

School of Psychology

**Playing the Game: An Exploration of the Lived Experience of
Australian Elite Level Athletes, with a Focus on their Mental
Health and Wellbeing**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
of
Curtin University**

May 2018

Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated May 2015. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC 00262), Approval Number RD-39-14.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gabriel', written in a cursive style.

Date: 25 / 05 / 2018

Abstract

Introduction. The current research focused on the exploration of the lived experience of elite level athletes in Australia in order to improve their experience. There is much research on and for athletes however such research has tended to be focused on the development of interventions that can support athletes in their sporting performance. It has been recognised that elite level athletes experience an increased vulnerability to poor mental health, and subsequently, understanding the impact of athletes' mental health and wellbeing, beyond the competitive domain, has become an increasingly important line of inquiry. The prevalence of mental health concerns among elite level athletes is equivalent to that of non-athlete populations, yet athletes' mental health concerns tend to be underestimated and underreported. It is hoped this insight will provide an account of the stress and stressors experienced by athletes, contribute to current contemporary understandings of elite athletes' mental wellbeing, and inform the development of targeted interventions that can support this population on and off the field.

Aims. The aim of the current research was to explore the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes from the athlete's perspective. This was considered important in order to garner a holistic and ecologically valid account of the day to day reality of training, competing, and living as an athlete in Australia. Athletes' experience of performance on and off the field, supports available, and athletes' socio-contextual environments were of particular interest.

Method. A qualitative research design was employed, embedded in community psychology, contextualism, and social constructionism, to explore athletes' lived experiences. As an Australian ex-elite athlete, I conducted the current research as an insider researcher. The research was conducted across three phases; 1) engagement with elite level athletes as well as support staff; 2) a single sport study and; 3) an exploration of representations of elite level athletes and sport by print media.

In total, 23 athlete informants and five support staff informants were engaged in a total of 25 semi-structured interviews across phases one and two. The interview transcripts were analysed via Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). CLA as an analytic tool enables one social phenomena to be viewed with respect to varying levels of conceptual depth and complexity, ensuring phenomena are considered beyond their superficial manifestations. The front page of all 2012 publications of *The Australian* newspaper were viewed and reviewed in phase three and headlines that pertained to sport or sports people analysed via thematic analysis.

Findings. The findings generated from phase one and two of the research revealed an understanding of elite level athletes as inherently human, positioned as vulnerable, fragile, and imperfect. These myths posed a challenge to elite level athletes where a number of social dynamics, systems and structures appeared to actively manoeuvre athletes away from ‘a human’ and closer to being ‘the athlete.’ This presented two dichotomous, yet interdependent, representations of athletes: ‘the athlete’ and ‘the human.’ Athletes appeared to be judged on their capacity to fulfil the expectations of the role of ‘the athlete,’ where making mistakes (being human) was criticised. These assumptions underpin athletes’ on and off field contexts and place limitations on athletes’ agency, autonomy, and control.

Phase three presented a snapshot of the social construction of elite level athletes and sport in Australia which were expressed across three dimensions: Focus on winning; Being super human and; Players a pawns. These reflected the attitudes, values, and ideology of Australian sporting culture and presented a series of societal expectations for athletes to negotiate, particularly with respect to victory. Findings further suggest athletes’ skills and sporting prowess are positioned publicly as a gift rather than being earned which serves to devalue athletes’ hard work, training, and effort.

Conclusions. Key interpretations of the current research reflect the integration of the emergent themes across the three separate causal layered analyses alongside the thematic analysis. Overall, the key finding of the current research is that athletes are fundamentally human. Findings speak to a dissonance between how athletes see themselves and how they are seen by others. It was apparent that only athletes and support staff viewed athletes as human. Other actors (i.e., the Australia public) required athletes to live up to the public discourse of ‘an athlete.’ Athletes are not afforded the right, or space, to be merely human. Where athletes’ humanness surfaced it was positioned as problematic and as entertainment. Further, the notion of being watched pervaded athletes’ lived experience. As such, findings extend the notion of performing and performance pressure beyond the context of the competitive domain.

Acknowledgments

“All the talent in the world won’t get you anywhere without your teammates.”

– Anonymous

This thesis could not have been completed without the assistance and support of many people.

First, I am so grateful to the many informants who were so generous in giving up their time to share their experiences. I am particularly indebted to the various athletes, past and present, who so willingly shared their insights, and stories with me. To those athletes, your bravery in recounting some of your darkest and most personal moments in sport was particularly moving and was often my inspiration to keep on keeping on.

I would like to acknowledge my supervisory team, Associate Professor Moira O’Connor and Dr. Rebecca Anderson, and thank them for their support, guidance and counsel across the duration of this study. The current research topic was well outside both their particular areas of expertise, and I so appreciate their courage in taking it on. The assistance gained from their many years of research and clinical practice was invaluable. In particular I wish to sincerely thank Moira who not only joined my supervisory team at the halfway point of my research, but was then willing to assume the role of my primary supervisor. Moira, words cannot adequately express what you have done for me in becoming my primary supervisor. Your compassionate and very supportive approach gave me the strength to continue during some very trying times.

The support of my fellow PhD comrades was invaluable. Being able to share this journey with all the Hubbites, with all its ups and downs, was such an important part of the experience. No matter how alone I felt in my experiences, I was never alone. There was always someone willing to generously give up their very precious time to talk through my ideas or issues and share their learned wisdom. I extend much gratitude for the comfort, and counsel provided, and myriad coffees shared across the journey. I am particularly grateful for the friendship of Emma whose unwavering support, personally and professionally, endless encouragement,

and uncanny ability to say exactly what I needed to hear was such an important component of my ‘thrive-al.’ I am so glad for our time as office buddies, and look forward to continuing our very special friendship on the other side.

I have the utmost gratitude for the friendship and support of so many beautiful friends outside the Hub. A very special thanks to my bootcamp crew: Thandi, Natto, Wellsy, Waz, Court, Pete, and Kitty-Kat. Training with you every week was, and is, an absolute joy and it was so often the light I needed on my darkest of days. Thank you for your support, friendship, and for putting up with me each week. The friendship forged sweating our way through Ewen Street runs, push up competitions, 1,000 rep nights, and of course ‘death by burpees’ holds a very special place in my heart. To Nell, Lauren, Texas, Luke and Lizzie, PBnJAM, Dani and CM, the Morgansons Amz and Brock, and many more who have ridden every step of this journey with me, I sincerely thank you for your support, encouragement, and for always having a shoulder for me to cry on and a non-judgemental ear for me to rant to. For all the dinners cooked, the wines poured, and for always returning a smile to face, I am forever grateful. I am superbly lucky for such wonderful fr-amily.

Finally, very special thanks for the staunch support of my family: my mum Candy, my brother Ben, and my PSD Richard, without which I would be lost. Thank you for always believing in me, particularly on the days I did not believe in myself. To my amazing mum, you are my everything. There is nothing like the comfort of your arms, and there is no wisdom like your words. You have always been in my corner, my champion, and I cannot thank you enough for your unconditional love and support, especially those days I did not deserve it. You always say that you are *just* being a mum, and while that might be true, I hope you know your incredible role as *just* a mum. I honestly could not have done this without you. Thank you for being *my* mum. You are the best mum one could hope for and I continue to strive to be the best daughter you deserve.

Dedication

“When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”

– Henri J. M. Nouwen

To my best friend Luke, you are the most fiercely loyal friend I have ever known. Even after 16 odd years the parallel nature and synchronicity of our lives still takes my breath away. I have such gratitude for our very special friendship. You are the true embodiment of what it means to be an elite athlete. I always admired your work ethic, professionalism, and attitude, and it was an absolute privilege to witness your career with such proximity. While I will never be able to save you from the hurt and disappointment you were so unfairly served, your strength, poise, and courage to ensure that your disappointments did not, and do not, define you is an inspiration to us all. Being one of the greats is so much more than the medals, trophies, and accolades that may or may not be on your mantle, and I hope that one day you come to believe, as we all do, that you were indeed a legend of our game. I have the utmost respect for you and I am so proud of who you are and who you have become. I dedicate this thesis to you.

List of Conference Presentations

Dessauvague, J., Dzidic, P., Bishop, B. (2015 July) “What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.” Curtin University Denis Glencross Student Seminar, Perth, Australia.

Dessauvague, J., Dzidic, P., Bishop, B., O’Connor, M. (2015 September) Poster Presentation (Best Poster Presenter Award) “What does it mean to be an elite athletes in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.” Curtin University Mark Liveris Health Sciences Student Seminar, Perth, Australia.

Dessauvague, J., O’Connor, M., Anderson, R. (2016 July) “What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.” Curtin University Denis Glencross Student Seminar, Perth, Australia.

Dessauvague, J., O’Connor, M., Anderson, R. (2016 September) Paper Presentation “The macrosystem may be closer than it appears: A case study of Australian athletes’ interactions with their socio-contextual environment.” Curtin University Mark Liveris Health Sciences Student Seminar, Perth, Australia.

Dessauvague, J., O’Connor, M., Anderson, R. (2017 November) “Playing the game: A qualitative exploration of the lived experience of elite athletes in Australia.” Crossing The Line Summit, Sydney, Australia.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“Let me tell you what I wish I’d known, when I was young and dreamed of glory. You have no control who lives, who dies, who tells your story.”

– Lin-Manuel Miranda

Hamilton, An American Musical

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with a discussion of the increase in the number of current and retired elite level athletes publicly discussing their experiences with poor mental health during and after their sporting careers. A brief exploration of what sport and sporting pride means to Australia and to Australians is then presented. The overarching research question is given, along with the aims, objectives, and significance of the research. My position as an insider researcher is discussed, and following this, I present my story, from athlete to academia, and my personal motivations for undertaking the current research. The chapter concludes with an overview of each chapter’s content, outlining the overall structure of the thesis.

1.2 The Faces of Poor Mental Health in Sport

The following section presents a number of examples of athletes, past and present, who have publicly disclosed and discussed their experiences with poor mental health, during and after their sporting careers. These examples are presented to illustrate the faces of poor mental health in elite level sport.

It is widely accepted that physical talent alone is not a predictor of athletic success and more focus is being put on understanding the impact of psychological factors on athlete performance (e.g., Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2008). In addition, training and competing within the elite level sporting domain exposes athletes to risk factors that contribute to a vulnerability to poor mental health (Hughes & Leavey, 2012) and necessitate psychological support (Chen, 2013). Despite the positive association between physical activity and psychological and emotional state, and better mental health outcomes generally (Cox, 2007; Hughes & Leavey, 2012; Stanton & Reaburn, 2014), negative experiences are also prevalent in the elite sport environment (Theberge, 2008). For example, participation in elite sport is often associated with mental stresses (Markser, 2011), overtraining (Purvis, Gonsalves, & Deuster, 2010), and performance pressure (Weigand, Cohen, & Merenstein, 2013).

“Tom Boyd has taken a leave of absence from the Western Bulldogs to deal with depression” – The Sydney Morning Herald (2017, July 5).

The mental health of athletes in Australia is an issue that is gaining much needed attention in the public domain. There has been a recent surge in media reports of high profile athletes experiencing poor mental health, and/or alcohol and drug related concerns. Alongside this surge, there has also been an increase in the number of formal discussions regarding the mental health of athletes in public discourses, such as televised panel discussions with past and present athletes, or individual athletes publicly discussing their experiences with poor mental health. For example, on April 11, 2017, SBS aired a two-part edition of Insight entitled “Game over: How do champions cope with life after sport.” This panel discussion featured retired athletes Lauren Jackson (Basketball), Barry Hall (Australian Football League; AFL), Libby Trickett (nee Lenton; Swimming) and Matthew Mitcham (Diving). Similarly in May 2017 Four Corners aired an episode entitled “After the Game,” followed up with the article “Elite athletes blow the whistle on the high price paid for sporting glory.” This broadcast and article presented stories from Brendan Cannon (Rugby), Lauren Jackson, Belinda Hocking (Swimming), Nathan Bracken (Cricket), and Courtenay Dempsey (AFL). These programs highlighted some of the struggles and mental health concerns these athletes experienced during, and after their careers. The main focus was post-career. These news reports, stories and open discussions have made it clear that poor mental health has implications for athletes well beyond the constraints of training and competing and well beyond performance.

“‘I was in a really dark space’: Former test cricketer Brad Hogg on how he considered taking his life after his international career ended” – The Daily Mail Australia (2016, October 29).

Alongside an increase in open and public discussions regarding athletes’ experiences with poor mental health during and after their careers, many athletes have also become public ambassadors for mental health organisations or the face of particular causes related to mental health and wellbeing. For example, Greg Inglis, a retired National Rugby League (NRL) athlete, is an ambassador for the NRL’s ‘State of Mind’ campaign, a campaign that encourages NRL athletes to be open about poor mental health (<http://www.nrlstateofmind.com.au>). Retired Olympic swimmers Libby Trickett, Leisel Jones, and Daniel Kowalski are all ambassadors of Beyond Blue, an organisation whose mission statement is anchored to the promotion and achievement

of good mental health to all Australians (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au>). Antoni Grover (former AFL athlete) is an ambassador for Men's Health and Wellbeing, an organisation dedicated to the improvement of health and wellbeing for the boys and men of Western Australia (<https://www.menshealthwa.org.au>). Courtney Bruce (Netball) was an ambassador for the Western Australian suicide prevention initiative, OneLife. Greg Hire (Basketball) founded the non-profit agency A Stitch in Time, an organisation that supports and promotes youth mental health and building resilience, and now hosts an annual fundraiser the Rise Up Gala Dinner (<https://stitchintime.org.au>). These public alliances to organisations and events position athletes within broader mental health conversations and may be viewed as attempts by athletes to honestly communicate mental health to the next generation of athletes.

“Swimming great Ian Thorpe battling depression and alcohol abuse” – The Australian, (2014, January 31).

Circulating in public discourses, there are stories of athletes of all levels, across amateur level sports, experiencing poor mental health. For example, in amateur (Olympic) sport, Olympic swimmers Ian Thorpe, Libby Trickett and Liesel Jones have all publicly discussed their experiences with depression during and after their swimming careers. Alongside them, Grant Hackett, also an Olympic swimmer, has talked about his battle with mental illness publicly. Matthew Mitcham, a 2008 Beijing Olympic gold medallist, publicly revealed that his battle with depression and other mental health concerns nearly resulted in his premature retirement from the sport before 2008. Further, Olympian Simon Orchard, who represents Australia in hockey, has also openly discussed how his experiences with anxiety almost cost him his berth at the 2016 Olympic Games. These stories highlight the existence of poor mental health within athlete populations and also speak to some of the consequences associated with the experience of poor mental health for athletes, particularly early retirement or non-selection.

““I wanted to die”: Kieran Foran opens up about gambling, drinking, self-harm and why he walked away from a \$5m contract” – The Daily Telegraph, (2016, July 31).

Countless professional Australian Football League (AFL) athletes have publicly acknowledged their mental illness on and off the field. AFL footballer Lance (Buddy) Franklin missed the 2014 final series, citing mental health concerns. Mitch

Clark publicly battled depression throughout his AFL career and attributed his retirement to poor mental health. Additionally, Ben Cousins' struggles with drug addiction plagued the final years of his AFL career, and his conduct was often the topic of public discussion and media stories. Even after retirement his struggles remain of public interest and are constantly the subject of media reports. Most recently, the fact that he was offered a job by his former AFL club became national news and was reported across all media forums during the week of January 9th, 2018. Adam Goodes has also openly discussed the mental health implications of the events of his final seasons of AFL and, of particular concern, the suggestion that these events had far reaching consequences, also affecting the mental health of his family and community. Further, across the 2017 season, AFL footballers Travis Cloke, Tom Boyd, and Alex Fasolo have all had time away from the game to address poor mental health. Poor mental health has also been reported in other professional sports in Australia, beyond AFL. Lauren Jackson, who is widely considered to be the best women's basketballer Australia has ever produced, has publicly discussed her experiences with depression after an injury forced her early retirement, and Darius Boyd (NRL) has publicly discussed how he overcame depression. This year Dan Vickerman, a former Wallabies representative (rugby union) died by suicide. Dan's ex-teammate and close friend, Brendan Cannon, publicly attributed Dan's death to the difficulties he experienced during his transition out of sport.

"How I went from world swimming champion to attempting suicide: Jade Edminstone" – The Sydney Morning Herald, (2017, February 17).

As such, it is clear that mental illness is prevalent in athlete populations and it does not discriminate. Poor mental health can occur during a career, and/or in retirement, and seemingly is not determined by how successful or unsuccessful you are as an athlete: everyone is potentially vulnerable. Although superficially these may appear to be isolated cases of poor mental health in sport, such reports seem to be on the rise across amateur level codes, in Australia and globally. Internationally, in 2015 Clarke Carlisle, a professional English footballer (soccer), publicly discussed his experiences with suicidal ideation and attempts to take his own life. United Kingdom Olympic swimmer, Michael Jamieson, used his 2017 retirement from sport to elucidate that depression continues to go unrecognised in elite sport. John Kirwan, a former New Zealand All Black rugby player, has publicly discussed his experiences with depression. This increase in public attention to, and awareness of, such stories

necessitates deeper consideration of mental health in sport and to what extent athletes are currently supported.

1.3 Sport and Australia

Globally, sport is often a source of national efficacy and pride, and is acknowledged as a significant and powerful component of shared collective identity (Hassan, 2013). Australia has a deep ideological regard for sport. Since British settlement in 1788, Australia's national identity, nationalism, and cultural and economic independence has been anchored to sport, and sporting supremacy over others has underpinned the ascension of nationalist sentiments and Australia's cultural ideology (Horton, 2012; Maguire, 2011). As such, sport and sporting pride is central to the postmodern Australian social, cultural, and historical national identity (Horton, 2012; Maguire, 2011; McKay & Roderick, 2010; Spaaij & Anderson, 2011).

The Australian community is fascinated by sport (Melnick & Wann, 2010; Toohey & Taylor, 2009). The number of accredited AFL journalists significantly exceeds the number of political journalists, which can be interpreted as a clear indication of Australia's enthusiasm for sport (Zion, Spaaij, & Nicholson, 2011). Australia also appears preoccupied with sporting results (Grunseit et al., 2012). For example, significant economic investment in sport tends to be explained by the perceived necessity to ensure Australia continues to rank highly on the Olympic medal tally (Mitchell, Spong, & Stewart, 2012). In addition, the conceptualisation of success is anchored to winning (Carless & Douglas, 2012). Consistent with this, when athletic triumphs occur in the public sphere athletes are constructed as iconic sporting heroes (Adebayo, 2013; Chase & Machida, 2011; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Hassan, 2013; Melnick & Wann, 2010) and portrayed as 'celebrities' (Hassan, 2013).

Australian sporting culture also promotes the consideration of, social construction of and celebration of its successful elite athletes as role models (Adebayo, 2013; Hassan, 2013; Melnick & Wann, 2010). However, the fascination with the feats of elite athletes has often been attributed to envy as well as admiration (Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2015) and, Australian culture has a reputation for being overly critical of successful people (Tranter & Donoghue, 2015). For example, the colloquially named 'tall poppy' syndrome is frequently experienced by those who have been formerly elevated in a number of fields in Australia (Smith & Phillips, 2001; Tranter & Donoghue, 2015).

1.4 The Present Research Study

The overall purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of elite level athletes in Australia to garner a contextualised understanding of the realities of training, competing, and performing as elite level sportspeople. In the context of the current research athletes' "lived experience" encompasses the meaningful insight derived from being in the world as an elite or professional athlete; living, training, and competing within an Australian context. In light of a recent surge of anecdotal evidence that suggests elite athletes are increasingly experiencing poor mental health, it is my contention that it is important to understand and disseminate a holistic and ecologically valid account of athletes' experiences. Given Australia's high ideological regard for sport and the centrality of sporting pride to the Australian national identity (Horton, 2012; Maguire, 2011; McKay & Roderick, 2010; Spaaij & Anderson, 2011), the Australian sporting context may be an ideal landscape to explore holistically how ideological assumptions, values, attitudes, cultural archetypes and societal expectations of athletes manifest and to consider the potential implications of these factors.

The present research focused on exploring the lived experience of elite athletes in Australia from the perspective of elite level athletes, as well as those individuals who support athletes. An ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) was used. This perspective positions athletes at the centre of four concentric systems, and suggests their lived experience is influenced by direct interactions (with family and coaches) and indirect interactions (i.e., socio-cultural ideologies) across these systems. The ecological systems enunciated by Bronfenbrenner (1977) broadly mirror the layers of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA; Inayatullah, 2004) which was used as the overarching methodology. CLA as a methodology is articulated in chapter three. However, simply stated, this methodology assumes individual and collective experiences are underpinned by a series of complex social drivers including varying worldviews, myths, cultural ideologies and social archetypes (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014). As such, CLA considers a presenting issue via different perspectives (layers), which enable the introduction of new knowledge of the athlete experience in terms of these complex social drivers. The deconstruction and reconstruction of the issue of the lived experience of elite level athletes via CLA elucidated the complex social drivers that underlie, contribute to and legitimate the social construction of sport and athletes within Australia and the associated societal expectations. The development of such

understanding contributes to insights regarding the support needs of elite athletes beyond the premise of elite athletic competition.

1.4.1 Aims and Objectives of the Present Research Study

The current research was guided by two overarching aims. The first aim of the current research was to explore and contextualise the lived experience of elite level athletes in Australia, within and beyond the competitive domain. The role of broad socio-contextual factors, such as the media, Australian values, attitudes, ideology, and mythology, within athletes' lived realities was of particular interest. This included garnering an understanding of how athletes are constructed socially, across a variety of perspectives. The second aim of the current research was to elucidate how Australian athletes are currently supported and identify any additional support needs. How current support interventions are experienced by athletes, and what athletes perceived they need from formal support systems was a key focus. Alongside this focus, attending to the hardships experienced by athletes would provide further insights with regard to the day to day support needs of athletes.

The objectives of the present research study are as follows:

1. To explore, holistically, the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes who perform or have performed at the top level of their sport.
2. To explore how broad socio-cultural factors are experienced by Australian elite level athletes and the potential impact of this on their wellbeing.
3. To explore Australian elite level athletes' experience of support.
4. To explore the social construction of Australian elite level athletes.

1.4.2 Research Questions

- What aspects of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes may function to give rise to poor mental health?
- How are Australian elite level athletes currently supported?
- How are Australian elite level athletes socially constructed?

1.4.3 Significance of the Present Research Study

The surge in media attention and public discourses surrounding Australian elite athletes' experiences of poor mental health within and after their careers necessitates the holistic consideration of athletes' everyday experiences and realities from their point of view. The significance of this original research lies in the

substantial four-fold contribution it can make to the literature, practically, methodologically, theoretically and economically.

There is a great deal of research on and for elite level athletes has been vast but ultimately much of this work has focused on the development of interventions to support athletes in their sporting performance (e.g., Harmison, 2006; Kerr & Males, 2010; Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Smith, Schutz, Smoll, & Ptacek, 1995) rather than developing a holistic understanding of athletes' mental health or lived experience. There is a paucity of research that presents athletes' wellbeing and the impact of stressors on the athlete as a person; however it must be acknowledged that this type of research is gaining increased attention. The current research will contribute to, and extend upon, understandings of athletes' lived experiences and mental wellbeing, such as those offered by Douglas and Carless (2015), Newman, Howells, and Fletcher (2016), and Howells and Lucassen (2018).

The many factors that can account for athlete populations to be at a higher risk of poor mental health has been widely acknowledged and includes factors such as performance pressure (Weigand et al., 2013) and sport related stress (Noblet, Rodwell, & McWilliams, 2003). However, such research tends to be narrowly focused on sport itself. A contemporary athlete cannot exist independent of the socio-cultural setting within which they are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), which likely gives rise to a number of broader level factors that might lead to a vulnerability to poor mental health (e.g., Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, & Fisher, 2015). However, exploration of such factors is still in its infancy. It is hoped the current research study will lead to an ecologically valid understanding of antecedents of poor mental health for Australia's elite athletes. Such knowledge would likely also have global relevance and applicability. In addition, it is likely exploration from this contextualised perspective will contribute to the provision of more appropriate and targeted support interventions for athletes beyond performance and competition.

This is the first research to use CLA as a methodology and/or analytic method on an athlete population. The significance of such is twofold. First, the application of CLA methodology to the current research demonstrates the versatility of CLA, and further contributes to the practical understanding of using CLA analytic methods. Second, adopting this approach to explore the lived experience of Australian athletes will enable the consideration of the potential impact of broad socio-cultural factors on athletes' experiences not previously considered. Insights gained will introduce new

knowledge of the athlete experience in terms of complex myths, worldviews, cultural ideologies and psychological processes that underlie, contribute to and legitimate athletes' experiences in Australia. As such, the current research elucidates how CLA can provide a unique, holistic and ecologically valid understanding of the lived experience of athletes with respect to the culture within which they are embedded.

Finally, there is a significant financial burden associated with supporting and treating mental illness at the individual, familial and societal level. At the societal level Australia's total annual cost of mental illness, inclusive of loss of productivity and labour force participation, has been estimated at \$20 billion (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Further, mental illness has been shown to be the leading cause of non-fatal disability burden in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). Athletes are not immune to poor mental health (Wolanin, Gross, & Hong, 2015) and likely contribute to this national economic burden. The experience of an injury can significantly increase depression scores (Appaneal, Levine, Perna, & Roh, 2009) and retired athletes are said to be at an elevated risk of poor mental health (Gouttebauge, Aoki, & Kerkhoffs, 2015). The current research has the capacity to inform the development of better targeted support strategies for current elite athletes beyond performing. It is likely this will subsequently improve the mental health status of elite athletes across the duration of their transition into retirement. Thus, there is the potential the current research may alleviate some of the financial burden of mental health.

1.5 The Researcher: An Insider

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change we seek.”

– Barack Obama

Researchers who chose to study a community or identity group of which they are a member are considered to be insider researchers (Adler & Adler, 1987; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Kanuha, 2000). I am an ex-athlete and, as an ex-athlete I am positioned as an insider. I made my first state team for women's water polo at 13 years of age, my first age national team at 16 and achieved my first senior international cap at 18. Across a 12 year career, I represented Australia in 58 senior international matches in women's water polo, and won three international medals. Given this history and my experiences as an athlete I did not have to be 'adopted' by

the athlete community (Tedlock, 2000) before beginning my research, as I was automatically seen an insider: a 'native' (Kanuha, 2000).

Insider research is often considered to be harder, rather than easier, to undertake (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) due to the distinct and complex challenges posed by this paradigm (DeLyser, 2001). However, conducting research from an insider position also has significant advantages in terms of the practicalities and logistics of conducting research (Costley, Elliott, & Gibbs, 2010; DeLyser, 2001; Hodgkinson, 2005). DeLyser (2001), Porteous (1988), and Thorne (1983) all reported experiencing logistic and practical advantages associated with their insider status, particularly with respect to access to their respective populations. For the current research the ease of accessibility to data and informants provided by my insider status was considered particularly advantageous (Unluer, 2012) as sampling in qualitative research is dependent on researchers' access to and availability of appropriate resources (Gaskell, 2000; Morse & Field, 1995; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Further, the community psychology principle of the 'Reflective-Generative Practitioner' (Dokecki, 1977; Dokecki, 1992) states to garner genuinely community relevant information, dialogue and direct engagement with the community itself is required (Dokecki, 1992), which serves as further evidence of the significance of my capacity to access, with ease, this community as an insider.

My position as an insider means I have a unique capacity to explore the lived experience of elite level athletes in-depth, with special knowledge about that experience; an informed perspective (Costley et al., 2010). That is, my background affords intimate knowledge of the unique experiences associated with training, competing and living as an elite athlete. Additionally the commonality of experiences, and a sense of camaraderie would likely result in a level of trust between myself, as the researcher, and the informants, before any formal communication between us had occurred. This is particularly important given a greater understanding of the culture being explored, and an established intimacy together with the trust between researcher and informant promotes truthful discourse (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998). Therefore rather than my background be a hindrance to my research I endeavoured to utilise my insider status to help the research process as well as the developing insights.

Undoubtedly my experiences as an elite athlete have influenced, and continue to influence, how I view, shape, and construct the world. But, these experiences can

also account for my passion for advocating for athletes, my particular interest in issues of athlete wellbeing and further, they informed the avenue of research presented in this thesis. Further, since my retirement I have had sufficient time to intellectually and emotionally distance myself from personal attachments arising from training, competing, and living as an elite athlete in Australia; however, I also acknowledge it would be remiss to ignore that, by its nature, what the current research would have implications for how I would come to understand my own past. A number of strategies were undertaken in an attempt to limit the any bias as a result of my experiences on the current research (discussed in detail in chapter four); however, it is acknowledged that complete emotional disengagement from the research process and research processes is not possible and complete objectivity cannot be achieved (McGannon & Smith, 2015).

Adopting the position of insider researcher means I have attended to the messages of my experiences as an athlete (Smith, 1983) and reflected on processes that are a part of this setting while wishing to effect meaningful change within it (Elias, 1994). This position again reflects understandings of the ‘Reflective-Generative Practitioner’ as a reflective-generative practitioner peruses knowledge to improve the community (Dokecki, 1992). Further, it is my contention that having lived as an elite athlete gave me valuable insights into athletes’ lived experience and how to explore it as an insider. It is hoped my status as an insider researcher and my intimate knowledge of this context will service the elucidation and dissemination of a genuine, authentic and ecologically valid account of athletes’ experiences. Research from an insider position has been shown to provide long term benefits for the setting within which it is conducted (e.g., Raelin, 2008). As such, it is hoped that studying Australian athletes as an insider will similarly contribute to the development of targeted and informed support interventions that will function to facilitate meaningful change in the provision of support to Australian athletes and have benefits to their long term wellbeing.

1.5.1 From Athlete to Academia: Researcher Reflections

“Who can say if I’ve been changed for the better? But because I knew you I have been changed for good.”

– Stephen Schwartz

Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz

The following paragraphs are intended to give the reader insight into my own reflections of my time as an athlete and why I chose to undertake the current research study. It was important to me that “the last word” of this PhD thesis was not my own but belonged to my informants. As such, I present this autobiographical consideration of my sporting career as a snapshot of some of my most significant experiences as an athlete early in the thesis. Further, by explicitly detailing my story, I have been able to hold it separate from the stories of my informants.

As the daughter of very sporty parents, my mum a successful swimmer and my father a hockey and rugby player, my story began before I can remember. I am told I was thrown in a pool before I could walk, and essentially stayed there until I was 25 years old. Swimming was a cut throat world, where first and last was decided by the reflexes of the timekeepers. I have good memories of swimming, especially competing in relays, but most of all it was the winning that I loved, though funnily enough all of my swimming medals are now gathering dust in a storage facility somewhere.

My fondest memory of my swimming days is a particular state swimming championships in Perth, Western Australia. All the heats in front of me were beating their listed personal bests (PBs). I was in one of the final heats, and it became very apparent that I was also going to have to break my own PB to get a place on the medal dais. My mum, proudly watching on from the stands, caught my eye before my race: she had also done the math. I had been stuck at the same PB for months, I had not been able to find a way to break through, but it did not really matter as my time was still the fastest for my age in my squad, and one of the fastest for my age at state level. But suddenly I had to find a way, and immediately. Mum shot me one more look, and silently chorused ‘it’s your turn now, you can do this.’ We were called to the blocks, a whistle, “take your marks”, and one starting gun later I was off, helicoptering my arms as fast as I could, and kicking my legs as hard as I could. I went to breathe to my right, over my shoulder, towards the stands, and there she was, my mother, running the length of the pool with me through the stands. She was pushing past other spectators, probably more accurately pushing them out of the way, and willing me on with her arm gestures to push each stroke harder, and faster. While I actually do not remember where I placed overall in that event, I remember very clearly that that day I did indeed break my PB. And the image of mum travelling that race with me is

permanently ingrained in my memories. Even writing this now, it still makes me smile.

As the years went on, I was expected to train harder and more often. At the age of 11 I was already training up to 11 times a week with my club. I was also made to keep sleep journals, training diaries, and monitor my resting heart rate daily. Ultimately it became too large a burden to carry on my broad, but very young, shoulders. It was harder and harder to get out bed in the morning, and I had started making excuses to not attend afternoon sessions. Not good excuses, clearly, and eventually mum asked me if I wanted to be a swimmer anymore, a question that incited panic. I knew, deep down I knew, that the answer was no. Swimming was a brutal and harsh sport, and one I was not convinced I was ever going to be the best at. And what was the point if you were not going to be the best? But it was mum's sport and I thought I owed it to her to continue her legacy. When I admitted to her that I no longer wanted to swim, she was not disappointed or angry. She asked me if I was sure, put her arms around me and said "okay." And with that my swimming career was over.

Not even a year a later I was approached by the junior coordinator of water polo at a local club. Only a week or so after that first conversation I was playing my first game, before even attending a single training session and within a year of that game I had made the under 14s state age team and from there I slowly began to climb the ladder towards national representation. Being in a team, throwing around a ball and scoring goals, and not staring at a black line for extend periods of time had me sold and, probably more important at the time, I was good at it. After about a year training with the senior Western Australian Institute of Sport (WAIS) squad as an invitee squad member, I was awarded a scholarship.

Across the next decade I made all of my age based state teams, a number of junior and senior national teams, captained my club and national league teams, played in Italy for a year, moved to Sydney and received various awards and accolades at club, state, and national level. Water polo had not only taken me from my home town of Perth, Western Australia, to Sydney, New South Wales but also afforded me the privilege of significant international travel: a worldwide tour of pools. And across that time every decision I made prioritised water polo. I went to Italy to play because the head coach of the senior national team told me I needed more international experience before he would consider putting me in the senior team. My move to Sydney was a

tactic to be closer to the head coach of the senior national team. And yet, ironically, almost as soon as I had established myself as a permanent member of the senior national team, a dark cloud that I had been keeping at bay for many years started to roll in and an inner voice I had managed to keep silenced for about 10 years was suddenly yelling at me: “I do not want to do this anymore.”

Throughout my career all I ever wanted was to go the Olympics. In every athlete profile I was ever made to complete I always wrote “go to the Olympics” under career goal. That was the ultimate and often my only driving force that got me out of bed and into a cold pool at ridiculous hours of the morning. And yet there I was, the closest I had even been to achieving that goal, not wanting to go on. I cannot name a single event that triggered the onset of that dark cloud, there were a number of events that all contributed to my inability to keep it at bay, but I remember clearly the exact moment I knew I had lost the mental battle to play on.

We were on tour in the United States of America (USA), competing in the World League Super Finals in 2010, and I was sat on the bench silently begging the coach not to put me in the water. And in that moment I knew it was all over for me. While I was still physically able to play, my head and my heart were no longer in the game. I sat with that feeling for weeks after that tour returned to Australia, and at the next scheduled camp approached the team psychologist for a private meeting. She helped me unpack what I was thinking, feeling, and experiencing but, ultimately, I think she could see it in my eyes: I was out. With the support of the psychologist I mapped out my last months in the sport.

I was lucky, I got to be in control of how I would go out: I chose my final tournament. Ironically, across that time I played some of the best water polo of my career. And I can only put that down to a newfound freedom: I was unburdened by the daily selection stress that marred my time as an athlete. As it turned out my last tournament was on home soil, in Sydney, Australia. I had been bestowed the privilege of captaining a B-side during that tournament, which was a wonderful honour. In my final game we beat our arch rivals, The United States of America, and when the final siren sounded I was in the water, with my team. It was a bitter sweet moment.

Reflecting on my career always incites mixed emotions. And, if I am honest, every time the Olympics rolls around I really struggle to watch it, particularly the water polo. While it is three weeks of discomfort, I think feeling nothing would be worse. Feeling nothing would mean I never cared, and then my 12 year career would

definitely have been a waste of my time: a waste of life. I think most athletes are haunted by the 'what ifs' of sport, during and after their careers. However, sport is so much more than the fleeting moments of triumph. For every second we may spend on a medal dais, there have been years of pain, suffering, tears, and sacrifice. I have talked to the positive experiences of my career, and now I share some of the less pleasant memories.

For me, the memories of my triumphs have faded with time, but the less pleasant experiences I experienced continue to affect how I view the world. For most of my life all I knew was being an athlete and, as such, certain ideologies became my own. For example, in the national program being emotional was positioned as weak. Crying in front of coaching staff was taboo and carried consequences. This is something I still struggle with today: don't be weak, don't be vulnerable, don't be broken. I was taught to bottle everything up and push it deep inside. Being able to take public bouts of 'constructive criticism' was considered being mentally tough. If you proved you could take this verbal abuse, you became the target for any general feedback that the team at large needed to hear. I had learned not to cry, not to be emotional, not to talk back, which meant I was often the target of such bouts.

Coaches often referred to us as *theirs*, they owned us, and they could use us however they wished, and often I felt like nothing more than training fodder. Early on in my senior career I struggled to gain and then maintain a place in the national team. I was named in training squads, and taken on senior training camps all over Australia, but rarely toured for international competitions. Eventually the senior coach pulled me aside and told me he will continue to take me to training camps because "you train so hard you force everyone else around you to train harder" but he would not tour me until I got more international experience. As I was young and ascribed to the 'do what you are told' mentality of sport, I did not think to question this. However, later on I found I could not escape the irony of that statement: how was I to gain the international experience required to then be taken on tour without being taken on tour internationally?

Finally breaking into the touring team did not alleviate such experiences, in contrast it seemed to give rise to more challenging experiences. On my first ever senior international tour we were playing in the USA against the USA. Fresh off the plane we did not put together our best game and we lost. Our coach, furious, berated us for the duration of the game and was very explicit about how embarrassed he was

of us, and how ashamed we should be of ourselves. When the final siren sounded we were promptly instructed to swim down and get dressed. Once we had all made our way to the change rooms, the coach sent in our manager to announce that we were to hand in our bathers to coaching staff after we got changed. They would only be returned to us once we had written a letter to the coaches explaining why we deserved to wear them. All of this because we lost one single game. I am still haunted by that memory of having to write down why I deserved to be in the first touring team I had made.

Towards the end of my career, four of us who played the same position were toured. Across the duration of a three-month tour, every other athlete that played my position got injured and had time out of training. This became particularly problematic as we approached the tournament we were preparing for. As the only athlete of that position who was not injured I got flogged every training session; day in day out. We were doing a lot of game play. Three teams would substitute in and out. However, I was the only fit athlete that played my position, so I had to play on every team. I did not get a break for what felt like weeks, and what was worse, I was constantly berated for not working hard enough. I continued to push on, push through, every session, every day, assuming the payoff would come when we got to the tournament and I would get significantly more pool time than usual. When we got to that tournament, and my fellow athletes had recovered from their injuries, I got benched. The coaches wanted “fresher” athletes.

Our coaches often pitted us against each other. One day we would be fighting each other for selection and the next expected to be best friends and know how to play with each other. In one particular international tour, an injury put me in direct competition with a teammate. We had travelled with a train on squad as we prepared for a tournament, which means additional athletes toured with us for training purposes, but would leave before the tournament commenced. About two weeks before we were due to travel to our final destination, the competition, I hurt my shoulder. The coaches were very explicit that they would not take an injured player to this tournament and, as such, a member of the train on squad was asked to stay on in case I did not recover in time. Everyone else on that tour has their position confirmed but the two of us; we would spend the next two weeks duelling it out for that final position. Me, I was trying to prove I was fit to play, she was trying to prove she was better than me. The night before we were due to fly out I was confirmed in

the team. While it was a celebration for me, the memory of that moment is significantly soured. The athlete that stayed on, and had trained on, had been told I would not likely recover, and in that final hour, she was sent home. She has not really spoken to me since. That was 2009.

Being an athlete had physical and mental implications. I had to gain weight and lose weight on command and by the time I retired I had injured almost every part of my body from my neck to my ankles. Eventually it became very apparent that my body was not made for the amount of weight I had to carry. I still experience the repercussions of a number of the injuries I sustained during my career. Beyond the physical pain and rehabilitation of my injuries, they also had emotional and mental implications. With each injury, I was reminded, directly and indirectly, that I was dysfunctional and replaceable. Often, I felt like I had to get back as quickly as possible before someone else took the spot I worked so hard to lay claim to. When I first injured my shoulder, I distinctly remember telling the physiotherapist to strap it to my body. I cared little about any physical damage or long-term consequences, representing my country was so much more important and meaningful than the future functionality of my shoulder. Mentally I struggled with persistent feeling that I was not good enough and may never be good enough.

I retired from international competition at the conclusion of the 2010 international season when I was just 24 years old. Much of the commentary that surrounded my retirement suggested I had retired too soon. I was, technically, in the prime of career. I was the right age and, while I was carrying a number of injuries, none of them were career ending. Ultimately, I could have (and some say should have) continued through to at least the 2016 Olympic cycle. Yet I retired less than two years out of the 2012 London Games. What was more shocking to people was that I was still currently in the team, something that was unheard of. My decision to retire did not fit the discourse that you are supposed to get injured, or be dropped, you are not supposed to choose to leave. As news of my retirement went public, the judgements started “How could you just give up? Why would you walk away from the opportunity to go the Olympics? What a waste. Why didn’t you just hold on?” I was met with anger, dismay, and disappointment. People told me I was weak, that I had just given up. I was even told explicitly that I had an obligation to keep playing, keep touring, to keep going until someone told me I was not good enough to go on.

I have been retired for a number of years, and have had ample time to breath, reflect, and create an identity for myself. But I struggled, like many athletes, in those early days. Despite being in control of my retirement, I still had to figure out who I was without sport. For about a year I struggled with this question. If not an athlete then what or who was I? I was lucky that I had had to work my entire career, and so when I left sport I had something to do and somewhere to go. I had a way to support myself and an additional skill set to “just” being an athlete, but I still had to find who I was and something to be passionate about. I had also been told from a young age that I could not be an athlete forever, and that always stuck with me. Fortunately, I maintained my interest and involvement in school and school work across my sporting career. I managed to do well in my school and tertiary studies despite taking time out for a number of competitions. On retirement I returned to university to complete the final years of my Bachelor of Psychology. While daunting, this was liberating. I could be whoever I wanted. The university context gave me an identity again, it provided me a safe place to rebuild myself, who I was and what I stood for. And I consider myself lucky to have had that.

I will never regret my athletic career. Despite feeling bullied by my sport for a long time I can openly and willingly acknowledge sport has given me a lot. It gave the highest of highs, and the lowest of lows, and now, everything I experienced has informed much of my academic and professional career. I often wondered how and in what capacity I would or could ever return to sport. I never wanted to be an ex-athlete that could not be associated with their sport once they had retired. I had seen this occur too many times and always thought it was really sad. So I am incredibly grateful that my tertiary education afforded me a platform to return, in some capacity, to sport: a yellow brick road home. I hope giving voice to the experiences and hardships of one generation will go some way to be able to save the next generation. I hold further hope that completing the current research study and disseminating the findings will provide athletes everywhere the reassurance that they are not alone in their experiences.

The more I look back on my sporting career and reflect, the less convinced I am that I ever wanted to be an athlete. I was good at it, and I loved being good at something. But when you are good at something, you perceive that is what you should be and should do. Over the years I came to realise I had never been a ‘lifer.’ I never had that same love, bond, or connection to water polo that so many of my teammates,

and other athletes I was surrounded by, exhibited. Water polo gave me validation rather than something I loved and was passionate about. I am incredibly proud of what I did and what I achieved. There is nothing like the feeling of wearing the green and gold and marching toward the presentation while having your national anthem play, but sport was a chapter in my life, it was not and is not my whole story.

If I had to identify *the* hardest thing for me to overcome when I decided to retire and negotiate my transition was *learning* how to value who I was as a person, not an athlete. My dream to go to the Olympics had been all encompassing for a most of my life. But there was a point when I realised that dream was going to end up costing me more than I would gain. However, rather than having to live with the ‘what if’ that I had seen plague a number of athletes, I had to live knowing that I would be the reason I did not make it. I would have no one to blame but myself. It was a long and very proactive process, but I eventually learned I would be enough and I am enough without the tag “Olympian.”

Despite all the discourses that surrounded my retirement I do not position it as a moment of weakness or failure. For me, my retirement was a time of strength and empowerment. As an athlete I had very little say or control of my life, coaches said “jump,” I said “how high?” Every decision I made from the time I was 12 years of age and learned I was quite good at water polo, until about 25 years prioritised water polo. The more I reflected back on it, the more I realised that in reality, I did not make a single one of those decisions. Ultimately all my decisions had been made for me. And so, for me, the day I retired was the first time in my adult life that I took back control, took back some of the power, and made a decision for me. My retirement allowed me to break free of what I should be, and begin on a journey of who I could be.

My intention in recounting the ups and downs of my career is not to provoke sympathy but merely to tell my story from behind the glory. Not through the lens of academia, theory, or hypotheticals, but how it is, and was, lived and experienced, the same lens I took to the current research study. Further, I hope in telling my story, it provides important context as to my position as an insider in the current research and serves to explicitly separate my experiences to those explored across the research study.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The present chapter introduced the context and significance of the research study. It provided the reader an understanding of the current state of mental health of athletes in Australia and an overview of the importance of sport to Australian culture. The specific research aims, objectives and research questions were presented and the chapter concluded with my background as an athlete. This served to outline my orientation to the research as an insider, and my motivation to engage in the study.

Chapter Two reviews the literature across five broad sections. The first section considers the current wellbeing status of elite athletes. The second section presents a dark side of elite sport, outlining some of the negative experiences associated with elite sport. The third section provides a detailed overview of the evolution of psychological research within the context of elite sport. Section four describes the current conceptualisation of mental health in elite athlete populations and identifies some of the gaps in how elite athlete mental health and wellbeing is explored and understood. The final section of the literature review adopts a systems perspective to contextualise the lived experience of elite athletes, and identifies factors that may affect the athlete experience that are not currently the focus of research. The chapter concludes by presenting the rationale of the present research project.

Chapter Three presents the theoretical approach adopted for the current research. First the research aims and objectives will be presented, followed by the research questions. The ontological and epistemological position of the current research are then presented. This is followed by a detailed account of CLA as the overarching methodological framework that guided the current research.

Chapter Four discusses the methods and procedures employed across the three research phases. The various methods used and procedural considerations for each research phase, including targeted recruitment, informant engagement and data analysis (phases one and two), and data collection, and data analysis (phase three), will be outlined. Ethical considerations will be discussed as well as the various procedures employed to maintain rigour and quality of the research, including reflexivity, maintenance of methodological audit trail and the use of respondent validation.

Following chapter four are five chapters that present the various research findings. Rather than presenting the findings of each phase of research chronologically, the findings chapters are organised to reflect the concentric levels of

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This was the primary explanatory model adopted for the research overall and enabled separate focus at each ecological level. Each findings chapter presents a conceptually broader perspective, from an individual lens (microsystem) (chapter five) through to a socio-cultural understanding (macrosystem) (chapter nine). The specific findings presented in each chapter are outlined below, alongside which phase of the research the findings were derived from.

Chapter Five presents the findings from the perspective of elite level athletes, derived from phase one of the research. This chapter presents an account of athletes' lived experience derived from the CLA of the data. This highlighted a number of hardships, pressures, and stressors athletes experienced day to day, with performance pressure a particular focus. Findings also provided insight into athletes' experiences of support staff, interventions, and systems, which elucidated a number of barriers for athletes to seek help.

Chapter Six continues a microsystem focus and presents the findings derived from phase two of the research. This chapter presents findings garnered from the qualitative content analysis of field research data alongside the CLA of interview data. This juxtaposition highlighted a number of dichotomous tensions between the type of experiences the governance of this sport attempted to foster, and the lived experience of athletes outside of the training context.

Chapter Seven is the first of two chapters that present a systemic lens. The CLA of data derived from interviews with support staff informants (phase one) were two fold. The findings themselves addressed two separate research questions and, as such, are presented separately. This chapter presents an understanding of athletes' lived experience derived from the intimate perspective of support staff.

Chapter Eight also presents a systemic lens. Here findings captured how support staff conceptualised their role as a provider of support to athletes. This highlighted athletes' current experiences and needs, and presented a number of barriers to the provision of effective and adequate support to athletes at large. These findings contribute to an understanding of how elite level athletes are currently supported in Australia and serve to elucidate additional support needs.

Chapter Nine presents a macrosystem perspective and presents a snapshot of the messages perpetuated about Australian elite level athletes within public discourses. These findings provided an understanding of the manifestations of

Australian sporting culture and ideology via print media (headlines) and contribute to the development of an understanding of the social construction of elite level athletes.

Chapter Ten presents the discussion as a reconstruction of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes. The implications, limitations, recommendations, and conclusion associated with the research and research findings are also presented.

“I think in terms of what athletes
need is a sense of normality in
a world that is very un-normal.”

– respondent; current elite athlete

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

“The formulation of a problem is far more often essential than its solution.”

– Albert Einstein

2.1 Chapter Overview

This literature review covers five broad sections. The first section considers the current wellbeing status of elite athletes. The second section articulates some of the negative ramifications of elite sport, in terms of physical and mental wellbeing, presented as a dark side. The next section acknowledges the complexities of psychological research in the elite sport setting and outlines the evolution of sport psychology research from the exploration of innate personality traits of successful athletes to the development of mental skills training that could be implemented to assist athletes achieve peak performance. The fourth section describes the focus of mental health research in athlete populations, and identifies some of gaps in how athlete mental health is explored, understood and conceptualised. The fifth and final section draws upon a systems perspective to contextualise the elite athlete experience and presents an ecologically valid conceptualisation of elite athlete mental health and wellbeing beyond individualistic (micro- and mesosystem) considerations. The chapter concludes with the rationale for the current research.

2.2 Athlete Wellbeing: The Rate and Prevalence of Poor Mental Health

The prevalence of poor mental health, or mental health concerns, in elite sport is frequently underestimated (Reardon & Factor, 2010), and, of particular concern, underreported (Rao & Hong, 2015). The limited literature available reports the rate at which athletes experience mental disorders as equivalent to the young to adolescent age group in the general populous (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Hammond, Gialloredo, Kubas, & Davis IV, 2013). This age group is relevant given peak performance for athletes is likely to occur around 21 years of age, depending on type of sport and event duration (Allen & Hopkins, 2015). A recent study explored the rate of poor mental health in Australian elite athletes, and found that as many as one in five elite athletes were reported to experience depressive symptomology, and one in four athletes displayed disordered eating patterns. This compares to one in four people aged 16 – 34 years in the wider community meeting clinical criteria for a mental disorder (Gulliver, Griffiths, Mackinnon, Batterham, & Stanimirovic, 2015). Such results are reflected internationally. For example, an American study reported

21% of collegiate athletes self-reported experiencing clinically significant symptoms of depression (Yang et al., 2007), and, findings from research in Germany suggests the prevalence of symptoms of depression in athletes is equivalent to the general populous in Europe (Frank et al., 2013) where the prevalence rate was reported as high as 15% (Nixdorf, Frank, Hautzinger, & Beckmann, 2013).

