



LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

Citation:

Kent, S and McKenna, J and Mellalieu, S (2024) Two on a tightrope: the stress experiences of the romantic partners of professional athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. pp. 1-24. ISSN 1041-3200 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2024.2428656>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/11557/>

Document Version:

Article (Published Version)

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

(C) 2024 The Author(s).

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.



Two on a tightrope: the stress experiences of the romantic partners of professional athletes

Sofie Kent, Jim McKenna & Stephen Mellalieu

To cite this article: Sofie Kent, Jim McKenna & Stephen Mellalieu (21 Nov 2024): Two on a tightrope: the stress experiences of the romantic partners of professional athletes, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/10413200.2024.2428656](https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2024.2428656)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2024.2428656>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 21 Nov 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 207




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Two on a tightrope: the stress experiences of the romantic partners of professional athletes

Sofie Kent^a, Jim McKenna^a, and Stephen Mellalieu^b 

^aLeeds Beckett University; ^bCardiff Metropolitan University

ABSTRACT

The romantic partner of a professional athlete can play a pivotal role in preserving performance and well-being (Brown et al., 2018). However, through their direct or indirect experiences partners have to cope with the stressors of professional sport that can impact relationship functioning, well-being and performance. Therefore, to help sport organizations better support romantic partners, the aim of this study was to explore partner's stress experiences within professional sports by adopting an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. Eight romantic partners (female partners $n = 5$; football ($n = 2$), paralympic rowing, boxing and long-distance running; male $n = 3$; middle-distance running, football, and tennis) participated in semi-structured interviews. Explained through the metaphor of 'two on a tightrope', partners balanced a dynamic range of stress-related themes; navigating the romantic space, sacrifices- some willing and some reluctant, feeling undervalued and unimportant, the sporting performance, receiving or dealing with abuse, and life after sport. To handle unfolding events, partners employed proactive coping, social support, avoidance coping, re-appraisal, supportive dyadic coping, protective buffering, acceptance, and problem-focused coping strategies.

Lay summary: This study provided a qualitative exploratory insight into the stress experiences of the romantic partner of a professional athlete. Findings highlight the dynamic events and difficulty in maintaining relationship functioning and well-being due to the experience of stressors, both regular and unexpected.

- Sport organizations should be providing informational and emotional support to partners that could help resolve ambiguity during challenging moments of the athletic career, such as periods of injury.
- Fostering a culture that aims to strengthen the partner's sense of belonging, where vulnerability is met with compassion, and promoting the use of proactive coping strategies may help mitigate a negative stress experience.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 March 2024

Revised 1 November 2024

Accepted 5 November 2024

It is widely acknowledged that people in the network of professional athletes may experience competitive, organizational, and personal stressors (Wagstaff et al., 2016). This broad network of individuals may include coaches (e.g., Kent et al., 2023) and

CONTACT Sofie Kent  sofie.kent@leedsbeckett.ac.uk  Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Fairfax Hall 206, Headingley Campus, Leeds, LS6 3QS, UK.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

sport science staff (e.g., Arnold et al., 2019), but strong evidence exists to suggest romantic partners of these athletes may also experience stressors (Sparkes, 2023).

The stressors experienced by romantic partners across various high-performance occupations (e.g. military, police, paramedic science) can have bidirectional implications (i.e., work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict) for performance, psychological well-being and mental health (Carter & Renshaw, 2016). Subsequently, the work-life interface has been explored across such contexts due to unique occupational characteristics, intense work stressors, and conflation of professional and personal lives which may ‘spillover’ and impact occupational performance (Najera et al., 2017). However, the literature is sparse within a high-performance sporting context. Jowett and Cramer (2009) were the first authors to explore relationship satisfaction (qualities of trust, communication, commitment, and acceptance) and examine any association with performance, and emotional well-being. This study was able to provide an initial insight into how romantic relationships can contribute to athletes’ perceived performance accomplishment and overall well-being. However, the authors emphasized that future research should seek to employ a more comprehensive and multifaceted conceptual framework and methodology (e.g. qualitative) (Jowett & Cramer, 2009). Since this research, there have been various sport-specific transitions examined that are stressful for the romantic partner, but only in isolation (e.g., migration; Roderick, 2013; separation during training camps; Waligórska et al., 2023). Furthermore, the application of a stress-based approach and descriptive methodologies may help develop a stronger understanding of how partners make sense of their personal and social worlds about the various challenges faced, and the meanings that stress experiences hold for them (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

When viewed from a transactional perspective, stress is an ongoing and dynamic transaction between the person and the environment that is appraised as taxing or exceeding his or her resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stressors are the starting point of the transactions and are any environmental stimuli that pose a potential threat to an individual’s goals, beliefs, or values (Lazarus, 1999, p. 329). Identifying the stressors faced can provide insight into the factors instigating partners’ cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses (Hanton et al., 2008). However, transactional theories of stress (e.g., Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) emphasize that it is the situational properties of stressors and appraisal that offer explanations for diverse stress experiences. Situational properties are an underpinning aspect of an environmental demand that includes novelty, imminence, event uncertainty, duration, temporal uncertainty, ambiguity, and timing about the life cycle (Lazarus, 1999). For example, an athlete may have significant preparation time for a training camp to a new location, and therefore the partner can prepare and plan (e.g., predictable, imminent). In contrast, an athlete may be expected to frequently and/or temporarily relocate to a new sports club and the partner may have little decision-making and preparation time (e.g., ambiguity). According to Lazarus (1999), it is such situational properties of stressors that offer explanatory potential for determining individual differences in stressor appraisals.

Appraising includes a set of cognitive actions that consists of at least two discrete but interdependent constructs: primary and secondary appraisal (Didymus & Jones, 2021; Lazarus, 1999). Primary appraisal considers the stressor in relation to values, personal beliefs, situational intentions, goal commitments, and well-being and may be experienced

as a: challenge, benefit, harm/loss, and threat (Lazarus, 1999). Harm/loss appraisals occur when an individual perceives that damage to the well-being or performance has occurred. Benefit appraisals occur when an individual perceives that enhancement to well-being or performance has occurred. Threat appraisals arise when personal significance outweighs coping resources and, thus, damage to well-being is anticipated. Finally, challenge appraisals arise when personal significance of the stressor is in proportion to the available coping resources and, thus, gain may result from the situation. For example, Najera et al. (2017) identified that when military partners perceived stressors derived from military service as meaningful, protective effects against relocation and redeployment could occur. Secondary appraisal involves an individual identifying and evaluating the availability of coping resources and consists of three components: an evaluation of blame/credit, coping potential, and future expectancy (Didymus & Jones, 2021). By understanding stressor appraisal and the underlying situational properties, researchers may also be able to understand the intention, function, and role of a coping strategy or strategies.

Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts that aim to “manage specific internal and/or external demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the individual’s resources” (Lazarus, 2000, p. 204). The most widely used coping dimensions have been problem- and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping strategies are intended to alter the stressful situation, whereas emotion-focused coping deals with the emotional distress associated with the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Three additional coping categories have been proposed to convey the conceptual complexity of coping (Franks & Roesch, 2006): avoidance- (e.g., cognitive or behavioral efforts to avoid the situation), approach- (e.g., increasing effort), and appraisal-focused coping (e.g., reevaluation; see Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Subsequently, coping can provide an overall characterization of an individual’s response to a stressor which can reduce or amplify effects upon the individual (e.g., building psychological resources) and dyadic (e.g., improved relationship functioning) outcomes. For example, Reddy et al. (2011) identified that maladaptive coping strategies with occupational stressors can not only impact the well-being of the partner but also disrupt job performance and career transitions (e.g. injury adjustment). In contrast, when a partner engages in adaptive coping it may improve the quality of social support (e.g., finding positive meaning, even with life-changing injuries) and job performance (Najera et al., 2017). Furthermore, understanding the stressor, situational properties, appraisal, and coping experiences of romantic partners may help to reduce the negative impact of the stressors experienced, positive relationship functioning, and the quality of social support a partner can provide to the athlete.

