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Talented but Disruptive: An Exploration of Problematic Players in Sports Teams

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to enhance the understanding of problematic players, who have been identified as highly talented but negative influences in team sport. Using semi-structured interviews, 15 players and coaches' experiences of problematic players were explored. Results were divided into features, causes of behaviour, impacts and managerial considerations surrounding problematic players. Findings revealed problematic players share characteristics with narcissists. From an applied perspective, the negative impacts from these players are recognised, such as negative role modelling and lower team morale. Managerial considerations for these players are discussed, which could be beneficial for coaches working with problematic players and their negativity.

*Keywords:* group dynamics, coaching, team sport, conflict

### **Lay Summary**

We explored coach and player experiences of individuals who are highly talented yet problematic. Such players can now be understood further, in terms of behaviours such as blame shifting, and their impacts such as negative role modelling and creating team divides. Creating stronger coach-player relationships were suggested for effective collaboration.

## Talented but Disruptive: An Exploration of Problematic Players in Sports Teams

56 Across multiple disciplines, negative team members within groups can be observed  
57 (Cope, Eys, Beauchamp, Schinke, & Bosselut, 2011; Cope, Eys, Schinke, & Bosselut, 2010;  
58 Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006; McGannon, Hoffmann, Metz, & Schinke, 2012).  
59 Researchers in the organisational psychology domain have labelled such individuals as ‘bad  
60 apples’ (Felps et al., 2006). ‘Bad apples’ have been shown to have a negative impact, including  
61 increased negative affect (Cole, Walter, & Bruch, 2008), decreased group cohesion (de Jong,  
62 Curşeu, & Leenders, 2014), increased co-worker withdrawal from work (Eder & Eisenberger,  
63 2008), and effort reduction in co-workers (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). In contrast to the  
64 healthy body of research in organisational contexts, in sport, limited research has examined  
65 how players who are perceived as ‘bad apples’ might impact group functioning.

66 Within sport, Cope and colleagues (2011) were the first researchers to explore ‘bad  
67 apple’ team members. Informal roles were analysed from articles in Sports Illustrated  
68 Magazine, and multiple roles were identified including the negative role of a ‘team cancer’  
69 [sic]. The ‘team cancer’ is defined as “an athlete who expresses negative emotions that spread  
70 destructively throughout a team” (p.24). Given that little research has explored the negative  
71 impact of such roles in sport, Cope et al. (2010) focussed their research on examining the ‘team  
72 cancer’. Ten coaches described their experiences of players who fit the ‘team cancer’ role and  
73 characterised the ‘team cancer’ to be negative, manipulative, and exhibit blame shifting  
74 behaviours towards others. Players were proposed to emerge into the role owing to external  
75 pressure and leeway from coaches. Consequences of the ‘team cancer’ were divided into seven  
76 sub-categories: negativity, cohesion, distractions, clique formation, performance, attrition and  
77 coach empowerment.

78 In further consideration of the ‘team cancer’ player, McGannon et al. (2012) examined  
79 the social and cultural narratives of such a player within a professional team sport context. The

80 authors focussed on a professional ice hockey player's (Sean Avery) most controversial team  
81 conflict and how the media portrayed derogatory comments Avery made about a relationship  
82 between an opposition player and a former girlfriend. Avery was seen as narcissistic, his  
83 behaviour was seen to distract the team and reduce team unity, and the 'cancer identity' was  
84 viewed as a character flaw that directed this poor behaviour. However, unlike Cope et al.'s  
85 (2010) findings, Avery was also seen to have positive impacts on the team (e.g., how his trash  
86 talking might entice opponents to make bad decisions which would benefit his own team).  
87 Within the articles, the coach also noted that Avery's talent was an important factor to consider  
88 during the management of the conflict, as Avery made positive performance contributions, and  
89 thus was difficult to leave out from the side. These findings suggest talented 'team cancer'  
90 players can have both positive and negative group-related consequences, and can impact upon  
91 the management of such individuals.

92         Given that 'team cancer' players appear to impact on group dynamic processes such as  
93 conflict, it is important to understand more about why this may occur. The concept of conflict  
94 as a group dynamics principle is well established (see Holt, Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012;  
95 Mellalieu, Shearer, & Shearer, 2013; Paradis, Carron, & Martin, 2014; Wachsmuth, Jowett, &  
96 Harwood, 2017; 2018a, 2018b). For example, in considering the negative outcomes of conflict,  
97 Paradis et al, found it appeared to bring out negative emotional states (e.g., frustration) and  
98 behaviours (e.g., verbal fighting), whilst Holt et al. (2012) found relationship conflict to be  
99 more destructive within the successful female teams, than performance conflict. Furthermore, a  
100 conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships (Wachsmuth et al., 2017)  
101 has been developed to explain both athlete-athlete (i.e., peer conflict) and coach-athlete  
102 conflict. This framework proposes a variety of conflict determinants (e.g., athlete personality;  
103 interpersonal communication), external factors (e.g., team selection), and conflict  
104 consequences (e.g., clique formation, withdrawal, and performance decrease). However, while

105 previous research (e.g., Cope et al., 2010; McGannon et al., 2012) suggests that the ‘team  
106 cancer’ player may cause interpersonal conflict, Wachsmuth et al.’s (2017) framework does not  
107 specifically include difficult/‘team cancer’ players as a source of conflict. Thus, examining  
108 such players could add to Wachsmuth et al.’s (2017) framework by explaining more fully why  
109 conflict occurs in sports teams, and the outcomes of conflict on group functioning.

110         When considering how a coach works most optimally with such a negative player,  
111 Cope et al. (2010) suggested that the ability of the ‘team cancer’ player may be a moderating  
112 variable. In practical terms, if a ‘team cancer’ player has lower ability, it is easier for the coach  
113 to drop such a player. However, a more high-skilled player is much more difficult for a coach  
114 to leave out of the side, due to the greater on-pitch contribution such a player can make. Within  
115 the elite sporting environment, anecdotal examples of such players exist, such as Kevin  
116 Pietersen, a highly talented cricket player who was permanently excluded from the English  
117 cricket team because of the supposed negative impacts his behaviours had on team functioning  
118 (Mole, 2015). Nevertheless, research has highlighted how the ‘team cancer’ player’s bad  
119 behaviour is tolerated due to their talent, and contributions to the team (McGannon et al.,  
120 2012). While it is possible that participants in Cope and colleague’s (2010) research implicitly  
121 discussed such talented players, this is not reported by the authors. Thus, we aim to build on  
122 the work of Cope et al. (2010) by having a specific focus on ‘team cancer’ players who are  
123 highly talented.

