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Olympic and International Level Sports Coaches' Experiences of Stressors, Appraisals, and Coping

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to use the cognitive-motivational-relational theory (CMRT) of stress and emotions as a lens to explore psychological stress with Olympic and international level sports coaches. In particular, the study aimed to explore situational properties of stressors and coaches' appraisals to address voids in the published literature. Guided by my constructionist epistemological position that contains traces of post-positivism and my relativist view of reality, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six women and nine men. I applied abductive logic during latent thematic analyses to organise and analyse the data. The findings suggest that the coaches experienced many stressors that related to ten themes (e.g., athlete concerns, performance) and that these stressors were underpinned by seven situational properties (e.g., ambiguity, imminence, novelty). The coaches reported challenge and threat appraisals and, to a lesser extent, benefit and harm/loss appraisals. The ways of coping that were discussed with the coaches related to seven families of coping (e.g., dyadic coping, support seeking) that each play a different role in adaptive processes. Collectively, the findings shed new light on the explanatory potential of situational properties and appraisals and go some way toward understanding coaches' diverse experiences. The CMRT was a useful framework for understanding high-level coaches' stress transactions and, thus, could be used in future research with this unique population. Coaches, practitioners, and researchers should attend to the ways that coaches appraise and cope with stressors to facilitate their adaptation to the potentially stressful nature of coaching at the highest levels.

Keywords: appraising, elite sport, Lazarus, NVivo, qualitative

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Olympic and International Level Sports Coaches' Experiences of Stressors, Appraisals, and Coping

The potentially stressful nature of sports coaching at Olympic and international levels has been well documented (e.g., Gould *et al.* 2002, Olusoga *et al.* 2009, 2010, 2012). Some of the reasons why coaching at the highest level can be a stressful occupation relate to the multiple roles that coaches are required to fulfil (Lyle 2002, Miller *et al.* 2002), the pressure to perform that coaches experience in relation to their own performance and that of the athletes they work with (Gould *et al.* 2002), the long working hours that coaches often endure (Knight *et al.* 2013), and the volatile nature of the elite coaching profession (Hill and Sotiriadou 2016). These factors make coaching a unique occupation and differentiate elite level coaching from other levels of competitive involvement. Despite some knowledge of the reasons why coaching can be stressful and a consensus that understanding stress with sports coaches is vitally important for performance and personal reasons (e.g., Fletcher and Scott 2010), coaches' stress experiences are not yet fully understood (Thelwell *et al.* 2016).

Psychological stress, which is an umbrella term that encompasses stressors, appraisals, coping, and strain, can be defined as a 'relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being' (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p. 19). This definition is based on a relational conceptualisation of stress, which was central to Lazarus' (1999) cognitive-motivational-relational theory (CMRT) of stress and emotions. According to this theory, stressors, situational properties (e.g., imminence, duration, timing in relation to life cycle), appraising, and coping are closely related concepts that are influential in individuals' experiences of stress. The CMRT describes stressors as environmental demands that have the potential to be appraised as psychologically noxious and highlights the important role of situational properties of stressors in determining individuals' appraisals. The theory defines

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appraising, which is the verb form of the noun appraisal, as 'the evaluative process by which the relational meaning is constructed' (Lazarus 1999, p. 13). This concept is fundamentally different to outcomes of stress (e.g., changes to wellbeing and or performance), which are thought to arise from an inability to cope. According to the CMRT, coping refers to dynamic cognitive and behavioural efforts that aim to manage demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the individual's resources (see also Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Some of the concepts described here (i.e., stressors, coping) have been explored as individual components of sports coaches' stress experiences (see e.g., Levy *et al.* 2009, Olusoga *et al.* 2009) but the relevance of the CMRT to the context of coaching is unknown. This is surprising when considering that the CMRT is widely used in different contexts, including sport (e.g., Uphill and Jones 2007) and experimental psychology (e.g., Smith and Lazarus 1993), and when keeping the benefits of theoretically informed research (e.g., advancing understanding of complex phenomena) in mind.

In the sports coaching literature, stress has often been explored in relation to burnout (see, for a review, Schaffran *et al.* 2016) and, as alluded to, some researchers have reported lists of stressors that coaches experience (e.g., Wang and Ramsey 1998, Olusoga *et al.* 2009) and the coping strategies that they use (e.g., Levy *et al.* 2009). Such lists are useful for developing preliminary understanding of coaches' experiences but they hold limited practical significance and do not provide comprehensive insight to coaches' transactions with their environment. This dearth of comprehensive knowledge is problematic because unexplored components of coaches' stress experiences (e.g., situational properties of stressors, appraisals) can play pivotal roles in functioning and adaptation (Lazarus 1999). In addition to list-like overviews of stressors and coping strategies that have often been reported independently of each other, researchers have suggested that coaches perceive 'staying cool under pressure' to be an important factor in their coaching effectiveness (Gould *et al.* 2002)

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and that they view coping as important for successful coaching at the Olympic level (Olusoga *et al.* 2012). Using a psychophysiological lens, Hudson *et al.* (2013) reported that coaches' alpha-amylase activity, subjective stress, arousal, and unpleasant emotions were higher on competition days when compared to noncompetition days. Collectively, this research provides insight to individual components of coaches' stress transactions and suggests that coaches' must be able to effectively cope with stress, particularly on competition days, to maintain their performance.

In addition to studies that have reported coaches' perceptions of their stress transactions, some scholars have explored the links between coaches' and athletes' experiences. For example, Hardy (1992) examined athletes' stress experiences and found that social evaluation by the coach was a noteworthy stressor for athletes. Other more recent articles (see e.g., Parent *et al.* 2014, Alsentali and Anshel 2015) support the suggestion that athletes can experience numerous stressors that relate to their coach. In a study that explored athletes' perceptions of coaches' stress experiences, Thelwell *et al.* (2016) found that both the coaching environment and athletes themselves were negatively affected by coaches' experiences of stress. Other researchers (e.g., Olusoga *et al.* 2010) have explored the links between coach and athlete stress experiences from the point of view of the coach, rather than the athlete, and found that coaches' perceived that their negative responses to stress could be projected onto athletes. With these findings in mind and when considering the potential ramifications of coaches' stressful transactions for athletes and coaches, further research that aims to understand how coaches cope with stress is warranted.

