing and promoting the service to encourage athletes to engage in development activities that support and stretch them beyond performance-oriented targets. Yet, the dominant performance narrative that exists within elite sport, suggests that winning is everything, above all else and that “sport is life and life is sport” (Douglas & Carless, 2016, p. 73) and anything outside of sport should be minimized to enable athletes to focus on their performance goals and win at all costs. Therefore, the performance narrative is internalized by athletes in terms of ‘how to be an elite athlete’ and accepted as ‘this is how we do things around here’. This narrative extends beyond athletes, coaches and sport organizations and is reinforced by the media and the public portrayal of athletes. Douglas and Carless (2016) suggested athletes are publicly portrayed in a number of ways. A common portrayal is “the hero” (p. 9) where athletes are viewed as committed, brave and “winning is everything” (p. 13). These assumptions have become embedded in social and cultural norms and can have a powerful influence on those in elite sport. This theme provides a window into the challenging and confrontational nature of everyday interactions whereby attempts to resist and contest the dominant performance narrative occurs. This theme aligns with previous research which has reported how athletes are silenced by dominant narrative scripts and need to “play the part of the athlete, with athletes modifying their story and actions depending on the sociocultural context” (Carless & Douglas, 2013, p. 703). Despite the PLPs continuing trying to challenge the dominant narrative to bring about change, the performance narrative is totalitarian and stifles alternative dialogue by creating the conditions that restrict the capacity for alternative storylines to emerge and services to be mobilized (Douglas & Carless, 2016). Those who tell alternative storyline (such as PLPs); therefore, risk being ostracized from the elite community.

Practitioners might need to consider how they make more stories (e. g., more-to-me; Everard et al., 2021) available that challenge the dominant performance narrative (e.g., discovery narrative; Carless & Douglas) and the narrative habitus (i.e., inner library) of elite performers. Predispositions can always change and are not final. If enough new stories circulate in elite sporting environments and break into athletes’ inner libraries, we can reshape and stretch our narrative environments and narrative habitus. The UK system’s World Class Program medal targets for an upcoming Olympiad are usually widely-acknowledged and discussed openly within sports across the British system. There is less system clarification of athlete development expectation that could better support athletes, practitioners and sports to create supportive environments and opportunities, that extends beyond performance. Research findings in professional sports, (e.g., Australian Football League, cricket and rugby union) where performance was elevated above other areas of life, practitioners were required to “self-promote their services to athletes, in the face of a resistant club culture” (Stensen & Chambers, 2017, p. 20). Continually working within a performance environment and having to constantly sell the PL service highlighted the importance of self-care and support for practitioners due to the personal cost and professional challenges associated with providing care and support (Delaney, 2017).

The second theme “It’s a Crowded Train” illustrates a PLP’s experience of delivering athlete personal development in a complex social environment of the PST. The rapid expansion of the PST has resulted in larger and more sophisticated support teams (Arnold et al., 2019;

Wagstaff et al., 2015). Participants identified the coach as a key person of influence and are often the “most respected and to whom others listen” (Kjær and Agergaard, 2022, p. 1212) with an assumed discourse of expertise (Mills & Denison, 2018). The coach was seen as instrumental in a PLP’s positioning within the PST and their influence on athletes to engage with their personal development. It is accepted that the coach athlete relationship is paramount and is at the core of athletic performance (McCarthy, 2021). Yet, coaches and athletes do not work in isolation rather part of a crowded complex psychosocial environment.

Bio-sciences have traditionally dominated performance support teams (Mills & Denison, 2018) and practitioners described an “unspoken hierarchy” and were aware of their importance within the support team, with some PLPs positioning themselves at the “bottom of the pile”. There may be a strong hierarchical structure within some PST, that can result in some practitioners feeling as though their work is not valued (Reid et al., 2005). We recommend further support and training for PLP’s in how power is exercised by the coach and senior leaders to understanding the impact of power relations upon athletes and the wider PST. Kitchin and David Howe, 2013 stated the wider use of social and ethical dimensions to sports management analysis such as the use of Bourdieu’s practice theory that emphasizes “an individuals’ everyday practice is not always explicit and mediated by language but rather tacit and embodied. Bourdieu’s practice theory consists of field (network of social relations; i.e., PST), capital (tools individuals use to contest for resources) and habitus (perceptions that provide meaning to individuals) were intended to overcome the objective and subjective divide by intertwining them and providing a critical and multilayered analysis (Bourdieu, 1977) can help to provide social explanations of everyday life (Kitchin and David Howe, 2013). Greater utilization of qualitative research within elite sport, could lead to an increased awareness of the social complexity, creating new perspectives to enhance collaborative working practices for coaches and the PST and encouraging the athlete voice to be at the center of decision making and policy.