124         In summary, the purpose of the present study is to expand on Cope et al. (2010) and  
125 McGannon et al.’s (2012) research on the negative ‘team cancer’ player in a number of key  
126 ways. First, we will examine a particular type of ‘team cancer’ player who is also extremely  
127 talented within their respective team (in light of the sensitive issues surrounding the word  
128 ‘Cancer’, we will hereon in use the term ‘problematic player’ to describe the talented, but  
129 negative player). In addition, Cope and colleagues (2010) only interviewed male coaches about

130 their perceptions of the problematic players, and McGannon et al. (2012) only used media  
131 articles to explore the portrayal of their sporting celebrity. Given this we aimed to use a diverse  
132 sample that also included female coaches, and team members (i.e., captains, senior and junior  
133 players) to provide a more complete first-hand understanding. In line with previous exploratory  
134 research into both informal roles and group dynamics principles (e.g., Cope et al., 2010,  
135 Wachsmuth et al., 2018a, 2018b), the primary aims of the research were to understand the  
136 characteristics and behaviours of highly talented problematic players; the consequences of such  
137 players on the team; and the potential causes of their behaviour. From an applied perspective,  
138 we aimed to raise awareness for leaders and practitioners concerning issues when working with  
139 problematic players in team sports.

## 140 **Method**

### 141 **Philosophical Perspectives & Design**

142 The present study took a qualitative descriptive approach that aimed to understand and  
143 summarise athlete and coach experiences of problematic players. Qualitative descriptive  
144 studies are particularly useful when exploring applied topics and used to understand the “who,  
145 what, and where of events or experiences” (Sandelowski, 2000, p.338). Given that this study  
146 was interested in understanding the characteristics, behaviours and impacts of problematic  
147 players, alongside understanding how to work with problematic players, a qualitative  
148 descriptive approach was deemed appropriate. Qualitative descriptive research is not associated  
149 with a specific philosophical perspective (Sandelowski, 2000). The design and analysis of this  
150 study were consistent with the researcher’s post positivist philosophical view, which  
151 recognises that some aspects of the social world cannot be measured, and therefore  
152 interpretivist assumptions are embraced (Weed, 2009). The rationale for this approach was to  
153 understand participants’ lived experiences of problematic players, whilst acknowledging that  
154 their views are reflective of their own sporting contexts. As problematic players warrant

155 exploration as a phenomenon, this approach was deemed suitable. In conjunction with this  
156 approach, the research adopted common qualitative traditions in the methodological and  
157 analytical processes (e.g., thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke, 2006). The design of the study  
158 incorporated components including the iterative process and memo writing (Corbin & Strauss,  
159 2015), which have been used within qualitative research in sport and exercise (e.g., Martin,  
160 Evans, & Spink, 2016). The iterative process outlines a sequence whereby data analysis begins  
161 as soon as the first data is collected (Holt, 2016). The analysed data was therefore able to  
162 inform future data collection through interview guide modifications and participant  
163 recruitment. This element allowed the development of knowledge in line with the exploratory  
164 nature of the research, (Holt, 2016), in aiming to create a more comprehensive picture of the  
165 problematic player phenomena. The taking of memos assisted the iterative process by enabling  
166 the lead researcher to detail new ideas, concepts, and linkages (Weed, 2017), and how the  
167 findings compared to previous literature.

### 168 **Sampling and Participants**

169         Theoretical sampling was employed due to its comprehensive nature in allowing for  
170 different participant types to be sourced as new concepts are identified, and to cover emerging  
171 gaps in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In conjunction to the theoretical sampling process,  
172 all participants were required to meet a sampling criterion. This stipulated that participants had  
173 to have experience of a problematic player within their interactive sports team for at least one  
174 full season. Participants were approached in line with purposive sampling (Fletcher & Sarkar,  
175 2012) in order for data from a wide array of sports and experience levels to be gathered. This  
176 allowed for the exploration to be wider and more rounded. Sampling occurred in three phases.  
177 The first phase used five heterogeneous coaches to expand on work of Cope et al. (2010), who  
178 also used coaches to explore the cancer role. Within the memos created from the coaches' data,  
179 it became apparent that players in the team may have a better knowledge of the problematic

180 players' impacts on the team, as the coaches were directly experiencing some of the perceived  
181 impacts. Due to players with more seniority often having a deeper knowledge of the team and  
182 how the team functions, it was therefore decided that the second sampling phase would focus  
183 upon senior players. Senior players were deemed as those who had competed within the team  
184 for at least two seasons, and who held formal leadership responsibility. The third and final  
185 sampling phase addresses junior players (defined as players who had been involved with the  
186 team for no longer than a season and a half and who had no leadership role) after data from  
187 senior players suggested that their seniority in the team may cause the impacts to be perceived  
188 differently by them in comparison to new or more inexperienced players.

189         The final sample (See Table 1) comprised 15 participants (5 coaches, 5 senior players  
190 and 5 junior players) ranging from 19 – 56 years of age ( $M = 24.9$ ,  $SD = 9.2$ ) and of both  
191 genders (8 male and 7 female). Participants had an average of 2.1 years of experience with  
192 their respective team containing the problematic player, with senior players an average of 2.8  
193 years and junior players of 1.4 years. A wide range of team sports were represented (e.g.,  
194 football, netball, basketball, American football, cricket), whilst participants competed or  
195 coached at varying standards. This provided a broad sample from which to understand the  
196 phenomena.