When exploring coping, researchers (e.g., Levy *et al.* 2009) have often used broad, structural coping distinctions (e.g., problem-focused, emotion-focused, avoidance coping) that are focused on the intention and function of coping efforts (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) to classify ways of coping. However, other researchers (e.g., Skinner *et al.* 2003, Didymus

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and Fletcher 2014) have criticised these classifications and proposed a system that, in line with the CMRT, views coping as an adaptive process (Skinner *et al.* 2003). This way of classifying coping is based on a hierarchal system of action types that spans the conceptual space between coping at the ground level and the adaptive processes that act as mediators between stress and long-term effects on health and functioning (Skinner *et al.* 2003). This system consists of twelve families of coping (e.g., problem solving, self-reliance) that have been used in recent research with athletes (Tamminen and Holt 2010, Didymus and Fletcher 2014). Skinner *et al.* (2003) pointed out that some of the families of coping are likely to be more relevant in some contexts than in others. Thus, the classification system was designed for use with various age groups and for diverse contexts. It would, therefore, be useful to identify the families of coping that are most relevant to high-level sports coaches and to explore the functions that these families could play in coaches' adaptation to their environment.

It is apparent that high-level level coaches' stress experiences are worthy of academic attention. Thus, it is surprising that there appears to be no published research that attempts to understand why different coaches respond to similar stressors in different ways or why the same coach may appraise a stressor as stressful on one occasion yet appraise the same stressor as benign on another occasion (Fletcher and Scott 2010). According to the CMRT (Lazarus 1999), situational properties of stressors and appraising offer explanatory potential for understanding individuals' diverse stress experiences. Lazarus (1999) admits that his CMRT pays little attention to situational properties of stressors and that further research is needed to examine the properties of situations that determine the potential for a stressful appraisal. The findings of previous research with world class coaches highlight that, despite the potentially stressful nature of high level coaching, little is known about why coaches use limited psychological skills to manage stressful encounters (Olusoga *et al.* 2010). With this

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and the widespread agreement that coaching at Olympic and international levels is a demanding profession in mind (e.g., Gould *et al.* 2002), the aim of this study was to use the CMRT as a lens to explore psychological stress with a sample of Olympic and international level sports coaches. In particular, the study aimed to explore situational properties of stressors and coaches' appraisals to address voids in the published literature.

Methodology and Methods

Philosophical Assumptions

Notwithstanding calls for epistemological ambiguity in qualitative research (e.g., Koro-Ljungberg *et al.* 2009), this study was paradigm driven due to the usefulness of this approach as a heuristic device for researchers (Wolgemuth *et al.* 2014). My epistemological position is such that knowledge is constructed, rather than created, via social interaction (Crotty 1998, Sparkes and Smith 2008). From this position, which is referred to as constructionism, I see the process of understanding as 'the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship' (Gergen 1985, p. 267). My epistemological position also contains traces of post-positivism (see Hill 2012), which allows me to focus on explaining and understanding at the nomothetic level. With reference to ontology, I have a relativist view of reality (Smith and Caddick 2012) and assume that my values and experiences influence what I understand. To maintain an open and thoughtful mind throughout this project, I maintained a reflexive journal using the internal sources function in NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2016). The aims of this activity were to expose implicit biases in my approach to knowledge construction (Finlay and Gough 2003), to remain aware of my internal responses to the research process (Etherington 2004), and to acknowledge subjectivity while capturing my developing understanding of the study method and findings (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

Interviewees

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Six women and nine men (M_{age} = 36.92, *SD* = 15.43 years) who were coaching at Olympic or international level ($M_{experience}$ = 13.75, *SD* = 11.41 years) and represented individual (athletics, equestrian, squash, tennis, triathlon) and team (netball, rugby league, rugby union, water polo) sports took part in this study. Due to the limited number of coaches working at Olympic or international level in each aforementioned sport, I have refrained from including further demographic information that could compromise the coaches' confidentiality. I used a criterion-based variation of purposeful sampling (Patton 2015) to recruit the sample. There were two criteria for participation in the study: 1) the coaches had to be coaching at Olympic or international level at the time of data collection and 2) and the coaches needed one or more years of coaching experience at this level. In line with previous research (e.g., Rhind *et al.* 2013), I deemed these criteria appropriate for recruiting interviewees who could co-construct knowledge that was relevant to the aim of this project. I assumed that each coach could articulate his or her sport-related experiences of stressors, appraisals, and coping.

Data Collection

Development of Interview Guide

I developed an interview guide using previous research on coach stressors and coping strategies (Thelwell *et al.* 2008, Olusoga *et al.* 2009, 2010). I adopted a semi-structured approach to the design of the interview guide, which included main questions that I asked to each interviewee, flexible probing questions that aimed to encourage the coaches to elaborate on their answers, and clarification questions that I could use in instances where an interviewee's answer was unclear. This semi-structured approach allowed interviewees to discuss areas of perceived importance (Sparkes and Smith 2014) while allowing me to collect data that were relevant to the research aim. In addition, the chosen approach complements my constructionist position by allowing me and the interviewees to engage in flexible and

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collaborative co-construction of knowledge (Roulston 2010).