Gender bias emerged as a prominent barrier for some PLPs, with some reporting salient challenges being recognized and valued in performance-focused environments. The participants noted that women working as PLPs often felt their contributions to holistic athlete development were marginalized. Cowan et al. (2024) outlined cultural, structural, organizational and personal barriers that affected women entering sport, exercise and medicine leadership positions with Australian elite sport. Within Cowan et al.’s study, women were four times more likely to report that their gender influenced their opportunities in elite sport. Given these findings, gender and other protected identities must continue to be proactively included within system change in elite sport.

Given the complexity for PLP’s within the PST, drawing on alternative team-based approaches could be more impactful for athletes, practitioners and teams. Hess et al. (2019) highlighted a variety of team-based approaches used in injury rehabilitation domains can be used effectively with teams in the sports domain, including “the lone physician”, “multidisciplinary” “interdisciplinary” and “trans-disciplinary”. The “lone physician” approach places responsibility solely on the practitioner and the athlete voice is absent in this approach. Some PLP’s did describe the lone practitioner working sitting outside the “in-crowd” and a small number not being included in PST meetings. Given the importance of the ‘athlete voice’ (Whyte, 2022) within professional practice this approach to team-based working is seen as inferior. A multidisciplinary team approach is defined by “multiple practitioners from diverse disciplines, simultaneously working on outcomes for a single person” (Hess et al., 2019, p. 235). Multidisciplinary working, results in practitioners working on discipline specific goals with little collaboration with other team members (Karol, 2014). The interdisciplinary approach described as “synergistic, producing more than each individually and separately could accomplish” (Melvin, 1980, p. 379). This approach was outlined by some PLP’s that highlighted athlete development was discussed as part of an athlete’s individual

development plan, that supported PLP's with athlete engagement and a reduction of barriers. The transdisciplinary approach, which was the least common reported by PLP's, requires communication and collaboration, where athlete need is not divided into distinct disciplines, rather an "athlete-centered and problem focused" approach. All of the team contribute their unique knowledge and a hierarchy of need is established (Karol, 2014). This approach requires "role release and optimal integration, whereby the involvement of the entire team is necessary and valued" (Hess et al., 2019, p. 236). Further support of the transdisciplinary approach includes greater empowerment for athletes, reduced staff burnout (Galvin et al., 2014), and could address power imbalances within the PST.

The third theme "You Need an Elevator Pitch" indicates the need for further clarity in both system policy and practitioner working practices, as clarity was thought to underpin a practitioner's ability to have impact. Low et al. (2024) explored how experienced sports psychology practitioners "hook" an athlete, coach or sporting organizations interest by being able to outline their service and describe their strengths and expertise. Participants described the pressure of trying to articulate the impact of the service to coaches and other senior leaders within their sports, often feeling like this interaction could "make or break" their credibility within the early stages of their role. Creating an elevator pitch can be challenging due to preconceived ideas of clients about a discipline (Low et al., 2024). Traditionally research in athlete development has been from a sports psychology perspective. Devaney et al. (2017) suggested this research perspective may have contributed to the lack of clarity for PLPs and sports psychologists they work alongside, with a greater focus on practical skill elements, rather on more of the relational roles within the literature.

There is currently no accrediting or credentializing body for lifestyle practitioners within the UK, although the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity is in the process of creating professional standards. The lack of clarity in professional standards creates a barrier for PLPs and has resulted in some practitioners being challenged about their qualifications. In addition to the lack of professional standards, there are a range of different job titles used globally for athlete development practitioners (see Table 1). Chambers et al. (2019) highlighted the need for an industry specific qualification, that would create greater clarity for practitioners, coaches and athletes¹ and support practitioners "to deliver services beyond traditional career and education matters" (p. 664) to better meet the needs of the modern athlete. Considering the paucity of research in the area of athlete development practitioners, it is useful to draw upon the emergence of sports psychology over the last 50 years.

Wagstaff and Quartiroli (2020) recently suggested the lack of a clear professional identity within sports psychology has led to confusion and a lack of regulation within the field that can contribute to unethical practice and unclear service practice. Participants expressed an uncertainty about their role and their "fit" within the system, both individual and as a service. Moreover, Aoyagi et al. (2012) noted that, "while psychology distinguished itself from the medical field and established its own licensure and accreditation, sport psychology is still searching for its own unique identity ... and ... is struggling to identify and gain widespread acceptance in its target markets" (p. 32). Participants in the present study identified psychosocial working and relationships with the sports psychologist as vital to effectively support an athlete's development. PLPs and sports psychologists have distinctly separate roles, yet there are important "grey" that exist between the two disciplines. Participants provided examples where relationships worked effectively, with "frequent open communication", while others described these relationships as a "lottery" and "challenging". Reid et al., 2005 suggests there is a "jurisdictional ambiguity" (p.213) that exists between Lifestyle

Table 1

Definition of athlete development roles in Olympic, Paralympic and Professional sports.