## 197 **Procedure**

198         Institutional research approval was obtained prior to participant recruitment and all  
199 participants provided informed consent prior to the commencement of data collection.  
200 Participants were drawn from contacts of the first author, and contacted via email to assess  
201 their ability to meet the sampling criterion, and to explain the aims and requirements of  
202 participating in the research. Upon clarification of meeting the sampling criterion, participants  
203 were invited to take part in the research. Participants were individually invited to take part in  
204 semi-structured interviews that were conducted at the researchers' institution. Prior to



205 interviews starting, participants were given a demographic questionnaire and an informal role  
206 questionnaire (Cope et al., 2011). The informal role questionnaire was given to participants to  
207 ensure they were familiar with the problematic player definition, and as a form of clarification  
208 that they had experience of such a player. Participants were then asked to rate the impacts of  
209 their chosen problematic player from -5 (very detrimental) to +5 (very positive). This was to  
210 ensure a negative influence had been experienced in their problematic player in alignment with  
211 the definition of such players. Finally, participants were required to verbally confirm they had  
212 experienced such a player. If such confirmation was given, and the participant had rated the  
213 player's impacts between -2 and -5, the interview was then initiated. Confidentiality was  
214 assured to participants at this point. Interviews lasted between 26 and 65 minutes ( $M = 46.93$ ;  
215  $SD = 11.25$ ). All interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed resulting in 140 A4  
216 pages of text.

### 217 **Interview Guide**

218         Prior to data collection, a semi-structured interview guide was piloted. Semi-structured  
219 interviews were chosen so participants could guide the process and expand on topics whilst  
220 ensuring all topic areas relating to the research aims were covered (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).  
221 The structure was guided from the interview guide used by Cope et al. (2010) which examined  
222 similar aims to this study. Pilot feedback from a coach, indicated that the questions were  
223 suitable at gaining data related to the research aims; however, the feedback did allow for the  
224 addition of follow up questions and clarification probes. The pilot question language was  
225 deemed participant friendly, as the pilot participant understood the terms given. The final  
226 interview guide contained questions based upon the four main aims of the study surrounding:  
227 (a.) behaviours and characteristics of problematic players, (b.) causes of problematic players'  
228 behaviour, (c.) consequences of the problematic players' behaviour (e.g., "how did the player  
229 affect team functioning?") and (d.) considerations when working with problematic players

230 (e.g., “were there steps taken to manage this player? And, if so, how?”). Based upon the  
231 iterative process principles (cf. Corbin & Strauss, 2015) interview guide modifications  
232 occurred following each interview, depending upon different factors, such as the discovery of  
233 any data that had not previously been mentioned or to add detail to the findings from earlier  
234 interviews; memos were used to detail this information during the audio analysis process.  
235 Modifications were made in many different areas of the interview guide in line with the  
236 findings from participants. For example, one addition to the interview guide, ‘do you think the  
237 player was aware of their impacts?’, was made after a participant implied that problematic  
238 players may not be aware of their own impacts. A second example of a modification was made  
239 in the managerial considerations section of the guide. A coach made a managerial suggestion to  
240 get to the know the player, and this was therefore included in the guide to ask player  
241 participants ‘what are your thoughts on that?’.

## 242 **Data Analysis**

243 Preliminary audio analysis and initial memos were made immediately after each  
244 interview, due to the nature of the data informing future decisions (Chinkov & Holt, 2016).  
245 However, transcriptions were created by the lead researcher after the data collection ceased.  
246 This was due to the compressed time frame whereby transcription was not possible between  
247 each interview. An inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used to examine the data  
248 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of analysis was deemed appropriate as it can provide an  
249 analysis of peoples’ lived experiences in relation to issues, factors and processes that underlie  
250 and influence a phenomena (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016); in the present case problematic  
251 players. Braun and Clarke's (2006) process of thematic analysis is also theoretically flexible,  
252 allowing it to be adopted by researchers of varying philosophical viewpoints, including the  
253 post-positivist philosophy that underpins the design of the current study By adopting both a  
254 deductive and an inductive approach, the research aims could be addressed deductively, whilst

255 also allowing for the inductive generation of novel data themes not accounted for by the  
256 researcher or the literature relating to problematic players. Although thematic analyses express  
257 themselves as flexible processes, several phases from Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines  
258 were followed.

259         The initial stage involved the lead researcher transcribing and immersing them self in  
260 the data; transcripts from participants were read several times for deeper immersion (Maykut &  
261 Morehouse, 1994) and sensitivity to subtle features of the data (Tuckett, 2005). The second  
262 phase involved the production of initial codes from the data, and basic segments deemed  
263 meaningful, were attached labels (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This happened with pre-existing  
264 research aims in mind (deductive), such as impacts, alongside openness to new segments  
265 (inductive), such as leadership impacts, and was completed manually by-hand. In phase three,  
266 themes were created by addressing concepts, and sorting codes into themes. Constant  
267 comparison (Weed, 2009) was employed, leading to the amendment of themes for the initial  
268 phase four grouping of overarching themes, themes and subthemes. Once themes were  
269 reviewed and defined, phase five involved going back through the data to name the identified  
270 themes in a more representative demise (e.g. unattainable personal performance expectations).

### 271 **Enhancing Rigor**

272         In line with the methods employed, multiple factors were considered to assess and  
273 enhance methodological rigor. Chiovitti and Piran (2003) determined that when using  
274 theoretical sampling, it is necessary to use a strong and well explained justification for  
275 participant selection. This was achieved across, and within the three phases of participant  
276 recruitment whereby participant recruitment was determined by the prior data collected. A  
277 second strategy used during data collection was researcher reflexivity, which is a crucial  
278 practice of qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). This reflexivity was achieved through the lead  
279 researcher who reflected upon her own biases throughout the process with reflective notes to

280 ensure they did not interfere with the data collection process. In combination to written notes,  
281 critical friends (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) were utilised throughout the data collection and data  
282 analysis process. Within data collection, the second author regularly discussed memo content  
283 with the lead researcher to modify the interview guide and to check understanding and  
284 interpretations. The data analysis phase was regularly checked by both the second and third  
285 authors, who challenged the lead researcher's decisions and constructions of knowledge (c.f  
286 Cowan & Taylor, 2016), developed interpretations, and offered alternative explanations (Smith  
287 & McGannon, 2018); an example of this was deciding upon several higher order theme names.  
288 The final factor which was considered was the naturalistic generalisability of findings (Smith,  
289 2018). Natural generalisability occurs when research resonates with the reader's personal or  
290 vicarious life experiences (Smith, 2018). Responses were invited from peers at the second and  
291 third authors' institution and from external colleagues when the initial research was presented  
292 at an international academic conference (i.e., 5th International Conference for Qualitative  
293 Research in Sport and Exercise). The audiences reported that their own experiences of  
294 problematic players did overlap with the findings reported. By using a variety of strategies, this  
295 further contributes to the enhancement of methodological rigor (Mayan, 2009).