2.2.1 Elite Athletes: A High Risk Population

There are a number of factors that can account for the prevalence of poor mental health in athlete populations. First, elite athletes' age. Peak onset of mental disorders coincides (overlaps) with athletes' competitive years (Allen & Hopkins, 2015; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Gulliver, Griffiths, Christensen, et al., 2012). Second, the elite sport setting gives rise to unique risk factors for athletes that can contribute to an increased vulnerability to poor mental health (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Gustafsson, Skoog, Podlog, Lundqvist, & Wagnsson, 2013; Hughes & Leavey, 2012; Rice et al., 2016; Theberge, 2008; Wolanin et al., 2015), for example, sport related stress (Markser, 2011; Noblet et al., 2003), overtraining (e.g., Purvis et al., 2010), performance pressure (Weigand et al., 2013) and injury (e.g., Appaneal et al., 2009). Particular sports also have their own unique demands (Nixdorf, Frank, & Beckmann, 2015). For example, disordered eating is a particular concern in sports with weight categories or leanness requirements, e.g., boxing, rowing, wrestling (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2010).

The intensity with which athletes are required to commit to their sport, physically and emotionally, also presents a higher risk of athletes developing mental health concerns (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Hughes & Leavey, 2012) particularly anxiety or depression and other affective disorders (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). For example, the routine and intensive physical training elite sport involves has been associated with mood disturbances (Raglin, 2001). Further the very nature of sport, where someone has to lose, puts athletes at risk of poor mental health and wellbeing. The relationship between performance outcomes and athlete wellbeing is complex and under researched (Kerr, Wilson, Bowling, & Sheahan, 2005). However, despite the limited literature loss (failing) has been attributed to decrements in athletes' self-efficacy (Lane, Jones, & Stevens, 2002), mood and self-reported health symptoms (Hassmén & Blomstrand, 1995; Jones & Sheffield, 2007), onset of depression (Hammond et al., 2013), and the experience of negative psychological

responses and unpleasant feelings which have implications for motivation (Kerr & Males, 2010).

Finally athletes tend to avoid seeking help for mental health concerns (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012). A number of factors are thought to account for athletes' reluctance to seek psychological help, such as perceived stigma, negative attitudes towards help-seeking (i.e. being perceived as weak; Watson, 2005; Watson, 2006), embarrassment (Kamm, 2005; Schwenk, Gorenflo, Dopp, & Hipple, 2007), poor knowledge of mental health (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012), a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of engaging with a sports psychologist (Leffingwell, Rider, & Williams, 2001) and previous negative experiences with sports psychologists (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Martin, 2005). Male athletes' attitudes towards sports psychologists are less positive than female athletes (Anderson, Hodge, Lavalley, & Martin, 2004; Gulliver, Griffiths, Christensen, et al., 2012; Steinfeldt, Steinfeldt, England, & Speight, 2009), and younger athletes are more likely to have negative attitudes towards sports psychologists than their older counterparts (Martin, Lavalley, Kellmann, & Page, 2004). Athletes that compete in contact, physically combative or masculine sports (e.g., rugby, football, or wrestling) are thought to be less likely to engage with sport psychology consultants (Martin, 2005). In addition stigma has also been reported as a deterrent for other professionals working with athletes to refer them on to a psychologist (Heaney, 2006) which may function as a further barrier to engaging in help seeking behaviour.

2.2.2 Misconceptions of Athletes' Immunity

There is an assumption that participating in sport protects athletes from the development, or experience, of mental health disorders (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012). There is some evidence to suggest athletes can fail to recognise their experiences as poor mental health as a result of internalising attitudes that suggest successful athletes are, or should be, less susceptible to mental health concerns (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Newman et al., 2016). This assumption offers a further explanation of the continued underestimation of the rate of poor mental health in an athlete population (Reardon & Factor, 2010).

Physical activity and sport participation is often associated with physiological benefits and positive influences on mental health outcomes, and emotional state (Cox, 2007; Hughes & Leavey, 2012; Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004; Stanton & Reaburn, 2014) which may account for the presumed protective effect of elite sport.

Sports participation, and especially success, is also associated with subjective experiences of high in enrichment and reward (Gustafsson et al., 2013). Such factors give rise to the conceptualisation of elite sport as a positive environment to be embedded in which ignores the increased risk factors unique to this context outlined previously.

Athletes are often commended for their mental strength, and, athletes' success or failure is frequently attributed to their mental toughness (Crust & Azadi, 2010; Gucciardi et al., 2008). Traditionally, it was assumed that only those athletes that possessed, or could harness, mental and emotional strength could be successful (Moesch et al., 2018). In line with this assumptions, it is apparent numerous interventions that aim to foster competitive mental skills and coping mechanisms have been explored and developed for an athlete population (e.g., Cox, 2007; Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Raglin, 2001). Specifically, mental toughness is now conceptualised as an integral characteristic for athletic excellence (Bull, Shambrook, James, & Brooks, 2005) and as such recent research has tended to focus on understanding how to build this quality (e.g., Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008; Crust & Azadi, 2010; Weinberg, Freysinger, & Mellano, 2016). However, this focus positions athletes as resilient, or even immune, to mental health issues (Frank et al., 2013).

The development of mental and coping skills interventions and training programs are largely constrained to a performance paradigm. Where athlete coping has been explored, it tends to be conceptualised in terms of responses to performance or non-performance related stressors across training and competition, such as managing injury, fatigue or poor performance (e.g., Nicholls, Jones, Polman, & Borkoles, 2009; Nicholls, Levy, Grice, & Polman, 2009), rather than athletes' capabilities to cope with diagnosable disorders (Rice et al., 2016). Further research tends to focus on identifying the utility of specific coping mechanisms or identifying maladaptive coping practices generally, rather than seeking to improve the coping strategies athletes' possess (Rice et al., 2016).

The Athletic Coping Skills Inventory (Smith et al., 1995) was designed as a psychometrically sound multidimensional measure of coping skills, developed to meet the needs of such inventories to capture both a global measure of coping skills as well as distinct psychological characteristics. While this scale has often been used in conjunction with other sport specific measures to explore issues related to the athlete experience that are not necessarily strictly performance based, such as athletes'

longevity in sport/s (e.g., Smith & Christensen, 1995) or injury prevention (e.g., Johnson, Ekengren, & Andersen, 2005), the majority of the subscales are relevant to the competitive domain. These coping skills and strategies are not necessarily transferable to the adversities that manifest outside this context. As such this does not provide insight regarding how well athletes cope beyond performance or how these skills might contribute to maintaining athlete wellbeing.

2.3 A Dark Side of Elite Sport

Alongside the myriad unique risk factors to poor mental health elite sport gives rise to (Wolanin et al., 2015), athletes are known to continue to train and compete when their physical health is already compromised; sick, in pain, or injured (Theberge, 2008). Athletes that identify exclusively with their athlete identity often do not consider non-sports environments and aims as important, and, as such, sport becomes the only context within which they can receive acknowledgment (Schnell, Mayer, Diehl, Zipfel, & Thiel, 2014). Further, this can become an “Achilles heel” when athletes negotiate their transition out of sport (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Sparkes, 1998). Despite the perceived association of health with athletic capacity among ‘responsible’ athletes (Theberge, 2008; Thiel et al., 2011), this dynamic puts athletes at high risk of blindly accepting any physical, psychological or psychosocial risk to their health as just a consequence of participating in elite sport (Schnell et al., 2014). In addition, recent qualitative inquiry undertaken by Newman et al. (2016) denotes that while sport can function as a form of escape from the experience of depressive psychopathology, this is only effective for a finite period of time, and the facilitative nature of the demands of sport become debilitating, exacerbating mental health concerns.

It is also common practice for athletes to resort to extreme methods to control weight (i.e., disordered eating; Nattiv, Puffer, & Green, 1997; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2010). Such behaviour, particularly disordered eating, can be further exacerbated by the context and or culture of the sport within which athletes’ compete (McMahon, Penney, & Dinan-Thompson, 2012). This highlights athletes’ willingness to accept and engage in practices that have both short term (impaired athletic performance) and long term health implications (Nixon, 2004) in the pursuit of peak or optimal performance. These arguably extreme physical and psychological demands of elite sport can have negative implications for athletes, in terms of engagement,

performance, and, of particular interest, wellbeing (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011) and speak to a darker side of elite sport.

2.4 Sport Psychology: A Focus on Performance

Mental stress is accepted as an inevitable component of elite level high performance sport (Markser, 2011). The focus and determination required by athletes to achieve optimal performances, in conjunction with the pressure they experience to be successful, necessitates support to ensure athletes are adequately prepared psychologically (Lawless & Grobbelaar, 2015). Psychology has a substantive role in elite sport to assist professional and elite athletes in their performance (see Raglin, 2001). While the modern focus of sport psychology is multifaceted, a fundamental goal remains the enhancement of athletic performance (Cox, 2007; Reardon & Factor, 2010). As such exploration has been, and continues to be, largely anchored to the performance paradigm, focusing on understanding the complex relationships between psychological state (or key intrinsic variables) and successful performance (e.g., Anderson, Hanrahan, & Mallett, 2014; Cox, Shannon, McGuire, & McBride, 2010; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Hanton, Mellalieu, & Hall, 2004; Krane & Williams, 2006), as opposed to issues of wellbeing; a priority for the athlete over the person.

Early research focused on the role of personality traits on sports participation and success (Cooper, 1969; Warburton & Kane, 1966). Personality was said to account for up to 45% of the variance in sporting performance (Morgan, 1980) and consistent with this, the potential to determine a predictive relationship between personality and behaviour or sporting performance was a significant focus of investigation (e.g., Piedmont, Hill, & Blanco, 1999). Considerable research attempted to establish a personality profile of successful elite athletes via the consideration of varying levels of personality traits, such as extraversion and neuroticism, exhibited across different categories of athletes; athlete versus non-athlete populations, very good versus average athletes, individual versus team based athletes, and, gender (e.g., Egloff & Gruhn, 1996; Morgan, 1980; Nia & Besharat, 2010; O'Sullivan, Zuckerman, & Kraft, 1998; Piedmont et al., 1999). However, high stakes athletic performance gives rise to a myriad extrinsic psychological stressors, such as pressure, that need to be managed to enable an athlete to performance optimally (Cooke, Kavussanu, McIntyre, & Ring, 2010; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). As such, researchers began to move away from exploration of the personality profile of successful athletes, to the

identification of a psychological profile of successful athletes and associated mental skills, such as anxiety and emotion control (e.g., Gould et al., 1999; Robazza & Bortoli, 2003).

The identification and consideration of psychological skills as a significant determinant of performance outcomes is a primary tenant of sport psychology (e.g., Durand-Bush, Salmela, & Green-Demers, 2001; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992; Robazza, Pellizzari, & Hanin, 2004; Williams, 1993). Athletes' mental readiness, levels of motivation, commitment, concentration, attentional regulation and thought-control, self-confidence, capacity to cope with distractions, goal setting, and arousal management have all been associated with athletes' ability to perform successfully (Gould et al., 1992; Gould et al., 1999; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Krane & Williams, 2006; Williams & Krane, 1998). Furthermore well-developed competitive routines and plans (Williams & Krane, 1998), and pre-performance state also have a significant influence on performance (Harmison, 2006; Privette & Bundrick, 1997). As a result a strong focus on mental preparation and strategies that assist athletes achieve a (subjective) ideal pre-performance mind/body state conducive to reaching peak performance is evident throughout the literature (e.g., Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) model; Hanin, 1978; Hanin, 1995; Robazza et al., 2004). Research suggests that athletes' performance suffers when precompetitive anxieties are significantly higher or lower than their individual optimal range (Jokela & Hanin, 1999). Therefore, it is increasingly important for athletes to understand and become proficient in their use of psychological strategies such as control of attention, arousal, energy, and anxiety, to ensure peak performance (Cox, 2007; Hanin & Syrjä, 1995; Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996; Harmison, 2006).

A number of psychological skill self-report inventories have been developed for use with elite athletes. Such measures are important in the assessment of athletes' cognitive and affective state (Vealey & Garner-Holman, 1998). For example, the Ottawa Mental Skills Assessment Tool (OMSAT; Salmela, 1992), refined to the OMSAT-3* (Durand-Bush et al., 2001) was initially developed to measure a wide range of mental skills. This scale is thought to differentiate between levels of competitive elite athlete in terms of how developed their mental skills are; better developed mental skills are thought to indicate a high level of athlete (Durand-Bush et al., 2001). Similarly, the Psychological Skills Inventory for Sports (PSIS R-5;

Mahoney, Gabriel, & Perkins, 1987) originally developed to measure various cognitive skills related to sport performance, including anxiety control, confidence, mental preparation, motivation and concentration (Chartrand, Jowdy, & Danish, 1992), is often utilised to discern elite athletes from non-athletes, female from male athletes, and athletes across various sports based on the results on different indexes of mental skills (see Smith et al., 1995). Such insight provides little clarity with respect to the cognitive factors that are most important for athletes' coping. Rather, they tend to quantify athletes' mental skills, and indicate that the presence of particular skills, or more advanced skills, are more likely to be associated with different levels of expertise of athletes, or different sports.

The Test of Performance Strategies (TOPS; Thomas, Murphy, & Hardy, 1999) was developed to measure those psychological skills strategically employed by athletes in competition (goal setting, relaxation, emotional regulation, automaticity, self-talk, imagery, activation, and, negative thinking) and practice (same as 'competition' however, attentional control replaces negative thinking). This scale has become one of the most popular inventories utilised in sport psychology (Weinberg & Gould, 2003) and has been utilised to investigate the relationship between psychological skills and various aspects of competitive performance such as the experience of competitive anxieties (e.g., Fletcher & Hanton, 2001), or interactions between psychological skills, flow, self-concept, and performance (e.g., Jackson, Thomas, Marsh, & Smethurst, 2001). However, the utility of specific TOPS subscales have been identified as problematic, particularly 'activation' which has been shown to be questionable across both the practice and competitive subscales (see Lane, Harwood, Terry, & Karageorghis, 2004). As a result, there have been attempts to refine this scale to address such limitations and ensure they capture the complexity of the psychological skills being measured, though some subscales remain a point of contention, such as automaticity (TOPS 2; Hardy, Roberts, Thomas, & Murphy, 2010). Hardy et al. (2010) highlighted additional limitations of TOPS and TOPS 2, where the utility of psychological skills are also likely to be influenced by personality or situational conditions, dynamics that are not yet captured within such inventories. Further, insight engendered from this inventory regarding athletes' coping, or the utility of psychological skills, is constrained to the competitive domain; performing.

The psychological skills that are associated with optimal performance can be innate or learned, for example anxiety control and self-confidence can either be

innate, or fostered (learned) via training strategies (Cox, 2007; Terry, Mayer, & Howe, 1998). Developing effective interventions to enhance athletes' psychological skills and strategies is a salient focus of research (e.g., Cox et al., 2010; Gaudreau & Blondin, 2002; Smith et al., 1995; Weinberg & Williams, 2006) where athlete mental skill inventories can be utilised to measure the efficacy and effectiveness of psychological skills training programs (Chartrand et al., 1992; Thomas et al., 1999). A number of investigations and reviews have demonstrated the effectiveness of planned psychological interventions and programs in fostering mental skills and enhancing performance across sports, where programs included, but were not limited to, goal setting, energy management, self-talk, and imagery (e.g., Bar-Eli, Dreshman, Blumenstein, & Weinstein, 2002; Carter & Graef, 2016; De Francesco & Burke, 1997; Grove, Norton, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1999; Mamassis & Doganis, 2004; McCormick, Meijen, & Marcora, 2015; Terry et al., 1998; Thelwell & Maynard, 2003; Vealey, 1994). Indeed the majority of articles that explore the effectiveness of psychological skills training on performance report a positive association between interventions and subsequent athletic performances (Weinberg & Williams, 2006). However, such studies are rarely utilised to explore the impact of psychological skills training on protecting and promoting athlete wellbeing (Marshall & Harrison, 2015), despite recognition that athlete wellbeing is associated with the creation of the optimal training that affords peak performance, i.e., decreased negative emotional state (Hardy et al., 1996). Even when wellbeing has been a central concern for research, improved performance outcomes were considered the primary indicator of the success of the skills training programs (e.g., Golby & Wood, 2016; Sheard & Golby, 2006).

In addition to intrinsic concerns that impact performance, such as self-confidence, anxieties, and mental readiness, some of the stressors that arise from and impact elite sporting competitive performance are extrinsic, such as pressure (Gucciardi & Dimmock, 2008). Pressure (increased necessity of a good performance on any particular occasion) affects performance, and, the inability of athletes to cope with this pressure has given rise to a phenomenon known as 'choking', which is operationally defined as diminished performance under pressure (Baumeister, 1984). Numerous frameworks have attempted to account for choking, including processing efficient theory (e.g., Eysenck & Calvo, 1992), the conscious processing hypothesis (e.g., Masters, 1992) and the attentional threshold hypothesis (e.g., Hardy, Gammage,

& Hall, 2001). However, how to maintain skilful performance under pressure remains a contentious issue and as such, understanding the mechanisms that underpin the pressure-performance relationship and developing athletes' skill in coping with pressure is of continued importance (see Beilock & Carr, 2001; Cooke et al., 2010; Gucciardi & Dimmock, 2008). Further, inquiry anchored to a performance paradigm neglects the consideration of the impact of extrinsic factors such as pressure, on athletes outside competing, i.e., the influence, if any, of such factors on athletes' wellbeing.

2.5 Conceptualising Elite Level Athlete Mental Wellbeing

Previously, there has been a paucity of peer-reviewed research focusing on the mental health and wellbeing of elite athletes (see Hughes & Leavey, 2012; Reardon & Factor, 2010; Rice et al., 2016); however in recent years qualitative exploration of athletes' wellbeing and lived experiences has gained increased attention (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2015; Howells & Lucassen, 2018; McMahon et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2016; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). Such inquiry is often underpinned by a narrative approach, and serves to elucidate athletes' stories. The impact of performance, and the performance narrative, are central features of this inquiry. Position statements released by two pivotal organisations and academic bodies in sport psychology; The European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC; Moesch et al., 2018) and International Society of Sport and Exercise Psychology (ISSP; Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2017), highlighted the importance of holistic consideration of elite athletes, within and beyond performance and sport, for future research and researchers. As such, it is expected qualitative exploration of elite athlete wellbeing will increase.

Previous to this, the consideration of poor mental health in the athlete population has often articulated in terms of poor athletic performance (e.g., the association of negative aspects of mental health with decrements to performance; Raglin, 2001). While it has been established that the regulation of athletes' mental, mood, and emotional state is important in attaining peak performance (Krane & Williams, 2006; Martin, Vause, & Schwartzman, 2005; Meyers, Whelan, & Murphy, 1996) this focus conceptualises mental health primarily in terms of the intrinsic conditions that impact performance; namely, heightened levels of unhelpful traits, lowered levels of helpful traits, or mood disturbances. Insight derived from studies attempting to explore athlete mental health may also be marred by poor design, such

as an overreliance on self-report inventories rather than diagnostic measures (e.g., Hammond et al., 2013; Nixdorf et al., 2015) and a lack of targeted intervention based research (Rice et al., 2016). The heterogeneity of the athlete population, as a result of self-selection, may also be problematic. Athletes can all meet elite level classification (Swann et al., 2015); however, there are salient variables that can manifest between different sports, for example, media attention and pressure, or remuneration, that can influence the onset of mental health concerns (Rice et al., 2016). Such factors are often not considered in studies that identify and report the prevalence of specific mental health disorders in athlete populations (e.g., Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004; Wolanin et al., 2015).

2.5.1 Athlete Mental Health: An Intrinsic Approach

Positive mental health traits have been reported to elicit positive performance outcomes (Raglin, 2001). The Mental Health Model (MHM; Morgan, 1978; 1980, 1985) frames mental health in terms of mood state. It was developed and utilised to explore the potential predictive relationship between precompetitive emotions and athletic performance (Prapavessis & Grove, 1991). This model still strongly draws on the role of personality on performance outcomes (Gill, 1986). As such, it reduces conceptualisations of good or poor mental health to intrinsic, innate variables. Insight garnered from a MHM approach suggests positive psychological state is associated with successful performances (Cox, 1990; Gill, 1986; Morgan, 1980). However, methodological, conceptual and interpretative flaws give rise to questions of its suitability (Prapavessis & Grove, 1991), for example its simplified approach to mental health fails to recognise the experience of mental health along a continuum (Rowley, Landers, Kyllö, & Etnier, 1995). This model is commonly used to differentiate between successful, and less successful athletes via the dichotomous positive or negative psychological profile (see Rowley et al., 1995), rather than provide insight regarding what mental health is, what the precursors are, or why athletes may experience poor mental health. Despite this, the role of mood state on competitive performance has been an important avenue of inquiry (e.g., Beedie, Terry, & Lane, 2000; Morgan, Brown, Raglin, O'Connor, & Ellickson, 1987) and continues to perpetuate the conceptualisation of mental health only in terms of intrinsic traits (mood states) that have implications for performance.

Mental health has also been positioned as athletes' capacity to cope with the stressors of elite competitive performance, where intrinsic conditions that prevent an

athlete utilising their mental skills to aid performance, such as manage their anxieties (Fletcher & Hanton, 2001), are positioned as poor mental health. Understanding the role of somatic and cognitive state (Craft, Magyar, Becker, & Feltz, 2003), trait anxieties (Ntoumanis & Jones, 1998; Perry & Williams, 1998) and the conditions under which maladaptive responses occur (e.g., situation ambiguity; Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2003; Eubank, Collins, & Smith, 2002) has been a major focus of research. Although this avenue of inquiry has enabled the consideration of intrinsic conditions beyond personality profile (i.e., the MHM perspective) in the conceptualisations of mental health such as self-esteem, confidence, and perfectionism, these variables are generally considered only in terms of their effect on performance (e.g., Ceballos Gurrola et al., 2013; Flett & Hewitt, 2005; Kerr & Gross, 1997; Koivula, Hassmen, & Fallby, 2002; Stoeber, Otto, Pescheck, Becker, & Stoll, 2007).

Such an approach to athlete mental health can only garner insight with regard to athletes' response to performance; the experience of competitive anxieties and the impact of such on performance outcomes. Understanding the impact of pre-competitive and competitive anxiety responses can assist athletes' in their performance, however, it is clear such inquiry has done little to garner understanding of the wellbeing for athletes beyond a performance paradigm. Mental toughness has demonstrated short-term positive effects on athletes' sense of psychological wellbeing (Golby & Wood, 2016; Mahoney, Gucciardi, Ntoumanis, & Mallet, 2014), however, inquiry on the experience of other intrinsic variables on athletes' sense of wellbeing had lagged. Given the rate of poor mental health or mental health disorders in athletes is equivalent to the general population (Frank et al., 2013; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Gulliver et al., 2015; Hammond et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2007) a more holistic conceptualisation of mental health is required.

2.5.2 The Social Environment

Factors external to the athlete have been shown to impact mental health, for example, training load has been associated with mood disturbances and subsequent poor performance (Morgan et al., 1987; O'Connor, 1997; Raglin, Eksten, & Garl, 1995). However, a more holistic exploration of the elite athlete experience has shown that wellbeing can also be effected by social, cultural, and/or situation context (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2009; Gustafsson, Hassmen, Kentta, & Johansson, 2008;

McMahon et al., 2012; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014) and associated external stressors (e.g., Newman et al., 2016).

Athletes' interpersonal relationships and social contexts are a key determinant of their motivation and wellbeing, particularly with respect to their coach's conduct (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Coaches play a critical role in the level of stress and anxiety experienced by athletes (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002; Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007) and their interpersonal style has been shown to shape the positive and negative psychological, emotional, and physical impacts of sport involvement (Smoll & Smith, 2002). Therefore self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) has become a commonly used approach from which to conceptualise elite athlete wellbeing as it includes the exploration of the role of social environmental and socio-contextual factors on the elite athlete experience.

The SDT paradigm considers issues of goal striving and achievement (e.g., Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015; Smith, Ntoumanis, Duda, & Vansteenkiste, 2011) in conjunction with basic psychological need satisfaction (or thwarting); competence, autonomy, and relatedness, to garner insight with respect to those conditions under which various levels of wellbeing (high or low) manifest (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015; Mahoney et al., 2014; Ng, Lonsdale, & Hodge, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2002). A consideration of social and environmental factors, such as interpersonal styles of coaches (e.g., autonomy-supportive, or controlling; Stenling, Lindwall, & Hassmén, 2015), and motivational climate, on the satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of athletes' basic needs (wellbeing) are also embedded in this framework (Reinboth et al., 2004; Reinboth & Dudab, 2006). Research using this approach has demonstrated that some environments have a positive impact on athlete wellbeing (autonomy-supportive; Gagne, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2003; Stenling et al., 2015), and others have adverse consequences for athletes' mental health (e.g., increased vulnerability to elite athlete burnout; Lonsdale & Hodge, 2011). However, such insight is constrained to the impact of the athlete's direct social environment i.e., relationships between athlete and coach, and does not afford the consideration of broader socio-contextual factors in athlete wellbeing.

2.6 Towards an Ecologically Valid Understanding of the Athlete Experience

The impact of the wider context and contextual factors on an individual's development and subjective experiences has been illustrated by examining the influence of the socio-contextual environment on the functioning and development of

children and families (see Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Such research cites a dynamic interplay of the interactions, linkages, and transitions between biological and genetic factors (age, gender), family processes and other influential settings, such as public policies, social systems, social class/socioeconomic status, school culture, ethnicity, and work environment, as influential in human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986, 2005; McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller, & Killip, 2004; Tudge, Otero, Hogan, & Etz, 2003). Such research highlights varied and numerous wider, contextual factors that can influence human development, beyond just personal characteristics (i.e., personality).

The modern day athlete faces great physical, social, and psychological pressures (Markser, 2011), particularly media scrutiny and the potential of failure on the world stage (Hammond et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2016). Therefore the consideration of a broader spectrum of social environmental or socio-contextual relationships on athlete wellbeing is important. There has been recent exploration of the role of those socio-contextual factors (for example, cultural, social, and discursive norms and practices; Blodgett et al., 2015) on the athlete experience. For example, discursive approaches have elucidated the role of the discourses athletes are embedded in on how they feel, speak and behave, suggesting athletes may constrain or modify behaviour in an attempt to adhere to the illocutionary effect (i.e., societal norms and expectations) of public discourses (McGannon & Mauws, 2000). As such, how athletes are represented via discursive socio-contextual factors (i.e. the media) may afford or limit athletes' subjective experiences. However, the influence of such with respect to athlete wellbeing has not been the focus of such inquiry.

It is of increasing importance to consider psychological phenomenon within the settings where it occurs, particularly within very unique contexts such as elite sport (see Blodgett et al., 2015; Cosh, Crabb, & Tully, 2015; McGannon & Smith, 2015). Although exploration of the impact of cultural, social, and discursive norms have provided insight with regard to conceptualisation of athlete identities (Cosh et al., 2015; McGannon, Gonsalves, Schinke, & Busanich, 2015) and the social and cultural context on the experience of specific syndromes (e.g., elite athlete burnout; Gustafsson et al., 2008), more holistic exploration of athlete wellbeing has been limited. Where contextual considerations have been explored in terms of the lived experience of elite athletes insight has been constrained to retrospective studies (e.g. Debois, Ledon, Argiolas, & Rosnet, 2012; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Ryba,

Ronkainen, & Selänne, 2015), and have not been considered in terms of antecedents to *current* athletes' wellbeing.

2.6.1 Athlete Wellbeing: A Systems Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977) as an explanatory model is a useful, ecologically valid approach from which to consider athlete wellbeing. This conceptual framework positions the athlete at the centre of multiple interdependent concentric systems (micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems), where interactions within and across each system have the capacity to influence individuals' psychological development and shape the lived experience (see Figure 1). Using this perspective to explore athlete mental health enables exploration of the direct social environment (micro-, and mesosystems) as is considered in SDT (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002) and the indirect social environment; the exosystem (linkages between individuals' immediate context and social settings) and macrosystem (cultural and ideological value systems; Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The microsystem is the closest concentric system to the developing individual, and is defined by those relationships and interactions that occur within the immediate social environment, where the majority of an individual's time is spent (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1994; Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). For athletes, this would include environments such as home, training centre, school, workplace, and peer group. The next system, the mesosystem, encompasses the dynamic interrelations between two or more microsystems, for example, the

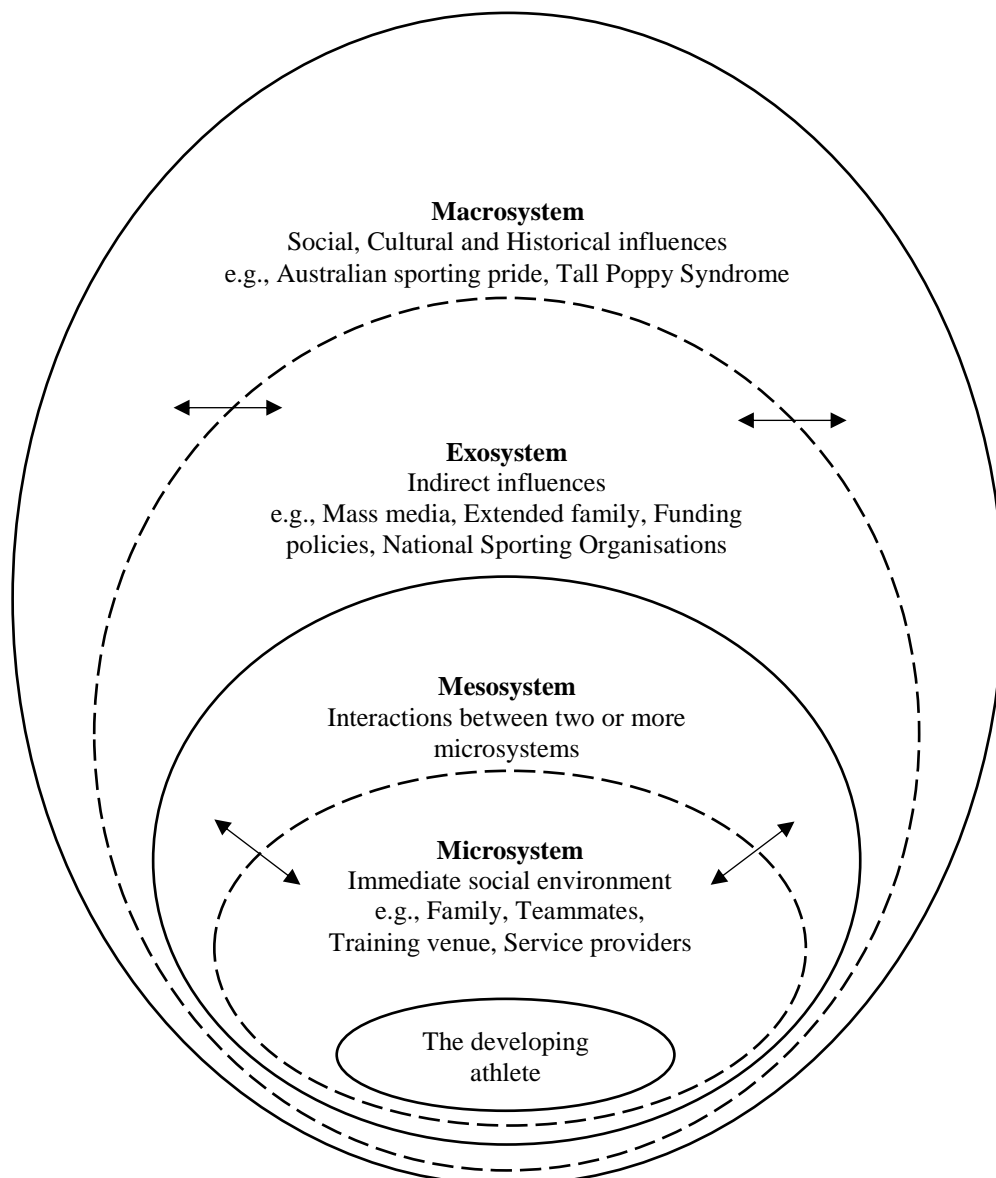


Figure 1 The Ecology of the Australian Sporting Context. Adapted from “Ecological Systems Theory” (pp. 187-248), by U. Bronfenbrenner, in *Annals of Child Development*. R. Vasta (Ed.), 1989, Greenwich, CT: JAI; and “The Ecology of Cognitive Development” (pp. 3-44), by U. Bronfenbrenner, in *Development in Context: Acting and Thinking In Specific Environments*, R. H. Wozniack & K. W. Fischer (Eds.), 1993, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum

relationships and/or interactions between an athlete's coach and their parents (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Insight engendered from SDT regarding the impact of the social environment on elite athlete mental health and wellbeing is constrained to these systems. The furthest concentric systems, the exo- and macrosystems, are neglected from SDT considerations. The exosystem are those environments the developing individual is not situated within, that is, they spend no time in, but can indirectly impact their immediate context, for example, mass media (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Tudge et al., 2009; Warren, 2005). A coach's home environment, parents' social circles, or, sports funding organisations are all exosystemic factors that would influence athletes' microsystem. The macrosystem, however, is fundamentally different from the other systems; rather than a specific context that influences a particular person, the macrosystem serves as 'prototypic blueprints' that govern the structures and activities that occur within a particular culture or subculture (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The macrosystem is often referred to as the overarching patterns of culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This ecology is defined by the shared characteristics of any cultural or subcultural group, including ideologies, customs, cultural and societal values, attitude and belief systems, ideological assumptions and cultural archetypes, political and economic structures, life course opportunities, material resources and bodies of knowledge. Different cultural groups exist as different macrosystems and, as such, will give rise to different conditions experienced at the microsystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 1994; Tudge et al., 2009). For athletes', the particular cultural, subcultural, and/or socio-contextual value system they are embedded in, such as importance of sport to the national identity, are important macrosystemic considerations. Given the proximity and direct contact of the microsystem to an individual it is often thought of as the most influential system to human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). While this may be the case, the microsystem is not independent from social processes and psychological elements of distal systems. The specific social, psychological and ideological elements of the macrosystem influence and are influenced by the conditions and processes that occur within the microsystem and ultimately influence an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1993, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Tudge et al., 2009). That is, despite athletes not being an active participant in the furthest concentric systems, these systems still impact their immediate context and

therefore will likely have implications for their wellbeing. In order to garner an adequate understanding of the potential influences of the macrosystem on an individual's microsystem, specific social and psychological aspects that occur at the broader macrosystem need to be identified and considered (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Utilising Bronfenbrenner's framework enables an exploration of the influence of those wider socio-contextual factors on athletes' development and lived experiences previously omitted from investigation, such as interactions between the modern contemporary (profiled) athlete and the media and, by extension, the public.

2.6.1.1 The Media and The Athlete

Mass media is a fundamental exosystemic consideration to develop an ecologically valid understanding of the athlete experience and wellbeing. Given modern day sport is interdependent with the media means one cannot be considered irrespective of the other (Zion et al., 2011), and the rise of social media in a contemporary sport setting (Adebayo, 2013; English, 2016) results in athletes facing prolific formal and informal media scrutiny (Hammond et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2016). Increased media attention may contribute to the pressure experienced by elite athletes to perform optimally (Cooke et al., 2010) or, exacerbate the consequences associated with the physical and psychological demands of elite sport, therefore impacting performance (Reinboth & Dudab, 2006). However, research regarding the influence of media and social media in a sporting setting tends to focus on issues such as public relations, marketing and motivations for consumption (e.g., Brown & Billings, 2013; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Summers & Morgan, 2008; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012) rather than the impact of the media on athletes day to day.

Contemporary sport has moved from an amateur pursuit of glory, to a highly commercialised, cultural institution, a transition largely attributable to the influence of the media (Billings, Brown, & Brown, 2013; Zion et al., 2011). However, sports journalism seems to have transformed to an outlet of entertainment, 'soft news', which is lacking a formal critical framework (Adebayo, 2013; Summers & Morgan, 2008; Zion et al., 2011). For instance, sports journalism has become increasingly reliant on the use of Twitter (Price, Farrington, & Hall, 2012; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010) which has implications for how sports news stories are gathered, published (Sanderson, Kassing, & Billings, 2011), broken and promoted to the audience (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Alongside this, the media has played a role

in the creation, and perpetuation, of the modern day sporting ‘celebrity’; a *product* defined only in terms of a name and a trademark (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Hassan, 2013; L’Etang, 2006; Summers & Morgan, 2008). This has seemingly resulted in the consideration of athletes’ behaviour, on or off the field, as public figures, to be newsworthy. Further, the diminution of the celebrity status can have significant implications for mental health (Howells & Lucassen, 2018)

It has been demonstrated that the media can manipulate audience behaviour, for example, via targeted advertising campaigns, and research has tended to focus on how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of such approaches in engaging the audience to change their behaviour (e.g., Stead, Tagg, MacKintosh, & Eadie, 2005). Alongside this, the media can exhibit an indirect influence over its audience where repeated exposure to specific stimuli affects individuals’ belief systems (e.g., López-Guimerà, Levine, Sánchez-Carracedo, & Fauquet, 2010), or behaviour. For example, while a contentious issue, some research has found an association between exposure to media violence aggressive behaviour in youth populations (e.g., Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Hong & Garbarino, 2012). This may have implications for athletes as consumers and main subjects of media stories, as well as the general population alike. For athletes, immersion and participation in collective discourses can affect their conceptualisations of identity (e.g. Cosh et al., 2015; Douglas & Carless, 2006; McGannon et al., 2015) and influence their behaviour to adhere to cultural and societal expectations (McGannon & Mauws, 2000). Such dynamics have also been associated with the mental health concerns. For example, repeated exposure to media representations and understandings of beauty and body shape have been linked to body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating in female populations (López-Guimerà et al., 2010). Similarly, athletes’ repeated exposure to the cultural norms and societal expectations of them perpetuated by the media may increase the risk of mental health concerns within this population.

A key assumption of media studies is that media representations of particular groups effects how members of that group see themselves and how they treated by others (Dyer, 1993). Consistent with this athletes are at risk of internalising the identities constructed and perpetuated by the media (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Birrell & McDonal, 2000; Whannel, 2002). Beyond performance, sports media circulates, perpetuates, and amplifies stories that speak to the culturally bound understandings and expectations of athlete identity, behaviour, and developmental

trajectories (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Internalising these societal expectations may shape how athletes perceive themselves (McGannon, Hoffmann, Metz, & Schinke, 2012; McGannon et al., 2015) and can have implications for athletes' subjective understanding of their reality (Blodgett et al., 2015; Cosh et al., 2015). For example, inheriting a negative identity from media constructions can have emotional implications, or contribute to additional pressures experienced by that particular athlete (McGannon et al., 2012). Further rather than athlete identity being the result of the extent to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) the modern day athlete identity is anchored to the manner with which the media represents them and how particular storylines situate athletes in public discourses (Andrews & Jackson, 2001). Such identities are fluid, where athletes can be positioned as good in one story and bad in the next (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Birrell & McDonal, 2000) often dependent on the socio-cultural significance of that particular narrative (see Kusz, 2007; LaFrance & Rail, 2001; Whannel, 2002).

2.6.1.2 The Media and the Macrosystem

Ecological theory posits that human development is conceptualised in terms of transactions between the individual and the environment (Barker, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Dokecki, 1977; Lewin, 1946), and an individual's competency in meeting the demands of the various and interrelated social systems contained within this environment (Kuhn, 1974). The close relationship between sport and the media (Zion et al., 2011) suggests that the media is an important system within an athlete's environment, and, as such, may have implications for their social and psychological development.

The media, despite being an exosystemic factor, has macrosystem implications. The media has been shown to shape public knowledge and expectations, as well as influence and elicit patriotic attitudes from its audience (Billings et al., 2013; Melnick & Wann, 2010). Summers and Morgan (2008) positioned the media as a vehicle of socio-cultural and cultural ideologies. The shared meanings of people, places, and events produced, reproduced, and circulated by the media results in the creation of ideological assumptions, and cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs being accepted as common-sense truths (Cosh et al., 2015; McGannon et al., 2015). These 'truths' may shape how athletes and sport are conceptualised by society (McGannon et al., 2012; McGannon et al., 2015). Dominant cultural discourses and narratives are

likely to reflect the societal preferences, expectations and assumptions of elite athletes and result in considerable cultural pressures that athletes must navigate to be successful (Carless & Douglas, 2013). These norms play a role in the construction the social reality of those who engage with it (Bryant & Oliver, 2009).

2.6.1.3 Conceptualising the Australian Sporting Ideology: The Macrosystem

A fascination with the feats of elite athletes has long existed (Swann et al., 2015) and Australia is arguably a sport obsessed nation, with high social and economic investment in sport (Mitchell et al., 2012; Toohey & Taylor, 2009). Significant monetary resources are invested in elite sport across developed nations, which results in an expectation of success (Grix & Carmichael, 2012) and the dominant conceptualisation of success is anchored to winning (Carless & Douglas, 2012). Consistent with this global trend, Australian elite sporting programs receive Government funding to foster athletic excellence and ensure international sporting superiority over rivals on competition medal tallies (Mitchell et al., 2012). This suggests Australia quantifies athletic success in terms of medal haul. Great acclaim and societal acceptance is placed on those who show remarkable athletic ability and excel at a chosen sport (Chase & Machida, 2011). As the quintessential sporting 'hero' is distinguished by achievement, sporting champions who publicly triumph at their sport are socially constructed as national heroes and consequently considered role models (Adebayo, 2013; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Hassan, 2013; Melnick & Wann, 2010). However Australia's preoccupation with medal tallies has potential implications for the status and worth assigned to those athletes who do not place at international sporting competitions.

Australians perpetually consider themselves a great sporting nation, a notion that likely stems from Australia, as a nation, consistently succeeding in sporting endeavours that appear impossible (Toohey & Taylor, 2009). Failure has similarly been socially constructed as a modern taboo; failing in sporting endeavours is perceived as un-Australian (McKay & Roderick, 2010). Given this, Australian elite athletes are often at the whim of a societal preoccupation with performance and performance outcomes (Grunseit et al., 2012) where their worth as national heroes defined not by their sporting prowess (i.e. the achievement of personal bests) but by their results. That is, societal acceptance of any athlete may not be determined solely by their individual athletic ability but how well they perform in comparison to their

competitors. This suggests Australian sporting culture constructs victory as the only respectable performance outcome and as such gold medals function as a quantifiable measure of athletes' worth and the nation's success. Such ideological pressure and societal expectation may contribute to or influence elite athletes at the microsystem; however, this has not yet been considered.

2.7 Rationale for the Current Research Study

The rate of elite athletes experiencing mental health concerns is frequently underestimated (Reardon & Factor, 2010) and underreported (Rao & Hong, 2015), despite the prevalence of mental health concerns being equivalent between athlete and non-athlete populations (Frank et al., 2013; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Gulliver et al., 2015; Hammond et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2007). Sport psychology research continues to provide insight with regard to the conditions, psychological skills and mental states that can aid in eliciting peak or optimal performance. While the focus of such research has often concentrated on the competitive domain, the insights obtained cannot not guarantee successful performances; winning.

The priority of performance based issues within research can be attributed, at least in part, to athletic performance being the defining factor of an athlete and the fundamental goal of sport psychology being the enhancement of performance (Cox, 2007; Reardon & Factor, 2010). However, this neglects the increased vulnerability to poor mental health as a result of those risk factors experienced beyond the competitive domain (see Wolanin et al., 2015), such as athletes' physical and emotional commitment to their sport (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Hughes & Leavey, 2012), sport related stress (Markser, 2011), increased media scrutiny (Rice et al., 2016) and ultimately the hesitation to engage sport psychology practitioners (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Leffingwell et al., 2001; Watson, 2006). The 'dark side' of elite sport necessitates a more holistic understanding of the athlete experience beyond competing, particularly athletes' own subjective experience of the specific risk factors unique to elite sporting context (Smoll & Smith, 2002). This will facilitate the development of support strategies, psychological interventions and coping skills beyond the pursuit of peak performance, to address athletes' wellbeing.

Where the impact of elite athlete mental health has been the focus of inquiry, this too has been constrained to the competitive domain, and psychological understandings of mental health have focused on its impact on performance (e.g.,

Ceballos Gurrola et al., 2013; Stoeber et al., 2007). There has been a move away from the exploration of mental health only in terms of the impact of helpful or unhelpful intrinsic variables (Beedie et al., 2000; Craft et al., 2003; Ntoumanis & Jones, 1998), or maladaptive coping strategies (Fletcher & Hanton, 2001) on performance outcomes. The consideration of more subjective factors such as the impact of interpersonal relationships on the satisfaction of athletes' basic psychological needs has become important (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2011; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). However, these conditions are still considered, ultimately, in terms of a performance paradigm. The association of poor mental health with poor performance (Raglin, 2001) provides the agenda of research, where even extrinsic antecedents to athletes' poor wellbeing, such as the conduct of coaches (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002; Reinboth et al., 2004) are considered in terms of their association with poor performance, for example, the experience of performance anxiety (e.g., Smith et al., 2007). Additionally, frameworks such as SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002) do not provide an ecologically valid account of wellbeing and do not allow for the consideration of those social environmental factors that occur beyond direct relationships.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is a conceptual framework and explanatory model of psychological development and wellbeing which emphasises the consideration of socio-contextual factors and social conditions, beyond those that an individual actively participates in, such as, the exosystem (e.g., mass media; Hong & Garbarino, 2012) and macrosystem (i.e., broad overarching patterns of culture; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994; Tudge et al., 2009). SDT theory posits that the impact of motivational climate and perceived support on wellbeing is influenced by coaches' conduct (Gagne et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2007). This dynamic can be said to mirror the interdependence of the systems within Bronfenbrenner's systems theory, where the macrosystem influences and is influenced by the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1993, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Tudge et al., 2009) and as such would likely similarly affect wellbeing. That is, Australia's high ideological regard for sport and sporting success (Horton, 2012; Maguire, 2011; Melnick & Wann, 2010; Toohey & Taylor, 2009) a macrosystem consideration, likely influence athletes' motivational climate and perceived support (i.e., the microsystem).

The dynamic interplay between an athlete's micro-, exo- and macrosystems also gives rise to complex identity issues for athletes to navigate. One's perception of

self is largely impacted by media representations (Dyer, 1993) and contemporary athlete identity is the product of how athletes are constructed and perpetuated via the media (Andrews & Jackson, 2001). As such athletes' identity formation is a particular concern; they are at risk of internalising media portrayals of their identity (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Birrell & McDonal, 2000; Whannel, 2002) rather than developing their own understanding of themselves. Given the media can function as a platform, or vehicle, for socio-cultural ideologies (Summers & Morgan, 2008) athletes have to negotiate managing their identity and behaviour in line with how the media constructs them alongside common sense truths and societal expectations held about them (McGannon & Mauws, 2000). This would likely have implications for mental health and wellbeing. However, how explicit cultural ideals, assumptions and expectations manifest and are experienced via media representations of elite athletes is not well understood. Further Australia's sporting pride is underpinned by a 'win at all costs' ideology (e.g., McKay & Roderick, 2010), where successful athletes are constructed as national heroes and role models (Adebayo, 2013; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Hassan, 2013; Melnick & Wann, 2010). This, in conjunction with ever present media attention (Zion et al., 2011), suggests athletes are 'performing' even when not participating in their sport.

Research examining how athletes' perceive and experience their socio-contextual environment and their lived 'athlete' experience within this setting has gained recent attention; however is still in its infancy. It is my contention that there is a need to continue to develop and articulate a holistic, and ecologically valid accounts of the everyday realities of elite level sportspeople both on and off the field. Therefore, the broad aim of the current research is to explore the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes in order to identify and better understand the aspects of their experience that may give rise to stress and precipitate poor mental health. The qualitative insight garnered from the current research will contribute to current understandings of the lived realities of elite level athletes, and will inform how to provide support to prevent the experience of poor mental health.

“Pretty quick turnaround in six months,
to go from playing in the Australian team,
to barely being able to dress myself.”

– respondent; current elite athlete

CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical Framework

“The actual path of a raindrop as it goes down to the valley is unpredictable, but the general direction is inevitable.”

– Kevin Kelly

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework adopted for the current research, which is informed by community psychology and underpinned by Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) methodology. First, I present the research aims, objectives, and research questions that guided the research. This is followed by a brief overview of community psychology, including epistemological considerations, aims, ecological framework, and core values. I then present the research design followed by a detailed account of CLA as the overarching methodology adopted for the current research.

3.2 Research Aims and Objectives

As described in chapter one, the current research was guided by two overarching aims. The first research aim was to garner a holistic and contextualised understanding of the realities of training and competing as an Australian elite level athlete. The exploration of elite level athletes’ lived experience was the key focus of this aim. The second aim was to develop an understanding of how Australian athletes are currently supported and identify any additional support needs. Giving rise to such insight may serve to assist the identification and/or development of targeted and ecologically valid support strategies for Australian athletes. How elite level athletes experienced support within their sporting clubs and/or organisations alongside the day to day hardships they identified were of particular interest.

The specific objectives associated with the current research study were:

1. To explore, holistically, the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes who perform or have performed at the top level of their sport.
2. To explore how broad socio-cultural factors are experienced by Australian elite level athletes and the potential impact of this on their wellbeing.
3. To explore Australian elite level athletes’ experience of support.
4. To explore the social construction of Australian elite level athletes.

3.3 Research Questions

As stated in chapter one, there were three research questions:

- What aspects of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes may function to give rise to poor mental health?
- How are Australian elite level athletes currently supported?
- How are Australian elite level athletes socially constructed?

3.4 Community Psychology: Understanding Persons in their Environment

Community psychology focuses on individuals' relationships with their context – the environment, community, and/or society, and aims to understand and improve the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and societies by integrating research with action (Kloos et al., 2012, p. 12). The importance and all-encompassing nature of a person's context was aptly described by Trickett (1996, p. 226) as “Context is the water in which we fish swim.” An individual is located in various settings, including but not limited to familial, friend, level networks; the social and economic context; cultural and ideological norms and expectations; political context; and institutions or organisations, such as school, and workplace, within which a person exists, lives, and interacts (Kloos et al., 2012).

The consideration of context in community psychology is underpinned by the assumption that human behaviour can only be truly understood when it is viewed with respect to the various ecological factors that influence that behaviour (Trickett, Kelly, & Vincent, 1985). This is important to ensure emergent understandings have ecological validity (Shinn & Toohey, 2003). Community psychology also recognises that a dynamic interplay of individuals and their various contexts exists and how an individual responds to, and attempts to change their context is an important consideration alongside context (Riger, 2001).

The nature of the research described in this thesis fits with a community psychology paradigm as it seeks to understand the lived experience of elite level athletes within their various contexts. Further, it is hoped the insights derived from the current research can inform targeted support interventions to improve the wellbeing of this population and investigate where social and cultural change is needed (Kloos et al., 2012; Sarason, 1981; Scribner, 1970). Below, I outline a number of the principles and core values that underpin community psychology research and which were adopted to inform the theoretical and methodological approach to the current research.

