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DSEP Conference: Leeds, 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> December 2015

Coping without doping: Exploring the relationship between psychological stress and

chemical assistance in high performance rugby

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OBJECTIVES: To explore associations between rugby players' stressful experiences, their

coping resources, and their use of chemical assistance.

DESIGN: A qualitative research design was adopted. Lazarus' (1999) cognitive-

motivational-relational theory was used as the theoretical lens to address the study objectives.

METHODS: Ten male (n=7) and female (n=3) high level rugby league and union players

 $(M_{age} = 22.6, SD = 2.80)$  were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. A high level

player was defined as an individual currently competing in national league one or above who

had been competing at that level for at least five years. All of the interviews were conducted

face-to-face and lasted between 25 and 98 minutes ( $M_{length} = 52.40$ , SD = 27.54). Data was

analysed using thematic analysis procedures.

RESULTS: All players reported lifetime use of nutritional supplements and that their

consumption dovetailed stressful experiences in rugby. Some (n=5) of the participants

suggested that they had used, or considered using, banned substances to cope with chronic

stressors such as injury, pressure to perform, and pressure to increase muscle mass. Players

were most likely to use supplements and or banned substances to cope with stressors when

their personal and social coping resources had been depleted.

CONCLUSIONS: This study has shaped our understanding of the associations between

psychological stress and chemical assistance in rugby. Researchers and practitioners are

encouraged to develop coping interventions that focus on chronic stressors and to educate

players about the risks involved with potentially maladaptive coping strategies, such as

supplement and banned substance use.

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