## 296 **Results**

297 The results represent the collated interview responses of the 15 participants and are  
298 presented using rich quotations to illustrate the themes. The findings are divided into four  
299 overarching themes: (a) the characteristics and behaviours of the problematic player, (b) the  
300 perceived causes of the problematic players' behaviour, (c) the perceived consequences from  
301 the problematic players on the team, and (d) potential considerations for individuals operating  
302 alongside problematic players. Participant numbers are included to indicate at what stage in the  
303 iterative process they were interviewed; participants 1-5 were coaches, 6-10 were more senior  
304 players, and 11-15 were more junior players.

## 305 **Characteristics & Behaviours of the Problematic Player**

306           When discussing their experiences of problematic players, participants highlighted a  
307 range of characteristics associated with, and behaviours typically exhibited by problematic  
308 players. The following section highlights findings which can be divided into two themes: (a.)  
309 self over-appreciation, and (b.) minimising error.

310           **Self over-appreciation.** This theme concerns the problematic players' heightened  
311 perspective of their own ability. This was both perceived by participants and observed through  
312 different behaviours witnessed. Having high unrealistic self-expectations was distinguished as  
313 a characteristic common in problematic players. A participant reported that these high  
314 expectations in such players may be based on a premise that they perceive themselves to have a  
315 greater ability than reality suggests:

316           It can be their expectations are out of sync with what's achievable at that time that's  
317 when they get really angry and sometimes they get really hard on themselves and they  
318 really expect themselves to be able to play at a much higher level . . . They've set  
319 themselves goals that are too high. (Participant 5)

320 Other groups of participants also mentioned that problematic players appeared to think that  
321 they were superior to other members in the team due to their richness of talent. An identity  
322 rooted in being the best was reported by a participant describing the problematic player they  
323 experienced. This problematic player appeared to acknowledge that they were the best player,  
324 and resultantly, wanted the rest of their team to similarly acknowledge:

325           [The problematic player had] a big personality. She was a good player, a really good  
326 player and she knew that. She was very authoritative, but she wasn't a good leader. My  
327 problem was that yeah she was a good player, but she was also used to everyone seeing  
328 her as that good player, so she wanted everyone to think she was funny and everyone to  
329 look up to her playing wise. (Participant 7)

330 Such a desire for self-appreciation led problematic players to have an intense focus on  
331 themselves and, as such, being deemed to have little interest in the team. Indeed, one  
332 participant described how the problematic player in their team had very little awareness of  
333 others:

334 I don't think he realised how annoyed with him we were and how it made us feel like  
335 we didn't want to be there ourselves. . .he was so arrogant and up his own arse, I  
336 reckon he was just too busy thinking about himself the whole time. (Participant 8)

337 In conjunction with a disregard for teammates, problematic players also disregarded coaches  
338 and their advice to other players. Such players believed they knew better than the person who  
339 was in charge. Problematic players would contradict a coach during a training session,  
340 undermining the coach to show off their knowledge to teammates. A player explained:

341 She [the problematic player] would try and help but she would normally hinder because  
342 she'd contradict the coach. It would hinder players because she'd try and help in one  
343 way and she'd say the coach was wrong, almost like she knew better. (Participant 10)

344 Alongside such disregard for others, problematic players were discussed as being unable to  
345 admit wrongdoing; they perceived themselves to always be right. A coach explained that their  
346 problematic player could never apologise or accept any wrongdoing:

347 "They could never see their opinions as being invalid or wrong . . . this player was just  
348 unable ever to be able to do that and admit she was wrong or apologise and not just to  
349 the coaches but also the players." (Participant 3)

350 A lack of trying or a lack of willingness to exhibit effort in training was explained by  
351 participants as a very visible behaviour of problematic players. One participant discussed that  
352 this is due to such players' views that because they are so much more talented than their  
353 teammates, they don't need to put as much effort into practice games:

354 He just wouldn't play very well, but it was a like a big fish in a little pond type thing.  
355 He knows he can play at a higher level and he knows he's better than everybody else,  
356 and so, yeah, he doesn't think he needs to work as hard as everyone else because of  
357 that. (Participant 9)

358 **Minimising error.** Despite a superior level of talent, problematic players appeared to  
359 want to minimise and mask any weaknesses they possessed in terms of ability. A high level of  
360 ability was perceived to be an aspect problematic players were very protective of. One coach  
361 described how a problematic player was unreceptive to being coached on a weakness:

362 I tried to teach her a very fundamental pivot . . . she continued to do it forwards, so I  
363 had to stop her, show her again, she had another couple of goes at it and then because  
364 she couldn't do it or grasp it to start with, she just said it was pointless and that it made  
365 no difference . . . she just tried to brush it aside. (Participant 4)

366 Problematic players were further described as open to blaming others for their mistakes. This  
367 was to mask their own wrongdoing and any noticeable imperfections, in order to preserve the  
368 highly talented views other players had of them. One player explained:

369 I feel like where people have noticed that she is a good player, that if she did make a  
370 mistake, then it isn't normal for her to make mistakes so then she will blame it on  
371 someone else to make out that she still is that really good player herself still.

372 (Participant 15)

373 One participant explained in more depth how far problematic players are prepared to go to  
374 cover up any inability on their part. It appears that such players are not averse to emotional  
375 outbursts directed at other people, when they are unable to showcase their ability.

376 Participant 10: Basketball is very much a team thing, and sometimes I think she [the  
377 problematic player] did put it upon herself to try and score more points and when she

378 couldn't, that was when she'd get frustrated and that's when the blame game would  
379 start.