3.4.1 Epistemological Considerations

Community psychology arose during a time of debate in psychology, where positivist underpinnings of mainstream psychology, and its methodology, and the individualist focus of clinical approaches to psychology, were challenged, which led to considerable tension (Bishop, 2007). Dokecki (1996) endorsed the necessity of moving away from traditional empirical studies to world-view analysis (macro-qualitative methodology) to explicate context. As such, researchers and practitioners moved away from positivist paradigms (e.g., Altman & Rogoff, 1984; Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Dokecki, 1992; Pepper, 1942) and endorse a postmodern understanding of the nature of knowledge, being, and reality. Consistent with this, the current research positions knowledge, being, and reality as constructed rather than discovered. Inquiry from this perspective is aimed to elucidate *how* people know, alongside *what* they know, and accentuates the participatory role humans have in the construction of knowledge and reality (Sexton, 1997). As such, the current research drew on epistemologies that accept the existence of multiple realities, foreground the constructive nature of knowledge, and endorse the lack of an absolute truth (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988).

3.4.1.1 Contextualism

Contextualism recognises that absolute truth is contested and that knowledge remains relative and incomplete (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). Posed originally as one of four world hypotheses that function as conceptual systems that characterise approaches to knowledge and a typology of research methodologies (Pepper, 1942; 1966), it is generally understood as a theory of knowledge that focuses on culture and worldview (Bishop, 2007). The current research is principally concerned with the lived experience of elite level athletes and the impact of broader socio-contextual factors. As such, it is aligned with the epistemology of contextualism as it foregrounds context and culture on the construction of knowledge and reality.

As a worldview, contextualism acknowledges the impact context has on meaning, and emphasises the influence of sociohistorical and cultural settings on the development of human activity (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). It argues that human behaviour can only be understood within the time, space, and cultural context where it occurs. Rather than a construct that exists externally to phenomena, contextualism positions context as being a part of, or integrated with, phenomena itself (Jaeger &

Rosnow, 1988). This is consistent with the axiom of the ecological model that human experience cannot be understood if considered independent of the setting, or context, within which it occurs, a central tenet of community psychology (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Kloos et al., 2012; Trickett et al., 1985) and of the current research. By adopting a contextualist lens the complexity and contextual factors relevant to athletes' lived experiences, alongside the social constructions of elite level athletes, can be captured.

3.4.1.2 Social Constructionism

The current research further drew on social constructionism as a theory of knowledge and an interpretative paradigm. Inquiry anchored to social constructionism aims to explore and explicate how individuals come to describe, explain, and account for themselves, and the world within which they function (Gergen, 1985). Social constructionism accepts the premise that multiple realities exist and is primarily concerned with the nature of knowledge, how it is constructed, and how it is understood (Andrews, 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Gergen, 1985). Knowledge is positioned as an artefact of the day-to-day interactions of people (Schwandt, 2003) and, as such, knowledge can be considered as both the process and product of social exchange (Britten, 2011; Gergen, 1985). As such, there is no objective truth, reality, or knowledge. Rather, these are viewed as socially negotiated constructs (Raskin, 2002) constructed through experience. Social constructionism also proposes that identity is not an intrinsic construct but arises as a result of, and within, the social domain (Burr, 1995). This gives rise to a fluidity of identity which is dependent on the social parameters within which it exists (Gergen, 1991; Gergen, 1994). This approach is of particular interest for the current research.

3.4.2 An Ecological Orientation: Levels of Analysis

Community psychology uses an ecological orientation to explore, examine, and consider context (Levine & Perkins, 1997). Endorsing an ecological perspective that can encompass all the various levels of analyses of the community or society of interest is a defining characteristic of community psychology (Kelly, 2006; Kloos et al., 2012; Prilleltensky, 2001). Rather than an individualistic perspective, which looks at individual factors in isolation, community psychology considers the impact of the various systems that individuals, families, and communities are embedded within. This consideration of the various relationship and factors across the individual (micro

level) to the broad overarching systems (macro level) of a community of interest will be adopted for the current research. This will enable a more comprehensive understanding of athletes' realities and the multivariate factors that can influence their wellbeing (Kloos et al., 2012).

There are numerous approaches and conceptual models that articulate ecological levels and systems, and systems theory, differently (e.g., Best et al., 2003; Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Duhl, 1996; Emery & Trist, 1972; Kloos et al., 2012). The current research is focused on the contribution of broader level exo- and macrosystems, and associated socio-contextual factors on the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes, and the influence of these on their wellbeing. As such, for the purposes of the current research, the ecological systems theory as proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) is considered the best fit and will be adopted. This conceptual framework was described in detail in chapter two as an explanatory framework to consider and conceptualise athlete wellbeing. The typology of this model is depicted below (see Figure 2).

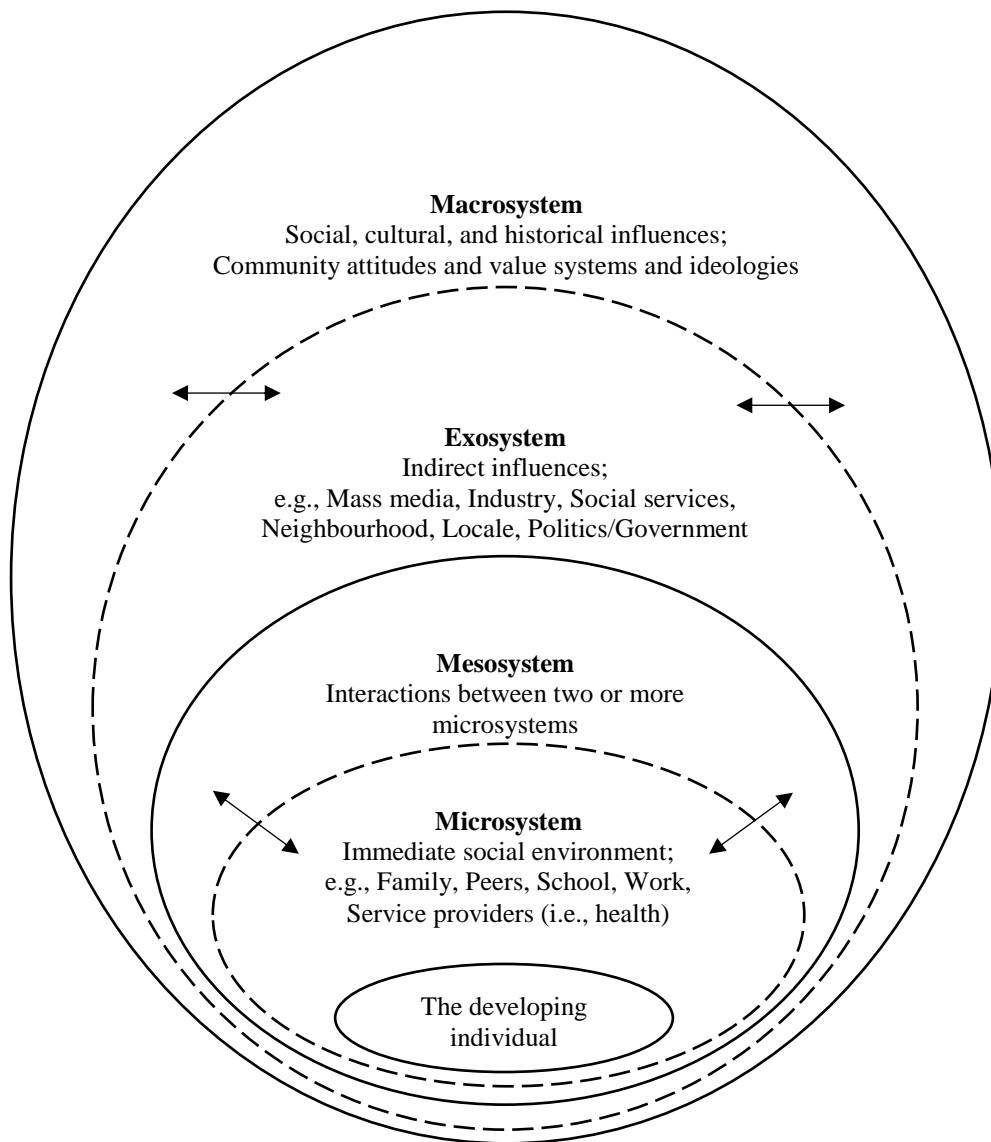


Figure 2 The Ecology of the Developing Individual. Adapted from "Ecological Systems Theory" (pp. 187-248), by U. Bronfenbrenner, in *Annals of Child Development*. R. Vasta (Ed.), 1989, Greenwich, CT: JAI; and "The Ecology of Cognitive Development" (pp. 3-44), by U. Bronfenbrenner, in *Development in Context: Acting and Thinking In Specific Environments*, R. H. Wozniack & K. W. Fischer (Eds.), 1993, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum

3.4.3 Principle of Goodness of Fit

The principle of goodness of fit is also relevant to the current research. It is important to consider an individual's fit with their environment or context as physical, emotional, or mental concerns may be attributable to a mismatch between a person and their environment (Kelly, 1968; Murrell, 1973). This perspective positions human 'deficiencies' not as individual abnormalities or pathology, but rather as matters of incompetency, or lack of fit (Hobbs, 1975) between the person and their environment, where the developing individual is unable to meet or negotiate environmental

demands (Kuhn, 1974). The better the fit between a person and their environment the higher an individual's subjective experience of quality of life (Murrell & Norris, 1983).

Central to an approach anchored to a goodness of fit perspective is improving the fit between an individual and their environment (Kelly, 1968) by targeting interventions at the individual, the environment, or both (Murrell & Norris, 1983). Many community psychologists would endorse effecting change at the environmental level (Prilleltensky, 2001; Rappaport, 1977) rather than the clinical approach of attempting to change an individual to fit their environment (Murrell & Norris, 1983). While early seminal work by Murrell (1973) suggested that giving resources to the individual or relocating the individual may be effective, Murrell also argues that changing the system to bring systems together is usually more sustainable and effective. The principle of goodness of fit will be an important lens for the current research to consider the fit of athletes and their context. Such understanding will likely contribute to understanding how to best support athletes, that is, target changing the athlete or the settings, systems, and structures they exist within.

3.4.4 Core Values of Community Psychology

A series of core values underpin community psychology, which are used to guide research and action including Individual and family wellness, Sense of community, Respect for human diversity, Social justice, Empowerment and citizen participation, Collaboration and community strengths and Empirical grounding (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Duffy & Wong, 1996; Kloos et al., 2012; Perkins, Hughey, & Speer, 2002; Prilleltensky, 2001; Sarason, 1974; Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1993). These are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Summary of Core Values in Community Psychology

| Core Value | Description/Objective |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Individual and family wellness | Absence of disease alongside presence of positive markers of health. Promotes physical and psychological health and wellbeing at individual (personal wellness), group (relational wellness), and broader community and societal (collective wellness) levels. |
| Sense of community | Refers to the connection and perceived belongingness of individuals within a geographic or relational collective. The quality of life of individuals and their community are interdependent. |
| Respect for human diversity | Acknowledges the human diversity within communities, and the diversity of communities at large. Necessitates the understanding of the idiosyncratic folkways of specific communities community psychologists work within to effect real change. |
| Social justice | Promote fair and equitable allocation of power (e.g., bargaining power, citizen representation, ability to express wishes), resources (e.g., money, access to education), and obligations within a population/society (Prilleltensky, 2001). |
| Empowerment and citizen participation | The consideration of relational, individual, organisational, and societal power dynamics present (e.g., the realities of who holds power). Promotes opportunities for individuals to gain and exert control over their lives and/or meaningful involvement in collective decision making (e.g., policy). |
| Collaboration and community strengths | Considers the relationship of the community psychologist with the community members. Promotes collaboration and equality with citizens (rather than hierarchy) by prioritising the learned and experiential wisdom of citizens. Considers the process community psychologists. Promotes the further development of community strengths already present to effect change. |
| Empirical grounding | Integration of research with community action. |

Note: Adapted from “Community psychology linking individuals and communities” (pp. 26-33), by B. Kloos, J. Hill, E. Thomas, A. Wandersman, M. J. Elias, and J.H. Dalton, 2012, USA: Wadsworth.

Below I present and expand on the key core values that underpinned the current research.

Individual and Family Wellness (Levine & Perkins, 1997; Prilleltensky, 2001). In the context of the current research this core value was understood in terms of the promotion of wellness. A fundamental aim of community psychology is to garner understandings of complex communities to minimise adverse social conditions, promote wellness (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 750) and effect real change (Bishop, 2007). This is consistent with the aims and objectives of the current research and were important guiding principles. The concept of wellness for athletes, past and present, was discussed in chapter one and reflected in the literature presented in chapter two. Consistent with the community psychology conceptualisation of wellness, the current research positions athlete wellbeing (wellness) as multifaceted and reflected the integration of an absence of signs of physical and mental psychological illness, and markers of positive physical, emotional, and mental well-being (Kloos et al., 2012; Schueller, 2009). Elite level athletes exist as a “relational” community (Gusfield, 1975; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974) and, as such, it is important to promote collective wellness across this community and not just of individual athletes or with respect to specific aspects of the lived experience (i.e., competing) (Kloos et al., 2012).

Respect for Human Diversity. Central to understandings of and, respect for, diversity is foregrounding idiosyncratic understandings of the community (Kloos et al., 2012) and the various contexts within which individuals (athletes) of that community exist and live (Trickett et al., 1993). In the context of the current research the core value of diversity was reflected by the focus on triangulation (Denzin, 1978), and the use of multiple perspectives, lenses, and voices to explore the one phenomena; the lived experience of elite level athletes. This principle is consistent with understandings of contextualism and acknowledges that research attends to various accounts of the world (Goodman, 1978). The perspectives of elite level athletes were the most prominent voice in the current research. Alongside this perspective, an observational lens was also adopted via: 1) the observations and experiences of support staff were invited; and 2) researcher observations (field notes). My position as an insider researcher (Kanuha, 2000; Tedlock, 2000) (discussed in detail in chapter one), with respect to my history as an ex-elite athlete, and an outsider, in terms of the sports explored within the current research (Hodkinson,

2005; Mercer, 2007), also provide additional perspectives that underpinned and guided the research process.

Social justice (Prilleltensky, 2001). In the context of the current research, this value is understood in terms of social change (Bond, 1997; Prilleltensky, 2001; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997; Rappaport, 1987). This is reflected in the aims and objectives of the current research which focus on developing an understanding of the needs of elite level athletes. I am ultimately seeking to bring about social or cultural change for Australian elite level athletes. The findings from the current research could contribute to changing how athletes are viewed and to promote the necessity to address athletes' contexts and settings other than the on field context.

Empowerment and Citizen Participation (Rappaport, 1987). In the current research the key element of this value is reflected in the direct engagement with the community of interest. While drawing on multiple perspectives, the current research ensured the understanding of Australian elite and professional athletes' lived experience was primarily derived from athletes themselves thereby giving athletes a voice (Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Rappaport, 1990). Further, insight regarding the power dynamics that surround elite level athletes in Australia is considered important in order to distil an understanding of the power and control athletes do or do not have within their lived experience (Kloos et al., 2012).

Collaboration and Community Strengths (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Prilleltensky, 2001). This value was reflected in my position as a qualitative researcher. It was important to promote and relate to the research informants as experts of their experience rather than impose a hierarchical relationship (Kloos et al., 2012). As a qualitative researcher I worked to minimise the power differential between myself and the research informants and prioritised building trust and rapport with the research informants to promote a rich and personalised account of informants' experiences (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998). Informants were conceptualised as active participants and co-contributors to the insights derived from the research, creating a bidirectional power relationship (Limerick, Burgess-Limerick, & Grace, 1996).

3.5 Research Design

The current research is informed by a community psychology perspective grounded in contextualism. This approach will capture the complexities and socio-contextual factors relevant to the lived experience of elite level athletes in Australia.

The exploratory nature of the current research, and its focus on the human experience with respect to context, lends itself to qualitative research and methods (Clissett, 2008) as such methods can capture the human experience in situ within the setting/s it occurs (Geertz, 1973). Qualitative methods will be able to capture the diversity of athletes alongside the specificity of their lived experiences, and enable the articulation of their perspective (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Adopting a qualitative paradigm also enables an appreciation of, and access to, the various layers of the human experience in conjunction with the embedded myths, metaphors, discourses, and worldviews associated with social phenomena (Inayatullah, 2004; Polkinghorne, 2005). Qualitative methodologies afford the consideration of multiple dynamic realities and enable the exploration of the subjective human experience as a construction (Creswell, 2013). Such inquiry enables an understanding of social processes and complex phenomena in their entirety, offering explanations that pertain to the *how*, *why* and *what* of social phenomena (Britten, 2011; Forman, Creswell, Damschroder, Kowalski, & Krein, 2008). This is consistent with the aims and objectives of the current research study.

3.6 Methodological Approach: Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

The underpinning methodology, CLA (Inayatullah, 2004), enables researchers to capture and comprehend these complexities of social phenomena (Bishop, Dzidic, & Breen, 2013).

3.6.1 The Features of CLA

In order to discuss CLA as a methodology, it is important to first understand the key practicalities of this approach. Below I describe different levels of CLA and the way these levels are organised.

Inayatullah (2004) identified four distinct levels (layers) of knowing within the CLA framework from which to analyse and consider social phenomena. These are summarised in Table 2 below. While distinct, these levels overlap, are dynamically interconnected (Inayatullah, 2007), and function to facilitate the deconstruction of social phenomena from increasing complex viewpoints (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014). It is important to note that within this methodology the term “causal” presents an understanding of the interconnected nature of these levels and their mutual influence on social phenomenon (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014). Social phenomena and experiences are embedded in a “thickness” of multiple levels of culture and contexts (Geertz, 1973, 1983) where the process of CLA can be likened to looking at the data through a

variety of lenses. The levels provide multiple frames of reference from which to consider social phenomena from the literal and proximal, to conceptually distant, deep, and mythical (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014). Using CLA forces a researcher to move beyond a focus on the obvious factors of social phenomena (Breen, Dzidic, & Bishop, 2016).

The levels of CLA stem from the assumption that individual and collective experience is underpinned by a social archetypes, myths, conventional metaphors, and worldviews (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014). They are organised by conceptual depth rather by importance, and no one level is privileged over others (Bishop et al., 2013; Inayatullah, 1998). Despite this, it has been argued that the myth metaphor level, as the level that transcends and drives the experience at all the levels that precede it, is more salient or important to consider (e.g., Inayatullah, 2003; MacGill, 2015; Meadows, 2008). The current research adopted the generally accepted position that all the levels of CLA have equivalency in terms of their importance (Bishop et al., 2013).

Table 2 Levels of Causal Layered Analysis

| Layer | Concern/Foci |
|---------------------|--|
| Litany | Issue presented as the uncontested truth, is superficial lacking depth, can result in a sense of helpless or apathy. |
| Social Causal | Issues presented in terms of systemic and/or technical explanations. |
| Worldview/Discourse | Deeper, more complex understanding of the issue. Relates to the meaning of the issue that is constructed. Worldviews shape understanding, and by understanding a worldview, researchers are able to determine insights as to how an issue is socially constructed. Discourses express a worldview through the sorts of words, terminology or phrases that are used. |
| Myth/Metaphor | Deep mythical stories and social/cultural archetypes, emotional experiences and responses to the issue. This is the most distal layer of analysis and is likely to require the greatest amount of analytic investment. |

Note: Reprinted from “Multiple level analysis as a tool for policy: an example of the use of contextualism and Causal Layered Analysis,” by B. J. Bishop, P. L. Dzidic, and L. J. Breen, 2013, *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 4, 5.

3.6.1.1 Litany

The first level of reality of CLA is known as the *litany*. The unquestioned, obvious, and often public descriptions of social phenomena exist at this level. This is often referred to as the “uncontested truth” (e.g., Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; De Simone, 2004). Barber (2010, p. 171) further described this level as “what we say.”

3.6.1.2 Social Causal

The second level is termed *social causal* and houses a systemic perspective. That is, social, technological, economic, environmental, political and historical factors that serve to create the paradigm that frame social phenomena are considered at this level (Inayatullah, 2004, p. 12). The role of various factors are explored at this level alongside predispositions that precipitate the social phenomena. These factors influence, and can account for, observable litany level manifestations of the social phenomena (Breen et al., 2016). This level has been described by Barber (2010, p. 171) as what we do.

3.6.1.3 Worldview Discourse

The next level, *worldview discourse*, concerns collective worldviews and discourses that function to support and legitimate social phenomena. This level foregrounds deeper social, linguistic, and cultural processes and value systems that give rise to, mediate, and, constitute social phenomena. The unacknowledged, value-based assumptions about the world (Sarason, 1981) exist at this level (Breen et al., 2016). Barber (2010, p. 171) further described this level as how we think.

3.6.1.4 Myth Metaphor

The deepest level of CLA is *myth metaphor*. At this level deep stories, collective archetypes, conventional metaphors, and unconscious dimensions of social phenomena are the focus. Evoking visual images and attending to symbols and symbolism, rather than the specifics of the language itself, is the key tenet of this level. These cultural aspects of social phenomena come to light via the narratives used in attempts to explain emotions and symbols, and are often so engrained that they go unnoticed (Breen et al., 2016). Barber (2010, p. 171) further described this level as who we are.

MacGill (2015) identified the importance of acknowledging that the use of the word “myth” here is not aligned with the tradition notion of describing something that is untrue. Rather, the consideration of myth in CLA is consistent with those images

that provide an understanding of a culturally and/or societally specific way of life (Campbell, 1959). Inayatullah (2004) drew on the work of Foucault (1972) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in his conceptualisation of the myth metaphor level. Respectively, these works suggest consideration of episteme as important to understand naturalised reality and position metaphors as a coherent and meaningful point of reference that enables navigation in the world. As such, myth refers to meaningful representations of coherent, and often unconscious, narratives that inform the other levels.

3.6.2 The Methodology of CLA

CLA was developed as a futures methodology and reflects a postmodern perspective in the proposing and evaluating of future strategies with respect to societal planning (Inayatullah, 1998). The development of CLA mirrored the rising importance of considering the societal and cultural context and ever changing national and international circumstances in making future projections (Breen et al., 2016). It represents a multi-level contextual approach to research that provides a deep understanding of social phenomena from a variety of viewpoints (Inayatullah, 2004).

While adopting Inayatullah (2004)'s theory, I have focused primarily on the conceptualisations of the methodology of CLA as described by Bishop and Dzidic (2014) and Bishop et al. (2013), as they have adopted CLA for the critical and community psychology context. CLA is both a theory of knowledge and an analytical process for deconstructing complex phenomena (Bishop et al., 2013). The current research used CLA in both ways. A detailed account of the analytic procedures adopted for the current research is presented in detail in the next chapter (chapter four).

CLA, as a methodology, is anchored to a contextualist epistemology and is predicated on the assumption that different means of knowing and degrees of reality exist and underlie common conceptualisations of social phenomena (Bishop et al., 2013; Inayatullah, 1998; Inayatullah, 2004). As such, CLA endorses multiplicity (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005) and accepts multiple perspectives as credible and important (Conway, 2012). This ensures worldviews and cultural underpinnings are explored, in addition to the social phenomena itself and the context within which it occurs and is experienced (Bishop et al., 2013; Inayatullah, 2004). This approach to data with respect to multiple and varied theoretical lens, or points of view, is also consistent with understandings of the principle of triangulation (Denzin, 1978).

CLA embodies the consideration of social phenomena beyond surface level manifestations, across a number of perspectives of varying conceptual depths, to elicit a deep and holistic understanding, akin to viewing phenomena through the varying lenses of a microscope (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; Bishop et al., 2013). It seeks to draw out and explore the various systems, structures, worldviews, and cultural ideologies that underpin surface level manifestations of an issue (Conway, 2012) and influence how individuals understand and interpret their world (Riedy, 2008). By delving beneath superficial expressions of social phenomena it enables the unarticulated and often unconscious views that drive and influence an issue to become apparent (Conway, 2012).

Unique to CLA methodology is the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the social phenomena under examination. CLA requires analytic movement across the levels (vertical analysis) and within each level (horizontal analysis) (De Simone, 2004). This process enables the recognition and consideration of themes across the levels that are clearly linked yet are varied with respect to complexity (Breen et al., 2016). It is this dynamic consideration of the multiple levels and the integration of the insights gained across all levels that engenders rich and deep understandings of social phenomena (Bishop et al., 2013). The reconstruction of social phenomena (vertical analysis) is synonymous with the proposition of an alternate future (Bishop et al., 2013; Inayatullah, 2004). Reconstructing the issue serves to create a transformative praxis (Bussey, 2014), which enables the imagining of real strategies to address this “issue” and present an alternate future (Conway, 2012; Inayatullah, 1998; Inayatullah, 2004). This provides CLA real world utility as it affords the proposition of new, targeted, and practical resolutions to address the presenting problem or challenges related to the social phenomena being explored (Bishop et al., 2013; De Simone, 2004).

3.6.3 Why CLA?

CLA positions people as inseparable from their context and, as such, meaningful consideration of people cannot occur independently of the context within which they exist (Breen et al., 2016). This is consistent with community psychology and contextualism (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Kloos et al., 2012; Trickett et al., 1985). This enables people (athletes) to be considered simultaneously with their social, structural, and cultural contexts. The deconstruction and reconstruction of an issue afforded by CLA (Bishop et al., 2013) also reflects the aims and objectives of the

current research and is in line with the aim of obtaining rich, and contextually relevant data and analytic depth.

CLA is appropriate where the researcher seeks an in-depth, and ecologically and contextually valid understanding of complex social phenomena (Bishop et al., 2013) as it can locate the social phenomena being explored within its broader social, political, cultural and historical settings, structures, and context (Bishop et al., 2013; Conway, 2012). My use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977), as a key conceptual and explanatory model from which to consider athletes' lived experience and wellbeing (discussed in chapter two), requires a methodology that mirrors this multi layered approach. Given the levels of CLA broadly reflect the ecological levels proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977) (Bishop et al., 2013; Breen et al., 2016) CLA is considered an appropriate methodology to use alongside a systems perspective.

Bishop and Dzidic (2014) argue that a purposive exploration of worldview, values, and social archetypes is crucial to ensure qualitative analysis is not limited to the litany. The successive conceptual depths of the levels of CLA enables the exploration of deep level components of athletes' lived experiences rather than just superficial or surface explanations (Breen et al., 2016). The process of reimagining the lived experience of elite level athletes via multiple frames of reference will facilitate the exploration of interdependent components that precipitate, influence, and legitimate this phenomena that have not previously been considered. Such insight and complexity can be uniquely provided using the process of vertical analysis within CLA (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; De Simone, 2004).

The underpinning philosophy of CLA suggests that genuine change can only be effected with a deep and comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014) and, as such, the insight garnered by CLA affords a greater propensity to effect real change (Breen et al., 2016). This is synonymous with the transformative ideology (i.e., second order change: promoting changes to how the systems individuals are embedded in function and/or fundamental decision making processes of governing social regularities; Kloos et al., 2012; Seidman, 1988) of community psychology (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). This is important as it is difficult to produce and maintain real change at the individual level in the absence of change at the community (context) level (e.g.,

Campbell, Nair, & Maimane, 2007). This is also consistent with the aims and objectives of the current research.

Since its inception in the late 1980s, CLA has been utilised as a means of developing more effective policies globally for governments, corporations, communities, and cities (Inayatullah, 2014). In addition to policy development, CLA has been increasingly used across a number of fields and social issues to bring about social change. For example, CLA was used by Conway (2012) to explore and conceptualise the divide between academics and administrators within the university context. Findings highlighted the impact of deep myths and worldviews to the maintenance of the divide within university settings and noted the need to shift thinking at this level to enable the reframing of university management. Robinson, Kennedy, and Harmon (2011) adopted a CLA approach in their review of occupational therapy services for individuals experiencing chronic pain which helped elucidate the impact of the social construction of individuals with chronic pain on their experience of chronic pain. Contemporary and salient social issues such as climate change (e.g., Green & Dzidic, 2014; Hofmeester, Bishop, Stocker, & Syme, 2012), the Global Financial Crisis (e.g., Inayatullah, 2010), traffic congestion (Inayatullah, 2004), Australian agricultural policy (Bishop, Dzidic, & Breen, 2015) and inter-country relationships (e.g., Hoffman, 2012; Wahi, 2013) have also been examined using CLA methodology due to the complexity of such issues. Across these studies the complexity of insight that emerged, with respect to broader cultural and ideological values, attitudes, and archetypes, was attributed to the use of CLA and its capacity to privilege context. Such insight allowed for a greater propensity to imagine, and effect real change. This versatility of CLA provides further evidence for the utility of this methodology to explore the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes in the current research.

“So you are literally just training,
just flogging yourself for 6 months without
any glory, without having a race.”

– respondent; ex-elite athlete

CHAPTER FOUR

Research Process, Methods, and Procedures

“Do not value what you measure, measure what you value.”

– Anonymous

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter describes the research methods and procedures employed for the current research. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the research process. The methods and procedures employed in phase one of the research are then outlined, including the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the informant recruitment and engagement strategies specific for each population considered. A detailed, step-by-step description of the analytical process is also included. This is followed by a description of the methods used in phase two of the research, including key research methodological and procedural considerations. The data, data collection, and analytic processes adopted in phase three of the research are then presented. The chapter concludes with a detailed description of the ethical considerations and quality procedures embedded in all phases of the research.

4.2 Research Process

The research consisted of three phases to address the four research objectives:

1. To explore, holistically, the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes who perform or have performed at the top level of their sport.
2. To explore how broad socio-cultural factors are experienced by Australian elite level athletes and the potential impact of this on their wellbeing.
3. To explore Australian elite level athletes' experience of support.
4. To explore the social construction of Australian elite level athletes.

The targeted recruitment of, and engagement with, particular groups of informants (phases one and two) primarily focused on research objectives one through four (see above). Insight garnered across these phases also attended to research objective five, though it was not the key focus of exploration. Research objective three (see above) was directly explored in the third phase of the research via an exploration of the representations of elite level athletes across newspaper headlines. Phase three of the research aimed to provide a snapshot of the key messages perpetuated about elite level athletes in public discourses. Procedures to ensure quality were embedded throughout the research.

The three research phases also addressed the three research questions:

- What aspects of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes may function to give rise to poor mental health?
- How are Australian elite level athletes currently supported?
- How are Australian elite level athletes socially constructed?

4.3 Ethics Approvals

The current research was conducted in accordance with National Health and Medical Research Council Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) national statement. As such, before the commencement of the research ethics approval was sought from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at Curtin University, who approved the study in November 2014 (Approval Number RD-39-14). An amendment to the ethics application was lodged with Curtin University HREC and approved in April 2015 (Approval Number RD-39-14/AR01; Refer to Appendix A for HREC approvals).

4.4 Phase One

This phase of the research aimed to provide a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of elite level athletes in Australia, both within and beyond the competitive domain, in order to address the main research question: ‘What aspects of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes may function to give rise to poor mental health?’ The perspectives of two distinct groups of informants, elite level athletes and support staff, were sought to provide an ecologically valid account of the highlights and hardships experienced by Australian elite level athletes. These perspectives also elucidated the current support offered to, and utilised by, elite level athletes in Australia. Findings provided an understanding of the current support interventions and systems, and addressed the research question: ‘How are Australian elite level athletes currently supported?’

4.4.1 Design

Phase one followed a cross-sectional qualitative design, using in-depth interviews. This phase was underpinned by Causal Layered Analysis methodology (CLA; Inayatullah, 2004), and was informed by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), as outlined in chapter three.

4.4.2 Informants: Elite level Athletes

Twenty three elite level athlete informants participated in the current research. Eighteen informants were male and 5 were female. The athletes were aged between 20 and 36 at time of interview (mean age = 26.91; standard deviation = 3.63). 15 informants were training and competing as an elite level athlete at the time of their interview, and eight informants had retired from sport. Informants were recruited from eight different sports. Fourteen informants were currently competing or had competed in a team sport, and nine informants were currently competing or had competed in an individual sport. Informants had competed at their highest level of competition for their sport for an average of 6 years (min = one year; max = 12 years; mean = 5.87; standard deviation = 2.80). The demographic information for the full sample of athlete informants is presented in Table 3.

4.4.2.1 Selection Processes

In Australia, two categories of elite level athletes are apparent; elite athletes (i.e., athletes that train for and/or have competed at the Olympics) and professional athletes (i.e., athletes who compete, or have previously competed, in a professional league). As such, for the purposes of the selection process definitions of each category of athlete were developed and specific inclusionary criteria for each group determined to ensure only those athletes who have competed at the highest level of their sport would be recruited. These are outlined below. These athletes are described as elite level athletes throughout the thesis, which mirrors wider literature. The selection and recruitment processes are the only section of this thesis that the athlete informants will be split into these two distinct categories.

4.4.2.2 Inclusion Criteria: Elite Athletes

Elite athletes were defined as those athletes not in receipt of a contractual salary beyond sponsorship endorsements or one-off payments at the time of the interview (current athlete) or did not receive such a salary beyond sponsorship endorsements during their career (retired athlete). Inclusion criteria for elite (amateur) athlete informants to be eligible to participate were as follows;

- Informants must be 18 years of age or older at the time of the interview.
- Informants must be an Australian citizen.

- Informants must currently (current athlete) or previously (retired athlete) hold or have held a national (Australian Institute of Sport; AIS) and/or state based (Western Australian Institute of Sport; WAIS, New South Wales Institute of Sport; NSWIS, Queensland Academy of Sport; QAS, Victorian Institute of Sport; VIS, South Australian Institute of Sport; SASI) institute of sport scholarship.
- Informants must have represented Australia at an established world class senior level international competition. For example, The Commonwealth Games, The World Cup, The World Championships, The Olympic Games, or equivalent.

4.4.2.3 Inclusion Criteria: Professional Athletes

Professional athletes were defined as those athletes who, at the time of the interview, were currently in receipt of a contractual salary from their respective sporting organisation or club (current athlete) or who received a contractual salary during their sporting career (retired athlete). Inclusion criteria for professional athlete informants to be eligible to participate were as follows;

- Informants must be 18 years of age or older at the time of the interview.
- Informants must be an Australian citizen.
- Informants must currently (current athlete) or have previously (retired athlete) hold or have held a contract with their respective sporting organisation or club in Australia, or been contracted to a professional sporting organisation or club in Australia.
- Informants must have competed in at least one game, or race, for their club, state, and/or Australia, at the highest level of senior competition for their respective sport.

A number of professional sports offer top level competition domestically (club or state) as well as international competition. For example Rugby Union, Rugby League, Soccer, Netball, Cricket, and Basketball. For an athlete to be eligible to participate in the current research they must currently or have previously participated at either the highest level of domestic or international competition for that sport. That is, it was not a requirement for a professional athlete to have represented Australia in their sport to be eligible to participate, even if that sport offered the opportunity to do

so. For example, Basketball offers the National Basketball League (NBA) in Australia and it is also an Olympic level sport. A professional athlete who had competed in the NBA competition in Australia, but had not represented Australia for Basketball at the Olympic Games, would still be considered eligible to participate.

4.4.2.4 Exclusion Criteria: Elite Athletes

A number of sports have multiple levels of elite competition and different representative opportunities available. As such, the following exclusion criteria were developed to ensure only Australian athletes who had represented their club, state or Australia at the highest level of senior competition for their sport were recruited;

- Athletes who only achieved club, state or national representation at a junior or age prescriptive competition/s were not eligible to participate.
- Athletes who currently held a contract for a professional class sport (i.e., Rugby Union, Rugby League, Soccer, Netball, Cricket or Basketball) but had not yet played a game were not eligible to participate.
- Athletes who are currently hold or have held a contract for a professional class of sport and were currently or had previously competed within the highest level of that sport, but were not an Australian citizen, were not eligible to participate.

Australian Rules Football (AFL) is a sport unique to Australia and, as such, only offered within Australia. AFL offers a senior elite state based competition as well as the nationally recognised domestic fixture. Where other professional athletes from other professional sports were eligible to participate despite not having achieved national representation where it was offered, here participation in the highest level of competition offered (the national competition) was considered a requirement of eligibility. As such, an additional exclusionary criteria was developed:

- AFL athletes who had only competed at the state based level of AFL competition (e.g., Western Australian Football League (WAFL), or Victorian Football League (VFL)) were not eligible to participate.

4.4.3 Informants: Support Staff

Five support staff informants participated in the current research. Two informants were male and three female. Three informants were currently employed as a Sports Psychologists, and one had previously been employed as a Sports

Psychologists. In their role as Sports Psychologists informants had serviced one or multiple sports. One informant was currently employed as a Player Development Manager. All five support staff informants had experience supporting professional sport/s and athletes, and three informants had experience with Olympic sport/s and athletes.

4.4.3.1 Inclusion Criteria: Support Staff

Inclusion criteria were developed to ensure only those informants who had adequate experience supporting athletes competing at the top level/s of sport were recruited. Inclusion criteria for support staff informants to be eligible to participate were as follows;

- Informants must be 18 years of age or older at the time of the interview.
- Informants must be currently, or previously, employed by an Australian national or state based institute of sport, professional sporting club, or sporting organisation as a Psychologist, Sports Psychologist, Player Development Manager, or Wellbeing Manager.
- Informants' responsibilities within their employing club, institute or organisation must include the support and/or service of athletes' wellbeing or mental health.

Table 3 Summary of Informant Demographic Information: Athletes (total sample)

| ATHLETES (n = 23) | | | |
|--|---------------|----------|-------|
| Informant Demographics | | | |
| <i>Age at Interview</i> | | | |
| Min | Max | Mean | |
| 20 | 36 | 26.91 | |
| <i>Gender</i> | | | |
| Male | Female | | |
| n = 18 | n = 5 | | |
| <i>Athlete Classification</i> | | | |
| Elite | Professional | | |
| n = 10 | n = 13 | | |
| <i>Career Status</i> | | | |
| Current | Retired | Olympian | |
| n = 15 | n = 8 | n = 7* | |
| Career Statistics | | | |
| <i>Age on Debut</i> | | | |
| Min | Max | Mean | |
| 14 | 24 | 20 | |
| <i>Years of Experience</i> | | | |
| Min | Max | Mean | Total |
| 1 | 12 | 5.87 | 144 |
| <i>Highest Level of Representation</i> | | | |
| National | International | Olympics | |
| n = 11 | n = 12 | n = 14** | |
| Sport Demographics (n = 8) | | | |
| <i>Sport Code</i> | | | |
| Individual | Team | | |
| n = 7 | n = 16 | | |
| <i>Sport Format</i> | | | |
| Game based | Race based | | |
| n = 14 | n = 9 | | |

* Number of informants who have represented Australia at an Olympic Games

** Total number of Olympic Games attended by informants

4.4.4 Methods

In this phase there were four key research methods: targeted recruitment of athlete and support staff informants, engagement of informants in semi structured interviews, subsequent analysis of the data, and quality procedures. These methods were iterative and flexible, and occurred concurrently throughout the research, reflecting the nature of qualitative studies (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Feedback from

all informants was invited via respondent validation procedures (McKeganey & Bloor, 1981). The research methods employed across phase one of the research are outlined in Figure 3.

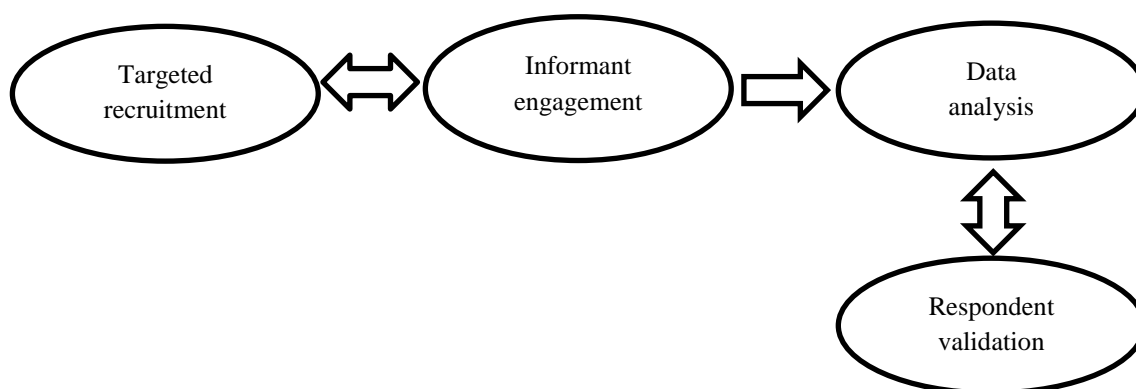


Figure 3 Flow chart of research methods undertaken in phase one.

4.4.4.1 Targeted Recruitment

It was important to identify and recruit those informants who would have sufficient expertise and knowledge about the lived experience of elite and/level athletes, and were able to reflect on and provide an experiential account (Morse, 1991). Two sampling strategies were employed to ensure a heterogeneous sample of informants from various clubs, organisations, institutes and domains of elite and/level sport Australia wide was obtained. Sampling strategies included purposive sampling, and snowball sampling.

Purposive sampling was employed as it is an appropriate sampling strategy to enrich the understandings of a selected group's experiences (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Purposive sampling ensures only appropriate exemplars of the research population are recruited (Polkinghorne, 2005). In the context of this research, purposive sampling ensured only those athletes who had adequate experience living, training, and competing as an elite level athlete in high stakes were the target of recruitment strategies. Additionally, only support staff who had adequate experience supporting elite level athletes were targeted by the recruitment strategies. The purposive sampling strategy targeted both typical (normal) and "deviant" (unusual) cases, as these provide meaningful insight into the phenomena of interest (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in this case elite level sport. In addition, snowball sampling

strategies were employed to access the wider social networks of individuals within my personal level contacts (Noy, 2008).

4.4.4.1.1 Procedure

Before any formal recruitment processes were started, a recruitment database was established. This was expanded throughout the research process. Contact information of potential informants already known, including mobile phone numbers and email addresses, was compiled and recorded in a password protected excel spreadsheet. This database was then expanded with the contact information of various elite level training institutes and organisations (such as the Australian Institute of Sport; AIS), and sporting clubs (such as AFL clubs). These were collated from publicly listed directories. Further, the contact information of the management staff of specific elite level athletes was also sourced and included in the recruitment database. Similarly, the contact information for specific organisations and institutions who had publicly established relationships with different sports and/or specific individual athletes (for example, radio stations, public relations and universities) were also recorded in the recruitment database. Finally, the contact information of additional individuals obtained via snowball strategies from current contacts was also included in the database.

Contacts contained within the recruitment database were contacted via a series of emails. Contacts identified as individual potential informants were forwarded a formal invitation to participate (see Appendix B), together with a participant information sheet (see Appendix C), directly via email. Within this email, the inclusion criteria for informants to participate in the research were provided, and confirmed at the time of the interview. Coaching staff, high performance managers, management staff, and/or administration staff associated with elite level sport were contacted with an informal invitation of participation to be forwarded to appropriate personnel. This included information about my research, an explanation of its purpose, a brief statement regarding the inclusionary criteria for potential informants, as well as the participant information sheet. These individual were requested, with the required permissions, to distribute and circulate this information to all staff, personnel and athletes within their organisations who may be interested in my research.

The wider personal, social, level networks of the contacts contained within the recruitment database were also targeted via various snowball sampling strategies. Individuals were requested, where appropriate, to identify members of their own

networks. These included teammates level colleagues who would likely meet the inclusion criteria listed and who may be interested in participating. They were asked to either:

- 1 Forward information regarding my research, including the participant information sheet, to such individuals, or
- 2 Provide me with the contact information of these individuals to be contacted directly by me.

Alternatively, some contacts preferred to contact members of their own networks directly and use email as a method of informal introduction. Where these potential informants were contacted on my behalf, I was copied into the email to put me in direct contact with such individuals. In addition, there were a number of instances where an individual associated with a potential informant/s acted as the liaison between me and potential informant/s and communicated with me on their behalf.

The potential for further snowballing was embedded into the interview procedure/s. First, informants who agreed to participate in a face to face interview were also invited to be interviewed with any member of their personal level network who met the inclusion criteria. Second, at the conclusion of each interview, informants were asked if they were aware of any elite level athletes or support staff, within their personal level networks, who might be interested in being contacted with regard to participating in the current research. This request was reiterated in an email of appreciation sent to informants the week following their interview. Again, informants were invited to either forward information regarding my research to other potential informants together with my contact information, or to provide me the contact information of any additional potential informants to be contacted by me directly.

4.4.4.1.2 Sample Size and Saturation

Sampling methods in qualitative research are primarily concerned with ensuring richness and depth of information (Kuzel, 1992), and the exploration of a range of opinions and representations of a particular issue (Gaskell, 2000). In line with this, the number of informants required in qualitative research cannot be determined solely by a number. Rather, it is dependent on the nature of the topic under consideration, the resources available (Gaskell, 2000), and the extent to which the data addresses the research question (Marshall, 1996). As such, considerable focus

was on the adequacy of the data throughout the recruitment phase of the research, rather than considering only the number of informants (Bowen, 2008; Marshall, 1996).

The sample size of athlete informants in phase one of the research adhered to the case-orientated approach of qualitative research (Ragin & Becker, 1992). The number of informants recruited and interviewed enabled an idiosyncratic account of each informant's data to be sufficiently explicated (Sandelowski, 1995), though it is acknowledged that this sample was not large enough to claim informational redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is likely the capacity to claim theoretical saturation was inhibited by the diversity of the sample of athlete informants recruited. The final sample size of the support staff informants was small ($n = 5$) and is addressed as a potential limitation of the research in chapter ten.

Saturation is understood as the point where no new information is being extracted from the data to develop a conceptual category further (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Green & Thorogood, 2004). Saturation is useful for determining the point at which no additional informants need be recruited (Francis et al., 2010; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Saturation is considered usual practice as an indicator of adequate sample size in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006). As such, in this study, at the point where sufficient commonalities had been identified across informants' experiences to address the research question with sufficient depth (Guest et al., 2006; Marshall, 1996) no further informants were recruited (see Figure 4). Further the current research foregrounded saturation of "meaning" over the saturation of codes. That is, saturation was considered as the point of understanding it all, rather than having heard it all (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017).

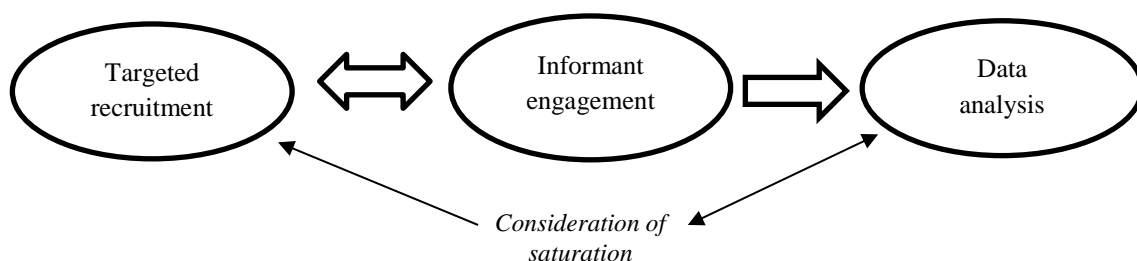


Figure 4 Consideration of saturation

4.4.4.2 Informant Engagement

In-depth interviews are accepted as a method of qualitative research that provide extensive and comprehensive descriptions of phenomenon (Geertz, 1973) and afford an understanding of particular phenomena or a particular view of reality from the perspective of the interviewee (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Semi-structured interviewing enables in-depth exploration of social and personal matters (Johnson, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) which was consistent with the aims and objectives of the current research. Therefore semi-structured interviewing was considered to be the most appropriate interview technique for the current research.

This format uses a set of predetermined open, yet direct, questions to elicit detailed narratives from informants (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and, as such, my interviews were guided by an interview schedule (see Appendix D). The interview schedule was developed iteratively following a number of steps. First, key topics of inquiry were identified from a consideration and integration of current literature, and insider knowledge. A series of 30 questions and associated prompts were first developed across the identified areas. This was reduced to a total of 12 questions that would garner sufficient depth on insight across key domains of the athletes' experience, as well as ensure the interview would likely be completed within a timely fashion. The topics contained in the final interview guide, and explored across interviews, included highlights and low lights of athletic careers (as experienced or observed), perceived stressors, the current support mechanisms, strategies, and interventions utilised by and for athletes, perceived public expectations, and experiences with the media.

Twenty-seven of the informants who agreed to participate in the current research were engaged in face-to-face semi structured interviews. One informant was engaged in a phone interview. The 23 athlete informants were engaged across a total of 20 interviews, totalling 983 minutes of recording. Interviews ranged from 30 to 102 minutes (mean = 49.15; standard deviation = 17.68). Five interviews were conducted to engage the five support staff informants, totalling 257 minutes of recording. Interviews ranged from 35 to 64 minutes (mean = 51.40; standard deviation = 11.87). Data from interstate informants were collected across three separate research field

trips to two states; New South Wales (one trip; three interviews) and Queensland (two trips; 11 interviews).

4.4.4.2.1 Procedure

Informants were given the opportunity to select the interview venue (Clarke, 2006). A suitable time and place for the interview was negotiated with informants directly or via an appropriate person. Prior to the interview commencing informants were given the participant information sheet for their perusal. At the time of the interview it was reiterated that their identity, as well as any and all information shared during their interview would remain confidential. This included to research supervisors, in the final thesis and in any associated publications. Informants were provided the opportunity to ask any questions and, following their satisfaction with the information provided, asked to read and sign a consent form (see Appendix E) giving permission for the interview to take place and digitally audio record of the interview. An audio recording device was used to record the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim (Whiting, 2008).

Athlete informants were also provided a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F) to complete that enabled specific demographic information regarding the informant's sporting career, to be collected independent of the recorded interview data. The demographic information was collated to provide an overall snapshot of the characteristics and experiences of the athlete informant sample.

4.4.4.3 Analysis

CLA as a methodological approach was discussed in detail, inclusive of a description of what each layer represents and the relationships between the layers, in chapter three (refer to table 2). As an analytic tool, it functions taxonomically (Bussey, 2014) and facilitates the analysis of qualitative data at four conceptually distinct levels that represent successive depths of knowing (Inayatullah, 2004). I reiterate that CLA functions to ensure social phenomena is not only considered at a superficial or proximal frame of reference, rather the discovery and exploration of the "root" of the phenomena is foregrounded to promote real transformative change (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014).

In order to explore the lived experience of elite level athletes and to unravel the complexities of these experiences a manual CLA was employed. As CLA is an analytical process for the deconstruction of complex phenomena (Bishop et al., 2013)

it can attend to multiple levels of phenomena which makes it an appropriate analytical method to adopt for the current research. In this study this approach enables the lived experience and social construction of elite level athletes in Australia to be deconstructed and reconstructed (Bishop et al., 2013; Inayatullah, 2004).

4.4.4.3.1 Procedure

The current research used a framework adapted from Bishop and Dzidic (2014) outlined below. This approach stemmed from the seminal work of Inayatullah (1998) and the procedural account of CLA as proposed by De Simone (2004). The procedures outlined by Bishop and Dzidic (2014) boasts greater salience for the analysis of complex social and psychological issues using qualitative data and, as such, was considered the most appropriate procedure of conducting CLA to consider for the current research.