Guided by an interpretive phenomenological approach, the aim of this study was to facilitate a novel examination of the stress experienced by romantic partners of elite performers/athletes.

Method

Philosophical orientation

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the stress experiences of the romantic partners of professional athletes. IPA is

grounded in the interpretive paradigm and is especially suited to understanding the complex world of human experience and the meanings that experiences, events, and states hold for them (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Thus, IPA provided the romantic partner of the professional athlete with the opportunity to reflect and to make sense of their experience, with the researchers being sensitive to the convergent, complex, and personally meaningful aspects of the participants' experience (Nizza et al., 2021).

Recruitment and selection

Studies using IPA typically use a homogenous sample (Smith et al., 2009).

Therefore, following institutional ethical approval, we used purposeful sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) to recruit a maximum diversity sample of romantic partners (e.g. variety of sports, genders, commitments (e.g., marriage, co-habitation, distance), race, religion and sexual orientations) bound by the common life experience of their partner being a professional athlete. Within this study, a professional athlete was defined as 'the athlete performing at a standard at which they can make a living from the sport.' (Swann et al., 2015, p. 9). Social media recruitment material were distributed by the lead researcher on Instagram stories and an Instagram post to attract interest from potential participants. These posts also invited potential recruits to contact the research team for more information and to enable followers of the lead researcher to share this recruitment post to other friends within their network. This 'snowball' approach is a recognized and viable method of recruiting participants (Leighton et al., 2021).

Eight romantic partners of professional athletes participated in the study (see Table 1). Participants included five female partners and three male partners. Partners were in a relationship ($n = 5$), engaged ($n = 1$), and married ($n = 2$). Sexual orientation included heterosexual ($n = 7$) and lesbian ($n = 1$) partners. One partner disclosed to be of Christian denomination ($n = 1$) and other partners disclosed no religious denomination. Partners were aged between 26 and 32 years of age ($M = 29.17$, $SD = 1.87$) and in a relationship between 2 to 13 years ($M = 7.14$, $SD = 3.64$).

Table 1. Demographics of romantic partners.

Participant	Gender (M/F)	Age	Relationship status	Athlete Gender	Children	Length of time in relationship (years)	Partner's Sport	Competitive Level
Kady	F	29	Married	M	Yes	13	Boxing	World boxing competitor
Tracey	F	30	Relationship	F	No	5	Football	Women's Super League
Mark	M	30	Engaged	F	No	9	Middle-distance	Olympic athlete
Sarah	F	32	Relationship	M	No	5	Long distance	Olympic athlete
Megan	F	28	Married	M	Yes	5	Rowing	Paralympic athlete
Anton	M	–	Relationship	F	No	2	Tennis	Top 10 British Ranking
Leanne	F	26	Relationship	M	No	11	Football	English Football League
Zack	M	–	Relationship	F	No	5	Football	Women's Super League

Data collection

Semi-Structured interviews

Using a qualitative semi-structured interview approach enabled the researcher to focus discussion on the personal meaning partners attributed to their 'stressful' experiences

(Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This approach also generates a dialogue between the researcher and the participant and gives enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise to fully understand the participants' stories (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Before the interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was developed. The interview guide comprised introductory, main, and summary questions informed by Lazarus (1999) cognitive-relational motivational theory. Introductory questions focused on obtaining demographic information about the relationship (e.g., duration, children) and making the participant comfortable by building rapport and trust (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For instance, "Could you tell me about how you and [partner] met?". A key feature of IPA is the recognition of valuing a situated experience from the perspective of the individual. The term lived experience refers to our encounters with everything within our lifeworld and can be perspectival (e.g., temporal, embodied) and relational (Ashworth, 2016). Therefore, the interview guide included expansive questions to understand the various constituents of the romantic partner which include embodiment, selfhood, temporality, and relationality. For example, temporality (e.g., "Are there any stressful experiences you believe may occur in the future because of your partners sporting career?"), intersubjectivity (e.g., "What demands do you believe you have experienced in your life because of your partners sporting career?"), selfhood (e.g., "Do you believe these methods of coping are effective for your well-being?") and embodiment (e.g., "How do these [performance] demands make you feel?"). Following this, the participants were asked summary questions (e.g., "Overall, what would you say are the three main stressors that you experience as a result of being the romantic partner of an athlete?") and provided with an opportunity for any final comments. One week before the scheduled interview, partners were offered an opportunity to have a copy of the interview guide emailed to them to ensure they were comfortable with the content of the interview. Upon agreement, participants provided a signed informed electronic consent form. The interviews ranged from 58 minutes to 1 hour and 23 minutes ($M = 71$ minutes, $SD = 10.1$).

Data generation and analysis

Analysis of the verbatim transcripts was guided by established procedures (Smith & Osborn, 2015) and recommendations of achieving excellence in IPA (Nizza et al., 2021). The first step commenced with several readings of each transcript before a detailed set of notes and comments were recorded to capture salient features of the account. Notes were made in three stages to focus on a different level of phenomenological analysis and interpretation to uphold the strong commitment to idiographic depth (Nizza et al., 2021). The first stage aimed to achieve a sense of familiarity and close attention to the structure of the participant's experience. Loose annotations were made to identify and summarize initial points of interest (e.g., any unique contextual differences between sports). Throughout this process, the researcher also prioritized making notes about observations and reflections about the interview experience (e.g., talking about the athlete's feelings first before their own).

Loose notes were then transformed into several inductive conceptual themes reflective of participant accounts. Connections were then made between these themes. Related

themes were partnered and then clustered into superordinate categories. Once all participant interviews had been analyzed in this way, they were cross-referenced. A cyclical process was undertaken whereby themes were compared across cases and, where warranted, merged. Here it was important to engage with the experiential and existential significance of what participants were reporting and to pay particular attention to meaning-making, prevalence, and variability. Additionally, we sought to balance commonality with individuality: how participants share higher order qualities, while retaining each participants' unique account (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Methodological rigor

IPA emphasizes adopting an active, dynamic stance in the overall process. As such, researcher reflexivity was considered throughout the data collection and analysis process (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This was particularly important, given the lead researcher had recent personal experiences of working within elite sport and past relationship experiences. An example of facilitating a self-critical and reflexive approach to the research was the lead researcher's reminder and focus on appraisal before the interview. This helped to limit prior assumptions to stressors being 'negative' or providing partners with an imbalance on questions about the difficulties during the relationship, in contrast to opportunities and benefits. Undertaking such 'bracketing' (to acknowledge more than set aside) helped the lead researcher to focus on the experiences presented and avoid critical judgment and presuppositions (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131).

Results

Five superordinate categories emerged from the data and have been organized into a coherent narrative that is representative of the partners' lived experiences of stress within their relationship with a professional athlete (see Figure 1). These were: navigating romantic space, sacrifices- some willing and some reluctant, feeling undervalued and unimportant, the sporting performance, receiving or dealing with abuse, and life after sport. Quotations, selected for their richness and capacity to relate to other themes (Smith & Osborn, 2015) are interspersed with our interpretations.