Interview Questions

The interview questions were divided into four sections. The first section consisted of open questions (e.g., 'what do you understand the term "stress" to mean?') that were designed to ascertain each coach's understanding of key terms (stress, stressors, situational properties, appraising, and coping). Section two of the interview guide asked one open question to generate a list of memorable stressors that the interviewees had experienced during their role as an Olympic or international level coach. Section three consisted of a series of open questions that I asked in relation to each stressor that was recalled during the second section. These questions were designed to encourage discussion about pivotal components of the stress process (Didymus and Fletcher 2012, 2014). For example, I asked the interviewees to 'describe the characteristics of the stressor in terms of what made it stressful' to explore underlying situational properties of stressors and encouraged the coaches to explain how they evaluated each stressor ('how did you evaluate this stressor?') to explore their appraisals. I explored the coaches' coping strategies by asking 'what did you do to cope with this stressor?' The collective aim of the first three sections of the interview guide was to facilitate detailed discussions about the stressors that had left a lasting impression on coaches and, thus, to explore their experiences of stress. The fourth section of the interview guide included open and closed questions to discuss each interviewee's thoughts about the research (e.g., 'how did you find the interview?' and 'were you able to fully discuss your experiences of psychological stress?').

Pilot Study

I piloted the interview guide with two coaches. One of these coaches had recently retired after an international coaching career that spanned 18 consecutive years. The second pilot interviewee was coaching national level athletes at the time of the study and had 11

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years of experience as an international level coach. During the pilot phase, both of the coaches suggested that the question 'how did you evaluate this stressor?' required further clarification. Therefore, in collaboration with the pilot interviewees, I changed this question to 'at the time that the stressor occurred, how did you evaluate the impact of it on your wellbeing?' No other refinements were made to the interview guide.

Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, I contacted high-level coaches via an e-mail that contained information about the nature and purpose of the study. This communication also informed coaches that participation in the study would involve one face-to-face interview with me; that the study was in compliance with the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct; and that data would be collected, stored, and destroyed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. Potential interviewees were invited to contact me if they wanted to take part. Those who did make contact with me arranged a convenient date, time, and location for an interview. At this stage of the procedure, I sent a copy of the interview guide to each coach and asked him or her to familiarise with the questions that would be asked. At the beginning of each interview, I asked each coach to confirm that he or she understood the purpose and procedure of the study and that he or she was happy for the interview to commence. Each interviewee then provided written informed consent and disclosed his or her age, gender, current coaching level, and coaching experience to a demographic details sheet. I audio recorded each interview using a password encrypted digital recording device. Each interview lasted between 45 and 95 minutes (M_{length} = 63, *SD* = 17).

Data Analyses

I transcribed the audio files verbatim using Microsoft Word®. The transcription process represented an opportunity for me to immerse in the data and, thus, assisted with the

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analyses. I deemed latent thematic analysis to be appropriate because it encouraged me to identify, analyse, and report patterns in the data (Braun and Clark 2006) and, thus, address the aim of the study. In addition, this method is compatible with my constructionist epistemological position that contains traces of post-positivism because it allowed me to focus on explaining and understanding the coaches' experiences by exploring the data set as a whole. I used NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2016) to assist the six phases of thematic analysis that I conducted in a recursive manner: familiarisation with the data, generating and grouping codes, searching for and identifying themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing this article (see Braun and Clark 2006, Merriam and Tisdell 2016).

I applied abductive logic (Denzin 1978, Patton 2015) throughout the analyses to encourage creative knowledge construction and to apply a theoretical framework to the interviewees' experiences. This procedure was appropriate because the aim of the study was to explore psychological stress (inductive) using the CMRT (Lazarus, 1999) as a theoretical lens (deductive). The abductive approach to latent thematic analysis first involved me generating inductive codes that I grouped together to represent subjective experiences. I then searched for and identified themes before making preliminary connections between the coaches' experiences and the CMRT. While remaining open minded to the unexpected, I deductively reviewed, defined, and named each theme as a CMRT-related concept (i.e., stressors, situational properties, appraisals, and coping). Throughout the data analyses, I explored various interpretations of the data with a critical friend. These explorations included discussions about the data that appeared to resonate most deeply with or be most pertinent to the coaches (e.g., we explored the number of times that each coach and the entire sample discussed a particular theme and the language that the coaches used). In accordance with Ryba and colleagues (2012), the purpose of these and broader discussions with the critical

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friend was to bridge 'diverse psychological worlds' (p. 86) and to expose the interpretations to 'new possibilities of meaning' (p. 86). In light of this purpose, I chose a critical friend who is an expert in qualitative research, rather than psychological stress, so that we could draw on our different knowledge and experience to consider various meanings.

Research Quality

I view criteria for judging the quality of qualitative enquiry from a non-foundational perspective (Smith and Caddick 2012). Thus, I see quality-related characteristics of research as time- and place-contingent (Sparkes and Smith 2014). With this in mind, I deemed the most appropriate criteria for judging the quality of this research to be the substantive contribution of the findings, coherence, resonance, and credibility. To expand on each of these characterising traits briefly, I aimed to co-construct knowledge that contributes to understanding of high-level coaches' experiences of stress and, thus, report findings that are substantive. A substantive report on the findings was also achieved by using thick quotes from the participants when creating the results section of this manuscript. I assessed the coherence of the findings (i.e., how well they created a meaningful and complete picture; Smith and Caddick 2012) throughout the study via discussions with a critical friend. With reference to resonance, my aim was to produce findings that are valuable in Olympic and international level coaching contexts and in various situations within these contexts (cf. Tracy 2010). Finally, I enhanced credibility by spending time with the participants, by sharing each coach's interview transcription with that individual to encourage reflection and dialogue about the data that I had deemed most pertinent, by using NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2016) to maintain a reflexive journal and an audit trail of the research, and by having a critical friend to scrutinize and discuss matters such as the sampling and data analyses.

Results

The themes that we (me and the participants) constructed relate to stressors (Table 1),

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situational properties (Table 2), primary appraisals (Table 3), and coping (Table 4). The results are presented as quotes from the interviewees that are interweaved with my interpretations of the data. This method of representation allows the voices of the coaches to be foregrounded and addresses the aim of the study by providing insight to the coaches' subjective experiences of working at the highest levels of coaching. Pseudonyms are used throughout the results section to protect the coaches' identities.