The procedure proposed by Bishop and Dzidic (2014) included five steps, however, the procedure adapted for the current research included only three steps. The first step outlined by Bishop and Dzidic (2014) required the consideration of the research question. For the current research, the consideration of the appropriateness of CLA to address the research questions posed, given the epistemology, ontology, and various aims and objectives of the research, well preceded the formal analysis and, as such, was not considered a component of the analytic produce itself. Further, Bishop and Dzidic (2014) posed two independent steps for the vertical (between the levels) and horizontal (within the levels) analysis. Below I present an integrated account of these two analytic processes within the one step termed “coding”, which more accurately reflected the nature of conducting CLA.

4.4.4.3.2 Step One: Familiarisation

Preceding any formal analysis a deep familiarisation with the data was achieved via a process of reading, re-reading, and preliminarily coded by hand (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; Bishop et al., 2013). Alongside this, interviews were conducted, transcribed and reviewed concurrently further supporting the familiarisation process (Bailey, 2008). Formal (journaling) and informal (supervision) reflexive strategies further enabled me to note and reflect on subtleties emerging from the data (Moon et al., 2013; Ortlipp, 2008).

4.4.4.3.3 Step Two: Coding

De Simone (2004) outlined a strictly linear process for CLA which involved ‘vertical’ analysis (between the levels), followed by ‘horizontal’ analysis (across the

levels). He suggested that vertical analysis would show the influence of systemic cause, myth and worldview at the litany level, and horizontal analysis across levels would illustrate the integration of the processes underpinning the phenomena. However, like many qualitative analytic methods (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017), the nature and reality of conducting CLA is not conducive to such linearity (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; Bishop et al., 2013). A more dynamic and interactive process of analysis was presented, where vertical and horizontal analysis occurred simultaneously with continued interviewing, transcribing, and re-reading transcripts (Bailey, 2008).

The process of coding required transcripts to be read and re-read. Each transcript was considered line by line and interesting features and extracts of the data were identified and organised into meaningful groups. The process of vertical coding involved identifying and organisation sections of text according to one of the four levels of CLA. Utterances relevant to each specific layer of the analysis were systematically identified and coded accordingly from *litany* through to *myth metaphor*. Some sections could be understood at multiple levels and were coded to reflect this. The process of horizontal coding involved re-reading the transcripts, paying particular attention to each level of the analysis to increase depth and understanding. This was an iterative process, where vertical and horizontal coding processes occurred simultaneously. This enabled emergent themes within and specific to each layer of the CLA to be identified, developed, and refined, and contributed to the overall depth of the analysis. The process of coding mirrored framework of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Manual coding was utilised throughout the analysis. Coding the data by hand, rather than utilising data management computer programs, enabled a greater connection and closeness to the words of the informants (Liamputtong, 2009). Across the coding phase of analytic memo-ing was undertaken (Morrow, 2005) which formed part of the methodological audit trail.

4.4.4.3.4 Step Three: Reconstructing the Issue.

The iterative nature of the analytic process was also apparent in this final stage of analysis. The final stage of the analysis, reconstructing the issue in light of the coding processes, is arguably the most crucial in providing overall meaning and new understandings of the phenomena under review (Bishop et al., 2013). Across this stage of the analysis themes at each layer were refined, amalgamated where

necessary, and finalised. This stage of the analysis was characterised by the tasks of mapping, refining theme, and writing up findings. The interaction between these processes allowed for understandings of the data to continue to develop, giving rise to further insights, and enabled the complexity of the issue to be articulated. This process was also punctuated by frequent meetings with the supervisory team, who provided opportunities for open discussion, and reflexive consideration and mapping of the overall analysis, to clarify issues and emergent themes. The integration of meanings from across all the levels engendered a holistic and deep account of the athletes' lived experience.

4.4.4.4 Respondent Validation

The analysis, explanations, and interpretations that materialised from the data was fed back to informants via a process of respondent validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McKeganey & Bloor, 1981; Pickler, 2007). This process was adopted in an effort to maintain the rigour of the research and to improve the credibility of the research findings overall (Kitto, Chesters, & Grbich, 2008; Torrance, 2012). However, it is acknowledged that respondent validation is not a panacea nor can it be considered a true measure of validity (Long & Johnson, 2000; Smith & McGannon, 2018). As such, it occurred alongside a number of additional quality procedures outlined at the end of this chapter.

The process of respondent validation aims to provide the opportunity for informants to check and provide feedback on the accuracy their data. It can be participants' complete data, full or portions of their interview transcripts, observational data, and/or interpretative claims (i.e., a synthesis of draft findings) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Torrance, 2012). For the current research, the formal procedure of respondent validation employed invited informants to reflect on and respond to the accuracy and adequacy of the interpretative account of their experience (Sandelowski, 1993; Torrance, 2012). This is consistent with current understandings of the use of respondent validation, termed "member reflections", in qualitative research processes outlined by Smith and McGannon (2018) who encourage research findings to be shared with informants. It was hoped this type of engagement with respondents would provide an opportunity for informants to review the interpretive representations of the data, the accuracy of the claims made, and offered the opportunity to refine explanations where appropriate (Barbour, 2001) to the final

account of their experience was robust and intellectually enriched (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

4.4.4.4.1 Procedure

At the time of their interview informants were asked to indicate their interest in being involved in the respondent validation processes for the current research. Informants who agreed to receive a summary of the research findings for their perusal, consideration, and feedback provided an email address on the consent form (n = 14 athletes; n = 4 support staff). Given the personal nature of the research data, a synthesized and decontextualized account of experiences abstracted across the individual informants was developed so informants would not be able to recognise themselves or their experiences within the findings provided (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). This also ensured the research findings were distributed to informants in a sensitive manner. The overarching messages were synthesised and summarised in a word document (see Appendix G), attached to an email and sent to the nominated email address of the informants from my university email address and clearly marked 'Private and confidential'.

Informants were invited to respond to the email with any feedback they had pertaining to the relevance and accuracy of interpretations made, explanations of particular patterns (themes) that emerged and, if appropriate, to provide additional information (Barbour, 2001; Clissett, 2008). Feedback received was to be incorporated into the final findings where necessary (Lazenbatt & Elliott, 2005; Mays & Pope, 2000; Smith & McGannon, 2018). No feedback was received. Hence, the interpretations presented in the findings are cautiously considered to be an accurate reflection on informants' views and experiences.

4.5 Phase Two

In order to look at the day to day lived experience of elite level athletes in depth, a single sport was the focus of a three day field research study. This small study provided insight regarding the day to day happenings of a training camp, and elucidated the potential influence of socio-cultural factors on athletes' lived experiences. The single sport study was undertaken at a national training camp for one sport in Australia. I was granted unlimited access to all venues, training sessions and athlete common areas across the training camp to observe and interact with the athletes. Further, I engaged the program's head coach, assistant coaches, strength and

conditioning coaches, support and administration staffers present at the camp in informal discussions regarding the governance of the sport.

4.5.1 Design

Phase two utilised the same overarching research design as phase one. Given that phase two of the research sought to describe the lived experience of athletes within a real-life training context, I drew on aspects of descriptive qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2003). Qualitative case study methodology is underpinned by a constructivist paradigm (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) which positions reality as a social construction (Searle, 1995) and, as such, this approach fit with the overall epistemology and ontology of the current research. Further, this promoted a holistic understanding of athletes in context as it allowed for the incorporation of data from multiple sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Although the research design was informed by understandings of descriptive qualitative case study methodology it is important to note it was not the aim of this phase to complete a case study. As such, some methods and procedures deviated from traditional case study methods.

4.5.2 Informants: Elite level Athletes

Three current Australian athlete informants were purposively recruited within this phase of the research. Informants were aged from 22 to 25 years of age at the time of interview. Each informant was at a different stage of their career (debutant to senior). Collectively these informants had been involved at the elite level of their sport for 14 years (min= one year; max = six years).

4.5.2.1 Inclusion Criteria: Elite level Athletes

The inclusion criteria of this phase of the research were the same as those adopted in phase one, with the addition of the following;

- Informants must be in attendance at the 2015 sport training camp.

4.5.2.2 Exclusion criteria: Elite level Athletes

The exclusion criteria of this phase of the research were the same as those adopted in phase one.

4.5.2.3 Demographic information

To maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of the sport and the informants who participated in this phase of the research, demographic information are presented in aggregate form with the full sample (see Table 1).

4.5.3 Field research data

The field research data totalled 34 pages of hand written field notes that was collected primarily at the formal training and recovery sessions, on field, in the weights room, and at the recovery centre. The interactions athlete to athlete, as well as athlete/s to coach, within and outside the context of training were of particular interest. Signage present at training venues and in administration areas was documented (photographs; 18). Documentation including training schedules (3 items), and other miscellaneous information of interest were also reviewed and analysed as examples of socio-contextual factors housed within this unique sporting context.

4.5.4 Methods

The research methods employed in phase two of the research mirrored those employed in phase one; targeted recruitment, informant engagement and analysis. Phase two was characterised by the additional research method of field research (Burgess, 2002). It became evident that the latent understandings derived from the interview data and field research data were markedly different. As such, rather than converging the multiple data sources across the analytic process (Baxter & Jack, 2008), the two data sources were analysed individually. The comparison of these findings enabled deeper level interpretative insight and provided additional contextual understanding of this particular sport, its structures and its governance. The findings from both aspects of this study were than integrated within the reconstruction of the lived experience of athletes using CLA (Bishop et al., 2013).

4.5.4.1 Targeted Recruitment, Informant Engagement, and Analysis

Before arriving at the camp permission was sought and granted, via the lead psychologist of the sport as well as coaching staff, to collect and collate observational data. On the first day of my attendance at the training camp I addressed all the athletes present to explain the purpose of my visit and my research. Throughout the first day of my attendance I approached a number of athletes to inquire about their interest in being engaged in a formal interview and check they met the inclusion criteria. Due to the constraints of the athletes' schedule during the training camp, their lack of availability for other reasons, and a number of athletes at the camp not meeting the inclusion criteria, only three formal interviews were conducted during this phase of research. These interviews were conducted at the training venue, totalling 102

minutes of recording. Interviews ranged between 31 and 39 minutes (mean = 33.67; standard deviation = 4.73).

The interview data were analysed via a CLA, as per the procedure outlined in phase one. The use of consistent analytic methods (CLA) for the interview data across both phases enabled comparability of the associated findings. Further, CLA allows for an in-depth analysis of small diverse samples (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014) and, as such, it was considered appropriate for this small study. The analysis was undertaken as per the analytic procedure outlined for phase one.

4.5.4.2 Field Research Data; Analysis

Observation notes, verbal data, and print media are all considered text data (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002) and, as such, a variant of content analysis was deemed an appropriate framework from which to consider the field research data (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). The purpose of content analysis is anchored to the provision of knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon being explored (Cavanagh, 1997; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). In this phase, the content of communications and the language adopted between the various actors was a predominant aspect of the field research data collected. As the content and contextual meaning of this text data was a key focus of the analytic consideration, a process informed by qualitative content analysis was well suited (McTavish & Pirro, 1990).

Qualitative content analysis can be defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). This approach considers large amounts of text (language) and organises it into an efficient number of meaningful categories of similar meanings (Weber, 1990), where these groupings can represent either explicit or inferred communication (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A conventional approach to qualitative content analysis was adopted (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

The data were analysed looking for latent meanings and considered for interpretative depth. An inductive approach (Krippendorff, 2013; Schreier, 2012) to the development of categories was used, where the categories were not preconceived but allowed to emerge from the data (Kondracki et al., 2002). First, full immersion and familiarisation of the data took place, where the field research data was read and

re-read (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kondracki et al., 2002) to get a genuine sense of the full data set (Burnard, 1991; Morse & Field, 1995). This was followed by analysis of the raw data via coding (making notes on extracts of data as it was read) and categorisation (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Categories were derived from the process of organising the collated codes to meaningful groups, rather than just superficially grouping related data (Dey, 1993). The categories created provided a summary of the social construction of elite level athletes and aspects of athletes' lived experience (Cavanagh, 1997). Findings of the analysis were then reported, alongside pertinent aspects or examples of the field research data. This procedure was based on the three key processes of content analysis: preparation (determining units of analysis), organisation (coding, and categorisation) and reporting (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Qualitative content analysis does not follow a strict linear progression and, as such, the analysis of the field research data was characterised by a reflective and continuous process of coding and categorisation (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Both manifest and latent content were considered and coded. The findings reported reflect primarily the interpretation of the latent meaning of the data while still being closely anchored to what was said, observed and noted across the study (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017).

4.6 Phase Three

Phase three explored representations of elite level athletes and sport by print media. This phase provided a sociocultural perspective of elite level sport in Australia, addressing the research question: 'How are Australian elite level athletes socially constructed?' The consideration of newspaper headlines elucidated some of the key messages about elite level athletes, and sport, and served as a snapshot of the ideological assumptions, values and attitudes, and societal expectations of elite level athletes that manifest within public discourses.

4.6.1 Design

Phase three followed a qualitative research design and was also underpinned by qualitative content analysis. The definition of qualitative content analysis posed by Krippendorff (2004) served to extend the applicability of qualitative content analysis to research designs (Bengtsson, 2016). Qualitative content analysis as an interpretative paradigm (Graneheim et al., 2017) is an appropriate framework for

research that views knowledge as a social construction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which makes it a good framework for this phase of the research.

4.6.2 Data

Previous research that has used print media (e.g., Bowman, Lewis, & Tamborini, 2014; Peake, 2007) to explore the messages perpetuated about a target phenomenon have adopted a focus on the headlines situated on the front page of newspapers. Adopting a similar methodology, the data for the current study comprised headlines and headers, related to sport, that appeared on the front page of 2012 editions of *The Australian* newspaper (including *The Weekend Australian* editions). Newspapers were deemed the an appropriate print media to use to analyse the social construction of elite level athletes in Australia as they were easily accessible, widely distributed and offer regular commentary on sport and sportspeople.

Readers are more likely to scan newspaper headlines rather than read an entire article (Dor, 2003) hence headlines were used rather than full articles. Further, readers tend to choose which stories to read based on the content of headlines (Zillmann, Chen, Knobloch, & Callison, 2004) suggesting headlines have particular salience in attaining the interest of a reader and draw them to particular articles. Therefore, the focus on newspaper headlines was considered an appropriate and efficient way to gain an understanding of the narratives most likely consumed by the general consumer of print media.

Similarly, the focus of the front page of print newspapers, rather than the traditional sport section, ensured an exploration of those narratives that are consumed by a broader audience (rather than just sports enthusiasts). With respect to print newspapers, research suggests readers tend to engage with the stories of the front page more extensively than the rest of the newspaper (see for example; d'Haenens, Jankowski, & Heuvelman, 2004). Gender has also been found to have a significant influence of the amount of time spent engaging with the content, where men generally spend more time reading about sport (d'Haenens et al., 2004). As such, by focusing on the front page I was able to capture the discourses attended to by males and females.

One newspaper was selected to be analysed to keep the sample manageable and meaningful. *The Australian* newspaper was selected as it represents a national perspective on sport, it is not influenced by sporting preferences of any individual

state, and it is the only national daily newspaper circulated in Australia. An Olympic year (2012) was selected for analysis as this would likely included a higher volume of sporting commentary on amateur (Olympic level) sports, than non-Olympic years. This provided an account of how sport and sportspeople are represented across Olympic level sports, as well as covering state, national (e.g., Australian Football League; AFL, National Rugby League; NRL, Netball; National Basketball League, Australia) and international leagues and competitions (e.g., Tennis Major International tournaments such as The Australian Open, and various international Cricket matches) that occur every year. This enabled insight into the representations of elite level athletes within Australian competitions, as well as when representing Australia in international competitions.

4.6.3 Methods

Two key research methods were employed during phase three alongside quality procedures; data collection and data analysis (see Figure 5).



Figure 5 Flow chart of research methods undertaken in phase three.

4.6.3.1 Data collection

The front page of all 2012 publications of *The Australian* were viewed via microfilm, and those with reference to sport or sportspeople saved and collated in pdf form. During 2012, 38.5% of front pages contained a reference to sport; 52 article headlines and 94 title headers.

4.6.3.2 Data analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was employed to explore and identify recurring patterns systemically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analytic technique enabled an interpretative account of the data from which the latent meanings of the headlines could be derived (Berg, 2001; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The themes that emerged from the headlines, rather than the content per se, were the key focus of this phase. As such, thematic analysis was deemed an appropriate analytic approach. This thematic analysis produced findings presented as themes (Braun & Clarke,

2006), where a theme is a meaningful motif of the data that functions to unify and bring meaning to various manifestations a recurrent topic (Graneheim et al., 2017; Morse, 2008). The use of an inductive approach to thematic analysis ensured the resultant themes were strongly anchored to the data itself (Patton, 1990). The analysis provided a qualitative snapshot of the messages perpetuated about elite level athletes and sport in Australia, from which an understanding of the social construction of elite level athletes was derived (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This enabled an understanding how elite sport and elite level athletes were presented, and represented, via print media in Australia, thereby demonstrating the social construction of, and cultural expectations imposed on, Australian elite level athletes.

4.6.3.2.1 Procedure

The analytic procedure is outlined below and was conducted as per the methods proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

4.6.3.2.2 Step One: Familiarisation

Preceding formal analysis, a process of familiarisation with the data and, immersion in the data, was undertaken via processes of active repetitious reading of the headlines obtained. In conjunction with this repeated reading, preliminary notes were also made, primarily pertaining to ideas for codes, which were referred to across subsequent steps of the analysis.

4.6.3.2.3 Step Two: Generate initial codes

A systematic process of manual coding was utilised across the entire data set to generate initial codes. That is, interesting features or salient components of data were identified and coded accordingly. This process of coding functioned to organise the data into meaningful groups or categories (Tuckett, 2005) where repeated patterns formed themes across the data.

4.6.3.2.4 Step Three: Search for themes

The initial codes generated in step two were collated and emergent themes (units of analysis) were developed. The development of themes marked the first stage of interpretative consideration of the data, where broader ideas of the meaning of the data and the arguments to be made about the social construction of Australian elite level athletes and sport began to arise (Boyatzis, 1998). This process was marked by the combination of different codes to produce overarching themes. A series of mind-maps were utilised across this step to make sense of emerging relationships between different codes and subsequent themes (see Appendix H).

4.6.3.2.5 Step Four: Review and refine themes

The candidate themes developed in step three were further refined in step four. First, the coded data supporting each theme was reviewed with respect to its internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity as per the criteria outlined by Patton (1990). Candidate themes either remained without further action, collapsed and reworked into each other, or teased apart into separate themes. Where candidate themes were considered too diverse or not sufficiently supported by the data, they were removed from the analysis. Second, the accuracy with which the themes represent the meanings evident across the entire data set was then considered. As coding is considered an ongoing and organic process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the data set as a whole was revisited with respect to the themes identified. Formal thematic mapping was used across this review and refinement process until a thematic map that satisfactorily fit the data was derived. The final thematic map is presented in chapter nine, with the findings associated with this phase of the research.

4.6.3.2.6. Step Five: Define and name themes

Once the thematic map had been finalised, themes were further refined. The data (headlines) for each theme were revisited and organised to ensure the narrative contained within each theme had internal coherence and consistency. Within the refinement process, each theme was given a definition: a statement to illustrate the central aspect of the data the theme captured. Alongside this, appropriate names for each theme were brainstormed. It was important that the name of each theme was concise and was effective in communicating the essence of theme. Once the full set of themes had been finalised, the analysis was considered complete and the associated findings were written up.

4.7 Ethical Considerations of All Research Phases

All informants received a participant information sheet outlining the topic and nature of my research, attached to the initial email correspondence, as well as at the time of their interview. This sheet further detailed the voluntary nature of informants' participation as well as their rights with respect to withdrawing from the research without consequence, the interview itself, and their data. Informed consent was obtained from all informants via signed formal consent forms, and, periodically throughout the interview process, this was confirmed verbally.

The confidentiality and anonymity of informants was a high priority and was protected at all times. Informants' identities, as well as the sports they engaged with,

have been kept strictly confidential. That is, they were not and will not be publicly revealed and, all reasonable measures were taken to ensure informants' privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality (Burns & Grove, 2005; Polit & Beck, 2006).

Informants' names, associated sport, and other identifying information were removed from all transcripts. Any identifying information, such as references to an informant's home state, current club/organisation, other athletes, teammates, level colleagues, or information that could be attributed to particular informants or sports was also removed from transcripts. Hard copies of the transcripts, as well as the digital vocal recordings of the interviews, were destroyed at the conclusion of the research, and, in accordance with ethical requirements (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007), digital copies of the interview transcripts are stored on a secure Curtin University computer, in a password protected file, and will be kept for a minimum of seven years. Only the supervisory team for this study had access to the data (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). In addition informants' consent for their de-identified data to be shared with the research team (supervisory team) and used for my final thesis and associated publications or conference proceedings was gained via the consent form (Levine, 1988). No identifiable information was contained in the transcripts provided to the research team nor presented in my final thesis, associated publications or conference proceedings.

Where required, permission was sought and granted from a representative of the overarching or employing organisations before recruiting or engaging with particular informants. This was of particular importance where multiple informants were recruited from one sporting club, organisation, or association. Organisations were assured informants were speaking for themselves, and were directed to answer the interview questions about their experiences, not as a representative of their organisation.

All research has the potential to cause distress (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011) and it was acknowledged that the personal stories, information, and insights, shared by informants regarding their own experiences had the potential to be sensitive. Informants were given the opportunity to take breaks as needed, or to stop the interview completely if they become distressed at any point (no informants required the interview to be ceased). Informants were given time at the conclusion of the interview for any additional questions (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). In addition, the

participant information sheet contained the contact information of service providers that could be contacted by informants who wished to seek further counsel at any time.

4.8 Rigour and Quality Procedures

A number of methods were employed to maintain the rigour of the current research. Formal and informal reflexivity, and a methodological audit trail were adopted throughout the research process, alongside the respondent validation processes of phase one. The triangulation of different information from multiple sources allowed for various facets of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes to be explored, which facilitated an ecologically valid and contextually sound understanding to be generated (Flick, 1992; Morrow & Smith, 2000; Tracy, 2010). These strategies provided the opportunity to recognise and address my personal and intellectual predispositions, sociocultural context, and value systems that could affect the research process, as well as acknowledge the wider social setting within which the research was embedded (Kitto et al., 2008; Long & Johnson, 2000; Mays & Pope, 2000). This served to identify and limit preconceptions that could bias the analysis and interpretation of the data (Moon et al., 2013).

4.8.1 Phase Two

The training camp schedule as well as informants' other commitments governed their availability to be interviewed at the training camp attended in phase two of the research. This resulted in interviews that were, on average, shorter than those interview conducted in phase one of the research. However, 30 minutes is considered an acceptable duration for a semi-structured interview (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and, as such, these interviews were considered to be adequate despite a shorter average duration. In addition the collection and integration of multiple sources of data within a case study framework functions to enhance the creditability of the data and associated findings (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003) and, as such, the interview data in conjunction with the field research data was deemed sufficient to gain insight to athletes' lived experiences within this sport (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

With respect to the analysis of the field research data collected in phase two, qualitative content analysis offers significant flexibility with respect to research design (Harwood & Garry, 2003). Further, it can be used across multiple sources of textual data to corroborate evidence (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This provided further rationale for the utility of this qualitative content analysis within phase two.

4.8.2 An Insider

As discussed in chapter one, as an Australian ex-elite athlete studying Australian athletes I conducted the current research from the position of an insider (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Kanuha, 2000; Mercer, 2007; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013). Although insider research has a number of advantages (outlined in chapter one) it can give rise to a number of issues which can risk the trustworthiness (or rigour) of a study. These include bias or insider blindness, lack of analytic distance and implications of role duality (Thomas, Blacksmith, & Reno, 2000; Tilley, Chambers, & MacKenzie, 1996; Unluer, 2012). Immersion in a community being explored can result in an inability to see and attend to what is obvious or foster a lack of awareness of pertinent issues (Costley et al., 2010; Kitchin & Tate, 2000). Further, making assumptions about the culture and informants' expectations and perceptions of the researcher also need consideration (Asselin, 2003; DeLyser, 2001; Sikes & Potts, 2008). Therefore, as much as possible, I attended to these issues via the use of reflexivity and reflexive strategies, including use of a reflexive journal, embedded throughout the research process (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Hodkinson, 2005; Unluer, 2012; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013).

Familiarity between researcher and informants was also an important consideration. Porteous (1988), an insider researcher, noted his informants' perceptions of his research gave rise to unique difficulties, where informants tended to engage with those issues that were important to them, at the expense of what was pertinent to the research and researcher. Similarly, informants may perceive an insider researcher as fulfilling a role other than researcher, which may influence how they interact with the researcher (Asselin, 2003). For example, informants may see the insider as an educator, rather than researcher, and expect answers to issues they have previously experienced or are currently experiencing (Asselin, 2003). Alongside this, eliciting deep and meaningful responses from informants as an insider research can be problematic, where informants who are overfamiliar with the researcher may expect them to know the answers to the interview questions they pose (e.g., DeLyser, 2001; Porteous, 1988; Unluer, 2012). This may result in informants not giving as much information in their responses or, be concerned about providing the right answers or responses that align with the researcher's view (DeLyser, 2001; Porteous, 1988). The recruitment techniques employed targeted informants I did not have an existing relationship with. This also served to limit any renegotiation of existing relationships,

and ensure my relationships were not affected by my role as researcher beyond the context of the interview (see Taylor, 2011).

I reiterate that as a previous member of this cohort I have an insider knowledge of the socio-cultural context. However, I am also an outsider as I do not have insider knowledge of informants' specific sports (Hodkinson, 2005; Mercer, 2007). This outside status served to minimise the effect of assumed knowledge between myself and my informants. That is, while it was assumed that I understood the dynamics and experiences they described, it could not be assumed I knew the specific details of their experiences given the different sports and contexts they competed in. Alongside this, I was explicit within the written and verbal descriptions of my research to informants that I was interested in *their* experiences. This served to limit assumptions that I already knew the answers to the interview questions posed, and functioned to provide informants with a platform to tell their story (rather than just answer questions). Further, during the interview process, the commonality of experiences afforded a bidirectional reciprocity between myself and the informant, where I was able to attune to the content of their experiences in a unique manner, and they to my responses.

4.8.3 Reflexivity

A researcher's self-reflection and reflexivity is an essential component of qualitative research (Burnard, 1995; Long & Johnson, 2000). It was imperative in conducting this insider research to ensure that the knowledge and understandings generated were not merely a product of my own experiences or prior knowledge of this community and its members (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013). Reflexivity refers to the "explicit evaluation of the self" and, as a researcher, involves a process of thinking about and reflecting back your own thinking to yourself (Shaw, 2010, p. 234). The current research approach allowed me to consider, and reflect, on my prior experiences, assumptions, and processes that shaped what data were collected and how and why questions were posed (Mays & Pope, 2000). The consideration of such reflections provided a greater understanding of how my research process could shape research outcomes (Lloyd, 2009).

Keeping my preconceptions at the forefront of my mind via reflexive strategies served to limit the influence these biases may have had over my research process, or the interpretations of my data during my analyses (Moon et al., 2013). Further, it would be remiss to assume I would not be, or was not, affected by my

informants, their stories, or the research and analytic processes (e.g., Taylor, 2011). Similarly, when the research process was confronting, or triggered an emotional response, I engaged in reflexive strategies. This ensured I was able to separate myself from the data which helped to limit my own feelings, responses and past experiences infiltrating the research process, analysis, or interpretations of my data, or my findings overall.

Reflexivity was primarily supported by the use of a reflexive journal throughout the research process. This included critical documentation of the justification and processes that surrounded decision making, together with my reactions, which enabled the conscious acknowledgment of my personal assumptions and attitudes throughout the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). Additionally, my supervisors acted as a reflective panel (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Morrow, 2005) whereby our continual open discourse and regular meetings allowed for further reflective consideration across my research process, analysis, and final interpretations. This reflexive sounding board provided opportunities for reflection, challenged my constructions of knowledge, and enabled the consideration and exploration of various alternative interpretations and explanations of the interpretations discussed (Cowan & Taylor, 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2018). This encouraged accountability for my values related to the topic.

4.8.3 Methodological Audit Trail

The methodological audit trail I maintained throughout the research process captured all research milestones and documented decision making. This was a chronological record, including memo-ing and supervision notes that detailed context, methodological choices and analytic decisions. This helped to ensure that my research was conducted ethically and systematically (Bowen, 2009; Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009; O'Connor, 2011). This provided additional information and an account of how interpretations of the data were generated, further ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings (Bowen, 2009).

4.8.4 Dual Coding

Dual coding, which is similar to peer coding, was employed during the analytic process. This was consistent with recommendations outlined by Bishop and Dzidic (2014) to enhance the rigour of CLA. Peer coding, or peer examination, is accepted as a useful strategy to enhance the credibility of research findings (Krefting, 1991), however, cannot be considered an unequivocal index for objectivity in

qualitative research (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). As such, dual coding across this study was not used to provide a formal measure of consensus and rigour of the analysis or strength of the final findings. Rather, our dual coding process was utilised as a means of facilitating trustworthiness to promote deeper level reflexivity across the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), foster an opportunity to explore the data from different perspectives, and to refine the analysis (Kitto et al., 2008).

Over 60 percent of interview transcripts (12 of 18 athlete transcripts; and four of five support staff transcripts) were independently coded by a supervisor, a clinical psychologist, to identify clinical indicators within the data and garner a provider perspective. Transcripts were coded systematically line by line and utterances relevant to clinical issues or mental health were noted. The benefits of this were two-fold. First, the data was reviewed analytically by an outsider subsequently embedding the analysis itself within a reflexive framework (Kitto et al., 2008; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013). Second, the data were considered from multiple perspectives (lenses). This process enabled two perspectives be incorporated across the analysis, providing additional complexity and depth to the subsequent findings. Quotes and segments identified were checked against the themes and levels. This process of dual coding served to enhance the credibility and quality of the analysis and subsequent findings (Morrow, 2005).

“so it’s like we put our life on hold
and then after it there is there’s
nothing, they won’t even know you.”

– respondent; ex-elite athlete

CHAPTER FIVE

Research Findings: The Lived Experience of Australian Athletes

“We know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

The findings derived from the three phases of research are presented in chapters five through nine. These chapters are organised to reflect the various concentric lenses of the system theory perspective adopted for the current research from the individual level (microsystem: chapters five and six) to broader systemic (mesosystem: chapter seven and eight) and cultural perspectives (exo- and macrosystem: chapter nine). Chapters five, six and seven provide a detailed account of athletes’ lived experience, from a firsthand perspective (athletes) and via observations (support staff). Chapter eight captures support staff informants’ conceptualisation of their role, which highlighted a number of barriers to the provision of effective support for athletes. Chapter nine presents broader level societal and cultural ideologies, which speak to the social construction of elite level athletes in Australia.

5.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter describes findings derived from phase one of the research and presents the experiences of elite level athletes. The chapter begins with an introduction, including a brief overview of the informant demographics. Alongside this, the overarching research questions are revisited. Prior to presenting the findings, a thematic map (see Figure 6) is presented as a visual representation of the themes generated. The findings are then detailed and organised typologically with respect to each level of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), commencing at the Litany level and concluding with the Myth Metaphor level.

5.2 Introduction

The findings described below were generated via CLA of data obtained via a series of semi-structured interviews with athlete informants. As described in chapter four 23 elite level athlete informants were recruited to participate in the current research, representing eight different sports. The perspective of athlete informants was sought to engender a holistic and ecological valid account of the lived experience of athletes in Australia. The athlete informants provided insights with respect to their

highlights and hardships, support strategies, the interventions they utilised, the systems they were embedded within, and the types of narratives they told about themselves, as well as the narratives they experienced directly and indirectly from others. Three research questions were addressed:

- What aspects of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes may function to give rise to poor mental health?
- How are Australian elite level athletes currently supported?
- How are Australian elite level athletes socially constructed?

5.3 Thematic Map

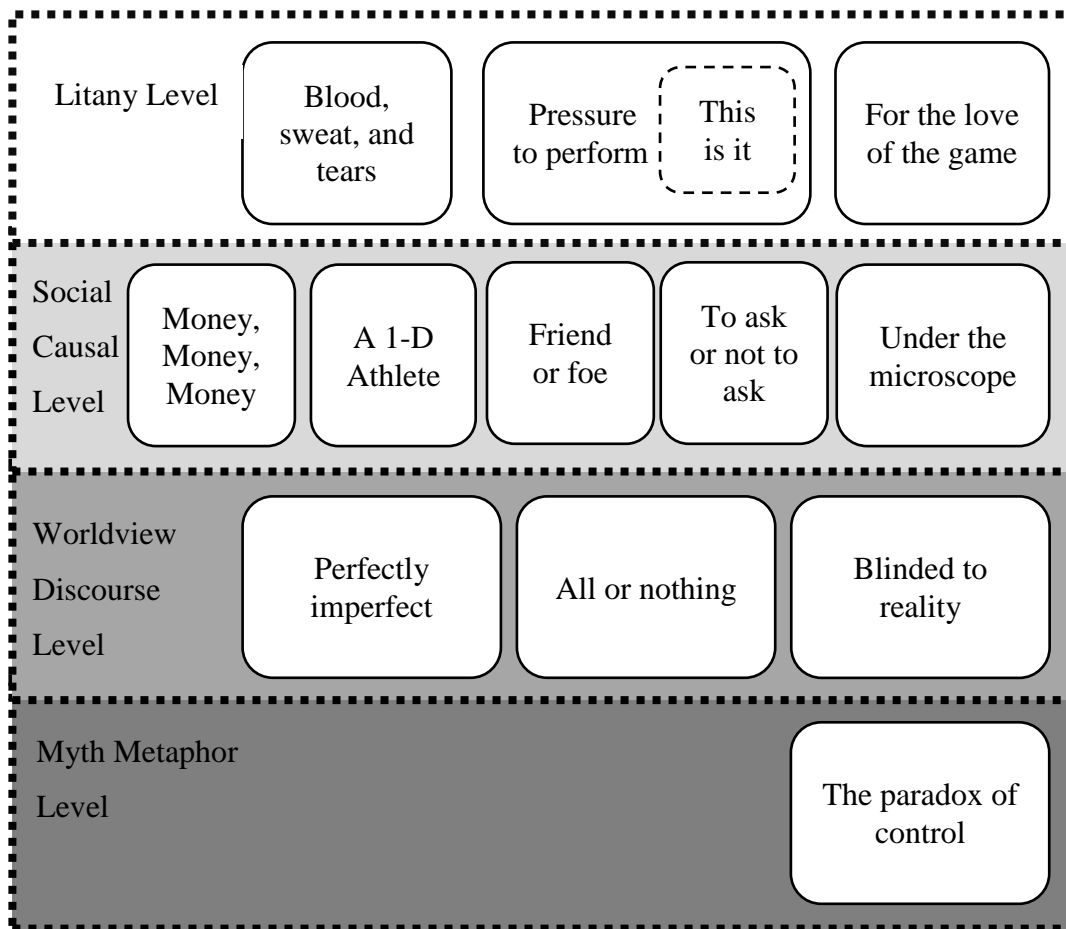


Figure 6 Thematic map of findings generated from Causal Layered Analysis: athletes.

5.4 Conceptualisations of the Lived Experience of Australian Athletes

The findings presented below provide an understanding of the surface level day to day lived realities of Australian elite level athletes, as well as the deeper level myths and metaphors that drive athletes' lived experience.

5.4.1 Litany level

The litany level of analysis captured informants' descriptions and explanations of their lived experience. Three main themes emerged at this level (see Figure 7): Blood, sweat and tears; Pressure to perform; and For the love of the game. These themes are described below, along with a sub-theme; one moment, one opportunity. Themes at this level of understanding represent aspects of training, competing, and living as an athlete that are rarely questioned and are considered an obvious and uncontested truth. Themes present a surface level understanding of being an athlete, and speak to issues that manifest within the training context as well as competing as an athlete.

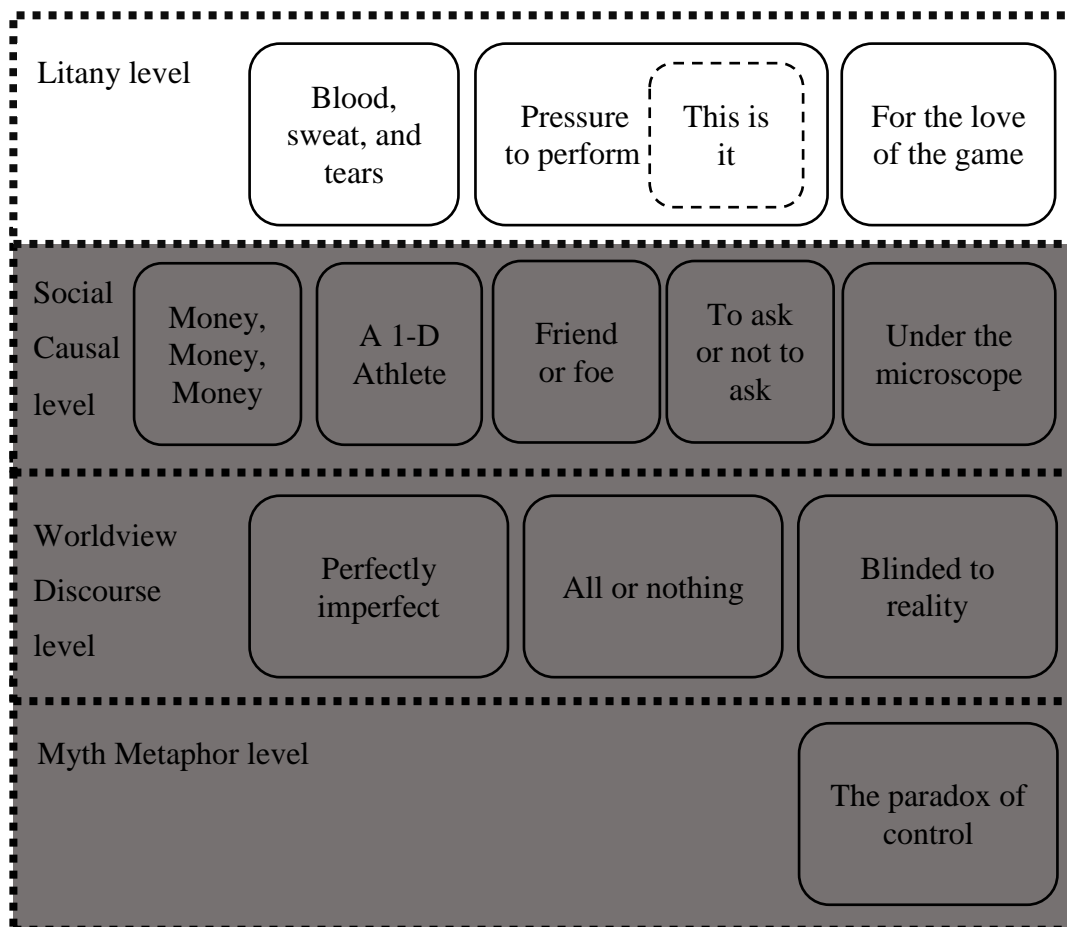


Figure 7 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Litany level of Causal Layered Analysis: athletes.

5.4.1.1 Blood, sweat, and tears

The theme *blood, sweat, and tears* represents what it takes to be an athlete, and reflects the hardships associated with training and competing. This theme captures the hard reality of being an athlete, where the relentless nature of the training and the lifestyle can detract from the enjoyment of sport. It was clear being an athlete required physical labour, significant time investment, and a number of sacrifices, and the payoff for these choices was never guaranteed. Informants reflected on the realities of elite level sport. For example, "...because at the end of the day, yes, I am so grateful to have been in the position that I've been in to be able to have done what I've done, but I worked my ass off for it...",

Yeah I think low lights are just the amount of time and effort you have to put in for you know if you're [competing] 2 minutes, 2 minutes a year you have to put in at least 4 hours a day during the week for training, plus if you are doing physio Pilates whatever you know whatever, you're looking at probably about you know 25-30 hours a week that you're actually putting in...

And

That's a lot of energy to do that, and with that you have to make a lot of sacrifices you can't you know you can't um if I've got a yoga session at night I might have to cancel a dinner date with my [partner] or can't see family um whereas some people you just wanna you know you go out with [friends] and they are smashing a few beers and a pizza and you'd love to you know but you've got to worry about that sort of stuff and so to live that sort of life it is definitely a lot of sacrifices and sometimes that's the difference between being a good [athlete] or a being great [athlete].

These comments reflect the time commitment and dedication required for training for elite level sport and positions training as a lifestyle. In addition, there are physical consequence of training and competing as an elite level athlete. Beyond the physical pain that was expected as a part of pushing yourself physically at training sessions, top level sport often results in injury or physical illness. Informants commented on this inevitability of injuries, often attributing injury to just the nature of their sport. For example, "Along with that, I'm just playing such a high impact sport for [sport], constant stop, start. That just sped up the injury.",

Um age body, um ugh ideally I'd like to have 10 years left but if you're being a realist your career can't go for that long, especially at the rate um not the

rate but the impact on your body and the way the game is going its getting more physical, a lot more injuries...

And,

So and the shoulder was the same, you get things like that that are pretty horrific when they happen um and then all the standard other ones but, that sort of, you learn to live with that and you learn to accept that that's probably what happens at times...

These comments reflect that informants viewed injury as just a part of sport they had to accept; an inevitability and highlight informants were cognisant that they had to expect, accept, and manage injuries as a part of being an athlete. However, injuries could also have a substantial impact on athletes and their careers. Informants commented on the career ending nature of injuries and illness. For example, "I've seen some people just be ravaged with injuries, and you go 'jeez I'm lucky that's not me', because it ruins their career and puts them out early when they should have probably had a really good career.", "I started getting injuries. Back and shoulders and that, and sort of I pulled out, there was a week before trials but I pulled out because of injuries, I said I couldn't do it." and, "...you know I never really had any injuries in sport, I was pretty lucky with that, I only really had a shoulder at the end, which probably [was] the end of me." These comments highlight that injuries had the capacity to end athletes' careers in different ways, suddenly or gradually. Across all discourse associated with injuries, informants tended to position themselves as "lucky" if they had not had any significant injuries.

Athletes' injuries carried additional consequences. It was apparent that it was the mental and emotional repercussions of injuries that resulted in the most pain for informants, rather than the physical aspects of an injury. For example, "There's always, I guess there's always ups and downs but I've been pretty lucky with injuries and that obviously some [athletes] they do struggle with their injuries, it's a pretty dark place...", and "Yeah well injuries are never a good part of it, I'm pretty frustrated." Informants further commented on the additional pressures that arose from being injured, including the necessity to recover within a prescribed timeframe, "...but yeah injuries more, there's nothing you can really do about it, you just gotta get over it like fix the injury and get back into it." And,

I think those pressure those day to day pressure of 'I need to perform at a training session', or 'I need to make sure I'm playing on the weekend', or 'I need to make sure that I'm getting back from my injury on time'...

The pressure to return from injury before they were fully recovered can have implications for worsening the original injury. Injuries also result in time away from sport and teammates which tended to lead to further stresses and frustrations. For example, "And getting to a [team] not knowing anyone and then being told you can't train for 12 weeks I couldn't even like bond with the group it was like crap...", "... and then the next week we I got my starting debut, um and that game in the first 20 minutes I dislocated my shoulder, so that put me out for the next 6 months." And,

But it's funny how quick like within the [team] they gotta move on, like I was all for I removed myself so when I was injured and knew I was out for the year I um just removed myself from it because I knew like the [team] has to move on, because it's a results based industry.

Injury was not the only experience that gave rise to stress and frustration for athletes. For athletes, not winning also carries emotional and mental consequences. Informants faced loss constantly as a reality of training and competing as an athlete. They reflected on the disappointment they experienced as a result of losing. For example, "I think as a [athlete] your mood is generally well how you're feeling is generally how your team's going or how you're playing...", "I think that's the hard thing about [sport] is um I guess so when you lose, say like half the time, you can play well but you're still disappointed you lost." And, "Yeah I think losing games probably is pretty I don't know like you're obviously you're not going to win every game but when you're constantly losing you get into that flat mode." These comments highlight informants' emotional response to loss and the interdependence of their mood with results. This positions loss as a negative reality of being an athlete. Such experiences seemed to detract from the enjoyment and positive experiences of being an athlete. In addition, internal performance reviews, alongside the external commentaries informants experienced when they lost further contributed to their stress and the pressure. For example, "They just wanted people to blame I guess, and we copped it, because we were number one and people think you're number one that you don't lose, which is obviously not the case.",

...like the pressures after like when you lose or like when you know you've got to come into the [team] the next day and go through your review like and you

know you're going to get yelled at or if something is not right like it's a very stressful job and people don't understand that, not at all.

And,

I mean there's a lot of disappointment, there's a lot of anger, there's a lot of frustration after losing a game um you're constantly reviewing, constantly thinking, um so that's sort of side to it is definitely the not pretty side...

These comments position performance reviews and public discourses that surround losing performances as significant stressors. Athletes are punished for mistakes which lead to the loss. Overall this theme presents a side of elite level sport that lacks glamour portrayed as an ugly truth.

5.4.1.2 Pressure to perform

The pressure athletes experienced with respect to performing, captured within this theme, was viewed as a significant stress. This type of pressure was positioned as a reality of competing as an athlete and this pressure was present during training and competition. Performance pressure was imposed on athletes via external sources but was also internalised by the athletes. For example, informants reflected, "...the most pressure is being put on by myself and what I expect of myself and what I want for myself, there really is nothing more than what comes with", "Oh obviously personal performance, not just the team but obviously you want to be performing at your best ability", "Obviously pressure to perform, that's a normal stress." And, "I think the stressors were like pressure on yourself was probably the main one. Um you know just wanting to be the best, and second best was not good enough..." These comments highlight the performance pressures that manifest from athletes' own expectations of themselves. Further, these comments speak to athletes' central motivation; a desire to be the best.

In addition to the intrinsic performance pressures, informants also described the extrinsic pressures that resulted from the needs and expectations of others. For example, "I suppose when you talk about pressure and high performance, it does put a lot of pressure on the athlete to perform. If they you know are expected to be entertainment for the Australian public", "...so if you're not performing to the standards they have set or the amount of money you'll get, you're gonna get absolutely stuffed." and,

I guess that also comes back to really not wanting to let the fans down, you don't want to be the person who, this comes back to the stress of it, but you don't want to be the person who costs the team and the outside world sees, so that's a lot of pressure internally externally, you don't want to be that person.

Athletes are constantly trying to fulfil the needs and expectations of others, as well as their own needs and expectations. When informants did not meet their own, or others', expectations of their performance, it tended to result in frustration, disappointment, and other negative emotional experiences. For example, "so I think that performance pressure is tough, and then it's a bit of an emotional roller-coaster which none of my friends outside doing other things really have to deal with", "I think it's more the performance pressure um you put a lot of pressure on yourself to perform, and you get really down when you don't perform.", And,

So it's definitely been frustrating and that can be some of those hard parts especially when it comes to pressure and personal expectations that you know you always want to aim high, but if you are consistently not meeting those goals it becomes difficult to re-evaluate and reset those goals. So it's definitely been up and down from that perspective...

These comments describe the weight of expectation. The capacity to withstand performance pressure is an important component of being a successful athlete. Failing to meet these expectations contributes to and even exacerbates the experience of performance pressure.

5.4.1.2.1 This is it

The sub-theme *this is it*, emerged within the theme *pressure to perform*. This sub-theme represented a unique dynamic within the experience of performance pressure, where athletes experienced increased pressure to perform at particular moments. Informants stated that particular competitions and events are more meaningful and that there was more at stake. For informants, at these moments, performing to the best of their ability was not only expected, but required. As a result, performance pressure is amplified. For example, "...we were overseas at about within two weeks of the World Championships getting under way, we were put head to head with another [team] from Australia, 'whoever wins goes to Worlds'."

I, again, for lack of a better word, I fucked up my semi-final [performance]... The second semi-final [raced] and I ended up coming ninth, and that had

happened to me four years prior. I came ninth by .09 of a second. So I missed out on a final in [Olympics].

And,

...particularly come Olympic time it's added pressure um yeah I think it just increases and all the focus is paid on you and then four years of training and you've got one moment where people watch it and it's like it can come all crashing down, you know it's like four years of work can be undone in a minute and 5 seconds.

These comments highlight that particular events, games, or competitions are held in high regard by athletes and the Australian public. As such, performance pressure is exacerbated by the potential consequences of a poor performance at such events. Such performances were positioned by informants as an athlete's single moment to *make it*, a finding that manifested at the Worldview Discourse level of the analysis.

5.4.1.3 For the love of the game

This theme captured the love and passion athletes have for their sport, and the enjoyment they experienced from training and competition. A number of informants' highlights were anchored to having fun. The love and enjoyment of sport seemed to account for informants' desire to participate and advance from the grass roots level into the elite level of their sport. Further, it also appeared to transcend the physical effort, pressures, and hardships faced day to day. For example, "I only [trained] because I loved doing it. And it was fun.", "I do [sport] because I enjoy playing, I love the challenge of going out there and playing.",

Well personally for sort of we are paid to run around and go play with a ball outside which is something would do for free, and then go to the gym and then I guess I'm doing something that I'm passionate about, like I'm not meant to come in on a Wednesday but I want to come in...

And,

I didn't really see it for what it was you know 'you're having fun' you know, this is the emotion that you feel like you know whereas now I'm quite like 'this is really enjoyable actually' you know and it's quite a relief from a lot of times where it's fricken hard.

It was clear that it was particularly important for athletes to love and enjoy their sport to ensure longevity and motivation to continue. Informants also commented on the consequences of taking the fun out of sport. For example, “Towards the end of my [sport] career, I wasn't enjoying it. I was hating the sport that I grew up loving, and I think it's just clearly because I put so much pressure on myself..”,

Yeah well if it wasn't fun I wouldn't be playing, um so there's still yeah elements of fun but they take a lot of the fun elements out for it, the freedom you have when you're out there, generally everything is just so structured.

And,

I think yeah, trying to perform for the wrong reasons became a big thing and it didn't become about, I love playing and I want to play and I want to be the best that I can be, but I'm playing and I need to make sure [the coach] is happy so I don't get berated and torn apart everyday on a daily basis. That was probably one of the biggest struggles I had.

These comments highlight that the experience of training and competing as an athlete was soured when the fun and enjoyment was taken out of it.

5.4.2 Social Causal level

The Social Causal level of understanding enabled a focus on the influence of social, financial, environmental, and organisational factors on athletes' lived experience and provided explanations for Litany level themes. Further, worldviews and myths (identified in the proceeding levels of the findings) gives rise to these systems which serve as overt expressions of the values, attitudes and assumptions that underpin athletes' lived experience. Five main themes emerged at this level (see Figure 8): Money, money, money; A 1-Dimensional athlete (referred to as A 1-D athlete throughout the thesis); Friend or foe; To ask or not to ask; and Under the microscope. These themes captured some of the systems athletes are embedded in and highlight the impact of individuals within these systems, as well as the systems at large. Further themes present an understanding of current support athletes experienced.