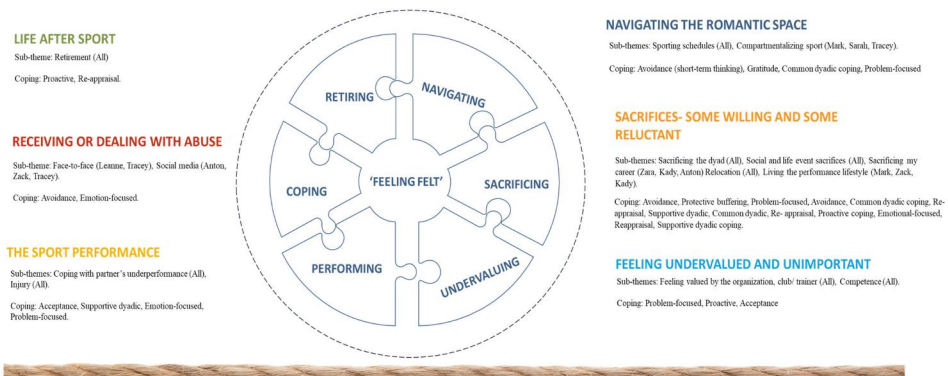


Figure 1. Stressor themes, sub-themes and coping strategies used by romantic partners in sport.

Navigating the romantic space

Navigating the romantic space describes the partner's experiences of how sport may impact the time and focus on the romantic relationship. Sub-themes included *sporting schedules* and *compartmentalizing sports*.

Sporting schedules

Sporting schedules were reported to evoke frustration for partners due to the impact on the couples' 'romantic space' in the form of social dates and trips. For example, Anton noted how the 'fast-paced' tennis tournament scheduling could inhibit romantic time with his partner when competing in international tournaments. Zack, Leanne, and Kady all discussed how it was incredibly difficult to book holidays or weekend breaks. This was due to sudden, unpredicted changes in training dates and the impact this could have on pre-booked non-sporting events. Zack also discussed how a club permitting time off, particularly before relocation was a valuable coping resource that allowed relationships to navigate romantic time (e.g., watching movies, restaurant visits):

This is the first holiday in nearly five years ... there's obviously a very small window [in football] we can go so there's been times where we might cancel holidays cause she had to go back in early or there is a move to another club ... luckily this year the club [partner] are really supportive letting her go on holiday ... some clubs are not like that.

Partners such as Leanne and Anton discussed occasions where planned dates with a partner "can instantly not happen in a second" due to underperformance, for example losing an expected fixture or being knocked out of a tournament early. For Leanne, this would evoke a mixture of emotions, from frustration with the uncertainty to self-blame and guilt. Leanne expressed that such emotions were derived from not relocating with her partner and the football club not being considerate to partners who were in long-distance relationships:

A lot of these issues, they could have been resolved if I was just around him all the time ... whether they win or lose a game that could impact the days off ... sometimes he will be sitting there like, 'are we in on Monday?'

Uncertainty in her partner's boxing schedule was also stressful for Kady. In the build up to a competitive fight Kady's husband would typically be away from home for training camp, averaging around 12 weeks:

In boxing you may have fights postponed which then holds back that fight for potentially another eight weeks whatever, you know, so that means another so many weeks of training and then him making weight again ... so a [cancellation] is disheartening, for the boxer, but also for the family as well.

Notably, rowing and distance running shared similarities where the sporting schedule could also impact the romantic space by being 'overly predictable', rigid and lack spontaneity. Mark discussed how this could limit freedom to explore wider activities with his partner and crafting of memories outside of sport:

There's more intensity in the relationship, there's something that's really important in there and everything else has to take a backseat so life can get mundane and boring

because you're fixated on one goal, you don't have the spontaneity that you would have of another partner, like the ability to just get on a plane this weekend and go to Barcelona.

"Short-term" thinking and gratitude were also helpful to cope with the unpleasant emotions associated with sporting schedule stress:

It's not gonna be forever ... so we have got the rest of our lives together, you just have to ride the storm out for a wee while, and to be honest, you know we've went to loads of places with boxing, thinking of the trips obtained through boxing ... [international examples] so I'm like, right, take your selfishness away ... (Kady)

Sarah, Mark, and Anton also expressed how their past or current careers could provide them with coping resources to manage their current stressors. For instance, Anton discussed how his experiences of working in the modeling industry (e.g. unpredictable schedules) helped him to develop effective coping skills to deal with his partner's sporting schedules:

I am used to operating on not really knowing where you're gonna be next week or not really knowing what your week is going to look so it helps cope with the uncertainty. If you are someone who struggles with uncertainty it would be a tricky relationship

Compartmentalizing sport

All partners noted how the pursuit of sporting excellence could be intense and could 'spillover' into the romantic space. For instance, Sarah discussed how her partner "not being able to switch off and stay stuck in that [sport] world and taking it [negative mood] home". All partners believed they should be taking an active role in supporting the athlete to navigate and create romantic space. For instance, Sarah, Tracey and Mark, discussed the importance of maintaining a broad identity and avoiding conversations relating to their partners' sporting goals:

It would be quite easy to stay stuck in that [running] world when we're trying to switch off ... but we just both try and think it is just something we do ... running isn't our relationship and that is important.

Mark reflected that the intense nature of the sporting schedule could make the compartmentalization of sport and the relationship challenging. Therefore, where possible, proactive coping in the form of creating 'date nights' was highlighted as an important protective factor for relationship satisfaction:

Running has an intense schedule so you do lose romantic time ... I get it because all she wants to do on a rest day is go for a bit of dinner with me and talk about stuff that's not running ... you have to work hard to try and keep that in there as you get caught in a trap that's definitely been one of the challenges.

Sacrifices-some willing and some reluctant

Partners described a range of sacrifices that they were either willing and/or reluctant to accept to support the athlete's sporting career. The sacrifices included availability for emotional support and/or physical presence from their partners (*sacrificing the dyad*), *social time and life events*, and *domestic location*.

Sacrificing the dyad

Sacrificing the dyad was a sub-theme discussed by all partners relating to the non-disclosure of personal stressors to the athlete. All partners discussed how their stress experiences could impact the athlete's psychological preparations for training and/or competitive performance. Partners subsequently all discussed the importance of emotional intelligence in recognizing the timing and/or disclosure of stressors to their partner. For instance, Zara discussed withholding pregnancy news until after her fiancé's rowing championships. Kady had also discussed sacrificing her emotional expression of grief and desire for her husband's presence during a period of family bereavement because of the anticipation it may have negatively impacted upon boxing performance:

I just kept thinking I can't let him see me break and I can't be a mess because if he goes back down there [to camp] ... he's going to be worrying about me and he has to concentrate on this fight. He has to win this fight I needed him to put all his emotion and energy into that fight, which he did.

Confidence in the athlete's ability to compartmentalize sport and life stressors was a significant factor that was highly influential in whether this sacrifice was required:

[athlete] is able to switch from personal news and then just focusing when she gets back into football ... I don't think it has ever affected her performance ... I don't know whether that's because she's just quite strong-minded as a player.

If partners perceived it was important to not disclose personal stressors to the athlete the support network of family, close friends and other partners within the sport were helpful coping resources. However, distinctively, Mark expressed a unique story in how he struggled to share personal stressors with the athlete due to the 'selfish' focus he wanted her to have on the sporting career. However, Mark also recognized his own personal challenges in then sharing this stress with his support network and how this did have negative implications for his well-being:

I need to find ways of venting [stress] somewhere else, I'll bottle it up and probably get more stressed ... but if I start bringing my feelings and my emotions into the relationship, it's going to impact her negatively so I would rather not talk to her about it ... If you want to win medals you have got to be selfish, so I want her to be selfish ...