380 Interviewer: So, when she was playing the blame game how and what did she say?

381 Participant 10: It was kind of like she was shouting at you . . . it was like a negative,  
382 I'm pissed off with you and you're going to know about it kind of voice. And you could  
383 tell she was annoyed with you, because she'd give you this look or she'd start swearing.

#### 384 **Perceived Causes (of problematic players' behaviours)**

385 Whilst discussing the potential antecedents of the problematic players' behaviours,  
386 several participants reported different perceptions as to why such players may behave in such a  
387 manner. These factors fall under one theme, threats to the high talent ego, with two sub-  
388 themes: shifts in power and poor performance.

389 **Threats to the high-talent ego.** Shifts in power and responsibility at various levels  
390 within a club can enhance the onset of negative behaviours in problematic players, should it  
391 filter down to and influence them in an adverse manner. Problematic players may perceive a  
392 reduction in responsibility as a signal that they do not have the necessary ability:

393 Before I became manager at the club and before my group of coaches came in to coach  
394 the team, I'd say that she was a lot more influential on the decision making in the team  
395 and of things in the club . . . I feel like we took a bit of power and responsibility away  
396 from this player and instead of just seeing it as positive and just be able to just play the  
397 game, she saw it as a bit of a negative and a bit of a power shift. (Participant 3)

398 Poor competitive performance from the whole team also appeared to stimulate negative  
399 behaviours in such players. Winning could be described as ego enhancing due to the success  
400 that it is assimilated with, while losing may be perceived as a threat to an onlooker's perception  
401 of their ability. One participant reports such a story:



402 What I've found is that they are only really a problem when they aren't winning. Like  
403 if the team is successful and winning then I find you don't have as many problems  
404 because they're happy and there's no issues. Obviously when things go downhill, that's  
405 when you get more problems and they become more negative in what they're like on  
406 and off the pitch. (Participant 9)

### 407 **Consequences of the Problematic Players' Presence**

408 Problematic players created a range of negative consequences that not only affected the  
409 team, but also the coaching staff and themselves. These were explained as being directly due to  
410 either their problematic player characteristics or behaviours, and comprised of three themes:  
411 (a.) team mentality, (b.) team divide, and, (c.) negative behaviour spread.

412 **Team mentality.** The psychological characteristics of team members, particularly less  
413 talented players, were impacted by problematic players' actions. This was often because of a  
414 problematic player's emotional outburst. One participant explained how a player resulted in a  
415 drop in confidence after being shouted at for a mistake:

416 I've found like when they're a talented member of the team and that when people who  
417 aren't as good mess up then they get like that. They get frustrated and say stuff and it  
418 makes those weaker players feel even worse about themselves. (Participant 8)

419 Psychological impacts occurred in training as well as competitive performances. The emotional  
420 outbursts of problematic players at team mates' mistakes in training made players feel  
421 uncomfortable and on edge, as one participant explained:

422 Everyone just seemed to be a lot happier when he wasn't there. Especially the younger  
423 player because they weren't being shouted at as much. . . But when he was there  
424 everyone used to be worried about messing up because they knew he's then be on their  
425 back. (Participant 9)

426 Problematic players were also seen to negatively impact upon enjoyment of team mates. For  
427 example, this participant described the effect on the training environment:

428 [The problematic player] also just made them not enjoy training as much as they could  
429 have done and not play with the smile on their face that they should have done. So,  
430 yeah, even though we were successful in what we did. . . looking at my players' smile  
431 now, and having formed really good bonds and really good relationships with them,  
432 have we done as well as before? Probably not. But have we enjoyed it and each other's  
433 company more? Then, yes, definitely and the atmosphere has certainly been better.

434 (Participant 3)

435 Additionally, problematic players' talent could be forgotten due to the negative influences they  
436 had on the team environment being at the forefront of peoples' minds instead, with one  
437 participant commenting:

438 He's done some great things, it's just those negative parts of him that overshadow it.  
439 People forget how he plays so well in a game because of how he behaves at training. I  
440 reckon if he stopped that then he really would be a star in the team, but because he acts  
441 the way he does he just kind of ruins it for himself. (Participant 8)

442 **Team divide.** Problematic players were also perceived to have a divisive impact on the  
443 team. In some examples, such players caused a split within the team, whereby players sided  
444 either with or against the problematic player. Players and coaches noted how definite small  
445 groups were established within the side: "There was 2 or 3 people in the problem player's  
446 corner and then there were a couple in our captain's, and then a few of us in the middle just  
447 floating and not really sure what to do really" (Participant 10)

448 A coach further explains how the severe divide they witnessed went on to impact the  
449 team's physical performance in competition:

450 You either sided with the problematic player or with the rest of the team, and then there  
451 were a couple in the middle who drifted from side to side because they didn't like being  
452 in the controversy. . .it wasn't so bad to the extent where they thought 'oh, yeah, I'm  
453 not going to pass to them', but instead of the team gelling and there being a fluid  
454 offense with the ball always moving, you can see that it's all disjointed. (Participant 4)

455 **Negative behaviour spread.** The behaviours of problematic players were copied by  
456 team mates and thus, spread throughout teams. One participant explained that they found the  
457 negative emotional outbursts so contagious they found themselves adopting them:

458 Interviewer: So how did this experience of him affect you personally?

459 Participant 9: Umm, well, I think I've become more annoyed with people myself. Like  
460 I'm a goalkeeper so my role in the team involves lots of shouting and lots of  
461 communicating, so as things went downhill for us, I found myself becoming more  
462 negative. I started having a go at people and I was having full on rows. . . It just kind of  
463 changed my personality a bit because that's what everyone else started to do and  
464 without thinking about I slowly became that too.

465 One coach added that the whole effort of the team in training appeared to reduce once players  
466 had started replicating negative attitudes exhibited by the problematic player:

467 It filters through from training as well so they see that she's got away with something.  
468 So, she's got a back injury and they see her not doing something, and then next week  
469 oh this person's got an injury and this person has this so they don't want to do this bit.  
470 And you can see players just getting lazier and lazier, and it's kind of flowed through  
471 now even into this current season. (Participant 4)

472 The same participant noted how such a spread of negative behaviour can go on to have further  
473 impacts. For example, coach scrutiny from a problematic player impacted upon the coach  
474 having to explain themselves to more and more players after making a choice:

475 I've just found I've had to explain myself more, so if I don't pick someone for a game  
476 or someone gets fewer minutes, I have a lot more people questioning my decisions and  
477 why. (Participant 4)

#### 478 **Considerations for Working with Problematic Players**

479 Participants discussed several factors that should be considered when working with  
480 problematic players. Two themes were highlighted, whereby participants suggested  
481 considerations at two levels: (a.) leadership and (b.) environmental.