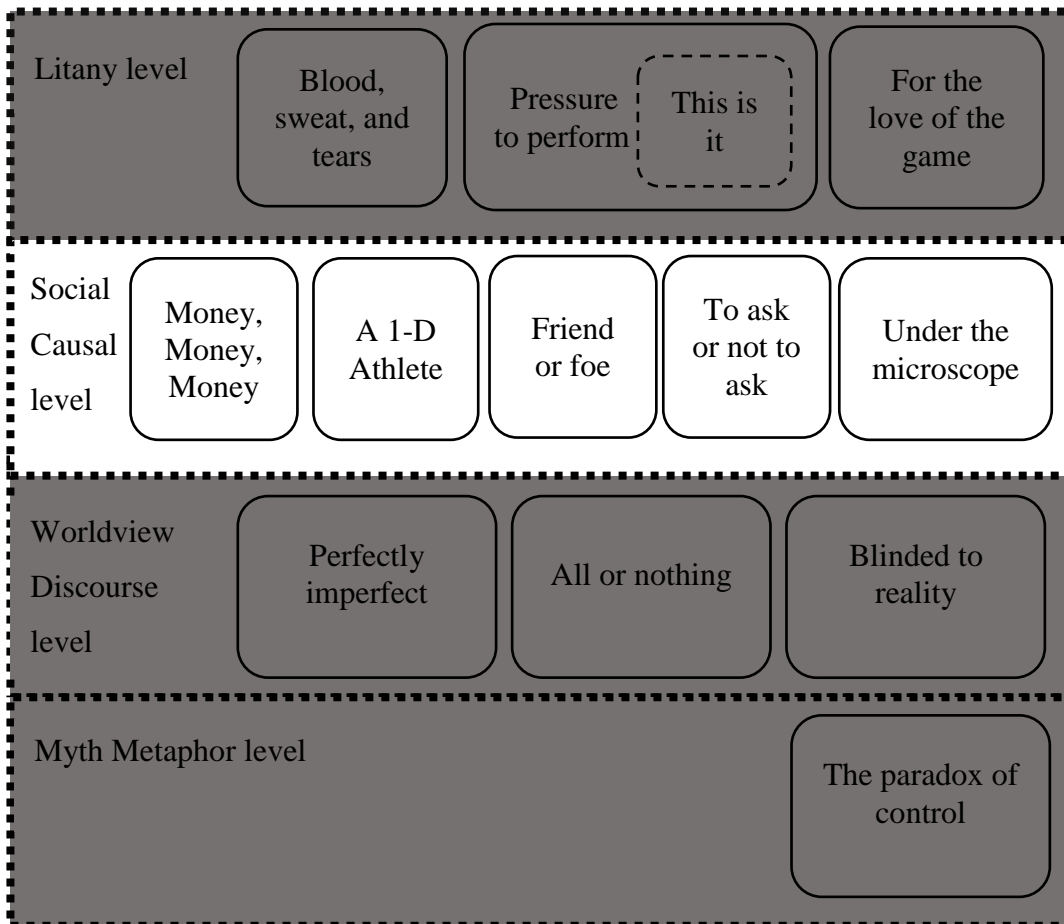


Figure 8 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Social Causal level of Causal Layered Analysis: athletes.

5.4.2.1 Money, money, money

Findings related to money were pervasive in the data. Informants reflected they would do their sport for free and acknowledged their privileged position in terms of being paid to do what they loved. They also recognised that their capacity to compete internationally was made possible by taxpayer funding. Alongside this recognition, issues related to finances were commonly highlighted. Informants' financial concerns appeared to stem from whether informants could conceptualise sport as their job (i.e., professional athletes were in receipt of contracts and salaries) or not (i.e., elite level athletes often had to rely on sponsorship deals and/or other forms of employment for their financial security). Athletes experience finance related stress in two ways. First, the potential financial implications of poor performances and or non-selection was a significant source of stress for informants. Just one bad race, game, or competition would be enough. For example, "So yeah when I didn't perform and I was struggling to get a contract they offered me a down grade on a

contract...”, “If you are not performing it effects money, it effects your family, it affects you as a person and then it just all builds up and it gets too much.” And,

You know you lose your chance to potentially compete internationally that year, you lose funding, you might lose a scholarship, you might lose your other sponsors, um so you know what can be a negative couple of minutes can quickly turn into a negative months and years...

These comments highlight athletes’ lack of job security, as well as the financial implications of poor performances. Athletes’ career longevity can never be guaranteed, so neither can their income. This systemic dynamic contributes to the experience of intrinsic performance pressure, as raised in the Litany level of the analysis. This demonstrates that performances can have implications for an athlete’s mental state.

Second, there was a sense informants felt the only way to justify income or tax payer funding was to perform well. For example, “Yeah, we’re spending taxpayers’ money so we expect golden medals from you all.”, “And they think athletes are getting paid a lot more, when they’re not. And they think athletes are wasting taxpayers money when not a lot of them are...” and, “Yeah I think like I think people think athletes get paid too much and the fact that like obviously they don’t justify that pay when you’re not performing well...” These comments highlight informants often felt that winning, or performing well, was the only way to justify their income.

5.4.2.2 A 1-D athlete

This theme captures a number of systemic factors that position athletes as one-dimensional. The training, training schedule, and commitment to elite level sport necessitated a regimented lifestyle. This lifestyle was positioned as 24 hours a day, seven days a week, where even beyond the field informants had to prioritise their sport. At times this seemed to be at the expense of their development as a person, particularly with respect to social skills and social development. For example, “[sport] can consume a lot of your life and I think like it’s hard to have a life outside of [sport] I think that’s like any professional sport.”, “I was very pointy in performance and high performing but I probably didn’t have great social skills being an [athlete] because you’ve got your [training] four hours every day, you don’t really go out and socialise.”,

...it's not just a nine to five, in fact its longer than a nine to five job, it's a 24 hours like you've got to your sleep, what you eat like what you put into your body you can't go out and get poleaxed with all your friends...

And,

You don't socialise, um you don't assimilate very often, um you don't you can't open yourself up to anything because your you have to be extremely focus and you can't have a late night every now and then or you know eat this food every now and then or you know forget to stretch every now and then, like you've got to nail all those things.

These comments highlight a number of barriers informants faced in being able to foster an identity and a focus outside of their sport, and the impact this seemed to have on their personal development. The nature of athletes' training schedules, alongside the commitment to being an elite level athlete outside formal training gives rise to a one-dimensional lifestyle. However, informants noted the significance of having balance as a key coping strategy. Having interests and friends outside of sport was positioned as an important component of being balanced. For example, "And balance as much as it's all clichéd and shit everything in moderation, um but it truly is important to have balance...", "Um, so probably the worst things are the lack of balance...", and,

Um I think the biggest thing for me, like I keep saying, has been the balance side of things, and that's why I think it's so important that [athletes] have like study or do something that they are passionate about outside of [sport] ...

Informants also noted the importance of balance as a strategy to foster an identity and skill set beyond sport that could then support them in their retirement. For example, "I guess making sure I was very very good at trying to make sure my life was balanced. I didn't want to be only an [athlete] because I didn't want it to define me." And,

Yeah, yep I think um probably reflecting back what would have been good is way more balance, so either studying something or um I think this would have way more important, is do a lot of careers work, like now that I've been retired for over 2 years, now I'm looking at what careers I want to do and that would have been so much more beneficial before I retired...

These comments further highlight how important balance was to informants, particularly with respect to retirement. It was clear that balance did not just mean

engaging in one singular interest beyond sport, such as studying or working. Balance was a holistic concept that encompassed any tasks, interest, or activity with friends or family that took athletes away from their sport for a period of time. However, the juxtaposition of the athlete lifestyle and the perceived importance of balance presents a problematic dichotomy, where these demands often appear to be mutually exclusive. This is further complicated by a perceived lack of accessible support to foster this balance at the systemic level. Some informants noted their club or organisation encouraged balance, for example, "...the club encouraged everyone to do something that's going to help them out, like some [athletes] do education, some [athletes] have real jobs, yoga-ers and that and the sports psychologist is there..." and,

...maybe a wide range of [sport] really push education they really push education during the season, they pay your HECS debt as well, bla bla bla. But they pay for all your courses, like anything you want to do yeah so um but even then it's not overly pushed that you should go study or do this do that.,

However, the sense that support to achieve balance was lacking was pervasive. Informants commented on the impact of the coach in their capacity to be balanced. Informants described a sense of 'lip-service' in the support of engaging in work, or study, outside of training and competing as an athlete. Coaches were supportive of balance theoretically but tended not to give this support in practice. Training sessions would be prioritised over commitments related to other interests. For example,

I think its coaches who need to encourage and support balance. The thing is, my coach, who was like, "Yeah, we're all about balance and we want you to work part-time and study and want you to do that." But then, you're asked to have a session after doing an exam or you're asked to get out early because you have to go do your work shift, and it's like, "Well no you need to be here, you have to change it." You're made to feel so guilty.

Particularly problematic, athletes were also enabled to disengage completely from their education in their pursuit of elite level sporting success. For example, "Well you know there is lots of examples in [sport] of people quitting their education just to [train and compete]..." and,

... I've heard examples from other sports where as part of being in that elite team you know you must be in some sort of education or work program and that you know I think some of those types of things are really positive because

it's obviously you know designed to create more well balanced individuals but that's not been, that's really not been the case in [sport] ...

These comments speak to a systemic priority for the development of athletes' performance over their development as a person. This dynamic positions the philosophy of sporting organisations in the provision of support to athletes as 'tick the box' which has implications for the validity of the support provided.

The provision of psychological support and intervention for athletes also resulted in the conceptualisation of athletes as one-dimensional. Informants reflected on a number of gaps associated with the support they received across their careers from their sporting organisations. Of particular concern was the perceived narrow scope of support provided by sports psychologists. Informants saw sports psychologists as primarily performance focused and unable to cater for the individuality of athletes, for example, "Because I think most of the times sports psychologists come into a program, it's to deal with in sport or your game issues or things that are affecting your performance rather than your head", "Because not everyone's the same, and I think with sport, especially in teams I do notice that when psyches come in, it's more about broad. It's not really catered individually I guess." And,

...that work side down, from the get go for them it would make the transition out of sport a lot easier. Yeah may take 6 to 12 months working with them, but I see that is a big area where I think sports could help, and psychology all the psychs did not have guidance for me.

These comments highlight informants thought the support they had received by sport psychology lacked depth. Performance and performing were seen as the sole treatment target. Informants also noted a number of additional areas where psychological support would have been useful, particularly in terms of retirement and transition out of sport. It was apparent informants thought the mental health of athletes could be better serviced if the scope of the sport psychology was widened, and not just anchored to performance. These comments speak to a number of inadequacies, inconsistencies and barriers to accessing support for athletes. Gaps in support for the 'person' compromises the coping strategy identified by the informants, of fostering a sense of balance and identity outside of sport.

5.4.2.3 *Friend or foe*

It was clear that athletes do not exist in isolation, and their lived experience is affected by the various systems within which they are embedded. Informants commented on a range of formal and informal support systems they existed within, which functioned to either provide support or create additional stress. While this dynamic was common to a number of support systems, the coach, who is positioned as a central figure within athletes' lived experience, is a significant systemic influence. As such, this theme attends specifically to informants' experiences with their coaches, and the influence they can have on athletes.

The athlete-coach relationship is a key component of athletes' training, development, and successes. Informants' perceptions of their coach as good or bad often stemmed from the quality of this relationship, understood as *friend or foe*. A good relationship was characterised by trust, encouraged open bi-directional communication, was experienced as supportive, and was perceived as having the athlete's best interest at heart. For example, "Um yeah mostly my coach was he was probably my biggest support strategy, going to someone to talk about shit...",

...so confidence in the coach is so important for those kinds of things, um which I have a lot of, and I trust [coach] and things like that and what he says, so he's obviously a really important support network, as well as being an excellent communicator, he's a fantastic listener, always open to um hear whatever kind of comments or feedback...

And,

... I think what's good is our coach being so positive. Whenever, like it's always constructive criticism, but then he's back to being positive about whereas I've had other coaches who like just on your back the whole time, basically telling you how shit you are and you start almost believing it.

Informants valued an athlete-coach relationship that mirrored a partnership, where coaches fostered collaboration, rather than directing. Athletes need to trust their coach, and coaches need to trust in the athlete. Informants' comments also reveal a desire to feel heard and understood by their coaches.

Outside of training, informants valued coaches who fostered a personal relationship with athletes and got to know their athletes as people. The provision of support of athletes' continued development as people off the field was presented as a key measure of a good coach. For example, "...no actually it was my coach that did it,

so my coach in [state] was really good at um getting balance in the sport and studying outside and that was really good...”, “My second coach was amazing she was fantastic, she was very nurturing she was all about communication and really trying to develop people more than athletes, kind of thing.” And,

And our coach is pretty good at um like encouraging stuff outside of [sport] like studying, family time and things and I think that's massive because then when [sport] is not going well you've got a whole lot to fall back on.

A positive athlete-coach relationship enabled informants to feel well supported both on and off the field. However, it was clear informants did not always experience a good relationship with their coach.

A bad athlete-coach relationship was characterised by a lack of empathy, support, and trust, a perceived power imbalance, conflicting ideologies between athlete and coach, poor communication, athlete blaming and shaming, and a blind focus on performance. These relationships positioned athletes as vehicles of performances. This type of relationship seemed to result in a number of unpleasant experiences for athletes and reports of additional pressures and stress beyond performance that athletes have to cope with, such as a preoccupation on the coaches' perceptions, or non-selection. Of particular concern for informants were the emotional and mental consequences of such relationship, in terms of their self-esteem and motivation. For example, “I think coaches are scared of that sometimes because I think it's delving too deep for them. They just want you to [perform] good.”, “I just want to tell you you're shit. And you better play good, otherwise I'm going to dump you. I don't want to know about anything else.”,

I think a lot of the issues that went on when I was playing came from we were playing to please as well because we never received praise and never not never, but rarely received praise or encouragement or positive feedback.

And,

...it cost me a lot of I guess mental strength even because it was becoming a kind of relationship where it then began to central more around me and made me feel like I was the one with the problem, and I was the one who couldn't train hard and I was the one who couldn't race well, and things like that...

These comments highlight the importance of the relationship between athlete and coach, and contributes to an understanding of the impact of the coaches' conduct, and relational skills athletes' lived experience. Coaches' communication skills, trust,

empathy, and capacity to see athletes as people were clearly important relational qualities to informants. When these aspects were lacking from the athlete-coach relationship it gave rise to informants feeling unsupported, isolated, unsafe and not good enough. This appeared to detract in a major way from athletes' lived experience and, at times, threatened to end athletes' careers prematurely. Overall, this theme elucidates the significant influence coaches have on the on field and off field lived experiences of athletes.

5.4.2.4 To ask or not to ask

It was clear that poor mental health was considered a reality of being an elite level athlete. Informants commented widely on their experiences of poor mental health, and also noted their teammates' experiences. Further, they highlighted a variety of factors that likely contribute to the onset of unhelpful thinking patterns, which can lead to poor mental health. Despite this, informants spoke to a number of barriers to seeking help or support for poor mental health. This theme captures some of the key dynamics and considerations that function to discourage athletes from seeking help for poor mental health. This revealed a dynamic where informants had to measure the potential benefits of engaging with support or psychology with the perceived consequences of seeking such supports. Accessing support was considered to be unsafe and perceived to result in on field consequences, such as non-selection.

The perceived trustworthiness of support staff and psychologists was an issue where informants did not or could not trust that what was said to support staff was confidential. Some informants reflected that they felt psychologists' allegiance was to coaches rather than athletes' wellbeing. For example, "Um I spoke to psychologists as well um as well for one reason they thought I was a psycho so I had to go and get it done." And,

You felt like she was working for the coaches. So I think you just need a psychologist that doesn't actually have a relationship with the coaches, who just has a relationship for [athletes] like 'here we can work on that' instead of working for the coaches. That's how I felt last year.

The perception that coaches would think an athlete was weak by disclosing the experience of poor mental health was also apparent. Informants noted a number of perceived consequences associated with disclosure. Informants were concerned about on-field consequences such as non-selection or less game time, and informants were

also concerned with implications to the athlete-coach relationship. Informants tended to confide in personnel they deemed as “safe”, where safety was defined as the personnel who had significant distance from the coaches. For example, “...there were just coaches who you would talk to or who you feel close to talk to, but even then you’d be worried about talking to them in case they relayed that to the senior coach.”, “And for an athlete to ask for help is very hard, they don’t want that because that shows a weak side to someone. No athlete wants to go around and go ‘I need help’...”

So I think that’s with [athletes] as well if they are going through some stuff there’s no doubt about it if they said something to a coach I think he would it would affect the amount of time, or the relationship with the coach...

And,

...sometimes those [athletes] who wanna talk with a teammate um you know because you don’t feel comfortable or you don’t want to seem like you’re weak or don’t want to speak to the coach because they coach might think they’re weak...

These comments also reveal the fear of being perceived as weak by engaging with psychology. Where support was provided, informants felt they could only engage with it if coaching staff endorsed it. For example,

That was purely like sports psychs were seen to be for weak people and people that you know can’t cope and that was not me so like my coach wouldn’t allow me to see a sports psych when I was younger um until much later in my career.

And,

...sometimes is up to the some of the coaching staff, the head coach doesn’t really believe that’s sport psychology is a necessity, I mean he is a very old school coach so he is very yeah that’s he’s way of thinking.

These comments elucidate the impact of coaches’ ideologies on informants’ capacity to access or engage psychological support. This further contributes to the influence of the coach on athletes’ lived experiences.

Finally, the nature of the structure of formal support systems seemed to serve as an additional barrier to help-seeking. Informants expressed a desire for support staff to get to know them beyond their performance, and acknowledge the athlete in front of them as a person. It seemed this is not what informants had experienced. For example, “Yeah um definitely a psychologist, so you do have someone to talk to, but

not a psychologist term it's also like a friend kind of relationship as well.", "...so for us we know our sports psych, we know them on a personal level and we have a professional relationship with him but a personal relationship too so you feel comfortable with him." And, "Um anyway that's super important [the relationship] and then I guess just an invested interest in the things that have nothing to do with sport that will affect the way that you perform."

The informants considered that psychology should be present and visible in order to foster trust and rapport with athletes. However, psychology appears to be a passive aspect of the formal support systems provided to athletes and athletes are charged with the responsibility of engaging with psychology if they are experiencing poor mental health. For example, "Definitely the sports psychologists need to I think be engaged more regularly in the sport", "but yeah not much I can psych stuff was there, but I never I wouldn't ring and go 'oh can I have a meeting, I want to have a chat', that would probably be my last person I would ring.",

Obviously you really don't want, like if it was me for instance I wouldn't want the club knowing if I had a personal issue so I would probably ask for them to talk to a family member or a person close to me um and kind of get that help and support rather than someone from the club necessarily finding out and getting them to help me that way.

And,

... whereas now I think the help is a lot more accessible, there's numbers up all throughout the corridor of psychologists, um any people you want to talk to, it's actually a lot more open, there's still I still believe there's a stigma attached to it, which is hard it's hard to change everyone's perception with that...

These comments reflect that informants perceived it was their responsibility to access support or ask for help when they needed. This presents a reactive approach to the provision of support where psychology is only called upon when it is needed. Overall, this theme reveals a stigma still surrounds poor mental health within elite level sporting contexts. Informants considered having a mental health concern as being weak or would be perceived as weak by others. As such, the current structure of formal support systems, which rely on individual athletes to engage with support when they need it, seems to reinforce that poor mental health is not common for athletes and, by extension, athletes should not need psychological support.

5.4.2.5 Under the microscope

This theme captures the pervasive attention informants experienced from the media, and by extension the public. Informants acknowledged that, as athletes, they existed within the public sphere and so the media and media attention were a reality of being an athlete. It was apparent this was further exacerbated by the nature and profile of the sport they were involved with. Additionally, the evolution of social media means that athletes are constantly in the public eye. For example, “I mean I guess these days with social media as a top echelon sports performer you’re never out of the spotlight, you’re always in social media.”, “That’s what we sign up for [media attention]. So we know it’s there...”, “...which can be a can bring you down in a way the spotlight because you stuff up, its everywhere.”, “Um because of what you have achieved and what you have done in the sport you’re always going to have eyes on you.” and,

You go well you know we’re held we can get slammed in the media, but we will only get slammed in the media once every 4 years’ um because no one cares every other time. Whereas them you know it’s like a week to week slamming that they can suffer from...

These comments demonstrate that informants were aware of the constant attention that being an elite level athlete invited, at least in some sports. This dynamic results in athletes being under constant scrutiny. Everything they do on or off the field is closely examined and, by extension, becomes a matter of public interest. Informants saw that athletes’ ‘negative’ on or off field conduct tended to be prioritised in media stories. The media were conceptualised as exploiting and profiting off athletes’ mistakes for entertainment. For example, “They [the media] usually pick the bad stuff more than the good stuff. Or like they always become the bigger story, all the bad stuff.”, “The problem is that they feed off controversy as well so controversy will always get portrayed more so in the media than success. I think because controversy is such a better seller than success...”,

...it’s gotten worse these days in general I think the media is a lot less neutral and tends to be a lot more yeah a lot less neutral a lot more bias um you see it every day there’s a lot more happening, there’s more about you know lets push more for celebrity, lets push more for controversial stores, lets push stuff that’s going to sell papers not necessarily the important news in the paper you know.

And,

I find the media incredibly fickle as well. When [sport] was doing really well, they'd build us up and we're amazing and we're this wonderful team and these people are amazing, but as soon as we hit hard times, when we've had some controversies, when we've had some lower than expected performances, they're very quick to jab a knife in and try and search under every bloody nook, and cranny to try and find some dirt on everyone.

Informants thought the media's treatment of athletes was harsh and unfair, found the attention relentless and felt the stories foregrounded controversy and drama. This dynamic was particularly problematic when it could have long term consequences. It was apparent the media had a key role in the public's perception of athletes, individually or generally. Where an athlete's mistakes were communicated across the public domain and entered into public discourses it could tarnish their reputation and longevity within their sport. For example, "...everybody pays attention to what the media says as well and suddenly everyone in the public gets this perception that you are a shit [athlete] or anything like that...", "...somewhat the media yep I'd say the media would be a huge influence on it [public opinion] um yeah the media massive.",

Obviously if you stuff up, yeah like doing bad stuff when you're pissed like yeah well you saw what happened to the [athletes] earlier in the year, like all that sort of stuff, that can sort of tarnish I think. Certainly your reputation.

And,

Like I feel sorry for them in terms of sometimes I guess they do things that we've all done, and straight away they're in trouble and everyone's against them and um and then like I guess the media just sways popular opinion as well. So the minute the media is against you like they could have done something that everyone could do wrong, and then media would jump on them and everyone's like 'oh what idiots or, get rid of them', yeah so everyone jumps on the bandwagon and yeah I guess it's just hard to turn it around.

These comments reflect the role of the media in the portrayal and representation of athletes to the public. Athletes' reputations could be defined by a single act, or mistake, and the publicity can flip from positive to negative as a result. The media was presented as inescapable and relentless.

5.4.3 Worldview Discourse level

The Worldview Discourse level of the analysis reflected an understanding of how the lived experience of athletes is socially constructed. The deconstruction of athletes' lived experience at this level reflected implicit understandings and provided an account of the various, commonly held ideologies, beliefs, and value systems that contribute to this. Often there are multiple conflicting worldviews present with respect to particular phenomena. The themes below (see Figure 9) represent the dominant worldviews extracted from the data, and capture athletes' and the public's worldviews, as reflected by informants. The theme 'Perfectly imperfect' primarily represents the athlete worldview and captures the conceptualisation of athletes as humans. The themes 'All or nothing', and 'Blinded to reality' illustrate informants' perceptions of the public's worldview within which athletes are embedded.

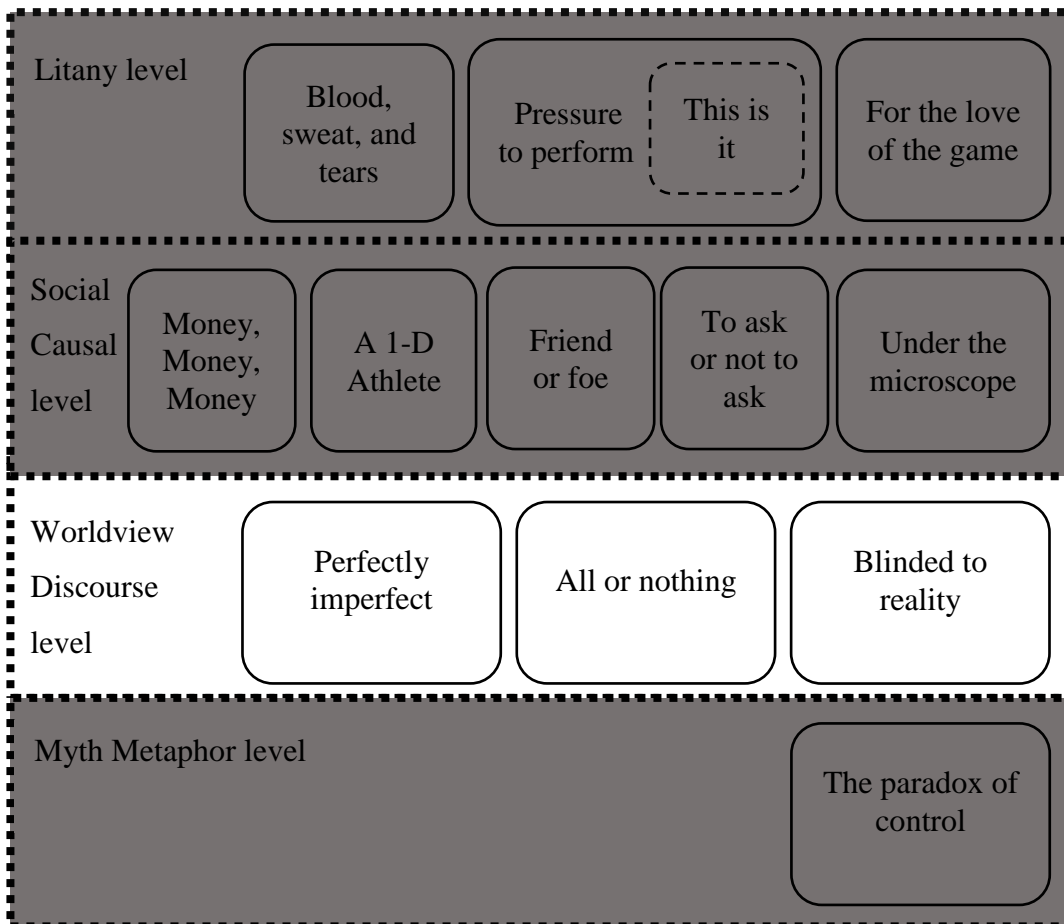


Figure 9 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Worldview Discourse level of Causal Layered Analysis: athletes.

5.4.3.1 Perfectly imperfect

This theme represents informants' understanding of themselves as flawed, vulnerable, and fragile humans (no more, no less). Informants considered being human primarily in terms of making mistakes and as not being perfect, on or off the field. Informants reflected on their humanness, for example, "At the end of the day, what we are is to be sports people. It's good that people or kids look up to us, but at the end of the day we're all just human and we do make mistakes.", "You're like 'oh I can actually mix it with normal people,' you know so it's quite uplifting and stuff like that, it just confirms that you are not just a robot. You're still a person, it's quite nice.", And, "It's okay to have someone, a sports person as a role model, but I think the right person I guess. Because you can't say that every sports person is perfect, we all do something stupid in our career." The inevitability of athletes making mistakes, on and off the field, was positioned as a characteristic of being human. However, despite this, athletes were embedded in a contradictory discourse and worldview that served to dismiss athletes as human conceptualising their humanness as weakness.

Informants described the public's worldview of athletes as expecting perfection and constant success. Informants thought the public's expectations of athletes functioned to deny them space to be human. Athletes' mistakes, particularly off field, were met with public disappointment and negativity and, importantly, a lack of empathy. Informants felt there was no consideration of the appropriateness of their conduct in terms of age, social context, or personal circumstances. The public were positioned by informants to be blind to this reality. For example, "So yeah you're expected, you're held in such high regard and then they are very quick to stuff up if you just act like a 20 year old.", "I guess there's a bit of that um pressure to, like a social pressure to kind of be a role model and never to mess up and that sort of thing...",

Yeah that, and that's why I think we don't that right of reply...you see it in the media all the time, someone has got 100 abusive tweets and the athlete will fire back at one and the only one they focus on is the one fired back at the fans...

And,

And I guess yeah they do expect perfect role models, [athletes] that never put a foot wrong, um which is fair I guess it comes with the territory um like we kind of know that before we do anything wrong, um, but when its things that

anyone could do wrong that's when I find it a little bit unfair like when normal people are doing it wrong every single day and then they are shocked that an athlete would do that or um or when it's a social issue not a an elite sports issue or whatever um yeah and other role models aren't held to the same standards.

A behavioural mandate is imposed on athletes which speaks to deeply held expectations of the need for 'good' behaviour off the field. Informants' comments also revealed a tension between how informants' conceptualised and valued their position as a role model compared to how they perceived the public conceptualised this. Informants positioned their role as an athlete on the field as reflecting hard work and commitment. For example, "Yeah, I just think it requires a lot of hard work and I think we should have more credit and a bit less negativity I guess on being athletes and making mistakes." And,

Yeah I think you are a role model in the sense of you have had to work really hard to get to where you are, but I think people put role model in the wrong um they look at it the wrong way, they don't you are a role model yes because of the work you've done, not because you are famous or because you're out in the public eye or um yeah all that sort of stuff.

Differences are evident between how informants position an athlete's value as a role model, and their perception of the public's view. These comments also highlight that informants thought the public tended to react to athletes' mistakes negatively. The manner with which informants described their reactions to such public discourses further highlight athletes' humanness. For example, "They [the media] were attacking my diet and my weight and it wasn't so much, it was a bit of form but mostly that I wasn't looking like an athlete, so that hurt me personally.",

...because I don't like that side of it, but I have been attacked a couple of times. And you try and hide the fact that it's not hurting you, but it does. I don't think anyone can hide the fact that they don't like that sort of stuff.

And,

I read all the social media, and all the bad things that people were saying about me. Yeah, I really let that affect me. It got on top of me, and I started to get into that dark hole towards the end of my career.

These comments highlight informants' emotional and human response to negative commentary.

5.4.3.2 *All or nothing*

This theme captures the athlete conceptualisation of success and, by extension worth, as reflected by informants alongside informants' perception of how the public conceptualised athletes' success and worth. Both these worldviews present an athlete's worth as interdependent with their success, yet differed in the indicators or measures of an athlete's success.

Informants' worldview of success was anchored to achieving a particular level of their sport. Each sport offered multiple tiers of competition and a number of opportunities for athletes to represent their club, state or country. However, a hierarchy existed for informants, where particular competitions, events, or achievements were deemed to be more important or more prestigious than others. Success in these competitions and events held in the highest regard by informants was seen as the highest level of success. This serves to define success as more than just being selected (e.g., on an Australia team) but being selected for an Australian team for a particular competition. As such, success is achieved by reaching the pinnacle of an athlete's sport. For elite sports, this was often defined as representation at an Olympic Games or senior national teams, level sports, debuting, the receipt of long term professional contracts, individual awards and accolades, and indeed winning a premiership were measures of success. For example, "Highlights were any world cup, world champs, or Olympics, and definitely winning medals at those events.", "I guess it's hard to go past an individual gold medal at the Olympics, because as a [athlete]... That's what you dream of.", "Um obviously your debut is pretty unbelievable, that's a pretty big moment.", "The best ones I would say my career was is been very moulded by the highest level which is the Olympic games...", "I would say getting [selected] would be probably a highlight, playing probably getting [selected], making my debut was massive, playing in an [semi] final against [team] for [team] in front of [a large crowd] that was pretty spectacular." And,

Well that's when I set my goal of making an Australian team because that really is the pinnacle in our sport, to be a member of that elusive team so when I actually got there it was pretty awesome, pretty amazing.

It was clear that the higher the tier of competition, the fewer athletes would 'make it.' This functioned to maintain the prestige of such competitions. Further, this functioned as a quantifiable measure of athletes' success. As such, these comments position success to be achievement, based on measureable and objective outcomes.

Athletes either make particular competitions or they do not. As such, this definition of success also functions as marker of legitimacy. Any athlete who does not achieve the highest level of competition within their sport is not considered to be legitimate. This approach to success could affect athletes' capacity to see themselves as worthy or successful.

The public were perceived by informants to be fickle in their approach to athletic performance and success. A key tenet of informants' understanding of the public's worldview of success was that they focused on winning. Informants felt that the public defined the outcome of sporting performances only as a win or a loss and perceived that the public only valued winning and good performances. This was reflected in informants' views of the media and also further exacerbated by the media. For example, "Just really ignorant of an athlete's state of mind, or how they approach races or the pressure they put on themselves, it's just basically win or die you know it is it's like gold medal or nothing.", "Playing with [team], my first year we won three games. Pretty, not very good at all. The media was pretty harsh on us... Yeah, we would get scrutinised all the time because we weren't winning.", "If we win we're in there [the media]. If not, no one gives a shit." And,

Um no I think that just people just judge it really quickly, I don't think people look into it that much, I think they kind of just 'oh my god she didn't win, what a failure bla bla bla' move on, like not particularly me maybe other people, anyone, even sort of [athlete] it's like 'oh my god he got second, what a loser, what a failure bla bla bla'...

These comments also highlight the consequences athletes face when they failed to meet the public's version of success, particularly in terms of public popularity and support.

5.4.3.3 *Blinded to reality*

This theme represents how informants' perceived the public viewed elite level athletes in general, and their lifestyle. A number of perceptions of the public's worldview of athletes emerged from the data, including ownership of athletes, a sense of entitlement to athletes' lives, and elements of the Tall Poppy Syndrome. In particular, informants saw the public as ignorant of their hard work and effort. It was clear informants thought the public viewed training and competing as an elite level athlete as easy. For example, "I mean not everyone if it was easy everyone would be

playing [sport] for a living...”, “...but I think they [the public] also don’t think of the early mornings, or the hard gym sessions or the meetings or all that sport of stuff...”

And,

I obviously love what I do and everything that accompanies what I do yeah, be that yeah what we do to try and win a championship, or win a game or be better [athletes] is a lot more hard work than just rocking up to training every day and um you know [doing a drill] for 2 hours, there’s so much more to it. It is a lot of hard work. I know people think, "Oh, your job. How fantastic that is to be able to play sport for a living," but it's gruelling. It's physically and mentally gruelling. You train two to three times a day, five to six days a week. It's a lot of stress on your body.

It was evident that informants felt the public assume that athletes’ lives are easy and ignore the hard work and sacrifice athletes often experience.

5.4.4 Myth Metaphor level

The Myth Metaphor level of analysis gave rise to an understanding of the lived experience of elite level athletes via symbolic representations and enabled the capturing of some of the deeply held, and culturally constructed meanings associated with this phenomena. One main theme emerged at this level of understanding which provided an account of the core narrative of “athlete” in Australia (see Figure 10): The paradox of control. This theme highlights control as a key myth that underpins the athlete experience and speaks to the archetypes of athletes as role models and as human.

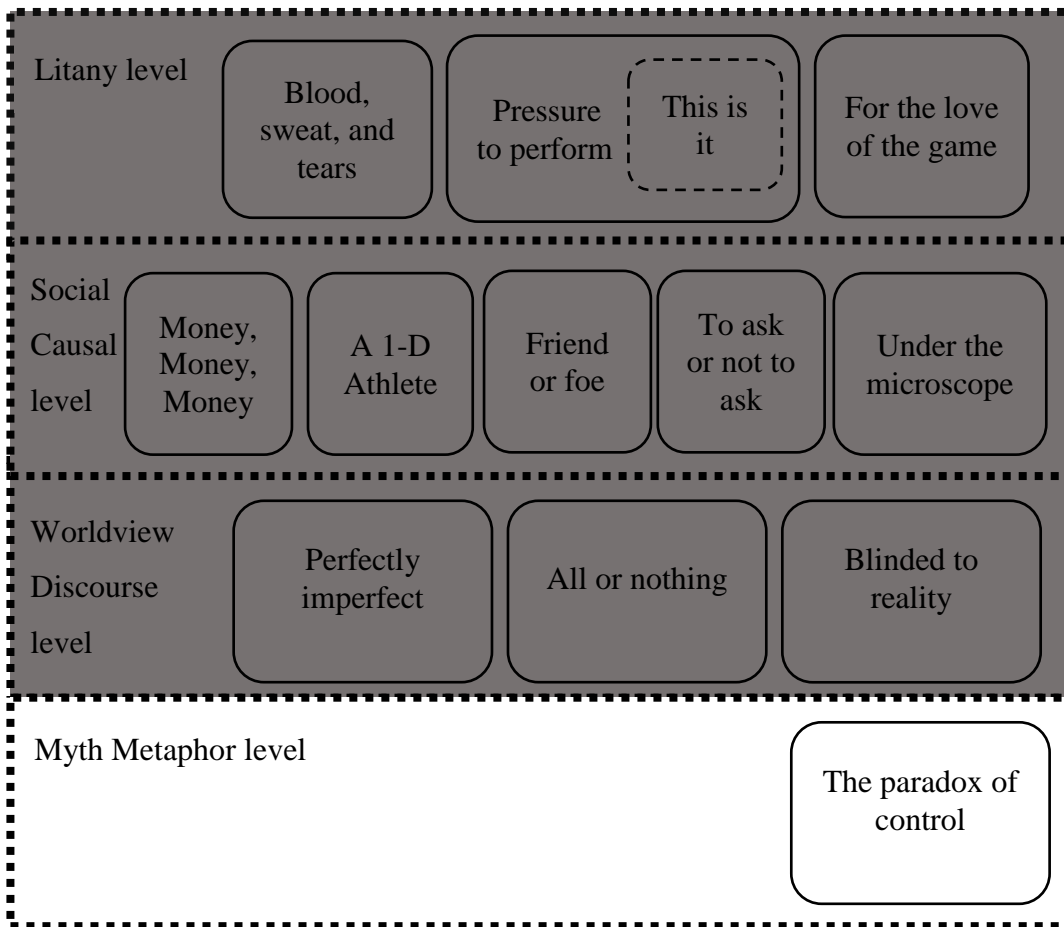


Figure 10 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Myth Metaphor level of Causal Layered Analysis: athletes.

5.4.4.1 *The paradox of control*

Control appeared to be an important tenet of athletes' lived experiences and emerged in various ways across all the layers of the analysis. At the myth metaphor level of the analysis two key dichotomous dimensions of control were apparent: being in control, and being controlled. While informants expressed that they were in control and had the capacity to control themselves, their performance, and their public persona, it was also apparent much of their lived experience was controlled by other factors. In addition, athletes exist within a number of domains and are embedded in various systems that deny them control, agency, and autonomy. This contradictory nature of being in control yet being controlled positions control itself as a paradox and a myth: a story.

Performance was a key aspect of athletes' lived experience and it was apparent that the informants perceived they could control their performance. While

informants were cognisant that there were limits of what they could control on-field, being able to “control the controllables” was seen as key in enabling a good performance. It was clear informants viewed being in control of their preparation, process, and final performance would result in a personal best (PB) or a winning performance. For example, “For me what I could control was doing a PB, doing the best race that I could. I knew if I did that then I would get really close to winning or getting those medals.”, “...just focusing on the all those things I had learnt over the years about controlling what you can control, focusing on the process and all those kinds of things and it was as simple as executing that.” And, “All of those things, the whole race is just up to you. There's nothing really that anyone can do to affect your race but yourself.”

However, again there is a paradox. If athletes were in control of their performance all the time they would never perform poorly. Regardless of an athlete being in control of their performance or not, this still did not and could not guarantee an outcome. For example, “I went too easy because I wanted to conserve energy, but I didn't see a couple of [athletes] on the outside who were actually ahead of where I was, so I ended up coming 4th...” The outcome of a performance is also dependent on the actions of the opposition or other team. This reinforces control as a paradox as athletes can control their performance but not the outcome. This suggests that athletes’ perception of control is a fallacy and has implications for athletes’ interpretations of their role in and responsibility for loss, or poor performance.

Focusing on the controllables was adopted as strategy to cope with performance pressure. Informants’ comments demonstrate the usefulness of focusing on what they could control as a way of quelling competitive anxieties and avoid unhelpful thoughts. For example, “it’s all about focusing on the things you can control, [competing] and doing what you need to do.”, “...he [coach] just made the Olympics realistic basically like why worrying about it, like there’s nothing you can do it is out of your hands out of your control so just don’t let it worry you.” And,

So that’s the good thing about having a process and a routine is that you can control it and you can practice it. And then thereafter when the gun goes you know you just hope you’re in the best position to be the best that you can be...

Comments also highlighted informants thought an athlete’s capacity to perform at peak was largely dependent on a number of mental and psychological factors. This perception of control serves as an expectation that athletes are capable of

always controlling these controllables and not concern themselves with those factors beyond their control. However, it was apparent informants were not always able to control what they deemed was controllable, particularly thinking patterns and emotional experiences. For example,

Um it's so clear that it's, psychology, a really really important aspect of performance um and as we've said in sport it's also very common for things like that to go array and usually is, as well high performance in general, you know usually that mental aspect breaks down of course the performance breaks down...

So my anxiety just like spiralled out of control and yep had no control over it and it just kept getting worse and so we tried to work through it but it just wasn't working so yeah medication was the only option.

And,

I ended up getting too nervous and not doing the processes that I would've normally done leading into the race and I just [performed] it terribly. I went out too hard because I was too nervous and clamped up and yeah ended up losing by .09 of a second I think.

The impact that mental factors and emotional experience have on performance is major and informants' comments elucidate the lack of control athletes can have over these variables. Performance is controlled by mental factors rather than athletes being in control of these factors. When an informant lost control of their controllables their performance suffered, which exacerbated stress and they were positioned as flawed. This also functions to reinforce that athletes are solely responsible for their results as losses tended to be explained as informants' failure to control their performance. For example,

Basically I went into a mini meltdown because I couldn't believe I'd done it [lost] again. The exact same thing had happened. I was in shock. I was in this mental world of going, "What the hell did you do? How on earth could you stuff this up so much?",

Alongside athletes not being always being able to "control the controllables", particularly with respect to mental factors for performance, informants' comments also revealed athletes are not in complete control of their bodies physically. Athletes have no control over the onset of injury or illness and the more they trained and competed the more likely they were to experience a major injury or illness.

Informants described the frustration associated with being betrayed by their own bodies and this stress and frustration was exacerbated by the consequences associated with the injury or illness, such as non-selection, the inability to compete, or even end an athlete's career. For example, "Yeah I trained for 4 years for 2008 Olympic [selections] and got appendicitis on the second day of [competition] and couldn't actually [compete] properly.", "...like trust me after your [sport] career, it might be all over next week and you might fucking hurt yourself and it's done...", "...yeah injuries more, there's nothing you can really do about it, you just gotta get over it like fix the injury and get back into it.",

Definitely stressful depends on what sort of injuries. So with my groins where I had continuous issues, I reckon I would have torn my groin 30 times, maybe, 40 maybe, like little tears that put me out for a week or 2 but still. Um yes so there for a while there it was a bit stressful because I thought I wouldn't play at the same level again...

And,

Um [my] third year started really well, same thing and then I broke my finger, ended up being out for 4 weeks, ended up wanting to come back so quickly that I came back too early and I actually still had the stitches in my hand when I played, and that got infected and then that put me out for 9 weeks with a broken finger which is ridiculous.

These comments reflect the lack of control associated with sustaining and recovering from injuries, despite athletes' attempts at obtaining control within the rehabilitation process. This further contributes to the construction of control as paradoxical, and a myth.

The training environment was another on-field setting that presented the notion of control as a paradox. Informants' comments revealed they had control over their work ethic and how hard they pushed themselves at training. However, the training setting and their experience within it was ultimately controlled by the coach. The impact of coaches' attitude and conduct within the training environment was significant and beyond the athletes' control. Where there was conflict between coach and athlete stress and additional pressure ensued. For example, "How do I justify being here? When I want to play at this level and I have no control, again, over who's my coach or anything like that. We can't change coaches.", And,

...and if you had a coach like I had which I imagine several people would have, who is constantly putting the pressure on you and putting the onus on you to be taking control, but at the same time not accepting the fact that their program could be the fault, which was clearly what it was because as soon as I moved to a different program I started performing better and you go 'well I'm not working any harder, I'm working to my maximum which is what I was doing with my previous coach, and yet I am getting the results now', you kind of go clearly the issue was the program not my work ethic...

Athletes have limited control, if any, over who their coach is. A lack of autonomy and agency was further evident with regard to training programs, sessions, and schedules. While this was positioned as part of the nature of the training setting, the impact of this lack of control was pervasive. The training environment was central to athletes' lived experience, however, everything that occurred within this setting was controlled by the coach. Athletes' choose to be at training, yet they have no choice over their training. The what, where, why, and how of training was set by coaches, and athletes follow. For example, "You um a lot of athletes don't control their lives. Don't control what they do.", "And the power of that [ownership] compared to just being dictated to all the time like a robot because you lose a lot of your autonomy and you just feel like a bit of a slave to your sport...", "...for an athlete everything is written on a board for them, they read it they just do it, and then they're back." and,

And the next year they sent me off to [international competition] and I didn't get to play any [club competition] um and I was doing something I didn't, basically they bought in a rule where each club had to give up 2 players to play [internationally] so I was forced to go and I didn't want to go, so that was a pretty low year.

This reinforces that the athlete experience of being in control is a myth. A further aspect of the impact of coaches' behaviour is selections. For athletes the process of selections and being selected is unpredictable and stressful. Informants' comments highlighted that they thought selections were based on factors outside their performance. This was negative as performance was the only aspect they felt they controlled. For example, "It can be stressful when you have a coach who has a certain opinion about you and doesn't select you for certain reasons as opposed to your actual performance and things like that.", "I believe the media can make and break careers,

so they can get people an extra couple of years on their contract, or they can be the end of some people.”,

Or they [the coach] might not see or there might be 2 of your for the same position and bring different things to the game um one's not worse than the other but the coach might just like that one more than yours, so that's a frustrating side of it.

And,

Then probably the worst disappointment I had was not being selected for the [team] [at the Olympics]. Team politics and people being for lack of a better word, dicks, or in my opinion, dicks. I wasn't selected [in the team] and that was the hardest to get over because I couldn't control it. Normally, particularly as a [athlete], we're in control. I was just never in control of that. That was really hard.

Coaches or selectors were perceived to look beyond informants' performance, or what they contributed on the field, and made selection decisions based on personal factors and in some cases current public discourses. It seemed it was the lack of control of the selection process, rather than the non-selection itself, that underpinned informants' disappointment and feelings of a lack of control.

Informants' public presence further highlighted the notion of control as a paradox. The media and social media platforms were conceptualised as vehicles that could be controlled by athletes to further their brand and public profile. Informants commented on the benefits associated with these platforms in terms of connecting with fans and sponsorship opportunities. However, it was apparent informants did not have full control over their social media presence. What they could post to these platforms was dictated by the organisations informants were associated with, such as their club or sponsors. For example,

I think it's a very dangerous game to play. Unless you have full control over it, which nobody does, I think you've just got to be so careful particularly with the message you put out there and I think athletes now, well anyone now, if they're going to be in the public eye need to have a brand and they need to stick to...

Yeah, um just like you have to be careful of what you do [on social media]. Like a few times I've gone back home and posted on social media what I'd

being doing and the club was like 'why are you posting that, we don't want people outside the club knowing what you are doing' kind of thing...

And,

...but [my] Instagram is more just my private life which the club doesn't like, whereas there are [athletes] here who just use it for their [sport] branding and all that and they love that whereas I am purely what I do...So I get grilled quite a bit about that, whereas some [athletes] actually do that.

These comments reflect a lack of agency, autonomy, and control over informants' decisions around their social media presence and the version of themselves they are able to put in the public domain. Rather than being a forum over which they had control, they were controlled by expectations of others. It was clear informants' posted to social media to appease or further the agenda of others, such as their organisation or the public.

Consistent with this athletes are required to behave in a manner that meets the public's expectations of an athlete. While this could be seen as athletes taking responsibility for their public profile and controlling their behaviour, they have little control over how formal and informal media outlets portray their words and actions. For example, "I don't know it's a bit two way like I mean they do well for the sport but they also hurt the sport at the same time.", "But it could be good for them I guess, if a [athlete] does something really good and the media blows that up and puts that other there as well. It works both ways maybe.", "...media is so important but you need to play the game and that's the problem so yeah but I don't think that will ever be fixed, like it'll always be like that." And,

I guess [athletes] that went from being just loved by the media and I guess if they had their time again they would have played their cards very differently um because they could do no wrong, you know what it's like with the media, something happens and it's not their fault its someone else's and like they'll never do anything wrong. And then once it flips you can't do anything right, kind of thing.

These comments highlight the potential impact the media and social media have on athletes' and sports' reputations. Comments also revealed the important role the media played in the progression of athletes' public persona. However, the media were considered inconsistent and manipulative in their conduct, and would do the best for their story, rather than what might be best for the athlete, their career, or their

reputation. For example, "...I've learnt that over time. Whereas I reckon earlier in my career you'd say "oh yeah it's frustrating that I'm not playing" and then they'd [the media] twist the words."

I believe they know what story they're writing, they just need to get the quotes to go with it. So they'll ask questions leading so they might ask you 5 different ways to try and get you say it in a particular way that will work for that article.

And,

That's my thing with the media, there's no accountability. They can pretty much print whatever they want and there's ways around it without having to find out the exact truth they can print stuff without them being liable for it, and they don't have to then backtrack. That's the frustrating thing I see but it's out there and people then talk about it or read it in the paper and it's like 'oh did you hear about this [athlete]', all that.

There is an apparent need for athletes to control their behaviour off field and to control how they portray themselves because their public profile is ultimately controlled by others. As such, athletes and their off field behaviour are controlled by the perceived conduct of the media and the public rather than athletes being in control.

The actions, ideology, and perceptions of the public were also a key concern for informants and their comments highlighted the inconsistencies of the public's responses to athletes' conduct. For example, "Well that's my thing, people feel like they own us and that we're on a pedestal and are looking to bring us down.", "Um I think we are looked upon as great role models, and great at what we do. But outside of that, we are looked upon as idiots...", "...if we've stuffed up anything like it's the public, not the media, it's the public feel it's in their interests to write into the [team] and say 'oh this person was being loud at the pub'..." and,

Yeah they do expect I guess perfection, but in saying that sometimes like you're almost if you're good enough you are allowed to bounce back so like the best um they'll kind of like sweep under the rug sometimes, but if you're a mid-range or a lower range then nope you're gone.

These comments highlight that despite the efforts informants went to in order to control how they were presented within the public sphere, they had no control over how the media portrayed them, and or how the public would react. A related point

was the issue of being seen as a role model. For example, “And I think a lot of people [athletes] don’t realise that. Um and they don’t want to be role models but it’s like stiff shit you’re a role model.”, “I know like obviously being role models for younger kids and all that , I agree with that absolute, but some days I kind of just want to do my normal life again.”,

Um I think the general public maybe puts people up, particularly sports people, up on a pedestal like um they must be role models, and all that sort of stuff and sometimes they don’t want that kind of pressure, or that’s not the reason why they do it.