Sacrificing social and life events

All partners mentioned how sporting schedules of training and competition resulted in the personal absence or the athlete's absence from such events (e.g., birthday parties, pregnancy milestones). Leanne discussed how they sacrificed social events to be a physical presence at sporting fixtures (e.g., social gatherings with friends) to not feel a sense of guilt if her partner performed well and was not present to see it. When discussing this stressor Leanne noted how this was challenging, and it was important to be proactive and communicate with friends to sustain friendships outside of her relationship. Leanne explained how the longevity of the relationship with her partner allowed friends to understand why she made such social sacrifices (e.g., "they know Easter Monday we have a game, so they understand I won't be there ... they just know my life now which is good."). Kady also discussed the essence of 'non-normality' being signaled where her husband's absence at social events due to boxing training camp could evoke unpleasant

self-talk and emotions (e.g., “everyone else is there with their partners and you know I think ‘here I am again, having to go here by myself alone again’”).

The experience of social and life event sacrifices was different for Mark and was appraised as an opportunity to gain additional coping resources. Mark disclosed how the greater the significance of a sacrifice the more this could act as a motivation and commitment to the pursuit of athletic goals for his partner:

How are we supposed to plan a wedding and then [partner] perform well in the Olympic Games it’s just not possible ... we had to pull [the wedding] ... anything that’s gonna get in the way of the next 18 months of her getting to where she wants to get to is gonna be pulled ... but happiness is worth more than the performance as long as she is happy I will support her to every extremity

Where sacrifices included decisions made by both individuals this could evoke challenges for partners. Specifically, Zara discussed how the paternity rules and regulations with UK Sport influenced time off and pay during paternity leave. It is important to note that UK Sport follows statutory government guidelines but has developed a maternity and paternity document. This document has tried to help provide key recommendations for sport’s governing bodies but advocates a ‘case by case’ basis (UK Sport, 2023). Zara discussed how a lack of clarity in the policy was stressful due to the uncertainty of how much or little time and support she would have with her partner postpartum. As a result, discussing the sacrifices connected to handling the sport and fatherhood was reported as a stressful experience:

Even after three months, he would have to be in for training but I’m trying to tell [name of partner] if he has loads of things in place for him to be in training and I give birth, I do not want him to not be committed to too many things. So, yes show that you want to be in training, but, please, also don’t fight too much.

A notable common theme across all partners to cope with social and life event sacrifices, was “short term thinking” (e.g., “You know, we’ve got the rest of our days, hopefully to enjoy times together at weddings.”). Perceiving the athletic career as short, enabled partners to perceive sacrifices and unpleasant emotions associated with social and life events sacrifices as manageable.

‘Sacrificing My career’

Due to scheduling and frequent location changes in sports, some partners discussed sacrificing their careers to travel to various locations with the athlete. For instance, Anton noted how a “9 to 5’ job would be incredibly tricky because she’d be away 90% of the time.” Therefore, a career sacrifice was appraised as an opportunity for Anton to “be more flexible and able to deal with [his partner] tennis schedule being the priority”, which he believed allowed his relationship to flourish. In contrast, Leanne was passionate about discussing how her current pursuit of a career was different from that in the ‘football world’ and that maintaining her own career was important for both her relationship and identity:

The way we [relationship] operate is a bit different than what I think is one of the norms in the football world ... a lot of women start their family young and we’ve worked really to not be too swayed by what he’s doing.

Although this did evoke guilt and frustration when training schedules were changed, Leanne highlighted the importance of dyadic coping with this stressor, “we have worked really hard on me having my own lane [career]”. As a consequence of their partner’s sporting contracts or training commitments many partners had experience of relocating. Resistance to ‘sacrificing my career’ had benefits for coping with relocation strain. For instance, Zara and Kady both discussed how their job enabled them to build a support network and friendship group which was beneficial when relocating to a new area with no social support network.

Relocation

All partners had discussed their partner’s sporting role could require the athlete to relocate internationally for a short-term period (e.g., “three-week training camp”) or across the UK. However, the contextual nature of the relocation impacted the appraisal, emotion and coping resources available about this stressor. For instance, UK sport-funded athletes require the Great Britain Paralympic team to be based within a particular area of the country for the Olympic cycle. The fixed-term nature of the contract was appraised by Zara as helpful in their decision to relocate and provided Zara’s partner with the tangible support required when injured, enabling them to spend substantial time together following childbirth, training camps, and competitions. However, the stress experienced was also coupled with the worry of isolation and financial stress: “it was definitely a really big decision [to relocate] ... we were both leaving to come to an area which we weren’t familiar with and the house prices are nearly double...” Throughout this relocation, Zara felt it was important to engage in proactive coping (e.g., to keep up to date with competitions and ensure family and friends were visiting during this time) which helped her to avoid the unpleasant emotions arising from feeling isolated and/or lonely.

Unique to the context of football, the temporary nature of sport contracts combined with their career aspirations influenced the decision to not relocate with their partner. Although this could be challenging for both the partner and the athlete, Leanne reflected upon her experiences and believed that alleviated pressure and enhanced commitment to their relationship:

I think [not relocating] has helped. I can’t imagine what it must be like for some women who have moved around ... if maybe their partner’s career is not going the way they thought it would or not going to plan ... then you would think what does that mean for us and the family? [by not relocating] all of my intentions are purely because I want this to go well for [name of athlete], not because of what that could mean for me in the future?

Additionally, by not relocating, Leanne did also not experience some of the perceived negative mood states that could occur if her partner did not perform well in his football match. For example, “I can tell when his mood is low and so I don’t have to deal with things that other partners might face by like having to interact with someone like that in the house.”

Kady also expressed another contextual difference with regards to relocation within boxing, fighters typically attended training camps and the frequent shifting from coping alone and then as a dyad, which was emotionally challenging. It was helpful through

these periods to vent to other boxers' partners who she felt could relate to this cycle of re-adjustment:

Sometimes you think, am I being selfish; but then you speak to other boxers' wives and girlfriends and no, no you aren't! ... 'cause they've been away for so long, you get yourself into your own life while they are away ... they come back and they'll leave everything lying about or they just do annoying stuff and you're like, Oh my God, just go back, and then you think, Oh my God, I sound like such a *****.

Living the performance lifestyle

Mark, Zack and Kady discussed how the lifestyle restrictions of the athlete influenced their diet, particularly alcohol. For Mark, the performance lifestyle of athletics did signal the 'non-normality' of the relationship where the dedication to the lifestyle could impact upon enjoyment and life satisfaction due to lifestyle restrictions:

The sport encompasses your whole life you don't have the freedom that you would have with another partner, and you don't have the spontaneity ... your life can become boring.

In a similar sense, Kady felt that being supportive and mindful of her partner's dietary constraints was important but could fluctuate in accordance with the competitive season. For example, in the build-up to competition it became more important for Kady to adhere to the same lifestyle as her partner as she appreciated the difficulties in his dietary restrictions:

When he is in camp it is different as it's not as we're not going out for meals because he can't. However, if he is out of camp and we have something on he can be the taxi driver so I can have a drink because my life has to go on.

However, both Anton and Zack discussed the joint value of healthy living the sacrifice of alcohol and poor food choices was appraised as beneficial to their lifestyle.

Feeling undervalued and unimportant

All partners discussed how stressful it was to feel undervalued and unimportant by the organization. The organization within this study could include the coach, the trainer, or the club. Finally, a lack of competency in the provision provided to their partner by club/organizational staff was also discussed as stressful.