Stressors Experienced by the Coaches

I defined this dimension of the results as 'environmental demands (i.e., events, situations, or conditions; Fletcher *et al.* 2006) that were encountered by the coaches.' The coaches reported a variety of stressors that related to the following themes: athlete concerns, coaching responsibilities, expectations, finance, governance, interference, organizational management, performance, preparation, and selection (see Table 1). Five of these themes resonated most deeply with the coaches: athlete concerns, coaching responsibilities, interference, organizational management, and performance. The codes within the athlete concerns theme related to athlete commitment and professionalism. In the following example, Jonathan described his experience of a lack of athlete professionalism: 'As a coach you face many stressors, like today, I sent a lad home because he went out for some beers last night and turned up [to training] not in the best of states. It was unacceptable.'

[Table 1 near here]

Turning to coaching responsibilities, the codes within this theme related to communicating with athletes, managing athletes psychologically, and meeting athletes' training needs. For example, Peter spoke about his management of athletes' anxiety prior to major competitions: '[Location] and [location] are their two events of the whole year to shine and attract new owners. There's no dress rehearsal and that pressure shows in the rider. It's so stressful because I have to manage their anxiety.'

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With reference to stressors in the interference theme, the group of codes encompassed conflict between individuals, distractions, equine quandary, media, parents, and weather conditions. With reference to conflict between individuals, Kristin spoke about conflict between members of a netball team: 'When you've got the squad bickering with each other it impacts the on field play. If your players aren't getting on off the field, that creates a bit of tension. So yeah, it's difficult.' Turning to the stressors that related to the media, Roland described his thoughts about relentless media attention: 'You can take it from me, there's no other job like it that will have that amount of impact in terms of media and fans. It is just constant, every day and yes, that's stressful.'

Within the organizational management theme, the codes incorporated management responsibilities, reliability of colleagues, travel, and working hours. For example, Roland discussed how long working hours adversely influenced his personal life:

> I'm getting divorced at the moment and the reason I'm getting divorced is because I am hell bent on making my job work. That means working every hour I have to. The by-product is that I am disconnected from my family. I don't have a partner who is ready to support me and go through the rough and smooth in all of the stressful times, and I don't have time to commit fully to my job and my family. A lot is laid on my doorstep. No matter what, this job has to get done and everything else has to wait.

Moving on to performance-related stressors, the codes in this theme related to athlete performance, coach performance, and injury. With reference to athlete performance, many of the coaches discussed stressors related to losing as a result of athlete underperformance. To illustrate, Anabelle spoke about tennis players' underperformance and regular losses: 'When you're losing all the time because players aren't performing it's the hardest job in the world being a coach . . . you're unhappy and you've got to get your players upbeat, you know, it's really hard.' Each of the coaches discussed injury as a significant stressor for them and the

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athletes who they work with. In the following quote, Jason described his stressful experiences relating to injury-anticipation in triathlon: 'The thing that's most stressful is the worry that something really serious might happen to one of your athletes…an injury. You know, we have a lot of bike crashes every year and people do get injured, some very badly.'

Situational Properties of Stressors

I defined this dimension of the results as 'some underpinning aspect of an environmental demand that determined the potential for a stressful appraisal' (Didymus and Fletcher 2012). The coaches discussed seven situational properties that underpinned their stressful experiences: ambiguity, duration, event uncertainty, imminence, novelty, temporal uncertainty, and timing in relation to life cycle (see Table 2). Ambiguity, imminence, and novelty appeared to be the most pertinent properties that were experienced by the coaches. Ambiguity, which I conceptualised as situations where the necessary information required to make an appraisal was unavailable or insufficient, is illustrated in the following quote from Thomas: 'It is stressful because we're not sure whether, for this tournament in May, whether we're going to get £10,000 or £15,000 or whatever, you know? I'm not sure what to think; it's unclear and that's confusing.' I conceptualised imminence, which was discussed by each of the coaches in this study, as the amount of time before an event occurs (see Lazarus and Folkman 1984). In the following example, Nellie spoke about a lack of time before an event, which was influential in forming her appraisal: 'At late notice I had to take another group of athletes and I hadn't had time to prepare. That's stressful because you think about things differently when you're under time pressure like that.' With reference to novelty, which relates to the effect of prior knowledge, Alison discussed her experiences of being a new coach: 'I was the new coach and I had limited experience; it was me trying to fit in with the other coaches as well as me being a good coach. That was quite stressful.'

[Table 2 near here]

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With reference to the other situational properties that the coaches discussed, the next quote is from Jason who spoke about the duration of stressors. This property refers to the length of time that a stressor persists: 'I think the really stressful things are those that have built up over a period of time . . . maybe you feel that your relationship with the athlete is not going well . . . that can be stressful if it lasts.' Turning to event uncertainty, which I conceptualised as the probability of an event occurring, Alison spoke about unpredictable weather conditions:

> Unpredictable weather is stressful. You could be outside one minute with bright sunshine and the next minute it's chucking it down. Half the time you have no idea whether it's going to rain or not. Even at the elite level, the athletes don't really like the rain so that's all added stress when you're not sure whether it's going to happen.

In the following quote, Thomas discussed temporal uncertainty (i.e., a lack of clarity regarding the timings of an event) that related to athletes' training sessions: 'One example is that we have certain pool bookings over the weekend but we're not completely sure of when they are . . . I mean that's not perfect, that's not the way things should be.' I conceptualised timing in relation to life cycle as the contextual properties that define the timing of an event. In this example, Joshua spoke about the timing of competitive events in relation to public holidays:

> The timescales weren't great, linked in with the previous chat about the Christmas period happening at the wrong time of the calendar year and the timescales that [country] and [governing body] have put on these selection meets . . . it's quite a lot of stress.