And,

That’s um it’s becoming apparent now that you know with how much access the public has to an individual, a sporting personality, you’ve got to become a role model. Even if you don’t want to be, even if you don’t aim towards it, you are...

These comments highlight informants thought that being an athlete and being a role model were interdependent constructs and you could not be one without the other. This dynamic seemed to underpin the lived experience of athletes and functioned to compel them to modify and be vigilant about their behaviour to avoid public backlash. This behavioural expectation stemmed primarily from the public and their expectations for athletes.

Finally, it was evident that a lack of control regarding the ending of an athlete’s career was particularly problematic. Informants identified the potential for a sudden ending to their career as a significant stress which athletes experienced. Informants noted an injury, a poor performance, a selection decision, or other external factors had the potential to end their career at any time. For example,

Um your career can end like that...I do I think that’s the biggest stress of an [athlete] um knowing that your career can be up [snaps fingers] like that, and the [team] will get rid of you as quickly as it can.

And,

Yeah that’s often the bit that [athletes] find the hardest the retired, because very few people get to say ‘I’m done, I’m retiring’, you know often you get the tap on the shoulder to say “yeah ‘you’re done”, and that’s often when you’re not prepared for it at all.

Informants thought that an athlete deciding to end their career on their own terms was rare. The nature of this ending of a career, alongside the uncertainty gave rise to stress. Again, this aspect of the athletes' lived experience was viewed as uncontrollable.

Overall this theme presents a particularly challenging tension as underpinning athletes' lived experience. Athletes are to believe in their capabilities and ability to control a number of aspects of their lived experience, especially with respect to performing. However, a myriad of factors and interactions can affect their capacity to "control the controllables." Similarly, outside the competitive context, athletes are positioned to be in control of the version of themselves they present to the public. However, rather than athletes being in control of this, they are reacting to broader demands and societal expectations within which they exist. Despite athletes being positioned as being in control, it is evident they are controlled, which presents control within athletes' lived experience as paradox and just a story, a myth. This is particularly problematic as it is the "uncontrollables" that give rise to stress. Further, this dynamic also positions athletes as responsible for performance outcomes on and off the field which could lead to stress and have implications for mental health and wellbeing.

“...the most disappointing races were invariably the ones where you walked away and you knew that you'd beaten yourself before the race had been even [*raced*].”

– respondent; ex-elite athlete

CHAPTER SIX

Research Findings: A Single Sport Perspective

“Underneath my outside face there’s a face that none can see. A little less smiley, a little less sure, but a whole lot more like me.”

– Silverstein (2011, p. 132)

6.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter gives an account of the findings of phase two of the research. The chapter begins with an introduction, including a brief overview of the demographic information, methods, and procedures associated with phase two. The collection of two types of data simultaneous characterised phase two: field research data and interview data. First, the findings associated with the field research data is presented. A thematic map of the findings associated with the interview data is then presented (see Figure 11). The findings derived from the interview data, organised with respect to causal layer, are then presented to conclude the chapter.

6.2 Introduction

As outlined in chapter four, phase two of the research involved a qualitative case study style approach to the exploration of the lived experience of elite level athletes of one particular sport. Athletes associated with this sport were observed across a three day period during a national training camp and the collated field research data analysed via qualitative content analysis. Three athletes were also engaged in face to face semi-structured interviews. These interview data were analysed via Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). Of particular interest, the juxtaposition of the observed field research data alongside interview data provided a detailed and contextualised account of athletes’ subjective lived experience and elucidated their day to day interactions within their socio-contextual environment. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner (1977) ecological systems theory such insight positioned the macrosystem as more proximal than traditionally considered.

6.3 Field Research Data

The field research data indicated that the governance of this sport was athlete focused. The sport achieved balance between promoting a professional training environment, while enabling opportunities for athletes to have ownership over and responsibility for themselves, aspects of their training and their future, empowering them to be more than a ‘robotic’ athlete. This data also gave an account of the day to

day experiences of elite level athletes during an elite level training camp for their sport.

6.3.1 'On field'

The camp itself followed a regime, where between 8 am to 6 pm athletes' daily activities were scheduled, including training sessions, meetings, lunch and other breaks. Athletes had limited control over their day to day, hour to hour, lived experience. However, despite this scheduling, athletes were afforded some autonomy for their training. It was athletes' responsibility to report to each training session on time, with all required uniform and equipment, without prompting from coaches. Further, athletes were also granted some say in how long they (individually) trained. For example, instead of a session being governed by the schedule, athletes, via appropriate and clear communication with the coaching staff, could adapt their training duration dependent on how they felt, physically *and* mentally. The only exception to this was in 'testing' sessions, where athletes had to complete all testing exercises before they could finish a session. During regular sessions coaches would stay with an athlete if they wanted to continue working on a particular skill after the scheduled session had been completed, similarly an athlete could leave the session before the scheduled end time if they felt their body had had enough. This seemed to have a positive impact on the relationship between athlete and coach, and clearly empowered the athletes, giving a sense of autonomy, responsibility and accountability.

Alongside access to formal individual interventions and support delivered by the sport, team, and psychologist/s, a mindfulness programme was incorporated within the camp regime. This program was of particular interest. It was not an additional commitment, but scheduled within the training program as regular sessions. The program was delivered in a group setting at the conclusion of a particular session, and it was compulsory for athletes to attend. This suggested to the authors that fostering these mental strategies and skills were considered equivalent to basic skills and technical training sessions, and considered in conjunction with the employed sports psychologists being present at the camp, demonstrated an appreciation of the mental side of sport as well its physicality. After discussions with coaching staff it became apparent this mindfulness programme was not implemented as a means of enhancing athletic and competitive performance, but more so a focus on the

meditative value of mindfulness. This suggests that mental recovery, and wellbeing, were also priorities.

6.3.2 'Off field'

Opportunities for open communication and self-reflection were an important component of off field 'training'. During this training camp, each week started with a team meeting, where coaches and players sat together and discussed the previous week's sessions, what was coming up in the current week, and shared their positive and negative experiences. This was a trusting, respectful and non-judgemental environment; athletes were given the space to identify what had gone well or not so well for them, and coaching staff also shared their observations. This meeting was casual in nature, not formally chaired by any one individual, and seemed to serve more as a forum for counsel than the traditional notions of a team meeting. Athletes were encouraged to be open, honest and reflexive about their experiences in front of each other, which was important in the development of trust and camaraderie between athletes. Further, instead of athletes being told by coaching staff where they had not performed well the previous week, athletes were afforded the space to self-identify, and then encouraged to be reflexive in order to come up with an explanation. Such behaviour was modelled from the most senior athletes at the camp, to the juniors. A 'reflections, goals, and values' board was also utilised as an additional mode of self-reflection, and open communication between athlete and coach.

This sport adopted various strategies to encourage and empower athletes to be more than just an 'athlete'. Strategies were embedded within the training camp, and, by extension, the sport at large. A personal development day was scheduled each week, that is, no physical training sessions. Athletes would instead attend presentations, education sessions, and/or engage with studies. Additionally multiple staff, beyond coaches, were employed to ensure athletes were well supported off field. These included psychologists, player developmental managers, and administrative staff. Such staff assisted athletes to engage with formal and/or tertiary education programs (e.g., TAFE, university, personal/professional development courses such as First Aid or personal training) and encouraged athletes to consider themselves as more than a 'one dimensional athlete', aiding the development of an identity and sense of worth independent of their athletic skills. Where athletes' control over their athletic experience is often limited, this type of support off field would likely

contribute to a sense of control over their lived experience outside just being an athlete, and additionally their futures beyond a sporting career.

6.4 Thematic map

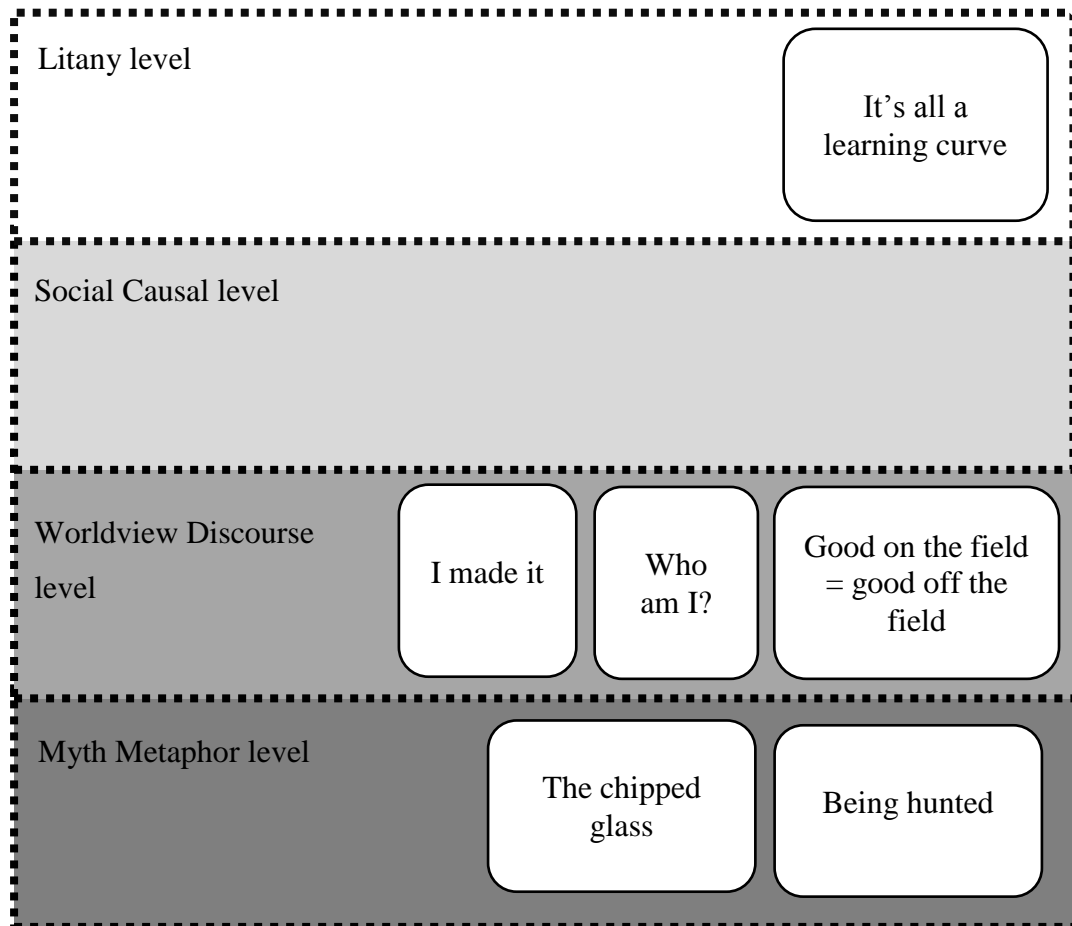


Figure 11 Thematic map of findings generated from Causal Layered Analysis: phase two.

6.5 Interview Data

Research findings from interviews are presented as themes specific to each of the causal layers. A number of the dynamics that emerged across the CLA of interview data of phase two, as expected, mirrored the dynamics present at phase one. However, the analysis also revealed additional insights with respect to particular social dynamics and process, discourses, and metaphors that were salient for the informants at the time of the interviews. The findings presented below capture the insights that contribute to the nuanced understanding of the lived experience of elite level athletes of one sport in Australia. The subtle differences present across the findings of phase one compared to phase two may be due to the nature of conducting a single sport study. That is, these findings may speak to the structural dynamics and core narratives associated with this one sport rather than the lived experience of elite level athletes overall.

All informants competed in the same sport and as such despite only interviewing three informants a number of key commonalities of experience were apparent. Even with the different stages of career trajectory each informant was at, these informants shared commonalities of experiences in terms of their pathways into the top levels of their sport, training settings and contexts, media attention, and support structures. As such, the findings presented below likely serve to provide a snapshot of the unique experiences of this one sport. It is also important to note given all informants were present at a particular training camp and, as such, it is possible particular themes, topics, and experiences, were salient for each informant at the time of their interview.

6.5.1 Litany level

One main theme emerged from the Litany level on understanding (see Figure 12): It's all a learning curve. The notion of learning one's sport was apparent in the interview data in phase one, issues related to a learning curve were more salient across the data in phase two, particularly as informants transitioned into higher levels of their sport.

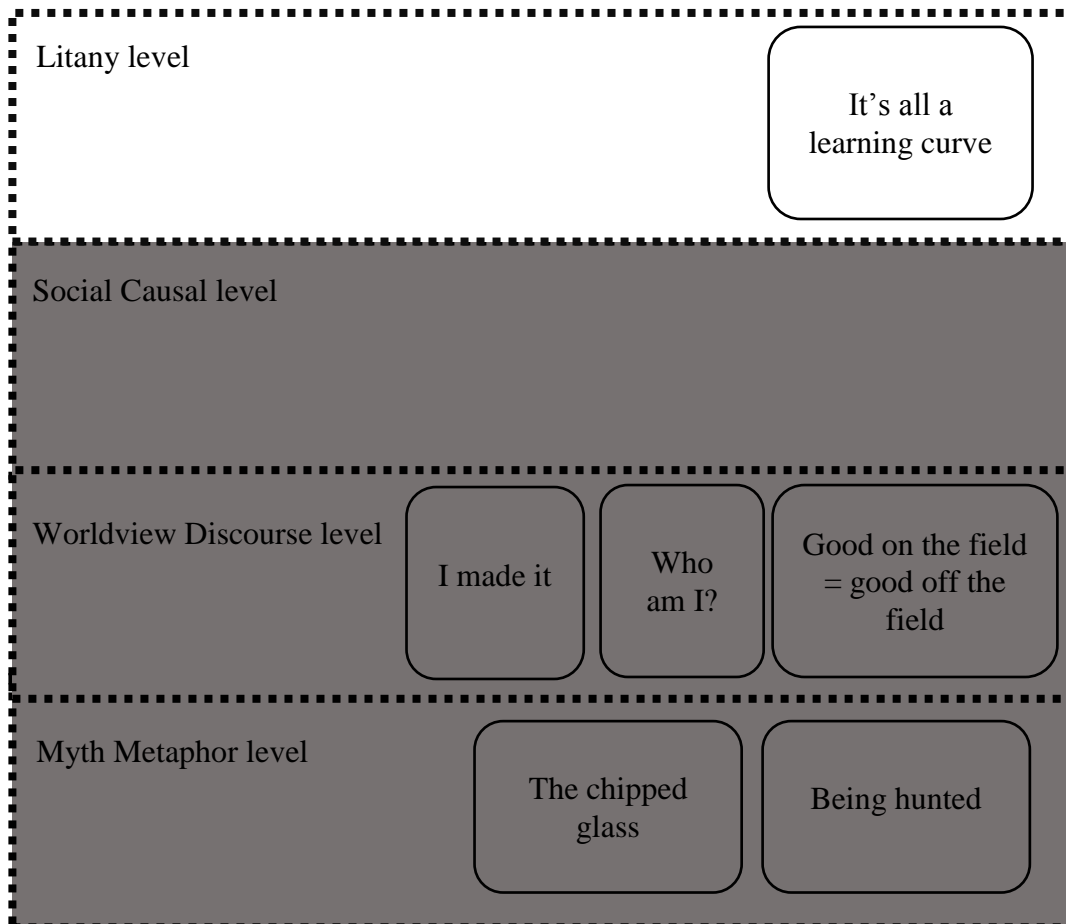


Figure 12 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Litany level of Causal Layered Analysis: phase two.

6.5.1.1 *It's all a learning curve*

Informants understood that capability was learned and earned, rather than being innate. However, a lack of leniency for athletes' mistakes at the top level of this sport was apparent, which positioned athletes as innately capable. Informants noted that athletes were required to be ready to deliver successful performances on demand, particularly on debut. However, informants reflected this does not appear to be the reality. For example,

I had just come off a really good series playing [juniors] and I definitely didn't deserve I don't think I was ready to be able to play at that [next] level um and played a few games and did not do well at all.

This quote illustrates a tension between the individual and the system, where the system was ready for the athlete, but the athlete was not yet ready for the system. This speaks to a 'ready or not' mentality associated with the top level of sport, however, there was limited discourse around the learning curve; the time required to learn their craft. It was clear opportunities were presented to informants based on what the system needed (i.e., athlete's current good form) and not the readiness of the athlete (i.e., being mentally and physically capable to compete at the next level of sport). There were numerous factors related to mind and body that compromised informants' ability to take advantage of opportunities presented to them. For example one participant reflected,

A lot of [athletes] don't harden up until they're a bit older you know whereas sometimes with some other sports the earlier you are you know your early 20s are sort of your best times um but with [sport] and with my position it's sort of like the back end of your 20s and early 30s are probably your physical prime.

This comment demonstrates that informants were not always innately ready, or able, to take advantage of opportunities presented to them; either the mind may be willing but the body unable, or vice versa.

Similarly, athletes' learning curve extended to the development of coping skills. A tension was apparent between what was offered by the system, in terms of coping, and what worked for informants. Informants reflected on a number of coping strategies that were imposed on them as athletes. However, despite these strategies being logically valid, that is, informants could understand why they *should* work and why they would be delivered to athletes at large, in reality they did not always meet what informants needed. Again, this gave rise to a tension between what the system needed from the athlete and what the athlete needed. That is, the system provided a particular coping strategy for its athletes, with the expectation of athletes would be ready to perform, neglecting the individuality of athletes, and the utility or effectiveness of that strategy for each athlete.

Informants noted that the coping strategies implemented by one athlete would not necessarily be appropriate, or beneficial, to anyone else. Informants seemed cognisant of having to find what worked for them experientially, "I think the only

way you realise what works for you is to actually do that stuff”, “so it’s probably the biggest setback...the biggest challenge that I have had to come across so far is the amount of injuries and learning how to deal with them” and “yeah at the end of the day that’s just what just knowing the game and knowing what works for you...and that’s something you can’t do unless you go through all this”. However, informants were continually offered blanket approaches by their sport, “I listened to information and I just felt like I had to do it because they said this is what works, but is it really what works for [me]? Is it really?” These comments illustrate that informants were aware that the governance of the sport functioned to enable them to reach their potential, and the perceived benefit of being exposed to various coping strategies, mechanisms and interventions. Despite this informants indicated ultimately they needed to be the ones to determine what worked best for them in terms of a trial and error process, rather than being forced to adhere to those interventions imposed by the system/s.

6.5.2 Social Causal level

No additional insights with respect to the Social Causal level understanding of the lived experience of elite level athletes, beyond what emerged at phase one of the research, manifested in this phase. Issues of informants’ relationships with coaches and support staff, which mirrored findings in phase one, were present across the data in this phase.

6.5.3 Worldview Discourse

Three main themes emerged from the Worldview Discourse layer of understanding (see Figure 13): I made it; Who am I?; and, Good on the field = good off the field. These themes build on the findings of phase one of the research. The themes ‘I made it’ and ‘Who am I?’ reflect the athlete worldview of themselves and ‘Good on the field = good off the field’ captures informants perception of the public’s worldview of athletes. These themes mirror the themes of *all or nothing* and *blinded to reality* presented at the worldview discourse level of phase one of the research. Here themes elucidate the influence of these differing worldviews on athletes’ lived experience, particularly with respect to issues of value, worth, and identity.

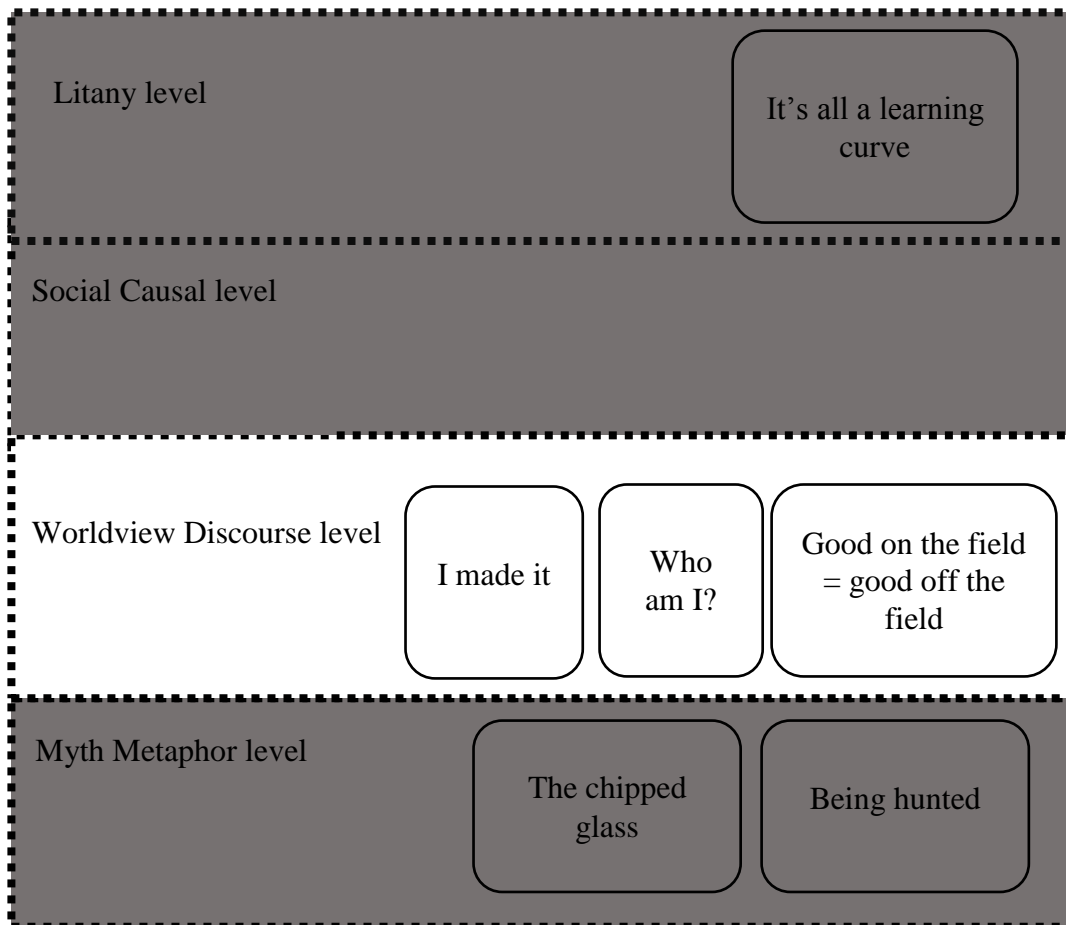


Figure 13 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Worldview Discourse level of Causal Layered Analysis: phase two.

6.5.3.1 *I made it*

This theme represents a key component of informants' sense of self-worth and 'making it.' An important moment identified by informants was 'the debut' in terms of *I made it*. This was conceptualised as a pivotal and defining moment of an athletic career, no matter how that career progressed. For example informants reflected, "making my Aussie debut...yeah my international Australian debut...yeah that has been the highest point of my career so far um that was pretty special", "it was always the dream to play [sport] for Australia", and "oh the two big moments are probably making my debut with [state]...then making my [national] debut um so there the two biggest moments that I can think of". These comments demonstrate informants' feelings of achievement, and the realisation of a dream, that are attached to 'the debut'.

Beyond the debut, indicators of 'making it' were anchored to the sport's quantification of how good informants were as athletes. For example, one participant

reflected, "...it wasn't until I became important because I had a contract and I was getting paid". In the context of this sport being awarded a contract served as the quantification of athletes' being at the top echelon of their sport, and by extension, their perceived importance and worth within that setting.

6.5.3.2 *Who am I?*

This theme captures informants' understanding of identity and represents the interdependence of their on field and off field self. This theme speaks to implicit understandings of what you *should* be as an elite level athlete and the role they have to play. Once informants had made it to the highest level of their sport, they no longer existed as an individual, a person, merely an athlete and a part of a system. This dynamic appeared to be underpinned by an inseparability of the athlete from their brand. While informants could attempt to use avenues to communicate their own representation of their 'brand', for instance, "you can try and put your brand out there and really start to open up to the public and let them know what you are like as a person", formal media platforms were perceived the more accepted conceptualisation of who they were for the public. For example,

...the thing is with sport people judge you solely what you're like on the field and pretty much that's what you're like as a person and the thing is people don't actually know you as a person ...and that's the thing like the media can paint a picture of what you're like and people just follow that and don't really know.

Informants perceived who they are on field, determined who they are perceived to be off field. Further, informants became synonymous with 'their brand', a representation of their sport. Reflections revealed this athlete brand, as perpetuated by the media, was as important to the longevity of a career as physical capabilities, mental wellbeing and positive performances. Damage to the brand could have personal consequences (i.e., tarnish career) as well as sport wide repercussions (i.e., compromise the reputation of the sport at large), for example, "it's something that is so serious and it like effects your brand forever, and it's something that is very hard to get back", "I think the way you represent off the field as well and the way you hold yourself is extremely important" and,

I had an incident last year that could have blown out to be really bad but I was very lucky with how it was dealt with, and I yeah it definitely was a big

realisation for me that yeah this is a big problem, this can affect you for your whole career.

These reflections indicate that it is not just sport that can define a sporting career; it is also defined by who informants were perceived to be off the field. Informants did not exist as their own person, rather they were perceived to be what their brand represented. This dynamic serves to dehumanise the individual, reducing them to a controlled image ‘sold’ to the public. It was also evident informants had a sense of moral responsibility to their sport and the wider community. For example one participant believed their mistakes would compromise participation in their sport at a grass roots level,

Yeah, well the thing is because um because there is so many kids too around that sort of look up to you as well, to be an elite sportsman or sportswoman you have to be a role model. To what extent you do that is up to you but I think you know you have to.

And,

If you didn't have the people at the highest level promoting the game and being good role models then um you know then a lot of people wouldn't want to play and certainly the parents wouldn't want to put [their children] in a sport where that's not great.

These comments indicate informants could not separate themselves from the moral responsibilities and expectations associated with their brand. Informants no longer played the sport, they were the sport.

6.5.3.3 Good on the field = good off the field

This theme speaks to informants’ conceptualisation of the public’s worldview of elite level athletes. This theme presents a perceived interdependence of informants’ performances on and off the field, and the overall experience of being an athlete, particularly in terms of public support. This positioned the Australian public as fickle, where their support of athletes was dependent on their results. When informants performed well on field, direct and indirect experiences off field were also positive, however, a poor performance on field often resulted in negative experiences off field. For example informants reflected, “The big thing I find is when you’re doing well like it’s good you know the people are behind you and that but the same people are quickly to turn off you as soon as you go bad”, “it can be good and bad like when

you're going well you've got the whole country behind you and when you're going bad you sort of have the whole country not with you" and,

I mean it's probably all good when you're on top of the world and [performing really well every game] I think is more of when you're not doing so well and the media just come at you really hard and you can't seem to shake it really.

These comments illustrate that informants' felt the public's support of them was anchored to the quality, or success, of their sporting performances on field. The media was of particular concern, whereby media attention was perceived to be influenced by informants' on field sporting performances. Although informants' were cognisant that their sporting performances would be scrutinised by the media, especially if the performance was not 'successful', for example, "I had not [scored] the whole [season], literally up till the final and um yeah there were reports in the media, big articles and back pages and things like that were saying that oh yeah, I needed to be flicked...", it was also clear that poor performances were perceived to serve as an 'invitation' for media to target informants' personal lives,

Um I suppose when you're going bad I think the media tends to bring your personal life into as well a bit um which is not great but that's what they can do so and they're all about making a quid.

These comments highlight that informants thought the conduct of the media was similarly dependent on athletes' on field results. That is, the type of media attention attracted when athletes' performed well, or were victorious differed significantly to loss or poor performances. Scrutiny of athletes, clearly, extended beyond performance itself rather than all commentary being anchored to constructive considerations. This seemed to have a negative impact on their overall experience.

6.5.4 Myth Metaphor

The deepest layer of the analysis revealed two themes (see Figure 14): The chipped glass; and Being hunted. These themes explored and challenged the cultural and fundamental archetypes that underpin the notion of 'athlete', and represent the fragility of the informants, physically and in terms of their careers. These themes extend the theme *the paradox of control*, which emerged at the myth metaphor level of the analysis in phase one. The theme *the chipped glass* serves an extension of the lack of control over athletes' bodies physically and ultimately retirement. The theme

being hunted reflects the lack of control athletes have over their public and social media presence as well as the conduct of the media.

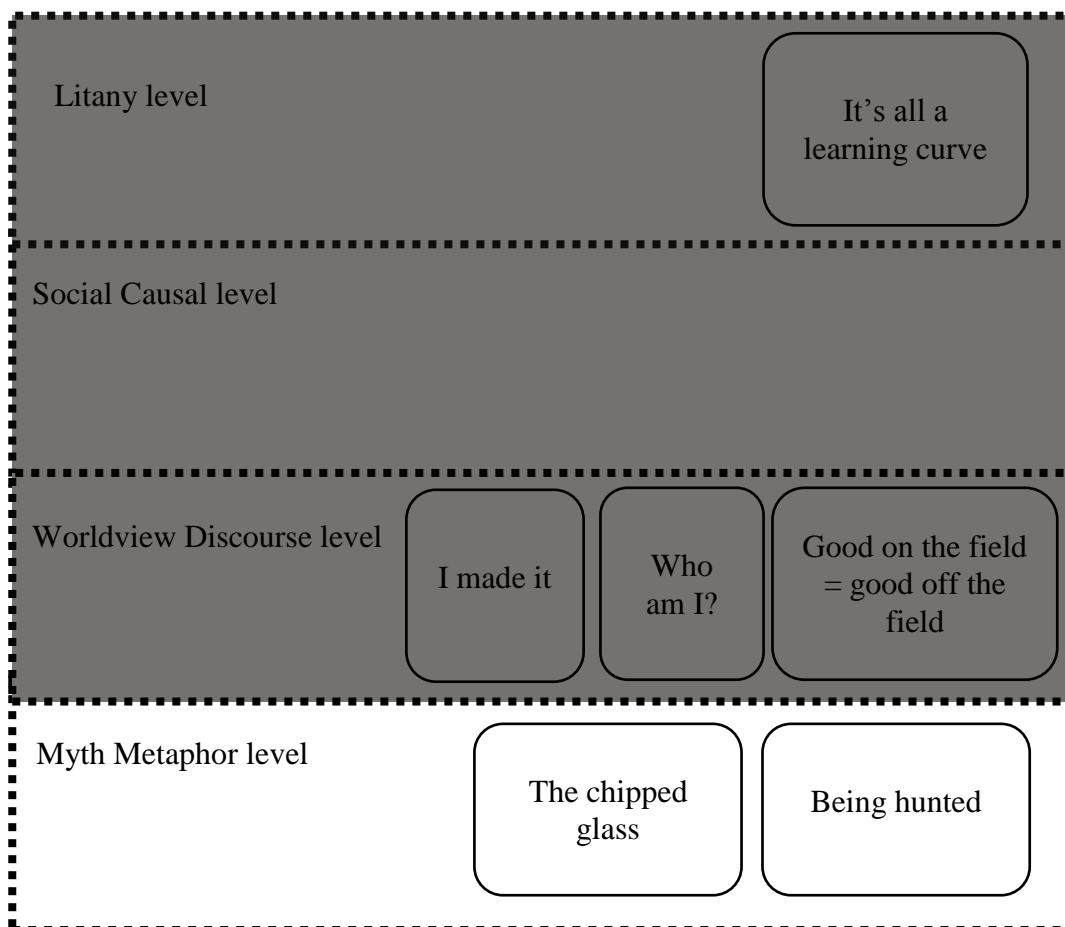


Figure 14 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Myth Metaphor level of Causal Layered Analysis: phase two.

6.5.4.1 *The chipped glass*

This theme represents the inevitable expiry of athletic careers and the fragility of athletes themselves. The athlete is glass, and on debut they chip. As their athletic career progresses they experience numerous factors that further compromise the integrity of the glass, such as injury, poor performances, non-selection, personal life, mental health, and media attention, where the chip becomes a crack, and that crack eventually breaks the glass, breaks the athlete, and their athletic career ends. The debut is the beginning of the end. For example, one participant reflected,

I just know that that's [season/career ending injury, getting dropped] going to happen because its sport. Um you can't really prepare for it, I just know it's going to happen so I'm just I guess, not waiting but yeah it's just in my mind that it's going to happen, you can't do anything to stop that.

And,

Being an [athlete] it takes its toll on the body um and yeah probably just the setbacks of you know reaching the highest level and performing there and then the next day you get injured and you're out 6 months, so it's sort of like there are so many times in a sporting career where you know you reach such high levels of excitement and then the next day it could all just be gone because of an injury and you just not able to do what you love to do.

This comment illustrates the understanding of the inevitability of the end of an athletic career. Of particular interest is the perception that this is usually due to something beyond the control of the participant, for example an injury or non-selection. The possibility of voluntary retirement, before the glass breaks, is not considered.

6.5.4.2 Being hunted

The media was perceived as pervasive and relentless in the contemporary sporting context. Underlying informants' experiences was the notion of being prey. This served as a metaphor for their lived experience. As athletes, informants' personal level lives were constantly targeted by both active and passive media attention, for example, "seems like reporters will go out on purpose and find stories and find people doing the wrong thing and stuff like that" and,

All the media are, well not the same, but similar. So they have a couple of questions that they actually want to ask you about the game and the sport, and a couple of sort of fishing ones that they just want to write up in the news or the radio or the newspaper.

These comments illustrate the constant media attention athletes attract, and the proactive strategies utilised by the media to get a story, any story. Instead of providing formal journalistic commentary on sport itself, the media was perceived to prioritise 'catching athletes out'. Additionally with the continued rise of social media platforms, it was not just professional media that hunted informants, but the wider on-line society. For example, one participant reflected, "with all the social media now everyone has a say so um basically everyone has a voice and it can get heard" and, "I mean there is so much with social media now and everything and everyone can have their say ... it's you know it's everywhere". These comments demonstrate the

inescapability of the media, in social level realms for informants (athletes), which results in a necessity to always be ‘performing’.

“...you know just wanting to be the best,
and second best was not good
enough and every day just constantly being
aware that you need to be the best...”

– Respondent; ex-elite athlete.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Research Findings: A Systemic Lens

“I never expect to see a perfect work from an imperfect man.”

– Alexander Hamilton

7.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter describes findings derived from phase one of the research and presents the experiences and observations of support staff. The chapter begins with an introduction, including a brief overview of the informant inclusion criteria and demographic information. A thematic map (see Figure 15) is then presented followed by the findings, organised typologically with respect to each level of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), commencing at the Litany level and concluding with the Myth Metaphor level.

7.2 Introduction

The findings described below were generated using CLA of data obtained via a series of semi-structured interviews with support staff informants. As described in chapter four, support staff informants were recruited alongside elite level athletes and included individuals who were currently, or has previously been, employed as either a sports psychologist (n = 4) or player development manager (n = 1). To be included in the current research informants' responsibilities within their role had to include the support and/or service of athletes' wellbeing or mental health. The CLA gave rise to two distinct domains of understanding: a view of the lived experience of elite level athletes (presented below); and the conceptualisation of the role of supporting elite level athletes (discussed in chapter eight).

7.3 Thematic Map

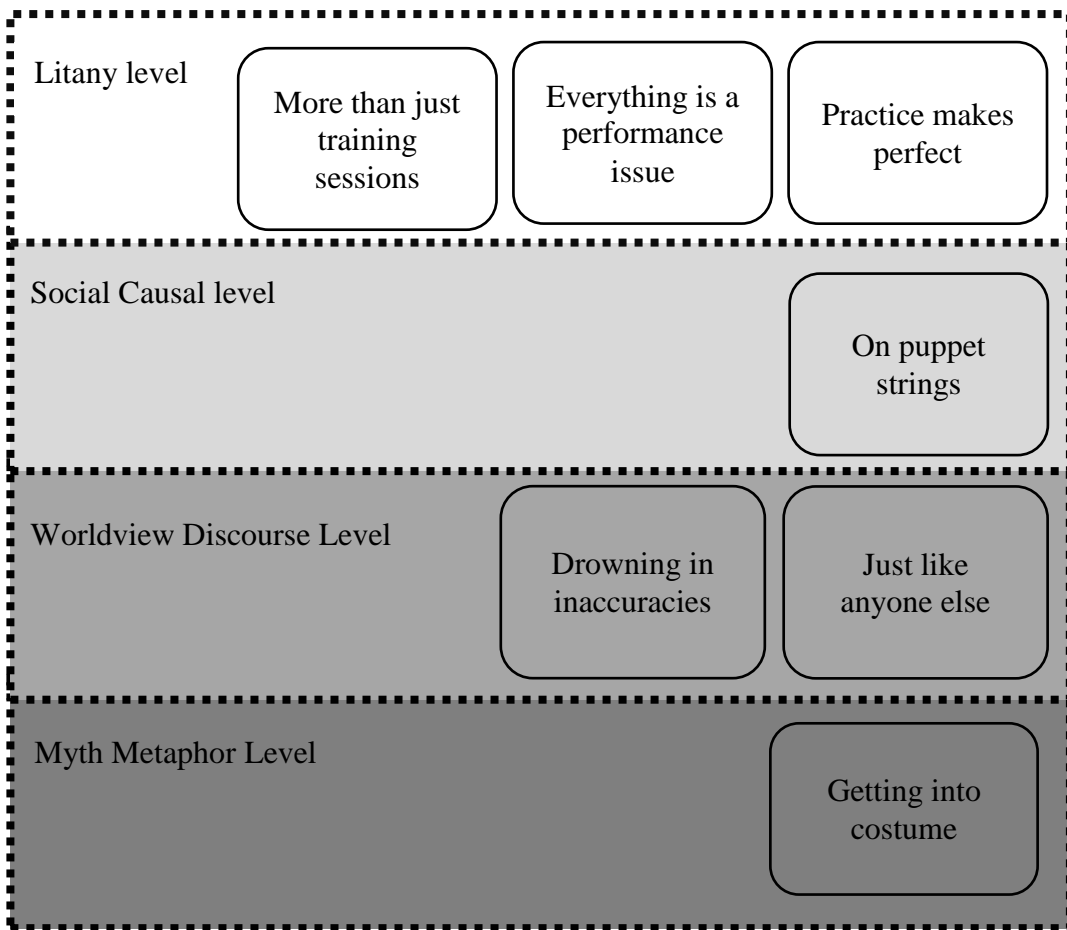


Figure 15 Thematic map of findings generated from Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

7.4 Seen and Heard: Observations of the Lived Experience of Australian Athletes

The insights provided by support staff informants were anchored to their observations and understandings of elite level athletes. These insights offered an alternate lens of understanding, adding to the overview of the lived experience of elite level athletes. These findings provide an understanding of what the lived experience of elite level athletes looks like, rather than how it is experienced. Support staff reported on the hardships they witnessed athletes experience, and their experiences supporting elite level athletes through some of these concerns. A number of the findings mirror the dynamics that emerged from athletes' accounts of their lived experience, particularly the 24 hours a day nature of athletes' lives and lifestyles, the interdependence of athletes' on field and off field contexts, and the perception of the Australian public as ignorant.

7.4.1 Litany level

Three main themes emerged at the Litany level of analysis (see Figure 16): More than just the training sessions; Everything is a performance issue; and Practice makes perfect. These themes mirror a number of dynamics represented in the theme *blood, sweat, and tears* that emerged in phase one of the research, as well as the theme *It's all a learning curve* which manifested at phase two. These themes serves as an extension of such findings and capture informants' common observations, descriptions, and explanations of athletes' experiences training, competing, and living as an elite level athlete. The themes reflected a view of the lived reality of the life and lifestyle associated with elite level sport in Australia day-to-day.

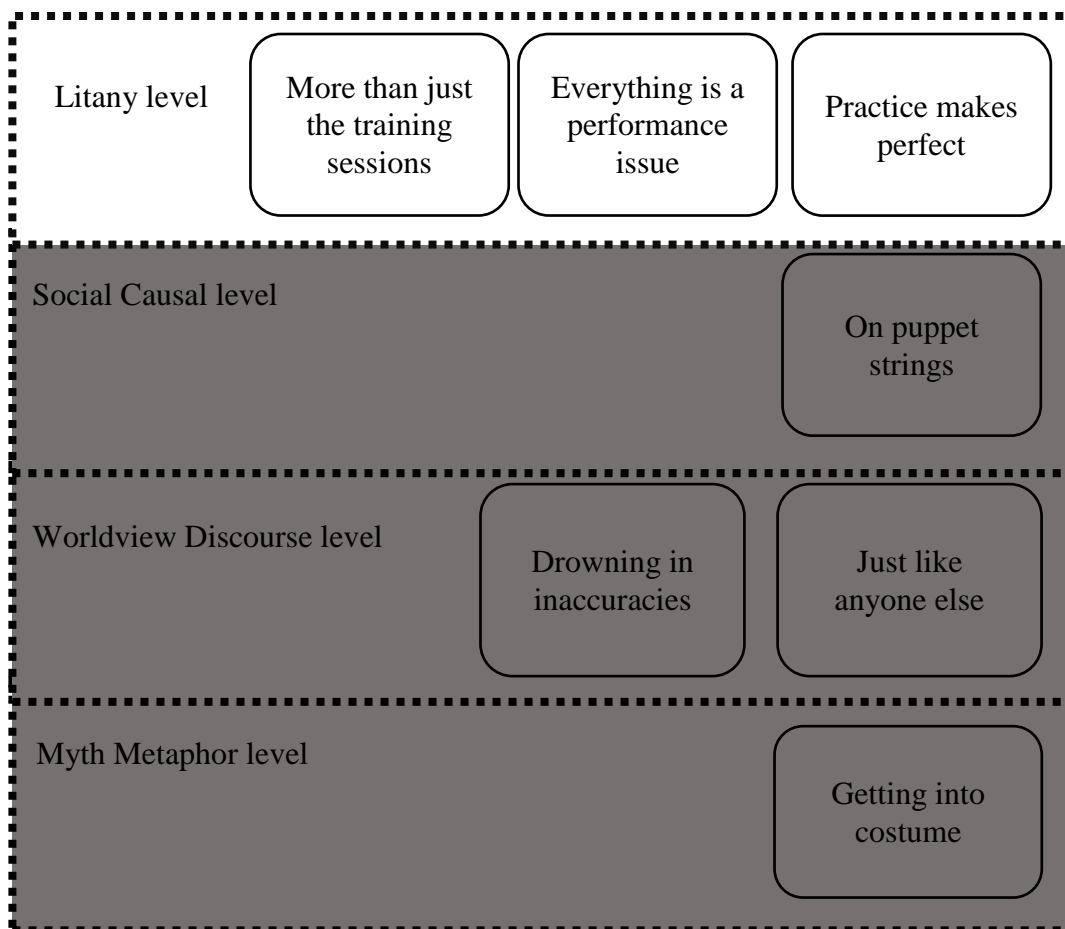


Figure 16 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Litany level of Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

7.4.1.1 More than just the training sessions

This theme captures the nature of being an elite level athlete and characterised their lived experience as more complex than just attending and participating in training sessions. Athletes' schedules comprised a number of tasks and responsibilities in addition to formal training sessions. As a result, athletes are not afforded many opportunities to turn off from being an athlete. Informants reflected,

Yep they train have an on field session they've got a bit of spare time during the day and then during their lunchtime and then they go to the gym in the afternoon. They spend that free time doing analysis they spend it doing uni work. They spend it recovering like say sleeping and just resting because they physically need to do that. They spend it getting treatment because they are injured... [they] have a full schedule. Quite often fuller than normal people. And,

Um you know they might start at 7.30 – 8 o'clock in the morning and then they mightn't finish their promo at a club until 8.30 at night. And then they've got to get up and do it the next day...

These comments demonstrate that functioning as an elite level athlete is not just about training. Athletes' free time (time outside of formal training sessions) is not free time at all, rather it is used to complete tasks that aid in their capacity to continue to train and compete, or attend to organisational responsibilities.

7.4.1.2 Everything is a performance issue

This theme represents the interdependence of the on-field (training, and competing as an elite athlete) and off-field (for example, athletes' wellbeing, relationships, or financial status) contexts. The impact of this is twofold. First, issues of performance affect athletes' subjective wellbeing, and second, issues that occurred outside performing affect performance. Informants reported a number of performance issues that defined athletes' low points. For example, "...ah you know low points around um you know I think yeah not achieving the performance you know ability rankings places medals you know wins" and, "so I think you know so there are certainly those performance things um and not, not performing well but you know my other team mates and competitors performing well and taking spots." These comments position athletic performance, and the quality of athletic performance, as a central feature of athletes' subjective experience, where poor performance gives rise to stress.

In addition, issues that were experienced off the field were conceptualised as problematic, not because they represented issues in their own right, but because they impacted athletes' performance or their capacity to perform to the best of their ability. Informants reflected on the myriad concerns that manifested beyond performance that subsequently affected performance, for example, "It's the culture you know it's the organisational aspects of that program and if I think um and that for me that's the thing everything is a performance issue", "I certainly see it spill more the other way yeah from personal life into performance yeah, yeah" and,

But yeah I have experienced athletes who when asked to go and speak to them about some aspect of their game, their performance, they've just looked at me and said 'well this and this is not happening in my relationship so you know

I've been away from home for 3 months, um all I want to do is go home at the moment.'

These comments highlight the interdependence of performance and off field stressors, and the impact that events outside performance can have on performance, in terms of preparation and execution. That is, everything affects performance, and everything is a performance issue.

7.4.1.3 Practice makes perfect

This theme captures the learning curve associated with performing as an elite level athlete. As well as learning the skills and tactics of their sport, athletes have to learn what specific strategies they can utilise, or need, to elicit their best performances. It is widely accepted that there is a learning curve associated with the physicality of sport, that is, it takes significant time investment and practice to gain mastery of the skills and tactics associated with sport. However, informants reflected the learning curve associated with the developmental of athletes' mental skills and coping strategies beyond the physical skills and processes sport, is rarely acknowledged as a reality of athletes' development. Informants identified athletes' own mental processes and routines, like physical skills, required practice. Further, the development of such routines were positioned as important to ensure optimal performances on field. For example, "so I think we've now evolved in this sport over the last 7 or 8 years in implementing psychology support as development of mental skills just like physical skills",

So just like the physical triggers we need to practice the mental triggers so I think they're sort of the main ways of you know when you're with the athletes regularly then that becomes a consistent part of their preparation and performance.

And,

I think there's that level where we are getting increasingly involved in saying 'ok um which is your ideal thought pattern when you are playing well, what's your ideal feeling when you're playing well, how do you replicate that, how do you train that, how do you practice that'.

These comments illustrate that support staff viewed the development and practice of athletes' physical and mental routines for sporting performance as important. This was positioned as an important strategy to cope with the pressures of

performing and to ensure athletes perform to the best of their ability. That is, the development and training of mental skills and routines was considered by informants as equivalent to athletes practicing their physical skills. To do this, athletes need to attend to and reflect on each performance to discern what might affect their performance. This further enabled athletes to determine where something might have gone wrong in the event of a poor performance. This proactive process occurs beyond the training field.

Informants reflected on athletes' learning, on and off the field, as experiential. That is, athletes learned how to cope via experiencing particular situations. The development of athletes' coping strategies required significant time investment and practice and, the more opportunities athletes had to practice using their strategies, the better they were able to execute them. This improved athletes' capacity to cope with the pressures of the athlete lifestyle and subsequently, were more likely to produce optimal performances on field. As such, the more time athletes had training, competing, and living as an athlete at the top level of their sport, the more successful they were. Opportunities to learn to practice competitive routines were frequent, however, opportunities for athletes to develop their understanding of and learning how to cope with lifestyle pressures, such as the media, public attention, isolation, were significantly fewer. For example, "Usually I say that [engage with the media stories] because you can't they've got to learn to deal with it", "I think the top athletes have learnt to separate from that... Whereas I think the younger athletes that are just coming through um can be much more sensitive to that" and,

...our national performance squad here who are young athletes from 19 to about 23, 24 talking about how they're coping, and some of them are not coping terribly well with living away from home, managing themselves, living in an apartment, cooking for themselves, doing all that sort of thing. And then having travelled with the national team, it was very quickly observable how most of the players, well the experienced ones, would get into a routine, you know they train, they sleep properly, they eat in certain ways, they set themselves up in little groups within the team so they could have things to do,

These comments demonstrate that athletes are often more 'successful' when they have had longer to learn how to accept and cope with performing as an elite level athlete, particularly with respect to those aspects of their lived experience that exist beyond the field.

7.4.2 Social Causal level

One main theme emerged from the Social Causal level (see Figure 17): On puppet strings. This theme captures an understanding of systemic and organisational influences on the lived experience of elite level athletes as seen by support staff.

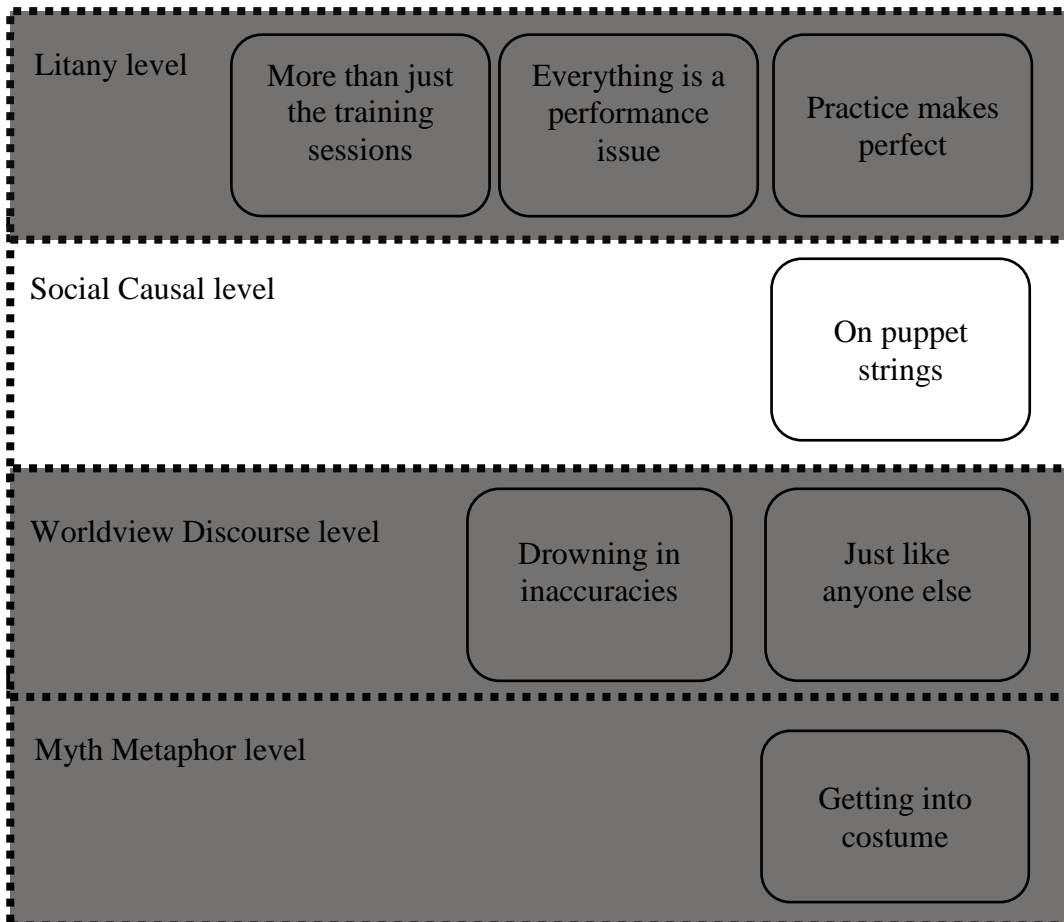


Figure 17 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Social Causal level of Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

7.4.2.1 *On puppet strings*

This theme speaks to the lack of agency associated with the lifestyle of elite level athletes. The athletic lifestyle does not afford the time and space for athletes to function as autonomous individuals and athletes do not have agency over their day to day decisions. Rather their lives are scheduled for them. Informants reflected, “But I think the professional environment is creating more of those issues. As I said its one dimensional, it takes away control and its very critical”, “Issues from the day-to-day structure of your life and the boredom of it, almost, that the one-dimensional nature of just doing physical things in a repetitive way” and,

The lack of control athletes have in some sports um where you know its very coach orientated and um and again particularly in some of those [professional sport] codes it's very controlled from above. Um combined with as I said earlier the potential media criticism, um coach criticism, um lack of the opportunity to be able to achieve day to day. It's actually a recipe for mental health issues.