Feeling valued by the organization

All partners experienced contrasting feelings of valuation by the sporting club or coach. Feeling valued comprised of being provided with informational support and efforts to build meaningful relationships and had significant implications for positive well-being. For instance, Anton discussed how his lack of experience in tennis and in understanding sport specific, was initially challenging and he could often feel apprehension for his girlfriend. However, when members of his partner's tennis team provided him with informational support, it could ease such anxiety and be "comforting ... because I could think something like terrible and they'd be like Oh no, don't, worry, and then it helps me on a human level." Dannielle also discussed how powerful informational support

could be in building trust and regulating her emotions building up to competitive fights:

When [trainers] involve you it's a big thing ... it puts my mind at ease because I feel comfortable with them. I can listen to what he is saying and then be able to put my trust into the trainer and know that he will be safe with my husband which is so important.

Deliberately building meaningful connections and relationships (e.g., hospitality at games with staff present) was highly valued by partners. Tracey believed this not only helped reduce stress but also served as a proactive coping resource for any future stressors:

Before the game we have teas and coffees ... it does make you feel a little bit more important but it has also meant I have built up relationships ... I've got quite a nice relationship with the physio she'll always ask how I am and vice versa ... I think then if I was in a position where I thought, gosh, [athlete] is really struggling, I'd feel comfortable to be able to go to her.

In contrast, Leanne felt undervalued by coaches and staff within the male football environment. She often felt there was a stigma in relationships and was underappreciated for the contribution she makes to her partner's football performance:

As long as [the players] are turning up to training on time, injury free and not overweight [the club] don't care ... there is also a part of football where players might have multiple partners so they can also be worried about the potential leaks and stuff ... I think we are not an asset from a business perspective.

Unique to the context of athletics, trust and value could also be demonstrated through organizational communication and consideration of partners. For instance, Sarah had mentioned how during the Olympic cycle information booklets were provided to partners with contact details of support services for partners following competition:

We got given a phone number for a Liaison Officer, so if [the athlete] is at risk of medalling, there was somebody there in case you needed the support as obviously at the Olympics, anything can blow up.

Competency

Competency related to partners' trust that the organization would be effective in supporting them, the relationship, and the athlete. Partners described how past experiences of broken trust could evoke ambiguity that the organization could best support the partner. For example, Zack highlighted this within his experience of his partner transitioning to a new football club:

When you first meet them [sporting director or coach] some clubs lay it on thick and then when you actually get there, it's all like smoke and mirrors ... like not giving them very structured timetables or being very vague on things and I worry the impact it has on her.

Competency regarding staff experience and knowledge could influence trust which could be stressful for Kady and Zack. For instance, Zack believed that lack of funding within the professional female football industry had impacted upon the trust he had in the competency of staff:

The game's growing and the girls are playing a lot more games but are getting a lot more injuries ... it's like the physios and [sport science] are going into them roles but they aren't really that experienced or qualified ... with [athlete] some of the things she tells me and what they tell them to do I just think is wrong.

The competence of sports staff in maintaining confidentiality could also influence the degree of trust a partner has with the sporting organization. This lack of trust could also be stressful for the partner. Subsequently, when seeking support Zara, Leanne and Zack believed that external resources would be more readily utilized (e.g., church chaplain):

[name of partner] just knew the sport psychologist didn't have his best interest at heart ... He felt like [conversations] would get back to the manager so as a partner opening your mouth could potentially open such a big can of worms for [athlete].

To cope, partners engaged in proactive coping by seeking to understand the attitudes (e.g., opinions on relationships) and values held by those working within their partner's context (e.g., moral principles of honesty), and their professional competency to support their partner (e.g., knowledge, experience).

The sporting performance

The sporting performance included the stressors that were derived directly from the athlete's sporting performance process and outcome. The themes discussed by partners were in relation to the athlete's *underperformance* and *injury*.

Coping with partner's underperformance

All partners discussed how the outcomes of the sporting performance influenced their partner's mood, especially following a defeat. This could impact romantic plans which was often viewed as deflating. For example, Anton discussed "if [partner] was frustrated or upset, that would then have an impact on our night ... if we're going out doing something or whether, she could be bothered." Additionally, Zara, Anton, Sarah and Mark, who lived with their partners had all noted how the athlete's rumination and high levels of self-criticism following poor performances could impact their own well-being. Anton discussed how:

I care about her beyond the sport so it's a taxing to watch sometimes ... you're already powerless to change the outcome, I'd love to be able to do something to help, but I just have to except that some days it's going to suck and some days it's going to be good.

Emotion and problem-focused supportive dyadic coping was reported by Leanne and Zack following an underperformance of their partner. Such coping was discussed by partners to help provide the athlete with analytical information. Doing so could help the athlete reframe stress, have a positive impact on mood, which then had a subsequent impact on relationship quality:

I would say it impacts me from like an emotional sense because I feel really bad ... so what I like to do is actually text him throughout the game because we're both quite analytical people, I'll be like 'oh 16th minute, what were you doing there you let your man run away'.

Sarah discussed how she felt stressed by the reactions of friends and family following her partner's underperformance; being an athlete herself, Sarah could empathize with not wanting to discuss an underperformance at a major event. Sarah described how it was important for her to 'protect her partner' and therefore providing information to family and friends before her partner returned from high-profile competitions was an effective proactive coping strategy:

[family] they've got like 10,000 questions ... the last thing he wants to talk about right now is the bloody Olympic Games it is all he has thought about for the last two years ... it's not gone the way he wants. The last thing he wants to do is be answering your questions about it so if I could feel some of those questions before he gets back so that he doesn't get bombarded [with questions] that helps me and him.

Injury

The onset of injury was a fear cited by all partners due to the emotional implications and physical implications injury could have on the athlete's career progression, and physical and mental health. Although all partners discussed this was part of the sport, it was not always easy to accept. For Kady, such anxiety was particularly intense noting how "all it takes is one punch for your life to be dramatically changed forever". Further to this she believed that she could also influence performance and injury risk through managing any external stress upon her partner. For example, Kady discussed suppressing any personal stress and the importance of using social support from family and other wives and girlfriends of the boxers:

The week of the fight ... I am keeping my nerves at bay ... if he sees me all nervous it's just going to make him more nervous and the risk of him not being focused is so big and any boxers partner will tell you that, so I have to be good at masking it ... I've been with him for so long I have learnt when to step back and just say I am here if you need me.

Sarah, Leanne and Zara all had partners who experienced a long-term injury within the relationship. A coping strategy that was discussed to be helpful throughout this period was informational support from physiotherapists and/or sport scientists who provided knowledge of the injury and how best to support the athlete emotionally and physically through their rehabilitation. However, Leanne discussed that where social support was not provided this may evoke strain:

The last time he got quite seriously injured no one told me anything and then he didn't sign the new contract ... I felt worried but there was no one to really turn to so that was hard ... if I really wanted to know something then maybe I could have asked and then they would spring into action, but [I] was never a priority.

Receiving or dealing with abuse

Receiving or dealing with abuse was categorized into two themes. First, the experience of negative comments and opinions about them or their partner on a social media platform that was direct (e.g., via a private message option) or indirect (reading on an open forum). Second, abuse from fans/spectators was reported to be experienced by partners in person.

Social media abuse

Social media abuse was discussed as a stressor by Leanne, Zack, and Anton. Anton also disclosed how he also received direct abuse on his personal social media account, affecting his well-being, “there’s times where I’ve been sent abuse but I just don’t look at my notifications [Instagram] ... but the potential negativity you receive as a partner of anyone high profile is quite concerning.”

To cope with this stress, avoidance was a useful coping strategy noted by all, and promoted between partners (e.g., ‘I tell [athlete] to not read too much into [social media] about how bad she played ... your manager and the people around you is the only opinion that matters’). Anton also discussed how having his management run his social media account would be an additional method of coping with this stressor.