Coaches' Primary Appraisals of Stressors

I defined the primary appraisal dimension of data as 'evaluations of environmental demands in terms of their relevance to the coach's beliefs, values, goal commitments, and

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situational intentions' (cf. Lazarus 1999). The coaches in this study most often discussed challenge and threat appraisals but did also refer to benefit and harm/loss appraisals on occasion (see Table 3). With reference to challenge appraisals, Hannah suggested that she felt 'quite enthusiastic' when experiencing a performance-related stressor and Annabelle reported that she felt 'enthusiastic, kind of happy going to work and, you know, tackling the next thing' when experiencing an unexpected win. In a more lengthy discussion, Katherine spoke about the challenge appraisal that she made in relation to balancing athletes' needs:

> I remember thinking at the time that the challenge of coaching women with different abilities is quite good. I think that's quite a good thing for me as it challenges me as a coach to balance their needs. If I was working with people of the same ability all the time then it wouldn't test me in the same way.

[Table 3 near here]

Turning to threat appraisals, Joshua articulated the way in which he appraised his own coaching performance and the potential influence of this appraisal on his wellbeing: 'It has the potential to damage my wellbeing. I have just got over a period of time where my wellbeing has been affected by this sort of stuff quite badly so I know it could happen again.' In another example, Katherine discussed how she evaluated observation of her coaching as a threat: 'It was threatening because someone was watching me and judging me on my coaching. Being watched made me tighten up and so my coaching could have been negatively affected by something that I couldn't control.'

In the following example, Peter described a benefit appraisal that he made following feedback from an athlete: 'Today was the first time she has ever said to me "I enjoyed today." The session was stressful but I felt a sense of gain from it…it made me feel good.' Another coach, Thomas, spoke about a benefit appraisal that he made in relation to selecting athletes:

> It's hugely rewarding when it, when you think, "okay we're getting close to the actual

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squad that is ideal for us" . . . I'm just trying to think about my evaluation of it at the time. It was a positive thing because my overall objective in the sport is to be better . . . to build a better team. So the stress of selecting the team was more of a benefit, it was helping me to reach that objective of building a better team.

With reference to harm/loss appraisals, Jason described this type of appraisal when referring to his forced redundancy from a coaching role:

I have experienced really quite dramatic things like being made redundant and the program being cancelled. That was a big setback in terms of me, my wellbeing, and the program . . . At the time, I certainly remember thinking that the decisions had had a detrimental effect on my wellbeing. I'd go as far as saying that they destroyed it.

The next quote is from Peter who spoke about how he appraised competition results with a sense of harm/loss:

The all-consuming nature of it was damaging physically and mentally . . . and the traipsing all around Europe and being physically exhausted and mentally exhausted as a result of never having quite the right result. It would always be like 3rd or 4th . . . you'd done everything other than won . . . we never enjoyed the moment at all.

Coaches' Ways of Coping

I defined the dimension of the results that encompassed coaches' ways of coping as 'cognitive or behavioural strategies that the coaches used to manage stressors that were appraised as stressful' (see Lazarus 1999). The coaches reported an array of coping strategies that related to dyadic coping, escape, information seeking, negotiation, problem solving, self-reliance, and support seeking (see Table 4). With reference to dyadic coping, codes related to common, delegate, and supportive ways of coping. For example, Annabelle discussed how she engaged with de-briefing after a match, which was a form of common dyadic coping: 'We de-briefed at the end of the game about what we could have done better . . . it was an

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476 open and honest discussion that helped me and the girls cope together.'

477 [Table 4 near here]

478 Codes within the escape family of coping referred to behavioural avoidance, changing
479 focus, and cognitive avoidance. Martin, for example, reported that he avoided conflict
480 between individuals by removing himself from the situation: 'It's easier for me to walk away,
481 else I end up saying things that aren't necessary and that can blow things out of proportion.'
482 Turning to the information seeking family, this included codes relating to asking others,
483 observation, and reading. Many of the coaches reported that they coped with stressors by
484 posing questions to colleagues. To illustrate, the following quote is from Joshua who
485 described a situation when he asked others to glean information and cope with coaching
486 responsibilities: 'I asked some people about it. I talked to my colleagues about different
487 movement processes and patterns, and about the transferability of some of the skills.'

488 The negotiation family of coping encompassed communication, prioritising, and
489 setting goals. For example, Martin spoke about his communication with an athlete that helped
490 him to cope with a performance-related stressor: 'I discussed a little bit with [the athlete]
491 about what his understanding is, why he finds it difficult, and what he's feeling.' The problem
492 solving family referred to changing behaviour, concentration, planning, professional
493 development, and strategizing. In this quote, Roland discussed how he changed his behaviour
494 to work longer hours when coping with athletes' underperformance: 'What I did was work
495 harder and do longer hours, spend longer looking at tapes of the games that we've played,
496 spend longer sitting down with individuals.'

497 Within the self-reliance family of coping, coaches reported strategies relating to
498 emotion regulation, emotion expression, reflection, and self-comforting. Jonathan described
499 how he used reflection to cope with his performance during a rugby game: 'After the game
500 when I got a quiet moment I took some time to reflect because I did tend to…I missed things

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and said things because I was so animated.' The support seeking family of coping encompassed comfort seeking, contact seeking, and instrumental aid. To illustrate, the following quote is from Kristin who described receiving advice as a form of instrumental aid to cope with interference from parents: 'I get advice from my manager, she's good. She can give me advice and she will have been through it herself because she's a tennis coach too.'

Discussion

The aim of this study was to use Lazarus' (1999) CMRT as a lens to explore psychological stress with a sample of Olympic and international level sports coaches. In particular, the study aimed to explore situational properties of stressors and coaches' appraisals to address voids in the published literature. The findings support and extend the CMRT, which provided a useful framework for developing new understanding. For example, the coaches reported a variety of stressors and suggested that these stressors were underpinned by a number of situational properties that are incorporated within the CMRT. Ambiguity and imminence, for example, are key foci of Lazarus' (1999) theory but the findings of this study suggest that other properties, including novelty, were also pertinent during the coaches' experiences. This information could be used to develop the CMRT during future research with high-level coaches. The coaches in this study experienced threat and challenge appraisals and, to a lesser extent, harm/loss and benefit appraisals. This supports the CMRT and provides insight to high-level coaches' evaluations of stressful situations, which have not until now been the focus of academic attention. With reference to coping, it is perhaps unsurprising that a plethora of coping strategies were discussed but the way in which these have been categorised and reported extends the literature by offering new insight to the role of coping in coaches' adaptation to and success in their coaching profession.