482 **Leadership considerations.** Effective communication appeared important when  
483 working with problematic players. One player suggested that coaches of problematic players  
484 should be both strict and friendly in their management style:

485 Everyone needs to be stricter on him, like the coaches, but that could really go the  
486 other way and force him to be more negative and possibly like make him want to quit.  
487 So you need to have like an autocratic leader who says look you're doing it my way but  
488 then you need to be motivating and friendly with him at the same time. . . it would  
489 have to be delivered in such a way where it then doesn't get his back up. (Participant 8)

490 It was stressed that although communication is beneficial, getting to know the player could be  
491 of equal importance, as this may inform improved communication, with a two-way open  
492 communication channel suggested as a way to facilitate working effectively with problematic  
493 players. One participant highlighted that a relationship developed through communication is  
494 effective for them when working with such players:

495 I would always try to learn about that individual, talk to them, open up the  
496 communication channels and see if I could work out what was behind the behaviours  
497 because everyone behaves in a way for a reason. So without probing and becoming  
498 personal you just listen and watch and talk to them and then work out your strategy  
499 from there . . . You just have to work it out from each individual. (Participant 5)

500 In response to this, the interviewer questioned further participants about the creation of good  
501 relationships, in terms of providing a foundation to coping with problematic players'  
502 behaviours. In empathising with the problematic player, one participant explained that it would  
503 be important for a coach to get to know them before working with them, and acting upon any  
504 negative behaviours:

505         If I was one of these players, I wouldn't want a coach to start dealing with me if I didn't  
506         feel I knew him and he didn't know me. So, yeah I completely understand that [coaches  
507         wouldn't want to do anything until they know the player] . . . and again that's one of the  
508         reasons I think our coach didn't do anything, as he didn't know her at all, he didn't try  
509         to get to know her. (Participant 7)

510 Players suggested that shared leadership (e.g., from individuals in both formal and informal  
511 leadership roles) was important when considering how to work alongside and manage  
512 problematic players. For instance, a player suggested that it might not matter who manages the  
513 player, so long as the individual has authority over the player, and has their respect:

514         The captain's input would probably be the most profound, actually . . . I think he would  
515         talk to him [the problematic player] on a regular basis, during the game and off the  
516         pitch. Either telling him to go and apologise or go to apologise to the other teams; and  
517         he had to do that on several occasions . . . So, from the captain's point of view, yes, it  
518         did work then, just because the captain was a figure of authority to him, unlike the  
519         coach and the manager who he didn't have such a good rapport with. (Participant 14)

520 Considerations regarding strategies to minimise negative impacts and behaviours were  
521 discussed. Imposing tangible consequences was proposed as a strategy for individuals  
522 considering suppressing problematic players' negative behaviours. However, participants  
523 suggested that this needed to be enforced, and not just threatened, for it to have an impact on

524 the problematic player. For example, one player explained how the use of fines was successful  
525 in reducing the problematic player's negative behaviour within their team:

526         The president actually brought one in where if you violated it you had to pay fines. And  
527         it was really enforced so in the first week the fine jar was up to like £200; just because  
528         the first team players were swearing and throwing equipment. . . you'd have to make it  
529         really obvious to everyone, though, with a captain or chairman or manager, and then I  
530         think it would make a difference. And yeah just reinforce the consequences and carry  
531         them through, don't just promise things that won't happen, otherwise it won't work.

532         (Participant 14)

533         **Environmental considerations.** Within the team environment, several factors were  
534         mentioned that had an impact on the management of problematic players. Participants  
535         discussed how the ability of the problematic player and the rest of the team had an impact on  
536         selection (i.e., made it difficult to deselect problematic players) and the application of  
537         problematic players. For instance, one coach described how a lack of talent in the same  
538         position made decisions altering the team tricky:

539         Interviewer: Okay, so, you said that she didn't miss a game, if you'd had had another  
540         keeper who was as good as she was, would that have influenced your team selection?

541         Participant 3: Yeah it would have. It would have been easier for me to say, "reign in  
542         your behaviour because otherwise I can chop and change this team how I like." So,  
543         that would have been easier, and yeah her having that bit of competition and knowing  
544         she can't mess up might have changed something at least. It might have made it easier  
545         for me to make solid decisions.

546         Another factor that may impact on the ability of leaders to successfully work alongside  
547         problematic players is contact time. Participants suggested that understanding any player and  
548         getting to know them may be a strain on coaches and captains as it takes a long time:

549 I do think that you need to know a player to understand what makes them tick. But I do  
550 think that you can't just figure that out and that it is a lengthy process, so you do need  
551 to stick it for the long haul and take some of those ups and downs. (Participant 10)  
552 Finally, coaches suggested that group values and goals of the team should be carefully  
553 evaluated when considering cooperating with problematic players. A coach described how  
554 management of problematic players may provide short-term success, but that it was important  
555 to consider the long-term impacts of indulging problematic players:

556 If I'm brutally honest I'd say I was a bit weak at times because again this is my  
557 objective that this is a bloody good player in this team, and I have nobody else to  
558 replace her so that's where I was chasing materialistic values and trophies too . . . It was  
559 also because we all had that one clear objective: we all wanted to perform well and win  
560 the league. And this player was an unbelievable player, so I could deal with it. But deal  
561 with it short-term because short-term was just until the end of last season. Longer term  
562 I knew that if anything was to erupt again I'd have to make strong decisions. And, so, I  
563 could deal with it knowing it was short term, however, I knew that knowing the long-  
564 term picture something did have to change. (Participant 3)