Face to face abuse

Only those within football noted direct face-to-face abuse. For example, Leanne and Tracey discussed how at the sporting event, ‘quite often you’ll hear people saying [athlete] this and [athlete] that and that’s quite hard ... supporting someone that you love, you are passionate about it as well and get quite agitated’. Leanne also discussed how partners who were new to the football industry could struggle with hearing abuse. For Leanne, re-appraisal of fan feedback and behavior was the most effective way to reduce stress:

It is difficult to not take a stand but I am representing [my partner] ... you always have that rogue girl at the club that will turn around and start fighting with fans because someone said something ... I think you have to think football is like their [fans] bill ... to these people they’re figuring out how their gonna find money for their season ticket before anything else so it is important to them.

Life after sport

All partners discussed concerns about life after sport and how this transition may provoke stress. Specifically, partners were apprehensive and anxious about how the transition from highly structured training and competitive life and identity within the sport could impact their partner’s mood and subsequent relationship quality. This concern was amplified in discussions with support groups where partners within male football had discussed their experiences of personality changes in their romantic partner, and the statistics of divorce following sport retirement:

I know that [the PFA] have made active steps to help partners who were coming to the end of their career because so many have spoken about things deteriorating at home ... some of them were going through a divorce because, like their partners [athlete] mood and personality is just started to change.

However, for Zara, Tracey, and Sarah, while apprehension was discussed they did also believe the transition out of sport could be an opportunity to grow in other aspects of life, to grow in their partnership, and to mitigate the social sacrifices they made inside sports. Proactive coping was discussed by many partners to manage any stressors

also associated to retirement (e.g., financial, identity within the sport). For example, Sarah discussed:

We live in the real world of [sport] which will come to an end one day so we are practical about it like we started our coaching business ... we have to be in a position where one or both of us retires it is not immediate stress.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to facilitate a novel examination of the stress experienced by romantic partners. Framed within an IPA account, partners described stressors that included (see [Figure 1](#)) navigating the romantic space, sacrifices- some willing and some reluctant, feeling undervalued and unimportant, receiving, or dealing with abuse, a partner's sporting performance, and life after sport. The experience of stressors could then test the adaptability of their relationship, like walking a tightrope. The 'tightrope' metaphor particularly captures the tense, uncertain, and narrow route that partners experience because of their involvement within the sporting network. The tightrope also symbolizes the complexity and interweaving nature of stressors (fibres). When walking the 'tightrope' any imbalance between partner and athlete could upset the dynamic (e.g., situational properties that included the temporal uncertainty, ambiguity, and co-occurrence of stressors) and could be appraised as threatening, harmful or an opportunity to enhance well-being and/or sporting performance. However, a large and central component of balance was when partners 'felt' felt (see [Figure 1](#)). "Feeling felt" did have implications on the partner's ability to appraise stressors as a potential opportunity or to be of benefit to the relationship by helping provide stability for the athlete. The range of coping strategies that were discussed to help maintain 'balance' included problem-focused, avoidance, common dyadic, supportive dyadic, protective buffering, re-appraisal, emotion-focused, proactive, and acceptance.

A specific disruption 'to walking the tightrope' were the sacrifices made by the athletes' romantic partners, which included sacrificing their emotional (e.g., protective buffering) and/or social support because of relocation. Sacrifices made by partners within our study did signal the 'non-normality' of the relationship but equally are a common occurrence within professional sports (e.g., location, career). The impact of sacrifice/s on relationship well-being can depend upon a variety of factors such as motivation, commitment, and personality (Righetti & Impett, 2017). For example, professional canoeing partners discussed how the athlete's time away at a training camp could reinforce the commitment to the relationship and provide opportunities for personal growth, and/or increase anxiety, loneliness, and insecurities about infidelity (Waligórska et al., 2023). Our study also identified how sacrifices can be multifaceted and be influenced by the sporting context and the appraisal of the sacrifice.

Irrespective of the appraisal of stressors, within this study romantic partners often reported the non-disclosure of stressors to the athlete to avoid potential performance distractions. It is common within high-stress occupations (e.g., policing) that romantic partners may not share certain experiences with their family members to protect them from the negative elements of their job (Huffman et al., 2019). However, frequent engagement in protective buffering can result in increased psychological distress for

partners and reduced trust within the relationship (Moore et al., 2020). Subsequently, during challenging times when it may be more predictable that a romantic partner may experience stress (e.g., training camps, injury) it would be important to ensure that the romantic partner has a supportive social network. Joseph and Afifi (2010) suggest that social support from experienced partners may be especially helpful, as they may be able to provide nuanced, case-by-case advice about not only when to disclose and when to protectively buffer, but also the best way to share the information.

Partners also discussed that feeling valued and important by the sport organization could occur from the distinctive value of having trusting, empathetic, honest, and information-rich support for resolving uncertainties. Partners also felt valued when they perceived the availability of support from a sports-based specialist - scientist, chaplain, or physiotherapist - to manage partner stress. However, some partners who believed they were not valued by their sporting organization feel most comfortable in seeking support from an external practitioner or organization. Given that partners are providing the athlete with analytical performance information and helping the athlete 'reframe stress', the partner may also be a key individual in the identification of any well-being challenges. Furthermore, by developing a trusting relationship with a partner, practitioners can become more aware of any lifestyle and performance issues and increase the speed of any training adaptations or psychological referral.

The sporting schedule could often evoke guilt, anger, and uncertainty in partners due to either the regimental and strict nature of training or the unpredictable changes to schedules. An explanation for this could be sporting culture and how coaches may expect athletes to prioritize work-life balance values and for partners to be supportive of high-occupational commitment (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2023). When exploring the experience of a clear understanding of schedules, partners can misinterpret time commitments and feel isolated and frustrated which can lead to conflicts and strain the relationship (Waligórska et al., 2023). Subsequently, it would be useful for future research to explore coach values and norms on the importance of protecting the romantic space for athletes and their romantic partners.

Life after sport was discussed as a predictable and inevitable transition. Yet, it could evoke much uncertainty in predicting how this may impact relationship quality. Establishing a clear purpose in life beyond sport may enable both partner and athlete to cope better with the negative consequences of sport, such as injury, poor sports performance, de-selection and retirement. The importance of maintaining the romantic space (e.g., conversations and activities external to sport) also had implications for sport retirement. Brown et al. (2019) reported how sport partners often felt unsure about their role and their partners' ability to cope with the transition out of sport. This may explain why future-orientated coping was a commonly adopted coping approach in our study (e.g., "this will not be forever"). However, while this may have been functional in the short term, a large percentage of athletes may transition into a coaching role and experience similar stressors post-athletic careers, rather than out of sport. Additionally, in their social group discussions partners within male football agreed about the 'threat' of the statistics for divorce rates in the sport retirement transition. This may suggest that while support groups are highly beneficial in creating a space for partners to share their experiences, they may be more adaptive to address

research-informed information on barriers, facilitators, and adaptive coping. A contextually unique stressor affecting both football and tennis was the online and face-to-face abuse partners received. For numerous reasons, the sports context is rife with opportunities for the public shaming of professional athletes (MacPherson & Kerr, 2021). The heightened celebrity status of professional athletes and increased media attention to athletes all contribute to the vulnerability of professional athletes to public shaming through social media and in person. Although awareness initiatives (e.g., FIFPRO) aim to reduce abuse and protect athletes' mental health and well-being, there is no recognition of the emotional impact and effectiveness of coping strategies with such abuse that can impact partners, directly or indirectly. Furthermore, future research should seek to understand more about the implications of social media abuse on partner well-being across sporting contexts to better inform support services and online presence and interactions more effectively.