The stressors that were reported by the coaches in this study support previous research (e.g., Thelwell *et al.* 2008, Olusoga *et al.* 2009) by highlighting the volume and variety of

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stressors that can be experienced and the potentially stressful nature of Olympic and international level coaching. This information is helpful for understanding the environmental demands that high-level coaches may need to cope with but it is the situational properties of stressors that offer a more promising avenue for impact. To the best of my knowledge, no published literature exists that specifically explores these properties with coaches although one paper (Olusoga *et al.* 2009) did present a comparable finding. To explain briefly, Olusoga and colleagues reported that stressors that occurred simultaneously created a demanding environment for their sample of world-class coaches. This finding is similar to the data presented here that relate to timing in relation to life cycle and, thus, the collective findings of both pieces of research suggest that the timing of stressors is important for high-level coaches. The current findings compliment the results of some general psychology research that link ambiguity to threat appraisals (see e.g., Chen and Lovibond 2016) by suggesting that ambiguous stressors are influential in coaches' experiences of stress. This may be because ambiguity is closely linked to various person factors (e.g., intolerance of uncertainty, Taha *et al.* 2014) that can provoke threat appraisals and negative affect, and because threat appraisals and negative affect relate to performance (e.g., Gaudreau *et al.* 2002, Moore *et al.* 2012). With reference to the other situational properties that were reported by the coaches, the pertinence of imminence may be explained by the CMRT, which highlights the moderating role of temporal properties (i.e., duration, imminence, temporal uncertainty, and timing in relation to life cycle) on appraisals (Lazarus 1999). These properties help to explain why a stressor may be appraised as harmful at one point in time yet beneficial at another and, thus, hold explanatory potential for a better understanding of stress experiences.

The results that relate to appraisals suggest that each of the four transactional alternatives (benefit, challenge, harm/loss, and threat) that are incorporated within the CMRT (Lazarus 1999) were experienced by the coaches in this study. The coaches did, however,

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report less information relating to their appraisals when compared to that relating to stressors, situational properties, and coping. This suggests that the coaches found it difficult to recall their appraisals of stressors during the interviews. One explanation for this may be that appraising can be either deliberate and conscious or automatic and largely unconscious (Lazarus 1999). Thus, it could be that the coaches' appraisals were largely instinctive, which supports some appraisal theorists' (e.g., Moors 2010) suggestions that appraising, or at least some parts of this process, are constructive and can occur automatically (Ferguson and Bargh 2003). While no other published research has provided a detailed examination of coaches' appraisals of stressors, Frey (2007) did highlight that coaches can respond to stressors in both positive and negative ways. The current findings support this assertion because the coaches discussed both positive (benefit, challenge) and negative (threat, harm/loss) appraisals.

Turning to the coping strategies reported by the coaches, the results presented here suggest that Skinner *et al.*'s (2003) categorisation offers a helpful framework that dovetails the CMRT and allows exploration of coping as an adaptationally relevant process. To expand briefly, the families of coping that were used as a framework to guide the categorisation of coping strategies each serve a different function in adaptive processes and, therefore, offer insight to how high-level coaches may adapt to high performance environments. For example, the coaches used coping strategies within the negotiation family of coping and Skinner *et al.* (2003) suggested that the function of such coping efforts is to 'find new options' (p. 245). This function allows individuals to coordinate coping preferences and available options (Skinner *et al.* 2003), which may explain why the coaches turned to prioritising and setting goals, for example, when managing stressors. The findings of this study highlighted dyadic coping (see Bodenmann 1995, 1997) as a coping option for the coaches and, therefore, suggest that high-level coaches' coping does not occur in a social vacuum but can involve athletes and members of their wider network. Collectively, the

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findings relating to coaches' ways of coping extend knowledge by moving away from lists of strategies that relate to the intention and function of coping (e.g., Levy *et al*. 2009, Olusoga *et al.* 2010, 2012) and toward an understanding of coping as an interpersonal phenomenon that moderates adaptational processes.

With my reflexive stance in mind, it is important to consider potential strengths and limitations of this study. One strength relates to the theory driven approach that I took to constructing knowledge. This approach advances understanding of complex phenomena and can aid researchers in making decisions on appropriate courses of evidence-based action. Another strength of this study is the sample that consisted of members of a high-level coaching community. Sampling these individuals can provide fascinating insight to the psychological factors that underlie the achievements of exceptional individuals (Simonton 1999). Despite these strengths and the methodological rigour that was inherent in the study design and execution, a number of potential limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. For example, the power relationships (Day 2012) that were inevitable within and between me and the interviewees are likely to have influenced the findings. This is because these relationships are tied to broad social structures (Sparkes and Smith 2014) that were not fully explored during data collection. In addition, while I explored the usefulness of the CMRT for understanding high-level coaches' experiences, the relational approach that is inherent to this theory and relates to person (e.g., goal relevance, goal conduciveness, coping potential, beliefs) and environmental (e.g., demands, constraints, opportunities) characteristics and their relative importance was not fully espoused. This is because the next logical step in understanding coaches' stress experiences was to focus on components of stress that had not been elucidated at the point of starting this study. Once these components are more fully understood, researchers should progress toward understanding the complex relational aspects of stress experiences.

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To further explore coaches' stress experiences, future research should focus on person and environmental characteristics, and on the role of relational meanings and emotions in high-level coaches' stress transactions. This will aid a more thorough examination of the relational approach that is fundamental to the CMRT. With knowledge that appraising is at the heart of psychological stress in mind (Didymus and Fletcher 2012, Lazarus and Folkman 1984), further research is needed to better understand the explanatory potential of appraising in coaches' stress transactions. Future research should also work towards a better understanding of the ways in which high-level coaches cope with the competitive and potentially stressful environment in which they work, and how effective coaches' coping strategies are in managing the negative outcomes of stressors. Such explorations should aim to corroborate Skinner *et al.*'s (2003) families of coping and foster knowledge of coaches' adaptationally relevant, interpersonal stress transactions that occur outside of the social vacuum in which they have been explored to date.

