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Abstract

Playing sport at any level can be stressful, especially for high-level adolescent rugby league players who are hoping to forge a career in their sport. These athletes could potentially experience stressors of playing for their academy side, loan team, and first team. In this article I provide a summary of a presentation I gave to rugby league academy and assistant academy managers from each super league club within the United Kingdom and France. I also explain elements of the presentation and the rationale for the inclusion of content.

21 Coaching the Coaches: Coping Effectiveness Training for Super League Academy Managers

Competing in sport, especially when an athlete is attempting to forge a career, has the 22 potential to be very stressful (Holt & Dunn, 2004). Stress has been defined as "an ongoing 23 process that involves individuals transacting with their environments, making appraisals of 24 25 the situations they find themselves in, and endeavoring to cope with any issues that may arise" (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006, p. 329). Research indicates that adolescent 26 27 athletes may experience stressors relating to failure (Sagar, Lavallee, & Spray, 2007), being evaluated by other team members or coaches (Reeves, Nicholls, & McKenna, 2009), and 28 having pressure to perform from other people such as coaches (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). 29 Stress can negatively influence performance because it can distract an athlete's focus (Hardy, 30 Mullen, & Martin, 2001). Further, stress can have a detrimental influence on an athlete's 31 psychological well-being (Lazarus, 2000). A self-regulatory mechanism that enables athletes 32 to manage stress more effectively is coping, which refers to thoughts and behaviors to 33 manage any demands (i.e., opponents playing well or coach criticism) that have been 34 evaluated as taxing a person's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). 35

36 Context for the Presentation

There are currently 12 professional rugby league clubs (11 from England, and one 37 from France, which will be reduced to 10 for the 2015 season), which compete in the Super 38 League. Each club has an academy that is part of the Advance Apprenticeship in Sporting 39 Excellence scheme. Academy managers are responsible for the overall development of 40 players within their academy and aim to increase the number of players who make the 41 transition from academy to first team squad. It should also be noted that some of the players 42 within the academy structure may also be first team squad members and/or dual registered 43 with a club in the rugby league championship (second tier of professional rugby league). 44

Prior to the presentation, an audit had taken place by the Rugby Football League that revealed 45 coping was a key factor in influencing whether academy rugby league players would make 46 the transition to professional level (personal correspondence with national academy 47 manager). I was invited to give a two-hour presentation on the 15th of December 2012 at the 48 John Smith Stadium in Huddersfield, by the national academy manager, regarding research 49 that I have published and practical information on how academy directors can help their 50 51 players cope more effectively. It should be noted that the majority of the academy managers or their assistants were ex-professional rugby league players who had played club and 52 international rugby league. 53 The Presentation 54 Research among professional rugby union players (e.g., Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & 55 Bloomfield, 2006; Nicholls, Jones, Polman, & Borkoles, 2009; Nicholls & Polman, 2007) 56 indicates that coping effectively with stressors is associated with the deployment of particular 57 coping strategies (e.g., blocking negative thoughts), so a large part of the presentation was 58 dedicated to coping. Researchers from mainstream psychology (i.e., Williams & 59 McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1999) have also found that self-awareness is important in managing 60 61 stress. As coach interactions can be stressful for academy soccer players (Reeves, Nicholls, & McKenna, 2009), I deemed it important to include information on this in presentation. As 62 such, the presentation contained three distinct themes, (a) understanding stress and appraisals, 63

64 (b) coping, and (c) effective coach behavior.

65 Understanding Stress and Appraisals

Having mentioned to the delegates that the presentation would be divided into threeparts at the very start, with the first being understanding stress and appraisals, a definition of