### 565 **Discussion**

566 The present study sought to identify the characteristics and behaviours of problematic  
567 players. In addition, the study also examined the consequences and potential causes of  
568 problematic players' behaviour. In line with findings from previous literature, participants  
569 noted problematic players displayed negativity, engaged in distracting/interfering behaviours  
570 and were seen to be selfish, manipulative and shift blame to others (Cope et al., 2010;  
571 McGannon et al., 2012). These findings extend literature through the acknowledgement that  
572 both coaches and teammates perceive problematic players' behaviours and characteristics in  
573 the same way, even when such individuals are highly talented. The consequences of

574 problematic players identified by participants also mirrored previous findings (Cope et al.,  
575 2010; McGannon et al., 2012). Specifically, problematic player behaviour was seen to decrease  
576 group performance and cohesion, and could lead to other players dropping out. Although  
577 negativity was briefly highlighted by Cope and colleagues (2010), the present study identified  
578 further negative psychological consequences of problematic player behaviour, including lower  
579 confidence and less enjoyment for their teammates. In addition, increased role modelling of the  
580 problematic players' behaviours were reported, which has not previously been identified as a  
581 consequence within the literature. As well as outlining characteristics and consequences of  
582 problematic players, causes of problematic player behaviour were identified including threats  
583 to such a player's ego (e.g., removal of power or poor performance).

584         In addition to highlighting the characteristics, consequences, and causes of problematic  
585 players' behaviour, the findings of this study add to the group dynamics literature by  
586 suggesting links with concepts that may explain the negative impact of problematic players'  
587 behaviour. In accord with previous research (e.g., Cope et al., 2010; McGannon et al., 2012),  
588 the findings from this study suggest that problematic players possess narcissistic traits.  
589 However, the present study contributes to the literature by highlighting potential links with  
590 narcissistic traits not previously identified such as an inflated beliefs of self, superiority, setting  
591 of unattainable expectations, indifference to coach knowledge, and lack of acceptance to  
592 wrongdoing (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot,  
593 2000; Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002). Consequently, given the narcissistic characteristics  
594 highlighted within the results, intuitively it could be suggested that narcissistic traits may cause  
595 problematic players' disruptive behaviour.

596         In highlighting the link between narcissism and problematic player behaviour, the  
597 present study also contributes to the emerging body of literature on group conflict (e.g.,  
598 Wachsmuth et al., 2017; 2018a, 2018b). More specifically, the causes of problematic player



599 behaviour (e.g., removal of power or poor performance) suggested by participants in this study  
600 appear to provide a theoretical suggestion that might explain how narcissistic traits cause intra-  
601 group conflict. For instance, poor performance from problematic players could be seen as a  
602 threat to their sense of self as they have failed to meet their high expectations (Morf &  
603 Rhosewalt, 2001; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Thus, to protect their fragile sense of self,  
604 problematic players may display negative behaviours (e.g., blame shifting) either to prevent a  
605 knock to their ego or out of frustration due to the threat to their ego. As a result, this leads to  
606 negative group consequences (e.g., reduced team cohesion, lower collective efficacy) and  
607 conflict. Thus, this contention extends literature by suggesting that problematic players may  
608 behave and create the resultant consequences in the way they do, because of the narcissistic  
609 traits they possess. Consequently, this contributes to our understanding of group conflict and  
610 would extend the current framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships, by  
611 suggesting that narcissism, alongside extraversion, may be a stable intrapersonal determinant  
612 of conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2017).

613         Although the present study sought to explore consequences of problematic players, the  
614 findings highlight three potential mechanisms that might explain how problematic player  
615 behaviour impacts on group outcomes (e.g., confidence, anxiety, performance). Firstly, role  
616 modelling (i.e., the undesirable spread of negative behaviour to other teammates) was  
617 identified by participants to be a negative consequence of problematic player behaviour. Given  
618 that problematic players are highly talented, it may be unsurprising to uncover that their often  
619 less talented peers view them as a role model. This impact may be explained through social  
620 identity theory whereby individuals who represent group values can have a large impact on the  
621 rest of the group (See Slater, Coffee, Barker, & Evans, 2014 for a review). Thus, if part of a  
622 team's identity is related to striving for high performance, the problematic player who is highly

623 talented may be considered prototypical of this value and thus be seen as a role model by the  
624 rest of the group, having a negative impact on other athletes' behaviour.

625         Linked to role modelling, a second potential mechanism explaining the negative impact  
626 problematic players have on group consequences may be through the formation of cliques; for  
627 instance, participants in this study identified that problematic players can create a team divide  
628 during times of conflict. To explain, by potentially being viewed as prototypical of group  
629 values, some teammates may side with problematic players in times of conflict, thereby  
630 creating a team divide with an in-group and an out-group. Wagstaff, Martin, and Thelwell  
631 (2017) suggest that such cliques can have detrimental effects on a team, similar to those  
632 identified within this study (e.g., increase likeliness of poorer performance). Though Wagstaff  
633 et al.'s (2017) study examined the development of cliques in sports teams, their findings did  
634 not indicate the potential for one player to have the influence to create cliques. Thus, our  
635 findings appear to expand the literature on cliques in sport; specifically, they may be formed by  
636 the contribution of one player. The third mechanism suggested to explain the negative impact  
637 of problematic players is conflict. That is, problematic players' behaviours lead to conflict  
638 (possibly as a result of clique formation) which subsequently may have a detrimental effect on  
639 outcomes (e.g., performance). This is supported by the previous finding that conflict can  
640 negatively impact group functioning (see Wachsmuth et al., 2018b). Additionally, the findings  
641 surrounding clique formation appear to further our understanding of conflict by suggesting  
642 cliques to be both a determinant and a consequence of conflict. At present the framework of  
643 interpersonal conflict created by Wachsmuth et al. (2017) suggests cliques are only a  
644 consequence of team conflict.

#### 645 **Applied Recommendations**

646 An aim of this study was to discuss managerial considerations for individuals working within  
647 team sport environments who have a problematic player within their team. Several

648 recommendations can be made in terms of working effectively with problematic players in a  
649 team environment. These are drawn from the findings of the present study, alongside group  
650 dynamics literature, and intended for practitioners and coaches working within team sport.