To close, this study constructed new knowledge of Olympic and international level coaches' experiences of psychological stress using the CMRT (Lazarus 1999) as a guiding theory. The CMRT was a useful framework that allowed some components of stress transactions, which have not been explored in the published literature with high-level coaches to date (i.e., situational properties of stressors, appraisals), to be highlighted as pertinent aspects of coaches' experiences. The findings signpost the explanatory potential of situational properties and appraisals and go some way toward developing a better understanding of high-level coaches' diverse experiences. Ambiguity, imminence, and novelty were pertinent situational properties that underpinned the stressors that the coaches experienced. Thus, sport psychology practitioners would do well to consider how their coach clients can effectively manage ambiguous, imminent, and novel situations. One example of how practitioners may apply this aspect of the findings is to work with high-level coaches to draw on comparable or

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626 vicarious experience to bolster self-efficacy (see e.g., Bandura, 1977) and, in turn, buffer
627 against novel stressors. Practitioners and researchers should also attend to the ways that
628 sports coaches appraise and cope with stressors, and how they adapt to the potentially
629 stressful nature of coaching at the highest level.

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769 Table 1

770 *Stressors experienced by the coaches*

Codes	Groups of Codes	Themes
Failure to take ownership of performance Lack of involvement Lack of motivation	Commitment	Athlete concerns
Attending training with a hangover Bad habits Denying mistakes Disrespectful behaviour Doubting ability Drink driving related incidents Drug related incidents Inexperienced athletes Lack of belief in the coach Making the transition to international competition Misusing sports equipment Reliability of athletes Top players affecting other athletes Unhelpful attitudes Unprofessional behaviour	Professionalism	
Building rapport Choosing helpful words when communicating Learning how to communicate	Communicating with athletes	Coaching responsibilities
Athletes' erratic reactions to stressors Building a cohesive team Developing athletes' attitudes Easing athletes' anxiety Instilling confidence in athletes Judging and accommodating athletes' moods Maintaining a positive environment Maintaining positivity during competition Managing athlete disclosure Managing desperation to succeed Managing athlete temperaments Supporting athletes through bereavement Unpredictable nature of athletes during training Working with mental health problems	Managing athletes psychologically	

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Athletes requiring more time than can be provided Balancing athletes' needs Coaching athletes from different cultures Meeting the needs of different athletes Providing appropriate support	Meeting athletes' training needs	Coaching responsibilities (cont.)
Expectations of coaching performance Unrealistic expectations	Athletes' expectations	Expectations
Expectations before a local derby Performance expectation	Expectations of self	
Family expectations Horse owner expectations Media expectations National governing body expectations Spectator expectations Sponsor Expectations	Perceived external expectations	
Funding for competitions Insufficient financial support Sport costs favouring wealthy athletes	Athlete finance	Finance
Budget for competitions Budget management Funding that is dependent on performance	Club finance	
Costs involved with being a coach Devalued assets due to poor performance Personal finance	Coach finance	
Being excluded from decisions that affect athletes Club board level decisions National governing body level decisions	Decision making	Governance
Centralisation of the training programme Confusion around training times Disorganised training and competition environments Emphasis on results Insufficient training time Job insecurity Uncertain competition plans	National governing body organisation and foci	
Unclear selection criteria Unclear selection procedures Unhelpful timing of selection meets	Selection	
Athlete bickering and disagreements Coaching a family member Conflicting agendas of coach and external agencies Disagreement between coach and athlete	Conflict between individuals	Interference

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Athletes being a training partner for an Olympian Athletes' involvement in other activities Competitions taking athletes away from training Noisy working conditions	Distractions	
Horse behaviour Horse's mental state	Equine quandary	
Agenda driven media Constant media attention Distorted media reports Getting helpful information to the media Media commitments Media portrayals of me as a person Social media	Media	Interference (cont.)
Parents being too hard on children Parents interfering with training	Parents	
Flooded facilities Weather affecting competition Weather preventing training	Weather conditions	
Completing multiple tasks simultaneously Managing multiple executive roles Managing staff	Management responsibilities	
Coaches letting athletes down Coaches not attending training	Reliability of colleagues	
Booking flights and accommodation for athletes Travel to competition Travel to training sessions Travel visas	Travel	Organizational management
Long working hours Working longer hours than contract states Work-life balance	Working hours	
Athlete underperformance Athletes not learning from instructions Indolent athletes Lack of effort from athletes	Athlete performance	
Being observed during training Making mistakes during training Coaching a new team or athlete Doubt in coaching abilities Making decisions under pressure Making helpful decisions about training plans Managing time effectively	Coach performance	Performance

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Not giving 100% during coaching Protecting athletes from coach's emotions Starting as a professional coach Teaching technical content Thinking on the spot	Coach performance (cont.)	Performance (cont.)
Athletes' acute injuries during competition Athletes' chronic injuries Athletes' injury rehabilitation Athletes training despite chronic injuries Coaches' chronic injuries Injury-anticipation	Injury	
Accessing facilities Inadequate equipment Inadequate facilities Lack of preparation time Organising athletes before a big tournament Preparing for major events Undoing unhelpful work from other coaches	Competition preparation	Preparation
Athletes not having appropriate equipment Getting to training on time Preparing training sessions based on match performance	Training preparation	
Choosing the best athletes for the team Leaving athletes out of the team Releasing players from contract	Selecting athletes	Selection
Missing a selection opportunity Olympic selection	Selection for major events	