stress was read out in the first slide. The aim of this part of the presentation was to increase 68 the delegates' awareness of what stress is, the stressors their players may encounter, why 69 their players experience stress, and how appraisal may generate more positive emotions. The 70 71 definition of stress used in the presentation was "an ongoing process that involves players making evaluations of the situations they find themselves in and trying to cope with issues 72 that arise," which was adapted from Fletcher et al. (2006). The delegates were then asked to 73 74 identify the symptoms of stress followed by how these symptoms may affect a player's performance. The purposes of these discussions were to illustrate that stress can influence 75 people differently, in terms of the symptoms experienced and the effects it has on 76 performance. It was hoped that this would be useful in increasing the academy managers and 77 their assistants' awareness of how stress influences people differently, so that they can 78 identify players who might be affected by stress the most. The symptoms of stress identified 79 by the delegates were similar to those that have been included in the previous literature and 80 included increased heart-beat, worry, shaking, and indecisiveness (Nideffer, 1992). With 81 82 regards to the effects it has on performance, the coaches said that it can be useful in terms of getting players "psyched up for a match," but have a negative impact on performance by 83 distracting players. 84

The academy managers were asked to discuss the stressors that their players face in groups, which would be fed back to the group. The purpose of this exercise was compare and contrast stressors that the coaches believed their players would experiencing with those identified in published research with team sport academy players (e.g., Nicholls, Backhouse, Polman, & McKenna, 2009; Reeves et al., 2009). Interestingly, the coaches identified education, training, performance, and relationships as some of the key stressors, but failed to identify how coaches might be a stressor for the players.

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The see-saw analogy diagram (Figure 1), proposed by Lazarus (1999), was then used

to help explain why players experience stress. According to Lazarus, when a player believes 93 that there is an equal balance between his or her resources to cope and the demands of a 94 situation, little or no stress will be experienced. When a player believes that their resources to 95 96 cope outweigh the demands of the situation boredom may prevail, and when a player believes that the demands of the situation outweigh his or her resources to cope, stress is experienced. 97 This analogy and diagram was useful, because it helped the coaches understand why their 98 99 players experience stress and helped me introduce the concept of appraisal. That is, the delegates were informed that players make an appraisal or evaluation of the situation in 100 regards to their own resources and the demands. 101

Recent research featuring a sample of adult professional rugby players by Nicholls, 102 Levy, Jones, Rengamani, and Polman (2011) found that appraisals of anticipated or actual 103 gains (e.g., winning a match or receiving praise from coach) were associated with pleasant 104 emotions such as happiness and hope. Conversely, appraisals of anticipated or actual losses 105 (e.g., sustaining an injury or opponents scoring a try) were associated with unpleasant 106 107 emotions such as anxiety and anger. Ouotes from the players who featured in this study were 108 presented to the delegates. The coaches were encouraged to communicate positive statements to players that focus on what can be gained from situations (e.g., "Drive the player in the 109 110 tackle away from the try line," as opposed to "don't miss the tackle and let them score"). The delegates were then presented with a range of scenarios and asked to identify instructions that 111 are more likely to generate gain appraisals and those that might generate loss appraisals. 112

113 Coping

114 The next part of the presentation was related to coping and how the delegates could 115 teach their players to cope more effectively. Similar to the stress section of the presentation, I 116 started with a definition of coping: "coping refers to ongoing thoughts and behaviors to

manage demands that tax a person." In order to illustrate that coping is an ongoing process
that includes thoughts and behaviors, the following quote from Michael Jordan (1994, p. 11)
was presented:

120 If I had stood at the free-throw line and thought about 10 million people watching 121 me on the other side of the camera lens, I couldn't have made anything. So I 122 mentally tried to put myself in a familiar place. I thought about all of the times I shot 123 free throws in practice and went through the same technique I had used thousands of 124 times. You forget about the outcome. You know you are doing the right things.

125 This example demonstrates how a variety of different coping strategies were used in such a 126 short period of time. The delegates were then asked to describe experiences in which they had 127 experienced stress as a player and what they did to cope with these stressors.