This study identified how challenging events could be moderated by sporting partners. Through their affinity, peers who are experiencing similar stressors have been found to offer the most effective coping resource through informational and emotional support (e.g., experiential knowledge; Solomon, 2004) and produce a sense of belonging and positive feedback to a person's self-worth (Solomon, 2004). Such partners became particularly helpful when they perceived that non-peer network members did not understand their experiences, (e.g., social sacrifices). In addition to social support, maintaining their current careers or fulfilling multiple roles was helpful when undertaking relocation transitions was a helpful emotion and problem-focused coping strategy. Employment itself has various psychological benefits for an individual by providing partners with a sense of stability and independence, greater opportunity for social interaction and developing interpersonal skills (Roderick, 2013). Additionally, past or current careers could also help provide partners with coping efficacy dependent upon the type of career. Particularly, flexible careers (e.g., modeling, social media) greatly influenced the benefits of the career, due to permeable work arrangements that could align with sporting fixtures. Therefore, sporting government bodies (e.g., UK Sport, Players Football Association) could provide partners with more information on flexible career opportunities or establish mentoring relationships that provide guidance, support, and career advice for partners (e.g., distance learning opportunities).

Finally, partners often discussed how re-appraisal could be a useful coping strategy to manage loneliness experienced with the partner being away. Re-appraisal has enabled partners to focus on what is gained rather than lost (e.g., sport has been a great opportunity to provide an excellent financial life for the family). Often, partners had mentioned using re-appraisal coping as a method of emotionally supportive dyadic coping. Such coping encompasses an empathetic understanding of the partner's stress but helps them reframe the poor performance or injury. When adversities are appraised as 'our problem' and common/collaborative dyadic coping approaches are used, including working toward common goals, couples experience positive outcomes (Falconier et al., 2023). Within this study partners stories were often concerned about engaging in dyadic coping to assist the athlete which also had positive implications for both individuals.

Applied implications

This study identified several applied implications for sport organizations and practitioners. First, sacrifices, such as relocation, can strengthen a relationship when they are acknowledged by both partners, signaling trust, cooperation, and commitment. However, the situational properties of sacrifices (e.g., predictability) and appraisal may be influenced by the sporting context and individual needs (e.g., children). Subsequently, applied practitioners can help develop context-specific programs that support both athletes and partners to reflect on, and acknowledge sacrifices to help the couple develop adaptive ways of mutually coping. Second, our participants suggested the quantity, quality, and timing of support matters for reducing the negative implications of stress experiences. Generally, individuals who receive well-timed, more frequent, and stronger support may appraise stressors as a challenge, in contrast to those with poorly timed, less frequent, and weaker support (Hanton et al., 2012). This latter scenario left partners to their own resources and made them feel as ‘outsiders’ and ‘undervalued.’ Accordingly, practitioners may wish to become proactive in providing informational support that could help resolve ambiguity, creating more of a ‘certainty anchor’ during challenging moments of the athletic career, such as periods of injury. This may also help promote the use of proactive coping strategies before experiencing stress, or by encouraging the deployment of problem-solving strategies before stressful situations (Mansell & Turner, 2023). However, in our study partners typically felt more comfortable in seeking any psychological support external to the sports organization; they had a fear of stigma, underpinned by a lack of trust in the confidentiality of discussions. This lack of psychological safety within the sporting environments will need to be addressed to fully engage partners with sport-based help-seeking. This can be achieved by fostering a culture where vulnerability is met with compassion and support, clear policies that ensure individuals are not punished for disclosing challenges and coaches may reinforce positive cultural norms around supporting the athlete and their wider network (Walton et al., 2024). Lastly, partners recognized that other athletes’ partners offered a helpful coping resource (for one partner this was not always helpful in the appraisal of stressors relating to retirement). Therefore, it would be advised to strengthen support between partners within the sporting organization to provide alternative outlets for stress. It also seems justified to focus this effort on creating social support groups and psychoeducation that include more research-informed information on barriers, facilitators, and adaptive coping. For example, within military domains, psychoeducation workshop sessions are a valuable intervention to enhance resiliency, coping effectiveness, and de-stigmatizing the discussion of the challenging experiences of military spouses (Kees & Rosenblum, 2015).

Strengths, limitations and future research

Using an IPA approach, a novel insight into the stress experiences of the romantic partners of professional athletes was presented. Strengths come from the purposive sampling of partners and the use of the IPA approach for investigating sensitive issues. Despite the uniqueness of this research, it is important to consider its limitations. Limitations emerge around using a single ‘one-off’ interview and relying on the participant’s

willingness to disclose and explore their experiences. Longitudinal approaches will capture the dynamic nature of stressful experiences across time. Such prolonged engagement with participants will build rapport and facilitate the disclosure of sensitive relationship stressors. Additionally, with the passage of time, people do not and, perhaps, cannot provide accurate accounts of the intensity of stressors experienced, and the subsequent appraisals and coping responses (Weckesser et al., 2019). Therefore, future research should utilize methods that capture the dynamic and moment-to-moment nature of the stress process. Despite a range of sports, gender, sexual orientation, marital status and parental status there was a lack of religious and cultural diversity within the sample. For example, participants included only one couple of Christian denomination. It is important to note that the sporting environment could influence the novelty, frequency, type, and intensity of stress experienced by partners and/or removed coping resources of partners of different faiths. For example, within Islam shared religious practice plays a vital role in promoting marital stability, security, and happiness in Muslim relationships (Roy et al., 2011). However, sport (e.g. international competition) may impact upon shared religious practice. Subsequently, future research should seek to explore the experiences of partners across different cultures and religions within a sporting context.

Finally, this study identified that partners can feel unimportant to the athlete's sporting organization. Currently, there is no literature to clarify, refute and/or explore such perceptions. Future research should explore coaching and support staff perceptions of the romantic partner, to enable applied practitioners to consider any barriers and/or facilitators when seeking to deliver interventions with romantic partners.

Conclusion

Using an IPA approach, this study explored the unique stress experiences of the romantic partners of professional athletes, represented using the metaphor of 'two on a tightrope'. Particularly, partners expressed how stressors were interweaved, dynamic and complex. The themes that encapsulated the experiences of partner's stress experiences included: navigating the romantic space, sacrifices- some willing and some reluctant, feeling undervalued, sports performance, receiving abuse, and life after sport. Maintaining balance and support on the 'tightrope' could be achieved by deploying various coping strategies including problem-focused, avoidance, common dyadic, supportive dyadic, protective buffering, re-appraisal, emotion-focused, proactive, and acceptance coping. Important contributions to romantic relationships can be achieved by ensuring that fewer sporting demands are unexpected or 'out of the blue'. The findings suggest future studies should utilize methods that capture moment-to-moment stress transactions over time, across different sporting contexts and cultures. Finally, future research should also address interventions aiming to optimize social support and psychoeducation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Stephen Mellalieu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2868-3328>