These comments highlight the one dimensional, and physically repetitive, lifestyle imposed on elite level athletes which has implications for their mental health. This positions the lack of control as an important consideration in understanding the impact of the athletic lifestyle on elite level athletes.

7.4.3 Worldview Discourse level

Two main themes emerged from the worldview discourse layer of the analysis (see Figure 18): Drowning in inaccuracies; and Just like anyone else. Themes capture the tensions that underpin complex, and often competing, worldviews, value systems, and ideological and discursive assumptions of elite level athletes in Australia. At this level the themes represent the social construction of elite level athletes as defined by the public, as perceived by informants (Drowning in inaccuracies), and support staff themselves (Just like anyone else). Support staff's worldview of athletes captured in this analysis reflects how athletes conceptualised themselves, as described in the theme *Perfectly imperfect* in phase one of the research.

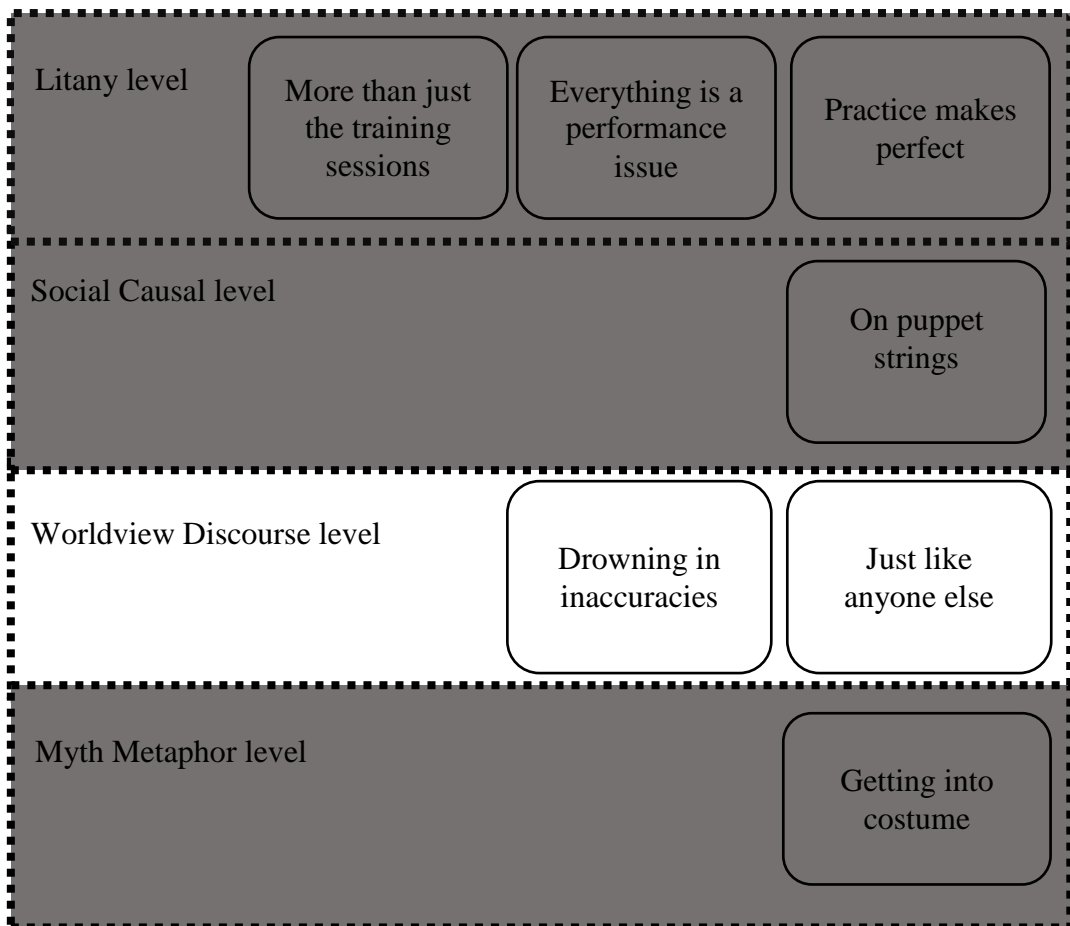


Figure 18 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Worldview Discourse level of Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

7.4.3.1 Drowning in inaccuracies

This theme describes the public discourses athletes were thought to exist within. Informants judged public opinion of the lifestyle of elite level athletes as ignorant and inaccurate and identified that the media and the public played an active role in the maintenance of such inaccuracies. Informants positioned the media having a significant role in and control of the public’s perceptions of athletes’ identity, worth, and successes on and off the field. For example, informants reflected, “I think depending on whether the media takes a liking to them or not they can be the villain or they can be you know the person that can do no wrong”, “I think the public tend to be quite critical of athletes because it mirrors the media approach that build up a new star pretty quickly and then chop them down” and,

I find the Australian media quite sensationalist to be honest. Like they are looking for the good story and a good story is someone falling down or um I find they tend to either play someone as a victim or crucify them.

These comments highlight that informants thought media and public opinion of elite level athletes was interdependent. This suggests that informants thought the public in general did not challenge media portrayals or representations of athletes, rather accepted them as truth. Alongside this symbiotic relationship between media representations of athletes and public perception, informants noted that the manner with which the media portrays individual athletes can affect that athlete. Informants commented on observing athletes' internalising media constructions of them, "well it does because the media helps shape their perception of themselves", and,

Because the media will create and depending on how close the identity is that the media creates of that person you know Sam Stosur as an example, the media perceive her as a choker and so that affects her how she views herself.

These comments illustrate that informants thought that the public accepted the stories and constructions of athletes perpetuated by the media as truth. Where athletes were observed to internalise such constructions, this dynamic was seen as particularly problematic, as it gave rise to additional stress.

In addition, informants commented on the public's contribution to the construction of athletes within the public discourses. Informants considered that the public felt entitled to voice their opinions about athletes generally and also about particular athletes' personal circumstances. As such, inaccurate commentaries continued to be presented across the public domains. For example, "keyboard warriors per se' get on forum aahhgghh and they have no idea..." and,

Sitting at the game on and there were two people behind me talking about this issue, and one person said "Oh what's going on with?", and this second person talking like they knew exactly what was going on rattled off on points X Y Z and said "So that's, and that's the problem." And I'm sitting there going and I'm sitting there in my head going I love how you are talking with so much authority about this particular issue when in reality you've got no idea and you've got it all wrong.

These comments demonstrate the inaccurate perception of athletes' lived experience and further serve to highlight informants understanding of the role the Australian public played in the public discourse surrounding elite level athletes. Further, informants thought the manner with which the public conceptualised elite level athletes was ignorant of the reality of their lived experience and positioned their lifestyle as easy and affluent. For example, informants reflected, "I don't think the

general public truly understands what it takes to be a really good athlete”, “probably that they’re, that they don’t have any issues, or that you know ‘you’re getting paid a lot of money to play sport, so what do you mean you’re bit a depressed’, so I think there’s some of that...”,

So I think the perception of a lot of people in the community is that athletes are overpaid in a lot of sports, and have this wonderful lifestyle and they would have no insight into the stress that we’re talking about with these athletes.

And,

I think they [the public] will look at [sport] for example and think they have it easy and I’m not saying they don’t have it easier compared to some athletes, some of them are getting paid a lot of money but they still work hard to be good at what they do.

These comments demonstrate informants thought that public perceptions of the elite level athletes and their lifestyle were not consistent with their own observations. Such conceptualisations seemed to undermine athletes’ efforts and hard work which are needed to be an elite level athlete. Further, these conceptualisations position significant monetary gain as synonymous with being an athlete. The underlying message that all athletes are rich and happy neglects the complexities and intricacies associated with the experience of being an elite athlete.

7.4.3.2 Just like anyone else

This theme represents informants’ conceptualisation of athletes as compared to their understanding of the public and the media. Informants commented on the public’s perception of elite level athletes as being synonymous with super heroes and being ‘super human.’ This led to a public perception of athletes as being immune to experiencing the life stressors experienced by individuals who are not athletes (i.e., financial, relational, familial, career). Informants commented on the humanity of elite level athletes, for example, “so that, that kind of gamut of for me at the end of the day athletes are people um so, so it you know they face the same challenges that non athletes do”, “a parent dies they are going to cry just as hard as you or I would you know there is nothing super human about these people they are just experts in one particular subject matter” and, “because they are and they have strengths and

weaknesses like us all and they have failings. And they are vulnerable to the same shit that you and me are vulnerable, you know, to.”

These comments illustrate that informants conceptualised athletes as *just like anyone else*, a person, nothing more nothing else. However, it was apparent this notion of athletes as people appeared to contradict the values, beliefs, and expectations of wider society. Informants spoke to an overarching societal belief that athletes are ‘better’ than non-athletes. This was particularly evident in the consideration of athletes’ off field behaviour. In particular informants thought athletes’ off field behaviour was often judged more harshly than the general public’s behaviour. For example, one informant reflected,

The reality is you will get any incident that a professional athlete has been involved in if you, you look back and you go well okay [they] did that, that’s what every other young man or young lady ah does in that same age group in that same space.

Informants considered athletes are held to a higher standard of acceptable behaviour.

7.4.4 Myth Metaphor level

This level of understanding revealed one main theme (see Figure 19): Getting into costume. This theme captures some of the socio-cultural and fundamental archetypes that underpin the construction and core narrative of ‘athlete’, and illustrate how these are seen to negatively affect the lived experience of elite level athletes in Australia. This theme serves as an extension of some of the key dynamics presented in the theme *The paradox of control* that emerged from athlete informants’ account of their experiences across phase one of the research. Further this theme also reflects the dynamics revealed at the myth metaphor level of phase two of the research.

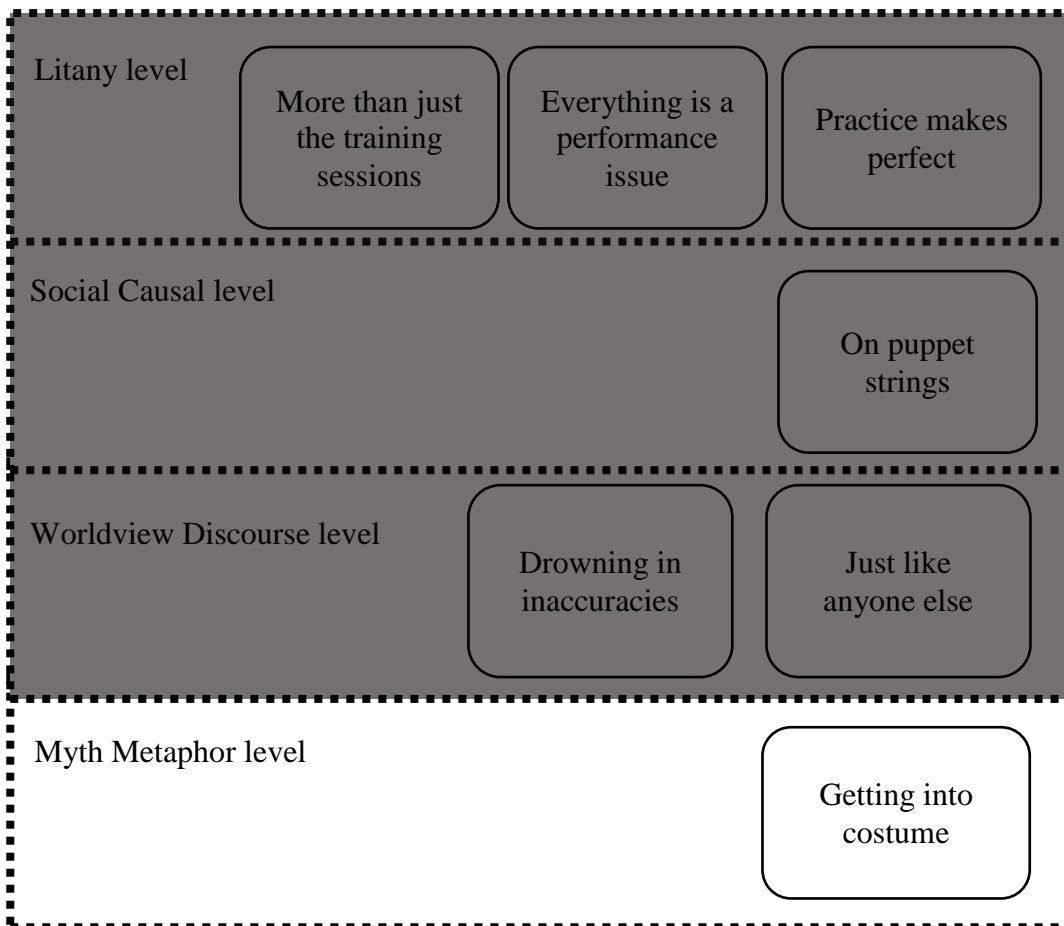


Figure 19 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Myth Metaphor level of Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

7.4.4.1 *Getting into costume*

A metaphor that seemed to underpin the lived reality of being an athlete was understood in terms of *getting into costume*, where athletes had to play the part of an athlete. Here, being an athlete is the costume, and its functionality is twofold. First, this costume could mask the effects of experiencing stresses, anxieties, and/or other mental health concerns, such as depression. While this may enable a particular performance at a particular time, informants noted the severe implications this can have for athletes' mental health, wellbeing and functionality in the long term. For example, informants reflected, "yeah. I've seen it a lot [*athletes perform even when experiencing poor mental health*]. It's been astounding that they can, given the very definition of generally a mental disorder is social and occupational dysfunction",

But I think it [stress/mental health] definitely affects them in terms of training so they carry that stress with them to training and therefore training is not as effective as it could be. And so you might only get an 80% effort out of them at

training instead of 100% effort. And an 80% effort over weeks and months is definitely going to limit how much they get out of themselves at training.

And,

But I have seen some that yeah are experiencing more moderate levels of distress and they can perform out there, but at some point um I think it's going to effect it, so I don't think you can sustain that for too long, but yeah I happens.

These comments highlight that athletes are seemingly able to function, to some extent, even when experiencing poor mental health, or other ailments, though it is clear such a level of function inevitably has an expiration date.

Second, this costume positioned athletes as constant performers. That is, once an athlete puts their costume on, as long as they have an audience, they cannot take it off: they are always athletes. The pervasive nature of the media in a contemporary society creates an audience for athletes. The media were perceived to view athletes as just a story and a source for entertainment. For example, informants reflected, "...and you know, that's pretty sensitive, you know if it's a personal problem it's personal, but the media don't believe that" and, "...because again they are probably more targeted in that the media is looking for a story amongst their athletes than in [*another sport*] would be". Here, an athlete in costume is fair game and the common decencies that would be afforded the general public, such as privacy, are absent. This comments highlight that informants thought the media were relentless and strategic in their quest for a story where such constant surveillance means athletes always have an audience. This is particularly problematic and means athletes are required to be rehearsed and measured in all their on and off behaviour.

The expectation and assumption of elite level athletes to fulfil the role of societal role models further results in a behavioural mandate imposed on athletes. For example, "well in your case it now means you have to behave exceptionally 100% of the time", and,

I think whether they like it or not they are role models. And I think that's just like any job, there are things you don't necessarily like about that job, but I think it's you just need to accept that once you get to a higher level that you are...so I think then along with that comes certain responsibilities that those athletes um and expectations that they should be held to.

These comments speak to some of the underlying behavioural expectations imposed on elite level athletes by broader society, further reiterating that they are always performing, on and off the field. This theme also captures athletes' lack of agency in terms of who they are. Athletes are seemingly defined by the perceptions and expectations of others and are required to manage the perceptions and expectations of themselves across a number of systems, particularly the public sphere. For example, "I think a lot of it is about perception of other people, perception of coaches, um expectation, um and so it takes them away from a focus on their own game and the processes that work for them", "that can certainly add pressure if you as an athlete buy into that perception and buy into pressure of that perception of that public profile of you creates", "you cannot control how the public react to the media you can only control what you do in terms of how you interpret that in terms of how you perceive that in terms of how you react to it" and,

All they can control is what they are doing, which is why I think they need to understand and there needs to be support around the expectation of how they act um because they can't control what the media is going to say.

These comments indicate that athletes are engaged in a constant juggling act, negotiating the expectations, perceptions, and dynamics of each system. Attempting to adhere to the perceived responsibilities and expectations of each system appears to give rise to additional stresses beyond their sporting performances. The only defence athletes had against the narratives the media perpetuate about them is controlling their own behaviour. However, this places the responsibility of any negative media attention solely on the athlete and places all responsibility on athletes not to provide the media with material by behaving poorly. While athletes can control, to a degree, their behaviour, how the media report that behaviour, as positive or negative, is out of their control. Any control athletes are empowered to have here seems to be a façade.

"Disappointments would be you've done all the preparation right and still couldn't string everything together."

– respondent, ex-elite athlete

CHAPTER EIGHT

Research Findings: Supporting Australian Athletes

“There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.”

– William Shakespeare

8.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter describes findings derived from phase one of the research and presents the experiences of support staff informants. The chapter begins with a brief introduction (informant inclusion criteria and demographic information was previously outlined in chapter seven). This is followed by a thematic map (see Figure 20). The chapter concludes by outlining the findings in detail, organised typologically with respect to each level of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), commencing at the Litany level and concluding with the Myth Metaphor level.

8.2 Introduction

As previously described in chapter seven, the research findings derived from the CLA of support staff data were two fold. In addition to the observed account of athletes’ lived experience presented in chapter seven, the analysis of the data obtained from support staff provided important insight with respect to how athletes are supported. This elucidated the types of concerns and experiences athletes tended to approach support staff for as well as the current support interventions available to athletes. Such insight was particularly important with respect to a key research question ‘How are Australian elite level athletes currently supported?’

8.3 Thematic Map

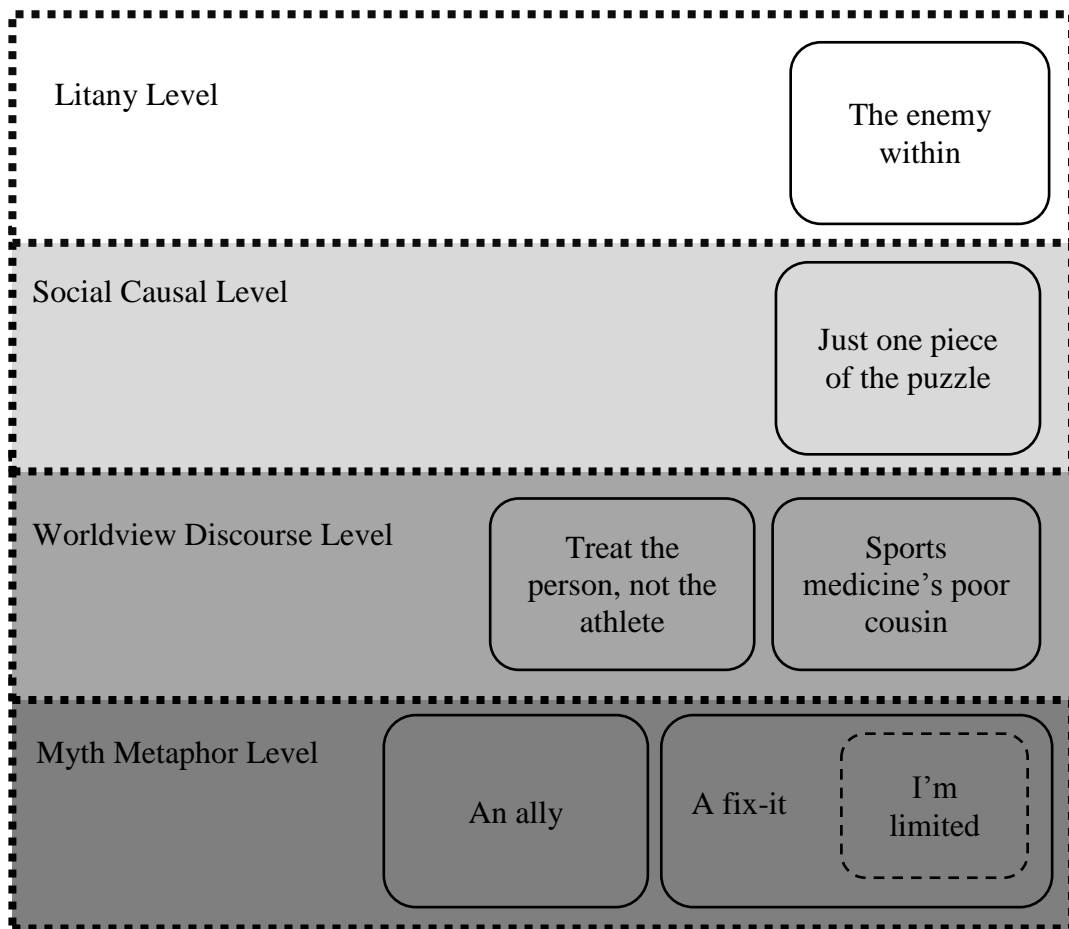


Figure 20 Thematic map of findings generated from Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

8.4 Supporting Australian Elite level Athletes

These findings highlighted a number of barriers faced by support staff in the provision of support to elite level athletes. Further, important worldview, discourses, and metaphors also emerged with respect to the support of elite level athletes. This chapter presents how support staff informants conceptualised the provision of support to athletes.

8.4.1 Litany level

The Litany level understanding of the analysis presented a key aspect of the lived experience of elite level athletes that required intervention. One main theme emerged at this level: The enemy within (see Figure 21). This theme reflected the reality that the athlete themselves, and their explanatory style, can work against them as their own enemy.

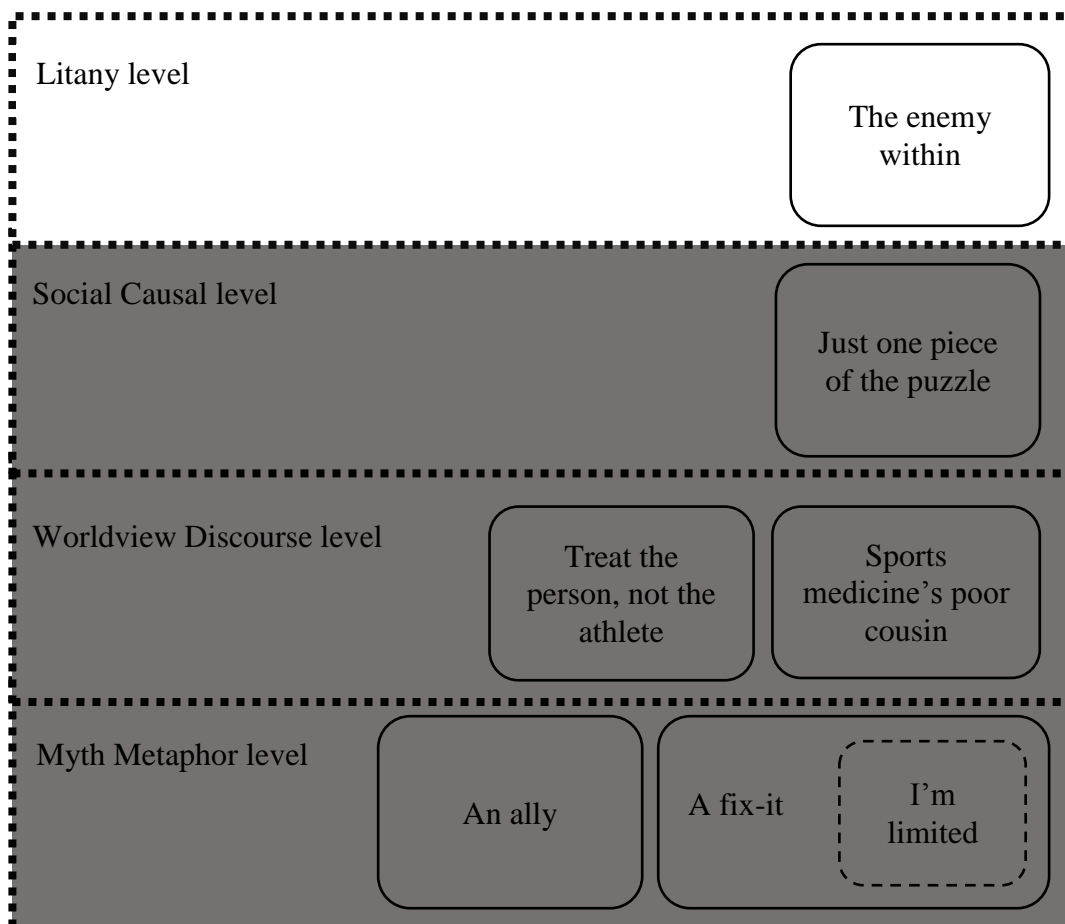


Figure 21 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Litany level of Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

8.4.1.1 *The enemy within*

Athletes' abilities to interpret internal and external commentary about themselves in a helpful manner was seen as a key coping skill. Athletes often received complex and often contradictory messages from various actors, where messages could be supportive, instructional, directive, or judgemental in nature. Where athletes' interpretation of these messages was unhelpful, it could lead to lack of confidence, or poor performance outcomes. That is, athletes could be defeated by their own beliefs before even walking out on the field. As such, athletes' interpretation of these messages, or capacity to challenge the core beliefs these messages feed, was positioned as central to their positive functionality as an athlete. For example, "I think it's important for [athletes] to have really good coping skills. Um and that comes back to thinking styles and explanatory styles and whether you are blame yourself all the time or blame others or take responsibility." This example also highlights the implications athletes' explanatory styles can have on them, here the level of an athlete's responsibility for an event, such as a team loss.

Informants described the importance of fostering and supporting athletes' skills in identifying and challenging unhelpful thinking processes. Informants reflected, "...is how you view the world and how you explain the world helping you to get the most out of yourself? And that often becomes about highlighting to them where it's not helping", "so ideally working with so if I look at [sport] now I work with the individuals and I will challenge sometimes belief systems or a lot of reframing around how they look at a situation" and,

If they've done nothing to deserve it, if they've just had a couple of bad games and then they're receiving this negative portrayal um the work that I would be doing around that would be helping with that confidence like challenging some of those core beliefs around 'am I passed it, do I not have what it takes anymore', building that evidence and their confidence back up.

These comments highlight the potential negative implications of unhelpful thinking styles among athletes, and demonstrate the positive influence appropriate (helpful) explanatory styles can have.

8.4.2 Social Causal level

The Social Causal level of the CLA enabled the exploration of the influence of systemic and ecological factors that relate to the provision of support to an athlete population. One main theme emerged at this level (see Figure 22): Just one piece of

the puzzle. A key dynamic revealed suggests support staff are constrained by the very system within which they exist and have to work with and for.

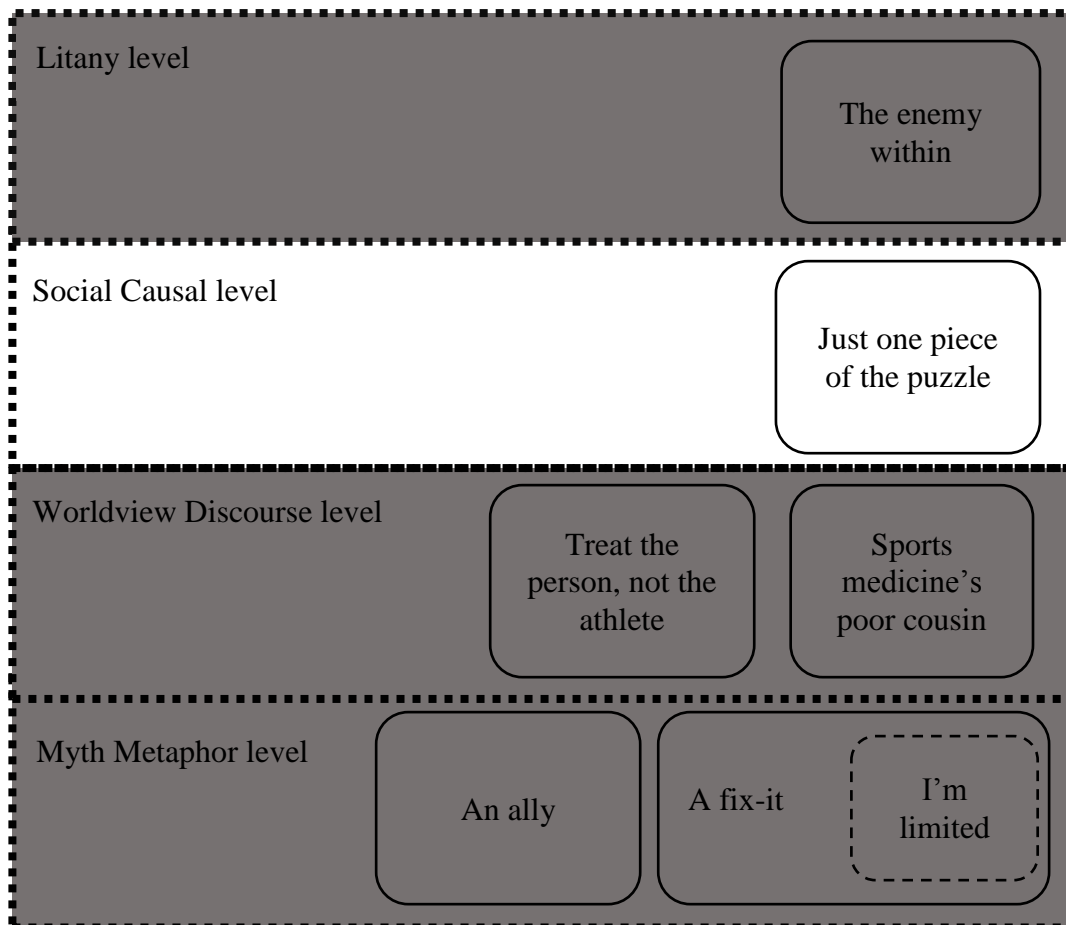


Figure 22 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Social Causal level of Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

8.4.2.2 *Just one piece of the puzzle*

This theme represents the impact of social processes, dynamics, and systems that exist outside of formal supports, or the sporting organisation. Informants reflect that athletes did not, and do not, exist in isolation. Rather, that are just one piece of their own broader social network. It was explicit that social support was important for athletes. For example, “what else is important, social support having really good strong healthy relationships around you”, and, “having said that I have seen some [athletes] without them [*time management skills/organisational skills*] still succeed but then again the support network around them has to be able to pick up that slack and not everyone has got that.” These comments demonstrate informants recognised

that the effective support of elite level athletes extended well beyond formal support systems offered within sporting organisations.

While an important system of support it was also apparent such systems had the potential to work against that athlete, a dynamic akin to the help being a hindrance. The impact of athletes' social networks or informal mechanisms of support in this regard was two-fold. First, informants recognised that as a provider of formal support, they are only one piece of athletes' broader support systems. Informants considered it important to extend their support and communication to people who surround and interact with the athlete, such as coaches, managers, family, and friends, particularly where athletes were embedded in systems that endorsed unhelpful communication styles, ideologies, or relationships. For example, "those I think working with the social support systems because they are, and that's coaches and parents, because they are around far more than a psych is likely to ever be",

Yeah so my philosophy I think you've obviously got to work with the individual but you've got to work with the system. And if you try and work with just one of those then you are unlikely to get the best possible result.

But it is important that they have that social network outside that is a healthy and I say healthy because if that social support doesn't fully understand what is required of them then its saying 'poor you' all the time it doesn't help.

And,

And you know CBT works with an individual but I think the reality is they function in a system and you have to look at the system as well to understand whether the system is contributing to the development of that mental health issue. Or contributing to the maintenance of that mental health issue.

The importance of supporting the professional, social, and familial systems athletes are embedded in are highlighted by these comments. It was clear that support staff (i.e., psychologist) do not have the most frequent interactions with individual athletes and therefore members of athletes' informal support systems have more influence on athletes' cognitive and explanatory styles and by extension their mental health: for better or for worse.

Second, the conduct of the individuals within athletes' informal support structures and systems, beyond just the explanatory style, could further impact athletes' wellbeing. Informal support was positioned as important to athletes' success, particularly social and familial systems. However, these systems can also house

dynamics, beliefs, and relationships that can work against the athlete. Hence, athletes often needed support to cope with their informal support systems, rather than be supported by them. As such, these systems had the capacity to function as a hindrance to athletes' motivation, preparation, and, ultimately, their functionality as athletes. For example,

Um it's certainly can trickle onto the field. It can effect motivation big time, um it can even leave them questioning, so for example if an athlete has an unsupportive partner um then that can certainly question their motivation and future in the sport, whether they want to continue with that.

And,

...an example of this was last year I, a [athlete] came and spoke to me and told me about [their] best mate who was ah having a lot of dramas struggling with depression and actually [they] was contemplating committing suicide. And ah so my [athlete] was being the crutch for [their] mate and so whilst my [athlete] wasn't having mental health issues it was having significant on [them], um reducing [their] sleep time, massive stresses...

These comments demonstrate that athletes' informal social support systems could house dynamics, beliefs, and relationships that can work against the athlete.

8.4.3 Worldview Discourse level

The Worldview Discourse level of the analysis reflected an understanding of how the role of supporting elite level athletes is socially constructed. This focus on the common rhetoric underpinning supporting athletes gave rise to two main themes (see Figure 23): Treat the person, not the athlete; and, Sports medicine's poor cousin. The theme *Treat the person, not the athlete* mirrors the conceptualisation of athletes as human that was pervasive across both phase one and two of the research and across athlete informant and support staff informants' account of athletes' lived experiences. The theme *Sport's medicines poor cousin* reflects how athlete informants experienced support staff, captured in the theme *Friend of foe* as reported in chapter five.

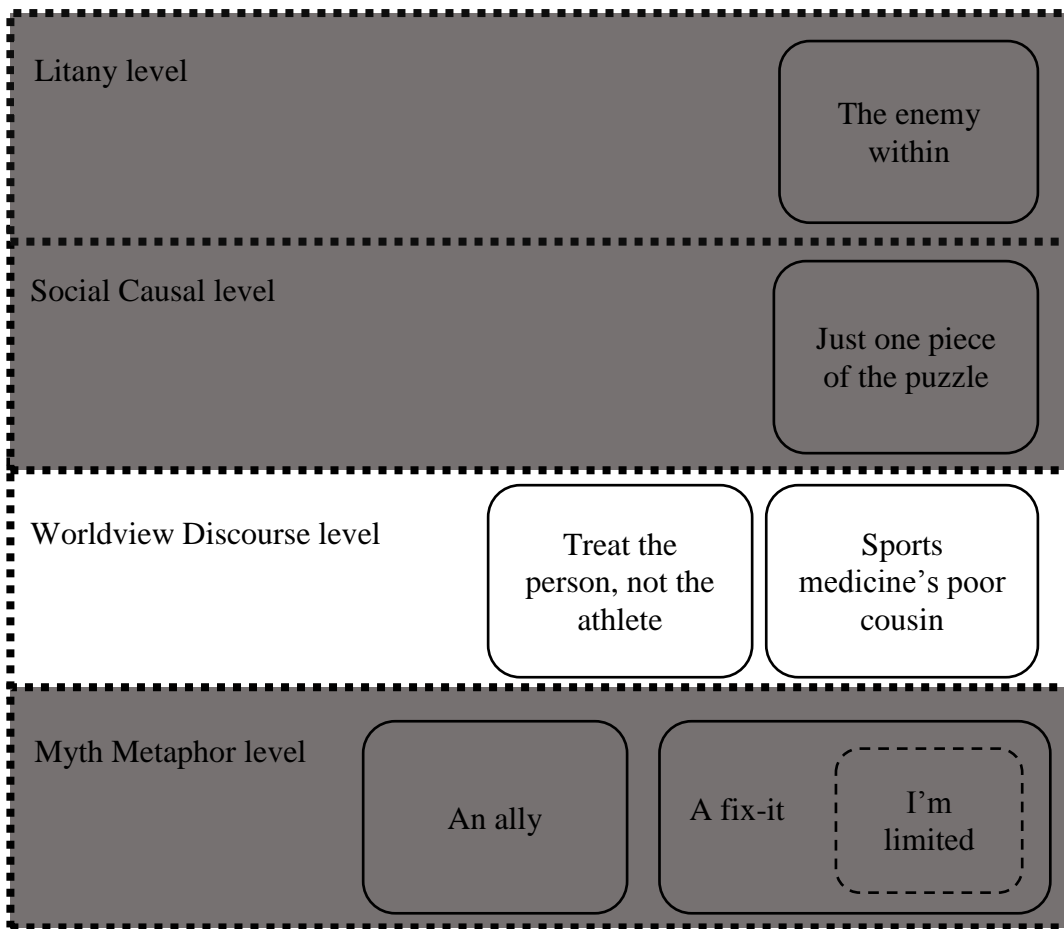


Figure 23 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Worldview Discourse level of Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

8.4.3.1 *Treat the person, not the athlete*

This theme captures informants' worldview as support staff. Informants reflected that the conceptualisation of athletes as people was central to their role. This was evident across the data in a number of ways. First, informants spoke to the individuality of elite level athletes and the importance of working with respect to each athlete's unique presentation. The necessity to assess, treat, and interact with each individual athlete was explicit, where a primary role of support staff was anchored to determining what worked best for each athlete. In particular, individual athletes required different levels of support to manage their off field anxieties. For example, "we've probably had one in particular athlete in this sport that comes to mind who seems to be able to separate that [off field anxiety] very well, but for the average [athlete] um it is going to be some degree of impact" and, "of course um athletes are trained to be able to separate from that [off field anxiety], so some manage to be able

to put that aside and some of them don't. Some of them it's automatic and some of them it's not." These comments highlight the variability of athletes' coping skills and presentations, suggesting that a blanket approach to supporting athletes is not appropriate. As such, seeing the athlete as a person, and treating the person rather than the athlete, underpins the provision of effective support.

Second, informants described their most meaningful moments associated with supporting athletes were anchored to their achievements off the field, rather than on the field. For example, informants stated, "...actually my highlights are more about the individual development um and growth and achievement" and, "we had an in house, an advanced diploma of management last year and again so much satisfaction from seeing some of those [*athletes*] complete and go 'this is just awesome.'" These comments show the significance associated with being able to provide a platform for athletes to succeed beyond sport, and highlight that informants conceptualised athletes as people. Further informants articulated supporting athletes was a balancing act of maximising their potential whilst minimising harm. Informants saw the central component of maximising athletes' potential occurred off the field, for example,

But I saw that maximising potential in the sporting arena as well off the sporting arena. In life in general and not just you know um how to score goals better but the whole person, how do they get the most out of themselves.

And,

I think the reality is athletes are people so you have to treat them as people first and if you look after the person you get someone who is able to do exceptional things. But if you don't look after the person then they might just be able, they might still be able to do good or even great things but they are not going to be able to get the best out of themselves,

These comments highlight that informants thought an athlete should be supported in a holistic manner, rather than as one dimensional athlete.

It was apparent informants thought they had responsibility for the development of athletes, as people, outside the context of sport particularly with respect to athletes developing an identity beyond their athletic capabilities. Fostering an identity beyond a one dimensional account of athlete was also positioned as key to ensuring athletes' wellbeing and functioning within, but significantly beyond, their sport. For example, "it's a part of um making sure that you know they have got something else that they are active involved in to help stimulate them at being better

athletes”, “for me that is important because the athletes that don’t have something else alongside really struggle with retirement” and,

...that you are also creating an identity for them, well you’re not creating it but helping them create an identity outside of sport. So there are different pieces of the puzzle to you, um sports just one, and what are those other areas. So that if they are forced into retirement through injury, or when they come to the end of their career it’s they don’t go through this massive identity crisis um and the associated feelings of depression etc. because they don’t know who they are...

These comments demonstrate informants’ understanding that it was important to support the development of athletes’ identities beyond the field and demonstrate that informants considered athletes as people first, and tended to foreground supporting the person before the athlete. This extended to fostering athletes’ independence and responsibility to ensure they could function at the conclusion of their sporting career: future proofing. Informants acknowledged the finite reality of sporting careers and saw preparing athletes for this inevitability as a key aspect of the ideology of supporting athletes. For example,

And they’ve got people to do stuff for them and ah and they’ve got that crutch in myself to lean on for help and support but the reality is that I’m not going to be there the rest of their lives

And,

And the um the approaches are all different obviously depending on the scenario but I take the philosophical approach that if you can you can create opportunities for these [athletes]. And open doors for them per se’ but I can’t walk through the doors for them they have got to be the one that does that.

These comments demonstrate informants’ viewed a key aspect of future proofing athletes was fostering their development and sense of responsibility for themselves beyond sport. This further positions athletes as human.

8.4.2.1 Sports medicine’s poor cousin

This theme captures the worldviews and discourse of the various stakeholders that govern support staff’s role. Informants described the ideologies and rhetoric that underpinned the organisations that had to function within tended to give low priority to psychological support and intervention and prioritised victory over mentally

healthy athletes. This perspective was in direct contest with informants' conceptualisation of worldview and ideology of support staff. Stakeholders' worldview manifested as a series of systemic issues that compromised the provision of effective support. Informants spoke to a hierarchy within support services where psychology was often positioned as less important than other types of support. This appeared to result in sport psychology facing a lack of resources, lack of funding, and a lack of access to athletes. In addition it appeared the interplay of some of these factors could exacerbate other barriers to support. For example, "I think we can't do our job effectively if we don't have regular access, which includes reflection and review on performance, and is regular enough to pick up on any on or off field issues that have developed", "I think absolutely assists with your ability provide services within that um so then it's just that matter of well and how much time am I getting with that sport" and,

That um people will automatically put money aside spend money on you know those kind of more tangible [physiotherapy, sports medicine] um sport support services. Um and so therefore you know therefore I don't think as much sport psych services that, that could or should be offered are, are able to be offered,

These comments show that the effectiveness of the support practitioners are able to provide is constrained by the systems within which they are required to function. This dynamic had additional implications. It was apparent informants thought stakeholder's worldviews and discourses were subsequently mirrored in athletes' worldview of psychological support. This was particularly problematic where "athlete buy-in" was key to the provision of effective support. That is, support was only as effective as athletes enabled it to be (i.e., the degree to which an athlete was willing and able to engage with the support). Informants' reflected that athletes did not innately trust support providers or have confidence in support interventions. Rather, athletes tended to be sceptical, guarded, and appeared to require 'proof' that the processes worked, or would work, before they would fully engage. However, the lack of regular and meaningful access to athletes, manifested as a problematic cycle: support staff did not have access to athletes to work with and prove support works, and as such, athletes do not develop confidence in the provider or the process. For example, "And I think with those situations when you're not seeing the athlete as regularly they don't tend to have as much confidence in the process",

And then you start to find out what it is you know what their weakness is, or their contentious issue, so um it's bridging the gap between them sensing they are getting a benefit and then getting them to buy into what the process is to fix it.

And,

I said to the manager of the [national] team when I first worked with [them], I said 'what's the key for these [athletes]?', and he said 'yeah if they think there's something in it for them, they'll buy into it, if they don't they'll run a mile.'

These comments highlight that informants thought they had to prove their worth to athletes before they would engage meaningfully with them and the process. Further, this serves to highlight the importance for athletes' to value psychological support and intervention to ensure effective support. This presents as problematic where such worldviews and discourse is in contest with the rhetoric and worldview of the overarching organisation.

The worldview of stakeholders was further perceived to primarily value the athlete as an athlete, a vehicle of successful sporting performances, rather than a person. Organisations, rather than support staff, defined success. It was apparent some organisations foregrounded mental health and were focused on ensuring athletes were supported to be mentally healthy, for example, "so yeah that's probably a newer thing [mental health] because that's sort of become a lot more prevalent and we know a little bit more about it and stuff like that. But it's definitely a key focus for us too", and, "so um from there all the player development managers are now mental health first aid trained." However, the propensity for organisations to identify athletes' results as the only marker of success pervaded the data. Informants stated, "...we know that we have these outcomes, goals and KPIs set people are wanting to achieve for the individuals in the program",

I think the interesting thing is, is that you know when you are working in elite sport and then obviously the end result is that you are wanting either the team to win or people to place or whatever or to medal.

And,

...I think the reality is that the organisations that pay for sport psychology pay for sport psychology in most instances because they want their current athletes to be performing. And they get benchmarks they get evaluated on

those performances so they want that time and energy and effort to go into getting results here and now.

These comments highlight the priority given to sporting results as a marker of success, not only for the athlete but also support staff. Despite informants acknowledging the innate motivation for support staff to be anchored to acting in the best interest of their athletes, this was not always consistent with the worldviews, discourses, and rhetoric of the organisation within they functioned or the various stakeholders they had to answer to. This tended to result in the provision of support delivered by informant being ultimately governed by the worldviews, values, and attitudes of the organisation that employs them.

8.4.4 Myth Metaphor level

Two main themes were revealed at this level (see Figure 25): An ally; and A fix-it. These themes together with a sub-theme *I'm Limited*, speak to the core narratives that underpin support staff, and provided an account of the archetype associated with this.

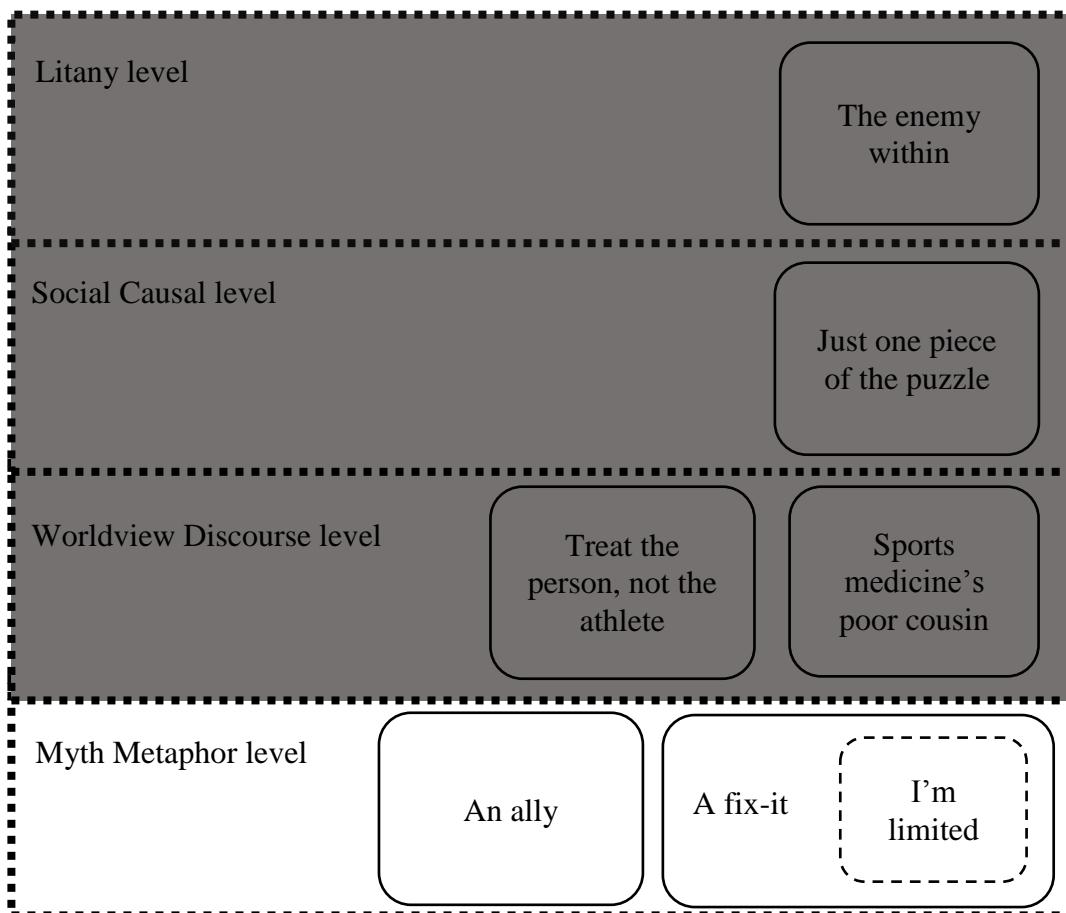


Figure 24 Thematic map of findings with emphasis on Myth Metaphor level of Causal Layered Analysis: support staff.

7.4.4.2 An ally

This theme captured a key narrative of supporting athletes as experienced by informants, understood as acting as a trusted friend as. The isolating nature of the elite level sport, and the associated lifestyle was frequently articulated and informants saw their role as supporting and protecting athletes as a trusted ally. This trust, alongside support staff being seen by athletes as ‘safe’, was a fundamental component of the relationship between support staff and athletes, and also essential for effective support. For example, informants reflected, “what do [athletes] need from sport psych in my view they need a safe place to be open and honest about who they are and where they are at”, “...developing that rapport so that they trust you [laughs] like in any psychological work is critical, because if they trust you then you are allowed to ask the hard questions”, and “...bitch and whinge and vent and all those exciting things knowing that there is not going to be any repercussions um in terms of contracts and opportunities and all those sorts of things.” These comments highlight that informants thought providing a safe and honest space for athletes to communicate was important. Alongside being trusted with athletes’ secrets informants also conceptualised their role as a loyal protector; to act in the best interest of the athlete. For example, “it’s better that they do it in an environment where they are supported and nurtured so if they do fuck up well there is someone there to help them with that” and,

And to some, and so certain things you, so an issue like that you sit there and go well you protect, you protect the brand you protect the [athlete] by avoiding having that topic of conversation come out at all.

Such commentary highlights informants understood their role as protective, which serves as a metaphor for support staff: to do what was best for the athlete, not use the athlete.

8.4.4.1 A fix-it

Informants identified that support staff were often thought of as providing a fix-it approach, implying support staff were only called upon when there was something “wrong” with an athlete, or team, that required fixing; *A fix-it*. This perception contrasts informants’ conceptualisations of their role in supporting elite level athletes, but was seemingly common amongst other stakeholders. For example,

The other main sort of observation [of sport psychology/psychologists] was that they were used probably more than 10 years ago, and sometimes even now, as someone who comes in for a brief intervention, we'll give the group a talk and you were supposed to walk out of there with some magic, and you know off you go.