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775 Table 2

776 *Situational properties of stressors*

Codes	Groups of Codes	Themes
Absence of clear information Excessive and unclear information Insufficient clarity	Ambiguous information	Ambiguity
Lack of time to prepare for the stressor Minimal time to adjust to the stressor	Acute stressors	Duration
Events taking too much time Repeated exposure to the stressor Stressor building over a period of time	Chronic stressors	
Unconvinced by the conditions Unsure how possible the event is Unsure whether the situation will happen	Uncertainty regarding event occurrence	Event uncertainty
Unpredictable nature of the stressor Volatility of the situation	Unpredictability	
Too much time to deliberate the event Too much time to prepare	Excessive time before an event	Imminence
Event is just around the corner Event needs to be assessed and addressed quickly Lack of time before an event Late notification of an event Time running out before an event	Insufficient time before an event	
Adequate prior experience of the stressor Limited prior experience of events No prior experience of the Olympics	Experience	Novelty
Limited prior knowledge of the stressor No existing knowledge of the event	Knowledge	
Not knowing when a stressor will occur Unsure of precise timing of events	Doubt about timing of stressors	Temporal uncertainty
Doubt about how long a stressor will last Doubts about the longevity of a stressor	Doubt relating to the length of an event	
Stressors coinciding with personal commitments Stressors coinciding with public holidays Stressors coinciding with work commitments	Stressors clashing with commitments	Timing in relation to life cycle
Incompatible coach and athlete timetables Multiple stressors occurring simultaneously Stressor occurring late in the season	Timing of stressors	

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778 Table 3

779 *Coaches' primary appraisals of stressors*

Codes	Groups of Codes	Themes
Experienced a sense of gain from the stressor Rewarding process of tackling the stressor	Benefit to self	Benefit
Stressor helped to achieve a goal	Goal attainment	
Confident that we can overcome the stressor Felt enthusiastic towards the stressor	Assertiveness	Challenge
Saw the stressor as advantageous for my wellbeing Sense of potential gain from the stressor	Potential benefit to self	
Saw the event as a way to achieve a goal	Potential gain	
Event prevented us from achieving our goal	Goals inhibited	Harm/loss
Felt mentally and physically exhausted by the situation Situation caused damage to my wellbeing Situation hurt my feelings Stressor caused me to be depressed	Damage to self	
Stressor threatened our goals	Goal-related threat	Threat
Stressor had the potential to damage the players Terrified that something bad would happen	Potential damage to others	
Felt an impending sense of threat Felt negative about the potential outcomes Potential damage to physical and psychological health Situation could damage my wellbeing	Potential damage to self	

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781 Table 4

782 *Coaches' ways of coping*

Codes	Groups of Codes	Themes (function in adaptive process)
De-briefing with athletes De-briefing with colleagues Discussing feedback Sharing the responsibility of learning Trying to understand the situation together	Common	Dyadic (pool available resources)
Athletes doing coaching tasks Referring athletes to discipline specialists Using school masters to help athletes feel movements	Delegated	
Athletes helping to relay information Encouraging athletes to realise their bad habits Encouraging athletes to think positively Encouraging athletes to train with 100% effort	Supportive	
Avoiding every facet of life and sport Avoiding stressors Avoiding the media and third parties Backing off from athletes Removing oneself from the situation Removing the horse from competition Taking a physical step back	Behavioural avoidance	Escape (escape noncontingent environment)
Consuming alcohol Exercising Using humour	Changing focus	
Putting the stressor to the back of my mind Switching off from the stressor Trying not to worry about the stressor	Cognitive avoidance	
Getting to know the individual athlete Having one to one meetings with athletes Listening to the athlete Posing questions to colleagues Seeking a second opinion	Asking others	Information seeking (find additional contingencies)
Assessing the situation Seeking further information about the athletes' situation Watching someone else riding the same horse	Observation	
Researching relevant information Using research to inform athlete preparation	Reading	

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Being honest with players	Communication	Negotiation (find new options)
Communicating club rules at the outset		
Communicating mistakes with athletes		
Communicating openly with athletes		
Conducting sessions on athletes' attitudes		
Highlighting the importance of representing the country		
Lecturing athletes to motivate them		
Presenting evidence to athletes		
Reviewing athletes' performance individually		
Speaking with parents		
Writing notes		
Focussing first on what is most urgent	Prioritising	
Prioritising what is important		
Re-adjusting goals	Setting goals	
Setting goals for each coaching session		
Setting process orientated goals		
Setting realistic and timely goals		
Accepting the situation	Changing behaviour	Problem solving (adjust actions to be effective)
Acting during coaching		
Adapting to the situation		
Being more organised		
Coaching the basics		
Creating flexible training plans		
Demonstrating on the athlete's horse		
Developing consequences for athletes' behaviour		
Involving athletes with decisions		
Leaving the house on time		
Making alternative arrangements		
Making time for a social life		
Under coaching to boost confidence		
Working harder		
Working longer hours		
Concentrating on the athletes	Concentration	
Concentrating on what I have control of		
Focussing on my own career		
Focussing on the job		
Focussing on the process		
Focussing on what can be done		
Being realistic about time commitments	Planning	
Developing a plan		
Having a back-up plan		

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Planning diversity into the athlete cohort Planning for competition Planning for various situations Re-planning based on new information	Planning (cont.)	Problem solving (cont.)
Developing myself as a coach Learning about developing athletes Learning about the chimp paradox Learning to see stressors as opportunities	Professional development	
Developing team trademarks Having well known players on the team Protecting athletes from coach's own stressors Removing an athlete from the team Removing an athlete from training Weighing up pros and cons	Strategizing	
Absorbing stress Maintaining a steady emotional state Not worrying about the stressor Protecting athletes from coach's emotions Remaining calm	Emotion regulation	Self-reliance (protect available social resources)
Celebrating Panicking about the situation Sharing repartee with colleagues Shouting at athletes Venting to other coaches	Emotion expression	
Reflecting on the situation	Reflection	
Having faith in coaching ability Reminding oneself of own ability Using positive self-talk	Self-comforting	
Being comforted Being listened to Being made to feel secure	Comfort seeking	Support seeking (use available social resources)
Receiving help from an athlete Receiving help from another coach	Contact seeking	
Receiving advice Receiving guidance	Instrumental aid	

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Disclosure Statement

The author will gain no financial benefit from and has no financial interest in the publication or application of this research.

Biographical Note

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