- 651 1. Enhance the coach-athlete relationship with increased communication with such  
652 players. As narcissism is a relatively stable personality trait, it is difficult to change;  
653 however practitioners could seek to understand the narcissistic traits possessed by  
654 problematic players. This would allow the practitioners to understand what the players  
655 view as a threat, and therefore such factors could be minimised or avoided. Such a  
656 suggestion is in line with Jowett and Carpenter (2015), who propose open  
657 communication helps maintenance of coach-athlete relationships, and Wachsmuth et al.  
658 (2018b) who suggest good communication as a strategy to minimise conflict.
- 659 2. Provide problematic players with individual consideration, which could include praise  
660 or opportunities for glorification. Literature examining the relationship between  
661 leadership and narcissism has identified that narcissists respond well to individual  
662 consideration but not to group goals (Arthur, Woodman, Ong, Hardy, & Ntoumanis,  
663 2011). However, practitioners should note that too much individual consideration may  
664 act as reinforcement for such players' ego inflation. Enhanced ego inflation may result  
665 in more chronic negative behaviours towards others and consequences to the team (e.g.,  
666 conflict).
- 667 3. Involve the problematic player in leadership/group decisions. In line with social  
668 identity theory, team members may naturally follow an individual who is highly  
669 talented, and therefore including problematic players within a shared leadership group  
670 should be encouraged. This may also encourage the problematic player to buy into  
671 group goals if they are part of the group creating the goals and values. Having a team  
672 of leaders has been shown to empower athletes and increase social support (Slater &

673 Barker, 2018). Such a strategy may also improve problematic players' social bonds  
674 with team mates, which has in turn been shown to enable more effective conflict  
675 resolution (Holt et al., 2012).

676 4. Referring to players as “problematic” or “team cancers” suggests that these players are  
677 problems to be dealt with and thus may colour staff and team member perspectives on,  
678 and interactions with, these players. Indeed, the language we use can often impact upon  
679 our thoughts and actions towards the problem we perceive (cf. Lindsay, Pitt, &  
680 Thomas, 2014). Our findings illustrated how such players were seen to contradict  
681 coaches and were unable to take on board the opinions of others. An alternative  
682 explanation to this might be that the coach is unwilling to take on board player  
683 feedback. Consequently, individuals (e.g., leaders, teammates) are encouraged to reflect  
684 upon why they perceive these players as problematic, and focus their efforts on working  
685 more effectively alongside such players.

#### 686 **Limitations & Future Directions**

687 The current study provides an in-depth exploration of problematic players from the  
688 experiences of coaches and team mates. A strength of the study was the iterative process used,  
689 with constant amendments made to the interview guide. This allowed for newly discovered  
690 concepts in the data to be explored more fully with subsequent participants with different social  
691 experiences of such players. For example, one of the coaches recommended not trying to  
692 manage a problematic player's behaviours until a greater understanding of the player and a  
693 stronger relationship with them is reached. Such a contention was supported when further  
694 participants were asked for their perspectives. Several study limitations must also be  
695 acknowledged. Firstly, problematic players were not interviewed, which would have given a  
696 further perspective on the phenomena. Future research might allow such players themselves to  
697 shed more light on their own awareness of their problematic nature, and consider the cause of

698 their behaviours, which currently have only been speculated by others. Secondly, a very  
699 diverse demographic was sampled which included some inexperienced coaches. This was  
700 purposively done to gather a more holistic rich exploration of problematic players in various  
701 settings and from the perspectives of different types of individuals. Finally, while we ensured  
702 participants recalled a problematic player who displayed negative behaviours and emotions, we  
703 didn't measure their severity which would have further confirmed the relative levels such  
704 players impacted on group functioning.

705 In addition to collecting data from problematic players themselves, several other  
706 propositions for future research can be made. Observation methods may be employed to  
707 explore the behaviour and impacts of problematic players within their team sport  
708 environments. This approach could be further utilised in interviews or focus groups with teams  
709 to stimulate recall of different experiences. Appropriate situations that a problematic player is  
710 involved in could be recorded, thus highlighting incidences that may not always be apparent to  
711 other players and coaches. These stimuli could encourage discussion of strategies to work  
712 optimally with such players. Moreover, further research might use these ideas to develop and  
713 examine interventions. From the present study's findings, recommendations for interventions  
714 with problematic players could be constructed, and future research could examine the efficacy  
715 of such interventions. These could be employed in case study designs (see Sparkes & Smith,  
716 2014), as present study findings suggest problematic players may differ from individual to  
717 individual. This would allow for longitudinal monitoring of an intervention aimed at reducing  
718 negative consequences and behaviours of such players.

### 719 **Conclusion**

720 To conclude, to our knowledge, this study is the first that has investigated problematic  
721 players who are very talented in relation to their teammates. It was also the first study to  
722 consider team mates' perceptions of such players. The study has highlighted many pertinent

723 issues with problematic players. These include characteristics of the players, which include self  
724 over-appreciation and talented ego protection, and negative consequences which affect the  
725 team, such as a team divide. Threats to the high talent ego, including poor performance and a  
726 loss of personal responsibility/power, were described as proposed causes of these negative  
727 behaviours. Improving the coach-athlete relationship and providing leadership opportunities to  
728 problematic players are important points from this study that coaches should consider.  
729

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858 **Table 1.**  
 859 *Participant Demographic Information*  
 860

Participant	Sampling Phase	Sport	Age (yrs)	Gender	Playing Level	Team Tenure (yrs)	Role within Club
1	1	Football	21	M	University	1	Coach
2	1	Volleyball	22	M	University	3	Coach
3	1	Football	29	M	National	3	Coach
4	1	Basketball	30	M	University	3	Coach
5	1	Netball	56	F	Regional	1	Coach
6	2	Netball	22	F	University	2	Senior Player
7	2	Football	26	F	University	4	Senior Player
8	2	American Football	21	M	University	2	Senior Player
9	2	Football	22	M	Club	3	Senior Player
10	2	Basketball	20	F	University	3	Senior Player
11	3	Rugby	22	F	University	1	Junior Player
12	3	American Football	22	M	University	1	Junior Player
13	3	Football	21	F	County	2	Junior Player
14	3	Cricket	21	M	Club	2	Junior Player
15	3	Football	19	F	University	1	Junior Player

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