Following this discussion, the concepts of coping dimensions were discussed with the 128 players. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping can be classified within two 129 130 broad dimensions: problem- and emotion-focused coping. Coping strategies categorized within the problem-focused dimension manage or alter the problem that is causing the player 131 stress. Examples of these strategies include speaking to a coach for advice, doing additional 132 133 training to work on techniques, planning, and trying to solve any problems. Emotion-focused coping strategies are those that are deployed to regulate emotional distress. Strategies such as 134 deep breathing, acceptance, blocking negative thoughts, or walking away from a stressful 135 situation are considered to be emotion-focused strategies. The delegates were then asked to 136 classify the coping strategies they had previously described into problem- or emotion-focused 137 138 dimensions. These dimensions were discussed in the presentation because interventions that have utilized these dimensions have found evidence to suggest that people can be taught to 139 cope more effectively (e.g., Chesney, Chambers, Taylor, Johnson, & Folkman, 2003; Reeves, 140

Nicholls, & McKenna, 2011). As such, I deemed it necessary that the delegates had an 141 understanding of these different dimensions so that they could see how the interventions were 142 developed and apply these to their players. Coping Effectiveness Training (CET: Chesney et 143 al., 2003) was an intervention designed for individuals diagnosed with HIV to help them cope 144 more effectively with stress. One of the main tenants of the intervention was based on the 145 goodness-of-fit approach (Folkman, 1984), which states that problem-focused coping 146 147 strategies will be more effective when the person can control the stressors, whereas emotionfocused coping are more effective when the person has little or no control of the stressor. The 148 participants in this intervention were taught to deploy problem-focused coping strategies for 149 controllable stressors and emotion-focused coping strategies for uncontrollable stressors. 150 Although the intervention by Chesney et al. (2003) was an non-sporting population, Reeves 151 et al. (2011) developed a similar intervention for academy soccer players from an Football 152 Association Premier League club. Both interventions had a positive impact on overall coping 153 effectiveness. 154

155 A key aspect of coping effectiveness training (Chesney et al. 2003) is that people 156 understand the difference between: (a) uncontrollable and controllable stressors and, (b) problem- and emotion-focused coping. A list of stressors, from a sample of English under-18 157 158 rugby union players (Nicholls & Polman, 2007), were presented to the delegates who were asked whether the stressors were controllable or uncontrollable. On the whole, there was 159 common consensus on all stressors other than opponents. A delegate mentioned that a player 160 can control his opponents by how well he plays. Another delegate stated that this was 161 incorrect and that players cannot control opponents fully and that this is an uncontrollable 162 stressor. The delegates were the presented with a variety of problem- and emotion-focused 163 coping strategies that had been deemed to be relatively effective among samples of 164 professional rugby union players and taught how they could teach these coping strategies to 165

their players. The coping strategies discussed were blocking negative thoughts, increasingconcentration, acceptance, increased effort, and gathered information.

168 Coach Behavior

Research with high-level adolescent (Nicholls & Polman, 2007) and professional 169 (Nicholls et al., 2006) rugby union players revealed that coaches were a stressor. 170 Furthermore, Chow, Murray, and Feltz (2009) found that coaches of adolescent teams who 171 had strong beliefs regarding their ability to coach were more likely to have players in their 172 team who conducted acts of violence. Gucciardi, Gordon, Dimmock, and Mallett (2009) 173 174 found that coaches are instrumental in the development of mental toughness in their athletes. High levels of mental toughness are associated with athletes who cope more effectively (e.g., 175 Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). As such, it appears that coach behavior might be a 176 contributor factor of stress levels among adolescent athletes and was included in the 177 presentation. The section of the presentation regarding coach behavior was very interactive. 178 179 The delegates, who were in small groups, discussed what types of coaching behavior might 180 cause players to experience stress and how they can limit the stress that they cause. This topic was debated quite strongly, and it was felt that clarity regarding selection, avoiding publically 181 humiliating players, and overly criticizing players could help reduce stress levels of players. 182

183 Presentation Reflections

184 The presentation was based on research with professional rugby union players given 185 that both rugby league and rugby union are high impact team sports. The presentation 186 included information how the academy managers could help their players to manage stress 187 more effectively and was partially based on paper by Reeves et al. (2011). It should be noted 188 that the intervention by Reeves and colleagues consisted of seven sessions, whereas this 189 presentation was only two and a half hours long. As such, the depth of the presentation was

- 190 not as great as the study by Reeves. However, a challenge of working in professional sport
- settings and providing psychological support to professional teams is that the time available
- 192 may be limited and that decisions have to be made regarding the content of such sessions.

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- 263 Figure 1.
- 264 Adapted Version of Lazarus' (1999) See-saw Analogy
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