Term	Characteristics	Organisation
Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement Manager	Well-being, transitions, education, career and work experience opportunities, social issues	Australian Institute of Sport
Game Plan Advisor	Mental health, skill development, education, community and career	Canadian Olympic Committee, Canadian Paralympic Committee, Sport Canada, Canadian Olympic and Paralympic sports institute network
Dual Career Advisors	Education and career	Japanese Sports Council
Performance Life Coaching Advisor	Wellbeing, responsibility, continuous learning, professionalism, purposeful planning and effective communication	High Performance Sport New Zealand
Performance Lifestyle Practitioner/Coach	Education, career development, financial health, learning and development, transitions, mental health and well-being	United Kingdom Sports Institute
Player Engagement Manager	Education, financial literacy, professional development, personal development	National Football League (United States of America)
Welfare and Education Manager	Unique needs, challenges and personal development goals, mental, emotional and physical well being, transition, education and career planning	National Rugby League (Australia)
Player Care Manager	Education, support with tenancy agreements, utilities, sourcing driving lessons, private chefs, travel arrangements, provide concierge service and transitions	Premier League Football (UK)
Player Development Manager	Gain Line programme, welfare, off field personal development, education and career planning	Rugby Players Association (UK)

services and Psychology. This study supports Ronkainen and Nesti, 2019 with an increasing focus on athlete wellbeing in recent years (Poucher et al., 2021) this potentially creates greater ambiguity between psychosocial practitioners. We recommend further support and clarification for practitioners working across sports psychology, athlete development and mental health and wellbeing. Arnold et al. (2019) suggested that organizations and practitioners should be provided with opportunity to "improve their cohesion and interpersonal skills" (p. 21). Considering the absence of a credentializing body for PL within the UK and a desire for clarity to improve relationships within psychosocial practice, clearer guidance and clarity may support practitioners with this vital area to better support athletes.

The fourth theme "A Seat at the Performance Table" highlights the tensions experienced by PLPs needing to demonstrate their impact on performance, in an objective and relatable format. The participants in this study felt a sense of obligation to measure and demonstrate to others their impact, with frequent requests from senior leaders of World Class Program, this creates a tension for some participants that frequently felt under pressure. This is supported by the findings of Chambers et al. (2019) that highlighted the lack of evidence base underpinning the Australian CAP that created a tension for practitioners, with them relying on "descriptive indicators such as increased uptake, or attendance at events to determine success rather than more meaningful methods of measuring program effectiveness" (p. 622). Arnold et al. (2019) found a stressor of sport science practitioners was their

¹ A range of professional titles are used around the world. See supplementary materials for an overview.

performance measurement “which was based primarily on how athletes were performing and improving, rather than proximal markers of their own work” (p. 18). There is a dominant scientific culture within PST’s and without clear measures participants felt they could not articulate their impact clearly in comparison to other “more respected scientific disciplines” that align more closely with the performance narrative and draw on quantitative data. In summarizing this section, we recommend further development of metrics that extends beyond descriptive indicators of attendance such as the inclusion of athletes’ perspectives in the design and delivery of CAP strategies. Participants explained how they had shared some emerging data that helped their relatability and “put them at the table in a slightly different way” practitioners felt there was a need to describe their work and impact through relatable means. The emerging representation of athlete development on individual performance development plans could encourage open dialogue about athlete development alongside performance conversations, across all sports and could raise the profile of engaging in development activities.

5. Conclusions

In this study, we report findings that highlight significant barriers that Performance Lifestyle Practitioners (PLPs) face within the British high-performance sport system specifically related to the dominant performance narrative, complex power dynamics within Performance Support Teams (PSTs), gender biases, and the need for clearer role definitions for psychosocial practitioners. Addressing these issues requires coordinated change across multiple levels of sport systems. Organizationally, establishing an accredited identity for PLPs could elevate their roles within performance teams. Certification pathways and targeted professional development would formalize the PLP role, reducing marginalization and combating gender bias. The present findings indicate that accreditation and clearer role definitions could help female PLPs gain greater legitimacy, lessening the need to constantly “prove” their value and contributions. At the policy level, improvements should include the integration of holistic athlete development alongside performance plans, with greater clarity of “winning well” for athletes, coaches and the high-performance community. Fostering collaborative dynamics within PSTs requires addressing both gender and power imbalances, and there must be opportunities for PLPs to co-design athlete support plans with coaches and psychologists to facilitate more effective working relationships and applied practice. Finally, further research is required that could use participatory action or ethnographic methods to seek deeper insights into the dynamics of PLP-athlete relationships, or explore cultural, contextual, and gendered dynamics within PSTs. Gathering perspectives from the high-performance community, including athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these relationships influence an athlete’s personal development. Such approaches would also allow for a more nuanced examination of the social structures and power dynamics that inform the roles and impact of PLPs within high-performance environments.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jane Holden: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Christopher R.D. Wagstaff:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ross Wadey:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Peter Brown:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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