References

- Arnold, R., Collington, S., Manley, H., Rees, S., Soanes, J., & Williams, M. (2019). “The team behind the team”: Exploring the organizational stressor experiences of sport science and management staff in elite sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 31(1), 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2017.1407836>
- Ashworth, P. D. (2016). The lifeworld–enriching qualitative evidence. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 13(1), 20–32.
- Brown, C. J., Webb, T. L., Robinson, M. A., & Cotgreave, R. (2018). Athletes’ experiences of social support during their transition out of elite sport: An interpretive phenomenological analysis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 36, 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.01.003>
- Brown, C. J., Webb, T. L., Robinson, M. A., & Cotgreave, R. (2019). Athletes’ retirement from elite sport: A qualitative study of parents and partners’ experiences. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 40(1), 51–60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.09.005>
- Carter, S. P., & Renshaw, K. D. (2016). Spousal communication during military deployments: A review. *Journal of Family Issues*, 37(16), 2309–2332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14567956>
- Didymus, F. F., & Jones, M. (2021). Cognitive appraisals. In: A. R. Arnold, & D. Fletcher (Eds.), *Stress, well-being, and performance in sport* (pp. 63–77). Routledge.
- Falconier, M. K., Wojda-Burlj, A. K., Conway, C. A., & Kim, J. (2023). The role of emotion regulation in couples’ stress communication and dyadic coping responses. *Stress and Health*, 39(2), 309–322. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.3186>
- Franks, H. M., & Roesch, S. C. (2006). Appraisals and coping in people living with cancer: a meta-analysis. *Psycho-oncology*, 15(12), 1027–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.1043>
- Hanton, S., Neil, R., Mellalieu, S. D., & Fletcher, D. (2008). Competitive experience and performance status: An investigation into multidimensional anxiety and coping. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 8(3), 143–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17461390801987984>
- Hanton, S., Wagstaff, C. R., & Fletcher, D. (2012). Cognitive appraisals of stressors encountered in sport organizations. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 10(4), 276–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2012.682376>
- Hinojosa-Alcalde, I., Soler Prat, S., Vilanova-Soler, A., & Norman, L. (2023). Balancing sport coaching with personal life is that possible? *Notes from Physical Education and Sports*, 154(1), 34–43.
- Huffman, A. H., Dunbar, N., Billington, A. G., & Howes, S. S. (2019). Soldiers’ perceptions of military spouses’ career experiences. *Military Psychology*, 31(6), 510–522. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2019.1676601>
- Joseph, A. L., & Afifi, T. D. (2010). Military wives’ stressful disclosures to their deployed husbands: The role of protective buffering. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 38(4), 412–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2010.513997>
- Jowett, S., & Cramer, D. (2009). The role of romantic relationships on athletes’ performance and well-being. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 3(1), 58–72. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jcsp.3.1.58>
- Kees, M., & Rosenblum, K. (2015). Evaluation of a psychological health and resilience intervention for military spouses: A pilot study. *Psychological Services*, 12(3), 222–230. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000035>
- Kent, S., Devonport, T., Arnold, R., & Didymus, F. (2023). Stress and coping experiences of UK professional football managers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Sport Psychologist*, 37(1), 26–39. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2022-0100>
- Lazarus, R. S. (1999). The cognition-emotion debate: A bit of history. *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, 5(6), 3–19.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer Publishing Company.

- Lazarus, R. S. (2000). Evolution of a model of stress, coping, and discrete emotions. In *Handbook of stress, coping, and health: Implications for nursing research, theory, and practice* (pp. 195–222). Sage.
- Leighton, K., Kardong-Edgren, S., Schneidereith, T., & Foisy-Doll, C. (2021). Using social media and snowball sampling as an alternative recruitment strategy for research. *Clinical Simulation in Nursing, 55*, 37–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecns.2021.03.006>
- Mansell, P. C., & Turner, M. J. (2023). The mediating role of proactive coping in the relationships between stress mindset, challenge appraisal tendencies, and psychological wellbeing. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1140790. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1140790>
- MacPherson, E., & Kerr, G. (2021). Sport fans' perspectives of public shaming of professional athletes on social media. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 13*(1), 146–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2020.1836505>
- Moore, C., Carter, L. A., Mitra, S., Skevington, S., & Wearden, A. (2020). Quality of life improved for patients after starting dialysis but is impaired, initially, for their partners: a multi-centre, longitudinal study. *BMC Nephrology, 21*(1), 254. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12882-020-01819-4>
- Najera, E., Landoll, R. R., Pollock, L. D., Berman, M., Ellis, K., Knies, K. M., ... Bowles, S. V. (2017). Stress and resilience in married military couples. *Handbook of Military Psychology: Clinical and Organizational Practice, 1*(1), 157–175.
- Nicholls, A. R., & Polman, R. C. (2007). Coping in sport: A systematic review. *Journal of Sports Sciences, 25*(1), 11–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0264010600630654>
- Nizza, I. E., Farr, J., & Smith, J. A. (2021). Achieving excellence in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): Four markers of high quality. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1854404>
- Pietkiewicz, I., & Smith, J. A. (2014). A practical guide to using interpretative phenomenological analysis in qualitative research psychology. *Psychological Journal, 20*(1), 7–14.
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2005). Qualitative research training in counseling psychology: A survey of directors of training. *Teaching of Psychology, 32*(1), 60–62.
- Reddy, M. K., Meis, L. A., Erbes, C. R., Polusny, M. A., & Compton, J. S. (2011). Associations among experiential avoidance, couple adjustment, and interpersonal aggression in returning Iraqi war veterans and their partners. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 79*(4), 515. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023929>
- Righetti, F., & Impett, E. (2017). Sacrifice in close relationships: Motives, emotions, and relationship outcomes. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 11*(10), e12342. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12342>
- Roderick, M. (2013). Domestic moves: An exploration of intra-national labour mobility in the working lives of professional footballers. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 48*(4), 387–404. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690212442497>
- Roy, J., Hwa, O. C., Singh, R., Aziz, A. R., & Jin, C. W. (2011). Self-generated coping strategies among Muslim athletes during Ramadan fasting. *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine, 10*(1), 137.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Sage.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2015). History and theoretical background. *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods, 25*(1), 80–81.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 51–80). Sage.
- Solomon, P. (2004). Peer support/peer provided services underlying processes, benefits, and critical ingredients. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 27*(4), 392–401. <https://doi.org/10.2975/27.2004.392.401>
- Sparkes, A. C. (2023). The second I got the phone call, everything changed exploring the temporal experiences of the spouses and partners of spinal cord injured sportsmen. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 15*(3), 313–331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2022.2127863>

- Sparkes, A. C., & Smith, B. (2014). Inhabiting different bodies over time: Narrative and pedagogical challenges. In *New directions in social theory, education and embodiment* (pp. 95–108). Routledge.
- Swann, C., Moran, A., & Piggott, D. (2015). Defining elite athletes: Issues in the study of expert performance in sport psychology. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *16*, 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.07.004>
- UK Sport (2023). Pregnancy guidelines. [Online]. UK Sport. Last Updated: 2023. Available at: <https://www.uksport.gov.uk/resources/pregnancy-guidance> [Accessed 12 November 2024].
- Wagstaff, C. R., Gilmore, S., & Thelwell, R. C. (2016). When the show must go on investigating repeated organizational change in elite sport. *Journal of Change Management*, *16*(1), 38–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2015.1062793>
- Waligórska, D., Frydrychowicz, M., Adamczyk, K., Rogowski, W., & Ochnik, D. (2023). Together, but alone: A thematic analysis of the athletes' and their partners experience of physical separation in romantic relationships. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, *13*(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.17583/rimcis.11677>
- Walton, C. C., Purcell, R., Pilkington, V., Hall, K., Kenttä, G., Vella, S., & Rice, S. M. (2024). Psychological safety for mental health in elite sport: A theoretically informed model. *Sports Medicine (Auckland, N.Z.)*, *54*(3), 557–564. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-023-01912-2>
- Weckesser, L. J., Dietz, F., Schmidt, K., Grass, J., Kirschbaum, C., & Miller, R. (2019). The psychometric properties and temporal dynamics of subjective stress, retrospectively assessed by different informants and questionnaires, and hair cortisol concentrations. *Scientific Reports*, *9*(1), 1098. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-018-37526-2>