And,

So it was funny because those who had worked with psychologists before in their states saw it as an automatic proactive preparation, and those who didn't saw it initially as 'well if I'm talking to you there must be something wrong with me.'

These comments highlight a typical concern for athletes, that if they had to access support there was something that needed to be fixed and they were broken in some way. Despite many organisations moving away from this, and many organisations prioritising mental health as a legitimate concern for the elite athlete population, informants commented on dynamics that indicated that athletes, and administration, still regarded support staff this traditional way; a quick fix. For example, informants reflected, “so they might tend to use it as a quick fix, or an excuse even. You know this didn't happen because of this and this, I'll fix that and everything will be right”, “so they're looking for something more like a quick fix. They are looking for you to say ok if you do this it will get better.” And,

I think that they [respective player associations] try to do some stuff, and I'm sure they are some sports that do that, but in my experience I haven't really seen it until it becomes an issue and then it's like 'well what are we going to do about this?'

These comments highlight that stakeholders, other than support staff, still perceived the role of support staff is to 'fix' poor performances and the athlete. Alongside this expectation to 'fix problems', informants thought they were also tasked with minimising harm; psychological, personal, level. It was evident that support staff felt a responsibility to ensure athletes were not harmed by the experience of being an athlete. For example, “that they feel the journey is a valuable experience that they came out the other side of that journey ready for the next journey rather than burned by the experience,” “so um so I think it very definitely and you know and checking in with you know minimising the impact if it is a real negative thing”, “yeah well so well a scandal that's a, I've had to deal with scandals but scandals that haven't

become public.” And, “so I can think of a sport that I worked with which was 99% reactive, putting out fires all the time, minimising psychological damage to the athletes.”

These comments position the role of support staff as reactive, rather than preventative. That is, they are only brought in to fix a problem, rather than offer genuine holistic support to athletes.

8.4.4.1.1 I'm limited

Within the theme *A fix-it*, a sub-theme emerged: *I'm limited*. This captured the importance of recognising and understanding the professional limits of support staff. Where support staff are often called on to fix an issue, informants noted they can only act within their own area of expertise: their individual skills, training, and experience. For example, “I feel they [eating disorders] are very specialised and if I identify an eating disorder, unless it was a minor one, I want someone who specialises in that area to work with it”, “we’ve got a network of psychs as well if we feel that it needs to be escalated further than that and we can put [*the athlete*] on to those psychologists” and,

You know when you start to get you know personality disorders or even you know OCD there is again an extent to which you operate. And then knowing that actually this is a significant and dysfunctional issue this needs to actually I need to be referring it to a clinical psych and lets work together from a case management perspective.

These comments reflect the importance of support staff working within their capacities. Alongside this, informants reflected that elite level athletes can, and do, experience a wide array of concerns, both physical and mental. Informants positioned anxiety and depression as the most common mental health concerns, but noted athletes can experience the full spectrum of mental health concerns. For example, “I have I’ve seen you know I’ve probably I could probably think of a case study across all the DSM axes”, “I haven’t had much suicidal stuff for a while um but certainly on the spectrum I’ve had some sort of mild to moderate distress” and, “so psychosis, eating disorders, I would deal with personality and any of the personality disorders, I would be dealing with those.” These comments highlight the wide array of mental health concerns experienced by athletes and, as such, it is likely some presentations fall outside the expertise of support staff. Support staff are not able to fix every problem that presents.

“...but only a very few crack
it on to that next level and that’s because
it is so hard, and it’s not just about talent.

The stars all have to align.”

– respondent; ex-elite athlete

CHAPTER NINE

Research Findings: The macrosystem

“To judge a man’s character by only one of its manifestations is like judging the sea by a jugful of its water.”

– Paul Eldridge

9.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter describes the findings from phase three of the research. The chapter begins with an introduction, including a brief overview of the rationale, research design, methods and data of phase three of the current research. A thematic map (see Figure 25) is then presented. The chapter concludes with a detailed account of the findings derived from thematic analysis, organised by the identified dimensions of the social construction of elite level athletes in Australia.

9.2 Introduction

The findings described below were generated via thematic analysis of data obtained via newspaper headlines. As described in chapter four phase three examined the representations of Australian elite sport and sportspeople perpetuated via the headlines situated on the front page of 2012 publications of *The Australian*, inclusive of *The Weekend Australian*. Newspapers were deemed an appropriate print media forum from which to analyse representations of elite sports and athletes in Australia as they were easily accessible, widely distributed and offer a commentary on sport and sportspeople. An exploration of the headlines, rather than full articles, ensured the data consisted of those narratives most likely consumed by the ‘general’ consumer of print media. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The relationships between the themes generated are illustrated via the thematic map. The findings presented in this chapter should be considered with respect to the context of the timing of the current research. As it was an Olympic year these findings serve only as an example of the public narratives and social construction of elite athletes in Australia. It is acknowledged such narratives may be different or not be apparent across other media modalities, sources, or outlets, and or during alternative years. It is acknowledged such narratives may be different or not be apparent across other media modalities, sources, or outlets, and or during alternative years.

9.3 Thematic Map



Figure 25 Thematic map of findings generated from Thematic Analysis.

9.4 A Snapshot of the Social Construction of Australian Elite level Athletes

Three overarching dimensions of the social construction of Australian elite level athletes and sport were uncovered: focus on winning; being super human; and players as pawns. The findings garnered an understanding of how elite level athletes and elite sport are constructed via print media, and provided an understanding of societal expectations of, and imposed on, Australian elite level athletes. Of particular interest was the perpetuation of societal expectations that extended beyond the competitive domain. These findings serve as a snapshot of the Australian sporting culture, rhetoric, and discourse elite level athletes are embedded in.

9.4.1 Focus on Winning

The four main themes served to illustrate the focus on winning dimension of the social construction of elite level athletes and sport in Australia consisting of the themes: Sacrificial; Impending victory; Shaming; and Second chances.

9.4.1.1 Sacrificial

This theme speaks to a win at all costs mentality and reflects the acceptability of compromising athletes' physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing for their sport. For example, "Athletes safer but medals on line as pills banned" and, "No gain from rest and no play". Here, a need to see an overt "gain" for resting athletes is presented, where the gain likely refers to victory, or at least improved performance. Such headlines suggest that winning is everything and, where the potential to win was perceived to have been compromised in order to prioritise or protect the wellbeing of athletes, it was portrayed negatively. This suggests that there is an expectation that supporting the wellbeing of elite level athletes in Australia should translate into results: victory. Where there is "no gain" the legitimacy of resting athletes is seems to be questioned.

In addition the physical, mental, or emotional wellbeing of athletes seems less important than the potential for victory. For example, "Clarke delays injury decision to eve of coin toss", "Last minute hurdle: Pearson's pre-Olympic tumble", "Sore winner: Is it time to retire the champion?" and, "Can't bowl, might bat; Watson's battle to be fit". These headlines single out particular athletes and position their injuries as a threat to victory. Athletes are seemingly in a race to overcome their injuries in time for an event, rather than being allowed to return when they are fully recovered. This presents victory as a higher priority over the athletes' current or

future wellbeing. The focus on an individual's injuries also serves to burden that athlete with the responsibility of their team, and suggests that without the athlete the team has no hope. This seems to function to attribute a team result to an individual athlete.

9.4.1.2 Impending victory

Victory was a key focus of the headlines and winning seen as inevitable. Headlines promised the Australian public victory in upcoming sporting endeavours. This positioned Australia's athletes as being the best. For example, "Going for gold", "I'll get gold", "I'm fit. I'm healthy. I'm ready to go", "Golden dozen: Australia's best hopes" and, "The man: Missile Magnussen on target for London". Such discourses sets athletes up for failure, where if they do not achieve gold (or win) they seemingly break this promise to the Australian public.

9.4.1.3 Naming and shaming

This theme represents an intolerance of loss and poor performance. Headlines presented winning as the only acceptable outcome. Australian athletes who achieved victory were celebrated, for example, "From last to gold: paddlers show what happens when you don't rock the boat", "Golden girls Pearson and Meares work Olympic alchemy", "A new tack: Slingsby ends gold drought", "Webber aces Monaco; Aussie's grand prix triumph", "A winning draw for the Aussies", "Tomic on top: Brain over brawn as Bernard beats giant American" and, "Tomic's triumph: 13th seed out of the way, now for Federer". However, loss, or poor performances, was described as shocking, and met with disdain, disappointment, and blame. For example, "After disharmony, rows and one gold medal, Nugent bids to keep his job", "Perfect prep a nightmare of Magnussen", "Soccer shocker", "Fickle finger of fate", "Shape up or ship out: Rafter's Davis Cup warning to Tomic", "Stosur's meltdown: Tearful Sam wilts in the Melbourne heat" and, "Izzie up to it? Another miserable night for AFL's great hope". Such headlines appear as emotive and emotional.

Other headlines acknowledged athletes good performance, however, where their performance did not result in victory, it seemed their efforts were minimised and positioned as not good enough. That is, the athlete could have, or perhaps should have, done more to achieve the victory. For example, "All square: Two Aussie tons not enough as Sri Lanka forces decider", "Brave bowlers fall short" and, "Batsmen dig deep: But it's too little too late". Such headlines position loss, or poor

performances as an unacceptable outcome and requiring an explanation. Loss or poor performance is not presented as a natural part of sport, rather as the responsibility of someone or something (i.e., an athlete's lack of preparation). This seems to serve to invite a public discussion, or analysis, of what went wrong. For example, "The race plan, the taper, the hype? Search for solutions to mend Missile", "Sleeping pills cost Hackett gold" and, "Sinking feeling: What went wrong for our London swim team". These headlines portray not winning as failing. Such headlines also present an acceptability of shaming athletes when they do not fulfil the 'promise' of victory.

9.4.1.4 Second chances

Despite this seeming intolerance of loss, headlines also presented an opportunity for athletes to redeem their failings. There was some leniency in the discourse when a subsequent win was assured in the discourse. That is, athletes were granted a second chance to appease public expectations of victory, for example, "London's silver is Rio's gold", "Out but not down; Federer praises vanquished Tomic as future champion", "Second chance for Rice", "Redemption: Melbourne Storm into the grand final", "Out of the Ashes, old hands redeemed", "A nation's morale replenished, but coffers bear brunt of Indian summer" and, "Consolation prize; Olympic selection gives Hewitt another short at Wimbledon". These headlines illustrate that the promise a future victories provided athletes to atone for their failings (losses). Such headlines promise guaranteed future success, which reflects the dynamics of the theme *Impending victory*. Additionally, when athletes seemingly made up for a previous loss, the discourse explicitly spoke to redemption.

9.4.2 Being Super Human

The notion that elite level athletes embody something that is super human comes through in the following themes that fall under this dimension: Naturally unnatural; Hero; and The final stand. These themes speak to the construction of elite level athletes as worthy of aspiration, while simultaneously suggesting that anyone could be an elite level athlete in different circumstances. This serves to invalidate elite level athletes' hard work and achievements.

9.4.2.1 Naturally unnatural

Athletes' skills were portrayed as being natural, innate, or even magical. For example, "Brotherly magic in one powerful package", "Tomic's secret weapon; The rise of our new hot shot", "Thurston magic – and the video ref – conspire to hold back

Blue's onslaught", "No shelter from the Warner whirlwind" and, "Bradmanesque Pup gives team a triple threat". Although these headlines celebrate athletic achievements, they also serve to minimise the hard work and time associated with training to master athletic skills. This constructs athletes as lucky, and infers that their achievements are gifted rather than earned.

9.4.2.2 Hero

This theme speaks to the representation of elite level athletes as heroes. Participation in elite level sport, good form, and/or the achievement of sporting feats are constructed as acts of heroism and attributed to bravery, valour, and gallantry. For example, "Golden boy", "Local hero", "Golf's homemade hero", "Jobe Watson: A captain's win", "Last man standing: Hewitt through as Roddick retires", "It wasn't the century they came to see but Siddle's was worth celebrating", "Aussies win nail biter: McKay takes five wickets to secure series victory", "For Pete's sake: Only Siddle can break Sri Lankan resistance" and, "One-Nil: Brutal Warner gives the Aussies the finals edge". Such discourse perpetuates messages that undermine elite level athletes' hard work and training. Team success seems to again be attributed to the efforts of one person. This serves to conceptualise that individual athlete as a saviour who single-handedly secured success.

9.4.2.3 The final stand

The end of athletes' careers was constructed as either valiant or obsolete. Headlines that celebrated the end of athletes' careers, portrayed the athlete's *final stand* as an act of heroism, for example, "Leisel's last stand", "End of an era", "Nation's achievers honoured as two great players prove they have runs on the boards", "The master's ton of tons: Some things are worth waiting for" and, "But wait, there's more: Thorpe's not finished yet". These headlines seem to construct the retiring athlete and their career as legendary. However, other headlines represented athletes as 'hanging on.' Instead of celebrating the final performance, headlines seemed to question why individual athletes were still competing. Individual athlete's longevity was questioned rather than celebrated, and their shortcomings and/or poor performances were the primary focus of headlines. This presents athletes' retirement as a process of being pushed out of the sport, rather than it being an athlete's choice. For example, "Beginning of the end: Stripped of the one-day role, test spot may be next", "As Australia shines against the world No 1, the shadows lengthen for

Ponting”, “Teen threat: The 17 year old set to sink Thorpey”, “End of an era: But no fairy tale finish for Punter” and, “A crying shame: Ponting’s innings ends on his own terms, having ‘given cricket my all’”. These headlines did not celebrate athletes or their career, but accentuate they were no longer at the top of their game; no longer the best. Headlines also focussed on new (younger) rivals set to overtake retiring athletes which seems to function to evoke pity.

9.4.3 Players as Pawns

Two themes emerged from the dimension related to the construction and representation of elite level athletes as pawns in a game: Gossip; and It’s just business.

9.4.3.1 Gossip

The interest in athletes’ personal lives portrayed in the headlines seemed equivalent to the interest in their sporting performance. Headlines seemed to indicate that what athletes engaged in off the field was as newsworthy as their results on the field. Controversy was also frequently foregrounded. For example, “London underground; The best source of Games gossip”, “Couldn’t be happier; Cricket captain Michael Clarke’s secret wedding”, “Promising life cut short; Mystery surrounds AFL star’s Vegas death”, “Clean up your act”, “Kids’ charity dumps Hackett; But nine sticks it out with troubled star” and, “Leisel fights fat attack”. These headlines illustrate there is seemingly public interest in elite level athletes beyond sport and sporting results. This positions athletes as entertainment and serves to conceptualise them as publicly owned figures and celebrities, not just athletes.

9.4.3.2 It’s just business

This theme reflects the idea of sport as a business. The value and worth of sport is anchored to how much money it can make an overarching organisation such as media outlets, sports clubs, leagues, and associations. This serves to prioritise the consumers of sport over the athletes. For example, “Olympic fury over rules of TV sport”, “Nine’s Olympic gold”, “\$1BN for the league, what it means for viewers, the sport, the networks”, “Media Olympics Special Starts: Nine’s games headache” and, “For sale: Football’s most famous jersey”. These headlines position sport as a commercial commodity. Athletes and sport are juxtaposed with issues of finance, positioning sports and athletes’ worth as monetary. Further, particular sports and athletes are positioned as being owned, and up for sale for the right price. This seems

to function to dehumanise athletes, and contributes to the representation of athletes as players of a larger game on someone else's field.

“What I hate is when they go,
"Oh we've spent X amount of taxpayers' money to
win one gold medal."...And it's like if you don't
win gold, you're a failure to us.”

– respondent; ex-elite athlete

CHAPTER TEN

Discussion: Reconstructing Athletes' Lived Experience

“We came all this way to explore the Moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth.”

– Bill Anders, Apollo 8

10.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the discussion, implications, limitations, and conclusion of the current research. The discussion is presented in three sections. First, I present a reconstruction of athletes' lived experiences from the first two phases of research. Following this, I present an account of the social construction of Australian elite level sport; phase three of the research. This is followed by a description of the implications and contributions associated with the research, and a discussion of the research parameters. Finally, the conclusion is then presented to conclude the chapter and thesis.

10.2 Introduction

The current research focused on the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes to address the research questions: 1) What aspects of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes may function to give rise to poor mental health? 2) How are Australian elite level athletes currently supported? And 3) How are Australian elite level athletes socially constructed? As described in chapters three and four Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) involves initially separating out the levels of understanding (deconstructing the issue). Then the issue is reconstructed by rebuilding the fundamental messages that emerged from the analysis at each level (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; Inayatullah, 2004). As such the two phases of research that used CLA as an analytic tool, phase one and phase two, are discussed together and presented first. A smaller discussion of the unique insights that emerged from phase two via the integration of field data with interview data within a single sport setting is then presented separately. Phase three, which used thematic analysis, is then presented. A summary of the findings (themes) generated across these phases one and two is presented below (see Table 4).

The relationships between the understandings that emerged from each level of CLA are complex. As such, in order to help navigate the discussion of phases one and two I present the following summary of the relationships that exist across the various levels. The deconstruction of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes

was organised typologically from the Litany level through to the Myth Metaphor. The organisation of this discussion, which serves as the reconstruction of this phenomenon, is reversed to rebuild the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes from the Myth Metaphor level through to Litany, across key findings. The Myth Metaphor and Worldview Discourse are the deepest levels of understanding and function to support and legitimate social phenomena (Breen et al., 2016). The key dynamics, processes, and structures highlighted at the Social Causal level of understanding present as tangible expressions of the myths, assumptions, and rhetoric that emerge at the deeper levels of the analysis (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; Inayatullah, 2004). Further, this Social Causal level is a systemic perspective and represents various predispositions that precipitate social phenomena. As such, it can account for manifestations of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes at the Litany level (Breen et al., 2016).

Table 4 Summary of Themes Generated from Causal Layered Analyses (Phase One and Two)

| Level of Understanding | Theme | Perspective | Description |
|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Myth Metaphor | 'The paradox of control' | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control as a contentious issue and rhetorical construct • Tension between being in control and being controlled • Control is represented as a skill and a component of success: "control the controllables." • Athletes stripped of control, agency, autonomy |
| | 'The chipped glass' | Athlete (phase two) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inevitability of athletes' expiry • Vulnerability, fragility, imperfection, powerless |
| | 'Being hunted' | Athlete (phase two) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represents the conduct of the media: relentless, pervasive • Symbolic representation of athletes as prey • Extends the notion of performance and performance pressure to off the field |
| | 'Getting into Costume' | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athlete as a social construct: a costume • Assumptions and expectations of athletes • Athlete as a constant performer • Lack of identity |
| | 'An ally' | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support staff as a trusted friend: safe |
| | 'A Fix-it' | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolic representation of support staff as a "fixer" • Rhetoric of "a quick fix" • Represents athletes as broken |
| | Subtheme: 'I'm limited' | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A subtheme of 'A Fix-it' • Professional limits of support staff • Acknowledges individuality and variability of athletes' concerns and presentations |
| Worldview Discourse | 'Perfectly imperfect' | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athletes' view of themselves • Flawed, fragile, vulnerable • Inevitability of making mistakes on and off the field • Assumptions of athletes • Dynamic of being judged on 'best fit' as role model |

| | | |
|--|---------------------------|--|
| ‘All or nothing’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double standard between the athlete and the public • Discourse of success • Athlete rhetoric of ‘making it’ versus the social construction of success as victory • All or nothing |
| ‘Blinded to reality’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public perception presented as ignorant • Athletes’ lives and lifestyle judged only on the highlights rather than the realities • Dynamic of the public as fickle, only support victorious athletes |
| ‘I made it’ | Athlete (phase two) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The debut as a symbolic representation of ‘making it’ |
| ‘Who am I?’ | Athlete (phase two) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdependence of athletes’ on field and off field self • Social construction of athletes’ brand • Athlete identity synonymous with their brand |
| ‘Good on the field = Good off the field’ | Athlete (phase two) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdependence of athletes’ experiences on field and off field • Social construction of athlete dependent on athletes’ results • The public represented as ignorant and fickle |
| ‘Drowning in inaccuracies’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public perception of athletes presented as ignorant and inaccurate • The media positioned as the vehicle of discourse • The public positioned as co-contributor to discourse, and active role in maintenance and perpetuation of discourse |
| ‘Just like anyone else’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The athlete as super hero versus human |
| ‘Treat the person, not the athlete’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support staff worldview • Variability and individuality of athletes (humans) • Dynamic of future proofing athletes • Holistic development the person alongside the athlete • Independence, responsibility, identity |

| | | | |
|---------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| | ‘Sport medicine’s poor cousin’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholders’ worldview • In contest with support staff worldview • Low priority given to psychological intervention and support • Series of systemic barriers to support act as tangible manifestations of this worldview • Integration of stakeholders’ worldview with athletes’ worldview • Provision of support constrained by stakeholders’ worldview and ideology |
| Social Causal | ‘Money, money, money’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdependence of performance and financial security • Sport as a job • Experience of financial stress |
| | ‘A 1-D athlete’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a one dimensional athlete • Lack of control, autonomy, agency, and balance • Importance of balance as key coping strategy |
| | ‘Friend or Foe’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representations of athlete-coach dyad • Impact of relational quality • Bad coach: sole focus on performance |
| | ‘To ask or not to ask’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to seeking help for mental health concerns • Stigma, lack of safety, on-field consequences, reputation |
| | ‘Under the microscope’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal and informal media attention presented as constant surveillance • Role of the media as creator of the public perception of athletes • Athletes defined by their mistakes |
| | ‘On puppet strings’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athletes’ lack of agency • Slave to the system |
| | ‘Just one piece of the puzzle’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athletes do not exist in isolation • Support staff are just one piece of athletes’ support systems, athletes are just one piece of their broader social system • Informal supports help and hinder athletes’ success and wellbeing • Extension of the role of support staff to systems athletes are embedded in |

| | | | |
|--------|--|---------------------------|--|
| Litany | ‘Blood, sweat, and tears’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living, training, and competing as an athlete is hard • Not everyone can do it • Sacrifice, time investment, hard work, pain • Realities not seen by the public: effort is hidden, invisible |
| | ‘Pressure to perform’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance pressure experienced as a fear of the consequences associated with poor performance • Intrinsic pressure as well as extrinsic pressure |
| | Subtheme: ‘This is it’ | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance pressure exacerbated, heightened, for particular moments, events, or competitions • Dynamic of the stakes being higher |
| | ‘For the love of the game’ | Athlete (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport as athletes’ passion • Love, fun, and enjoyment of training and competing |
| | ‘It’s all a learning curve’ | Athlete (phase two) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being an athlete as a learning curve rather than innate capability • Performances on demand, athlete not ready • Trial and error approach to determining the efficacy and utility of various coping strategies for individual athletes |
| | ‘More than just the training sessions’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being an athlete is more than training sessions • 24-7 lifestyle • Cannot turn off from athlete • Club and/or organisation responsibilities |
| | ‘Everything is a performance issue’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance issues presents as an interdependence of on field and off field concerns and contexts |
| | ‘Practice makes perfect’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process of development of mental skills and routines positioned as equivalent to mastery of physical skills • Coping skills are leaned, rather than an innate capability • Require time investment and practice to be effective |
| | ‘The enemy within’ | Support Staff (phase one) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athletes can defeat themselves • Significance of athletes’ own interpretive/explanatory styles |

10.3 Reflecting on Phase One and Two: Reconstructing the Lived Experience of Australian Elite level Athletes

Key findings highlighted a number of tensions that underpinned athletes' experiences of being an athlete and the explicit societal expectations and perceptions imposed on them. Particularly, these findings position athletes as vulnerable, fragile, and controlled, where their lived experience lacked autonomy and empowerment. Further, athletes felt an expectation to be faultless, on and off the field, which directly contradicted their own understanding and conceptualisation of themselves. These findings elucidate the complexity of athletes' lived experiences, where athletes have to negotiate a number of issues beyond training and competing and serve to highlight the importance of a consideration of issues that exist well beyond these domains in conceptualising and considering athlete wellbeing.

10.3.1 A Human in Athlete's Clothing

10.3.1.1 Myth Metaphor level

A tension between the conceptualisation of athletes as the athlete versus a human emerged as a key finding. At the Myth Metaphor level of understanding the consideration of athletes as humans was the focus. A range of qualities were apparent as central to the concept of athletes as human, including fragility, vulnerability, and imperfection. These qualities are symbolised across a number of metaphors. First, the metaphor of 'getting into costume', where the athletes are forced to play the role of an athlete, and leave their humanness at the door. Second, the fragility, and vulnerability of athletes was further symbolised in the metaphors 'the chipped glass,' where athletes await, powerlessly, for the evitable end of their sporting career. Finally, the metaphor 'being hunted' further perpetuates athletes' weakness, and vulnerability, positioning them as prey within a wider game, where their weaknesses, humanness, and mistakes are often exploited for the benefit of others, such as the media and the public. Athletes are rarely afforded any genuine opportunity to transform this athlete role, that is, athlete and human are positioned as mutually exclusive constructs. Where athletes' humanness becomes explicit, such as, they make a mistake on or off the field, discourses function to remind them how they *should* perform as an athlete. As such, the deepest levels of understanding revealed an unacceptability of athletes as human. This symbolic 'athlete' is particularly problematic as it sets athletes up to fail.

The reality of being human sits in contest with the expectation that athletes ascend this.

The Myth Metaphor level of understanding also revealed a key meta-process, identified as ‘The paradox of control.’ Components of this meta-process reflected athletes’ attempts to adhere to this socio-cultural pressure and manoeuvre themselves from human closer to athlete (perfect) by trying to control a number of factors that surround them. A number of the factors positioned as controllable are not within athletes’ control, this imperative is paradoxical. As such, athletes are controlled by their humanness rather than being in control of their humanness. This dynamic pervaded all levels of analysis, where athletes’ lived experience is controlled by various systems, processes, and dynamics, rather than athletes being in control of their experiences. Considering results from Pensgaard and Ursin (1998) who provided further evidence in support of the notion of a positive correlation between athletes’ coping and their perception of control, athletes’ perceived lack of control could affect their capacity to cope with performance pressure, as well as having an impact on their lived experiences generally.

10.3.1.2 Worldview Discourse level

The tension between athletes as the athlete versus a human emerged at the Worldview Discourse level of understanding across various perspectives. The findings of the current research provided an account of a number of worldviews athletes interacted with day to day: athletes; support staff worldview; the worldview/s of sporting organisations; and various understandings of the worldview of the Australian public at large. These worldviews present the various conceptualisations of the social construct of ‘athlete’, alongside the social construction of the lifestyle of elite level athletes. These worldviews served to establish a number of pervasive and rigid identities for Australian athletes to embody.

The broader systemic, organisational, and societal worldviews present the expectation of perfection from athletes, on and off the field, as at the core of the social construct of ‘athlete.’ That is, athletes are infallible: they should always win and, they should never make mistakes. This positions and constructs athletes as something more than, and better than, human. This was in direct contest with the worldview of athletes themselves, and support staff. The inevitability of athletes’ mistakes was key to the worldview presented by athletes and support staff. Further, mistakes, particularly on

field, were somewhat necessary to foster athletes' learning. As highlighted by McGannon et al. (2015) athletes' attempts to achieve these unattainable cultural illusions could lead to psychological distress. Further Carless and Douglas (2013) and Papathomas and Lavalley (2014) both found conforming to a performance narrative, that is living the part of the athlete, being governed by performance outcomes, and sacrificing everything to the pursuit of success, can also threaten long term wellbeing. In addition, Pensgaard and Ursin (1998) demonstrated that the type of stress that resulted from expectations before sporting competition was more detrimental to performance than the duration of the experience of stress.

It was apparent athletes and support staff were the only actors within athletes' lived experiences who viewed athletes as human. While athletes' friends and families were positioned as important sources of support, they frequently viewed athletes as athletes, rather than as humans. Athletes were embedded within a number of discourses, social dynamics, and process, which worked against their personal conceptualisation of themselves (as human). As such, the myths, metaphors, and discourses present at the deepest levels of understanding function to create a dissonance in the construction of 'the athlete' that manifest as two competing voices: athletes (and support staff), and everyone else.

10.3.1.3 Social Causal level

The tension between athletes as human and athletes as athlete filtered through into other levels of the analysis. A number of dynamics and social processes that functioned to manoeuvre athletes closer to 'athlete' rather than human manifested at the Social Causal level. At this level of analysis the issue of athletes' humanness was attended to via the various social and organisational systems that endorse the conceptualisation of athletes as the athlete. It was clear the nature of training and competing as an elite level athlete served to limit athletes' opportunities to just be human, compromised athletes' social development, neglected the athlete learning curve, and stripped athletes of any sense of agency or autonomy. This functions to promote the athlete, while simultaneously dismissing athletes' humanness, and positions athletes' humanness as weakness. Additionally, in order to ensure success, this weakness needs to be removed. Such forces promote athletes to identify exclusively with their 'athlete identity.' Schnell et al. (2014) described identifying

exclusive with the athlete identity as problematic, noting that subsequent athletes are not enabled to find importance, achievement, or worth beyond their sport.

The support available for athletes mirrored the dynamic of manoeuvring athletes away from human and closer to athlete and tended only to attend to athlete-related issues; primarily performance. This is particularly apparent in the consideration of mental toughness as a key factor to ensure athletic success and wellbeing (e.g., Bull et al., 2005; Golby & Wood, 2016; Gucciardi et al., 2008; Mahoney et al., 2014). However, this type of social process appears congregative in nature, where athletes are metaphorically grouped together as ‘athletes’ and, as such, treated the same. This dismisses the individuality of athletes, functions to reinforce a view that athletes are athletes, not humans, and positions all athletes as ‘the same.’

A persistent push-pull dynamic was also present where athletes and support staff pushed back against the systemic processes that de-humanised athletes. Athletes recognised the need for balance as a key coping strategy, however, their capacity to achieve balance was undermined by the nature of the athletes’ lifestyle, and their reliance on the approach of their coach. Support staff saw the need to develop athletes’ identities beyond sport and foster human development but were not provided the space or resources to do this effectively. This was particularly problematic when coaches did not endorse or encourage athletes accessing support. This dynamic is consistent with understandings of the impact of the social environment, and specifically the conduct and interpersonal style of coaches, on athletes’ lived experience posed by self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The findings presented in this thesis extend such understandings by suggesting that the ideology of the coach, and coaches’ value and attitude systems, affect athletes’ experiences and wellbeing. Further, Pensgaard and Ursin (1998) highlighted where an athlete’s coach is experienced as a significant source of stress an athlete’s perception of control is lowered. This suggests this dynamic has implications for athletes’ experience of paradoxical control, as presented in this thesis.

The issue of athlete versus human also emerged at this level as a barrier to help seeking, in terms of stigma. This likely reflects key societal worldview, ideology, and value systems. Despite a number of athletes disclosing their experiences with poor mental health, or athletes providing explanations as to why athletes would likely experience mental health concerns, poor mental health still seemingly existed in the dark and was taboo. There are a number of potential explanations for this, however,

this dynamic could be attributable to the perception that athletes as athletes are immune to, or protected from, poor mental health (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Newman et al., 2016). It may also provide explanation for the lack of reporting of poor mental health within athlete populations as found by Rao and Hong (2015).

10.3.1.4 Litany level

The various hardships that athletes faced day-to-day emerged as a key feature of the Litany level understanding. At this level of understanding an account of the true nature of living as an athlete emerged, where training for, and competing in, sport was only one aspect of athletes' lived experience. The interdependence of athletes' on field and off field contexts was key, and the impact of this was twofold. First, athletes do not, and cannot, stop being an athlete when they leave the field. Rather their performance continues from the training setting to their personal life and across the public domain. This manifests in the presence and experience of performance pressure off the field, which was further exacerbated by the presence of the media. Performance pressure has been identified as a key risk factor for poor mental health within athlete populations (Mahoney et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2016; Weigand et al., 2013) and, therefore, pressure to perform as 'the athlete' off the field likely contributes to athletes' vulnerability to mental health concerns.

Second, athletes explained that what occurred on field has consequences off field, and support staff reinforced this stating that they saw that what was occurring in athletes' personal life off field tended to have an impact on them on the field. A central tenet of being an elite level athlete is performing competitively. As such, performance pressure was a common experience across athlete informants. As articulated by Markser (2011) and Weigand et al. (2013), such pressure is accepted as a reality of a contemporary athlete and contributes to the experience of poor mental health in athletes. However, the findings of the current research position the pressure to perform well often stems from the stress related to the consequences of a poor performance rather than the performance itself. It is not the performance, or the idea of performing, that gives rise to stress, rather, it is the perceived consequences that are associated with a poor performance that result in distress.

Athletes described a love for the game, and emphasized that competing and performing on field was what they looked forward to. The pressure, stress, and distress arose from non-selection, loss of income, potential for public backlash, and

failure to meet intrinsic and extrinsic expectations that were consequences of poor performance, rather than performing itself. While the development of strategies and interventions to improve athletes' capacity to cope with performance pressure, in order to reduce the impact of this on performance, remains an important facet of research within sport psychology (e.g., Cooke et al., 2010; Gucciardi & Dimmock, 2008; Nicholls & Polman, 2007) and a number of frameworks have been adopted to account for performance pressure (e.g., Eysenck & Calvo, 1992; Hardy et al., 2001; Masters, 1992), these findings suggest that how performance pressure is experienced and conceptualised by athletes themselves seems to be lacking from the current research. This may have implications for the ecological validity, efficacy, and effectiveness of the strategies and interventions that are developed based on such frameworks.

10.3.2 The Media

10.3.2.1 Myth Metaphor level

The media pervaded all levels of understanding of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes. At the Myth Metaphor level of understanding conceptualisations of the media as a hunter was the focus. A number of qualities emerged as central to this concept of the media, including the notion that the media are strategic, cold, and “go for the heart”, symbolised by the metaphor ‘being hunted.’ Within the metaphor of ‘being hunted’ athletes are ascribed the role of prey, where they are persistently being pursued: stalked, tracked, and trophied by the media. The symbolic hunter, by extension, further perpetuates their vulnerability and fragility, and positions athletes as in need of protection. Athletes become wounded by the stories told of them and, in some instances, these wounds never heal. The manifestations of this metaphor were apparent across the other levels of understanding.

10.3.2.2 Worldview Discourse level

The issue of the media emerged at the Worldview Discourse level primarily in terms of the social construction of Australian elite level athletes. The social construction of elite level athletes and their lifestyle derived from the worldviews revealed across the analyses have implications for athletes' identity, self-worth, and wellbeing. Public discourses serve as the foundation for what an athlete is and is not, creating a construct of the athlete, and in turn athletes' identities. Athletes can come

to be defined solely by the collective stories told about them or may be forced to rely on the stories they are surrounded by to construct their identity. This provides limited opportunities for athletes to forge their own identity, and suggests athletes' identity and, by extension the athlete, cease to exist outside of the public discourse. This dynamic is consistent with understandings of social constructionism (Britten, 2011; Gergen, 1985; Raskin, 2002) as these understandings of what it means to be an athlete as well as athletes' identity are predicated on the social parameters within which they arise (Gergen, 1991; Gergen, 1994).

The findings of the current research further suggest the media constructs athletes' identities. This extends on understandings of the role of the media as limiting the identities available for athletes (e.g., Cosh et al., 2015; McGannon et al., 2015) and reflects work of Andrews and Jackson (2001), Birrell and McDonal (2000), and Whannel (2002) who found that athletes internalise the discourses they are surrounded by. As such, athletes struggle to challenge the discourse perpetuated about them or subsequent identity imposed on them. Further this presents athlete identity as more complex than traditional conceptualisations which is often considered in terms of the degree with which athletes' identify with the athlete role (e.g., Brewer et al., 1993). This has clear implications for retirement. A number of researchers have found identity loss is a significant experience associated with retiring from sport (e.g., Baillie & Danish, 1992; Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, & Kettler, 2013; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). This highlights the importance of fostering an identity beyond the field, and beyond the media.

It was evident that the media was conceptualised as a vehicle of public opinion, which is consistent with understandings of the function of the media provided by Summers and Morgan (2008). This resulted in the media being viewed as synonymous with public opinion. The key perception of public opinion that emerged from the analysis was the sense that the public were ignorant of the realities of training and competing as an elite level athlete and have only a superficial appreciation of being an athlete. This suggests the lifestyle of elite level athletes is socially constructed as easy, lacking *real* hard work or effort and that anyone can do it. Viewed with the lens of social constructionism (Gergen, 1985), the media is positioned as a fundamental component of the creation and perpetuation of this conceptualisation of athletes' lifestyle. Athletes are constantly encountering inaccurate accounts of their experiences and this functions to invalidate and diminish

their effort and achievements. In addition, at this level, public discourses surrounding athletes were perceived to be contingent on their ability to live up to an expected infallibility. The media, as a vehicle of the public discourse, were seen to prioritise controversy and examples of athletes' mistakes.

The perception of the public discourse as limited extended into conceptualisations of success. Athletes perceived they were embedded within public discourses that only valued winning, where public support of athletes was contingent on successful performances. This conceptualisation of success was further mirrored across broader systemic, organisational, and societal worldviews. This notion of success was in contrast to athletes' perception of success. Alongside objective and quantifiable markers, success could also be subjective, experiential, individually defined, and not anchored rigidly to victory. Athletes explained success as debuting, personal bests, good performances (in the absence of victory), making a final, and/or medalling (any colour). As such, the worldview of the public and, by extension, broader systemic and organisational worldviews, was experienced by athletes as fickle.

10.3.2.3 Social Causal level

At the Social Causal level media concerns were around an ever present surveillance, which present as tangible manifestations of the symbolic hunter. The media were persistently and relentlessly poised to capture and disseminate athletes' mistakes to the wider society (hunted). As such, the media presents as a social system that profits off, and exploits, athletes' humanness, while simultaneously functioning to de-humanise them. Such pervasive attention is consistent with findings that evidence the interdependence of sport and the media (Zion et al., 2011). The juxtaposition of the symbolic hunter alongside the infallible athlete presents as a particularly problematic social dynamic. Rather than just the reality of being human, athletes' mistakes are positioned as unexpected, public interest, and entertaining. As such, athletes are embedded in a discourse that functions to elucidate their failings and their inability to satisfy societal expectations, individually and at large. This gives rise to a series of expectations that athletes are mandated to negotiate day to day, and athletes are under pressure to adhere to these expectations.

10.3.2.4 Litany level

At the litany level issues of the media are also understood in terms of performance pressure. The conduct of the media contributes to, and likely exacerbates, the experience of performance pressure at the litany level. Unique to the current research, it was clear media plays a fundamental role in the extension of the notion of performance pressure beyond the field. The experience of performance pressure beyond the field has implications for wellbeing and functioning within sporting systems, and serves to explain, in part, issues of autonomy, identity, and self-worth as anchored to the perception of how well athletes adhere to expectations of being an athlete as promoted by the media.

Athletes felt the burden of societal expectation via the media to maintain a persona of perfection. This resulted in a perceived necessity for athletes to always be ‘the athlete’ on and off the field to avoid the repercussions associated with violating the sociocultural expectations and exemplar of ‘athlete.’ This dynamic opens athletes up to a series of additional opportunities, beyond their sporting performances, to “fail” in the public eye. This reflects early work by Goffman (1959) who argued that ‘backstage’ (being ‘off’) spaces are essential to effective functioning within systems and the pressure of constantly being ‘on stage’. The findings of this thesis suggest athletes are not being afforded ‘backstage’ space (i.e., the time or privacy to just be themselves rather than ‘the athlete’) which therefore likely has implications for athletes’ mental health and wellbeing. This is also consistent with the notion that contemporary athletes face increased pressure. This supports findings by Rice et al. (2016) and Hammond et al. (2013) who note the additional pressures faced by contemporary athletes which stem from media attention, public scrutiny, and the subsequent potential to fail on the world stage.

Athletes’ changing their behaviour to adhere to sociocultural expectations reflects work of McGannon and Mauws (2000) who suggested the cultural and societal expectations athletes are embedded in often function to constrain and manipulate their behaviour. This type of behavioural mandate also reflects dynamics within athlete-coach relationships articulated by SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002) and suggests athletes’ interactions with the media and other socio-contextual factors can mimic behavioural control dynamics that affect the satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, of basic psychological needs that are known to compromise athlete wellbeing, undermine autonomy, and result in athletes questioning their ability (e.g.,

Bartholomew et al., 2011; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010; Ng et al., 2011; Reinboth et al., 2004). In addition, findings from the current research suggest that the relationship that exists between athletes, the media, and, by extension the public, may be as salient as the athlete-coach relationship, in terms of proximity, importance, and influence.

10.3.3 A Poor Fit

According to CLA (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; Inayatullah, 2004) the dynamics identified at the Social Causal level of understanding represent tangible manifestations of the various worldviews, myths, and metaphors. However, it was apparent in the current research that a number of the systemic processes stemmed from a consideration of athlete as athlete, which is not consistent with the worldviews, myths, and metaphors garnered from informants. The findings of the current research position the social processes, dynamics, and structures that manifested at the Social Causal level as a reflection of the perceived worldviews, myths, and metaphors of broader society. This presents a mismatch between athletes' story and the systems portrayal of athletes, and may serve as one explanation of athletes' experience of poor mental health. The goodness of fit principle (Kelly, 1968; Murrell, 1973; Murrell & Norris, 1983) states that a lack of fit between a person and their environment can give rise to pathology, and, as such, a lack of fit between an athlete and their context (environment), may account, at least in part, for the incidence of poor mental health within athlete populations (e.g., Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Gulliver et al., 2015; Hammond et al., 2013). For example, athletes positioned their humanness as strength, and having balance and an identity, interests, and/or passion outside of sport, was viewed as a key coping strategy. However, athletes are embedded within a system and a context that does not support this and prioritises the support and development of the *athlete* above all else. This mismatch could potentially exacerbate the stress athletes experience day-to-day.

Another key example of the lack of fit was evident within the experiences of support staff. The juxtaposition of the experiences of support staff alongside the lived experience of elite level athletes provided a unique opportunity to compare the assumptions, values, ideologies, and overall experience of these two key populations. Of particular importance in the current research was the opposing nature of how support staff saw themselves, and how they were perceived by athletes. Support staff saw themselves as allies, characterised by unconditional trust. Athletes in the current

research described a pervasive sense of mistrust of support staff and the system at large. This has implications for the ideologies and structures that govern the provision of support to athletes, and suggests that, in order to deliver more effective support to athlete populations, the ideologies and structures of the governing organisations need to change. Specifically, the ideology of coaches towards accessing psychological support was positioned as a key barrier to athletes' help seeking behaviour. This is consistent with Martin, Zakrajsek, and Wrisberg (2012)'s findings. These authors suggested that it is the coaches' attitudes towards support, rather than the athletes' attitudes, that have the most influence on athletes' willingness to access such supports. This was also reflected at the Myth Metaphor and Worldview Discourse levels.

10.3.3.1 Myth Metaphor level

The metaphor 'A fix-it' represents the organisational level conceptualisation of support staff that is in further contest to the symbolic athletes' ally. That is, support staff as 'A fix-it' presents an allegiance not to athletes but to their employing organisation, to 'fix' performance related issues, rather than attend to athletes' as individuals: as humans. Again this is reflective of Goffman's (1959) early work that positions staff in institutions as there for the institution not the recipients or users.

10.3.3.2 Worldview Discourse level

At the Worldview Discourse level, support staff are not enabled to support athletes in a manner that is consistent with their own ideology, nor in line with their understanding of how to support athletes effectively. Rather, support staff are defined by the values, assumptions, and ideologies that underpin the systems and structures they are required work within. A number of the dynamics identified in this thesis are consistent with Gould, Murphy, Tammen, and May (1989) who found that the most frequent issues experienced by support staff included lack of funding, lack of access, and a lack of trust from, and poor communication with, coaching staff. The findings of this thesis suggest support staff are enabled to fix problems that present rather than provide long term or systemic support with appropriate follow ups.

10.3.3.3 Social Causal level

At the Social Causal level this lack of goodness of fit emerged as barriers to seeking help. The dynamics, and social processes at this level serve as tangible representations of the symbolic 'A fix-it.' These manifestations serve as barriers to

help seeking, which work against the very purpose of having support staff. Athletes tended to “suffer” through their experience of poor mental health on their own rather than engage with support staff. The impact of the sense of mistrust between athletes and support staff and, by extension the system at large, was twofold. First, this lack of trust was positioned as a significant barrier to engaging with support staff. This fits with the notion that athletes’ attitudes towards support, as positive or negative, will impact their help-seeking behaviour (e.g., Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Schwenk et al., 2007; Watson, 2005; Watson, 2006) and is consistent with research that suggests negative experiences with support staff will result in further barriers to seeking help (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Martin, 2005). Second, the sense of mistrust, positioned as a lack of buy-in, was also identified as a barrier to the delivery of effective and efficient support to athletes. This is consistent with findings from Orlick and Partington (1987) who identified athletes’ key markers of effective support staff as those who worked individually with each athlete, showed interest in athletes’ lives beyond the field, met the needs of the person in front of them and, of particular salience for the findings presented in this thesis, were experienced as caring. Findings from Orlick and Partington (1987) also highlighted that deficits associated with the effective provision of psychological support are also anchored to athletes’ lack of access to support staff and other support services.

10.3.3.4 Litany level

At the Litany level of understanding concerns regarding the lack of fit are anchored to athletes’ experience of poor mental health. That is, the lack of fit may account for the prevalence of mental health concerns within athlete populations in Australia (e.g., Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Gulliver et al., 2015) and potentially internationally (e.g., Frank et al., 2013; Nixdorf et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2007).

10.4 Reflecting on Phase Two: A Single Sport Study

Phase two of the current research allowed for an exploration of the multi-faceted experiences of athletes in one sport across multiple levels and at various stages along the career trajectory. This phase of research, in particular, highlighted the proximity of the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) to athletes’ lived experience. Field data in combination with the CLA of interview data suggested that the macrosystem affects the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes, and the

factors that affected athletes existed beyond the sport setting. Despite the positives associated with the micro- and mesosystem experiences of athletes, socio-contextual factors, such as the media, sponsorship branding, and the public were still present day to day. Such factors influence how athletes perceive themselves and position themselves in sport and life, where issues of identity, autonomy, and self-worth were evident.

The juxtaposition of the field research findings and the interview findings is key to providing a holistic appreciation of the realities of these athletes. The field research findings highlighted micro- and mesosystems that athletes interact with every day, and suggests the overall experience of being an elite athlete is positive. Athletes associated with this sport were embedded in a supportive system where there was a balance between expectation and autonomy. Athletes were empowered to have some say of how to structure their training/s and their identities were considered beyond a one dimensional 'athlete' identity. However, this is in contrast with findings generated from the interview data that suggested the overall experience of athletes was less positive and athletes felt disempowered. These findings suggest that despite the support this sport is able to foster within the training environment, contextual factors still permeated athletes' lived experience. There are several interpretations that could account for this. One plausible interpretation is that athletes' interactions with the exo- and macrosystems, particularly via mass media (social and formal) explains the findings. This reflects findings by Blodgett et al. (2015) and Smoll and Smith (2002) who reported that how athletes perceive and experience such socio-contextual interactions will affect their subjective experiences as positive or negative.

The single sport study provided some evidence to suggest how blanket approaches to supporting athletes can be experienced as ineffective. Within the training environment, athletes identified this type of approach did not necessarily consider the individuality of athletes and, therefore, did not afford the time and space for them to learn how they could best cope with the stressors of their environment. A specific example of such an intervention was observed in the delivery of a 'mindfulness' programme. The potential implications of this are twofold. First, the findings presented in this thesis are consistent with dynamics highlighted by Orlick and Partington (1987) who indicated that interventions delivered in a group setting were perceived as being too general and lacked contact with support staff and subsequently athletes were dissatisfied with the intervention and the support staffer.

Second, it highlights the importance of considering the individuality of athletes. With respect to mindfulness, it has been noted that the appropriateness of mindfulness for any individual should be determined on a case by case basis by a clinician, as mindfulness programs can serve to exacerbate or worsen underlying mental health concerns such as anxieties, stress, depressive symptomology, and other psychopathology (Dobkin, Irving, & Amar, 2012). However, it is acknowledged such insights were derived from a small single sport study, and, as such, deeper and broader exploration of this dynamic would be required to ascertain if this was a common experience across athletes outside of this sport.

The findings of this phase of research also elucidated the extension of performance beyond the competitive context, and was not confined to athletic performance outcomes. These findings suggest the lived experience of elite level athletes was saturated by a performance narrative, which reflects findings by Carless and Douglas (2013) and Ryba et al. (2015). The prominent focus on athletic performance in the consideration of elite athletes (Reardon & Factor, 2010; Schnell et al., 2014; Turner & Barker, 2013) suggests the only expectation of athletes is to be successful in the competitive domain. Similarly, this reflects the mechanistic view that athletes tend to adopt of themselves, where they perceive their bodies as merely a vehicle to deliver athletic performances (Theberge, 2008). The experience of being an athlete, which is based on athletic performances, is not consistent with the realities of being an athlete in Australia as suggested by the current research. It is clear that it is not just athletes' sporting prowess that attracts attention and positions athletes as celebrities (Hassan, 2013). Previous research by L'Etang (2006) and Summers and Morgan (2008) suggested athletes' lives, beyond the competitive domain, are not only of interest but central to their image as 'athlete.'

Despite the sport explored within phase two having positive support strategies embedded within the training and development of their athletes, risk factors associated with poor mental health were still apparent. This suggests there may be gaps in our current understanding of how to best support athletes beyond the training environment. Where SDT suggests variations in psychological wellbeing can be predicted directly by levels of need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ng et al., 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2002) the findings from the current research suggest a significant role played by exo- and macrosystem interactions. This goes beyond those factors considered within SDT frameworks, in satisfying psychological needs. The dynamics

identified here have implications for the maintenance of athletes' psychological wellbeing. A better understanding of what athletes perceive as positive or negative has the potential for the development of better targeted support interventions for *current* elite level athletes.

10.5 Reflecting on Phase Three: When back page news is front page news

Phase three of the research allowed for direct engagement with the public discourses that serve the social construction of elite level athletes in Australia. The thematic analysis of print media headlines within phase three provided understandings of the cultural underpinnings of the representations, social constructions, and societal expectations of elite level sport and elite level sportspeople, perpetuated by Australian media. A summary of the findings generated across phase three is presented below (see Table 5).

Table 5 Summary of Themes Generated from Thematic Analysis (Phase Three)

| Dimension of Social Construction of Australian Athletes and Sport | Theme | Description |
|---|-----------------------|--|
| ‘Focus on Winning’ | ‘Sacrificial’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Win at all costs mentality • Acceptability of ‘sacrificing’ athletes’ physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing to the cause: victory |
| | ‘Impending victory’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victory as an inevitability and the expectation |
| | ‘Naming and shaming’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss and poor performances as taboo • Distain, disappointment, blame • Athletes’ efforts positioned as not good enough |
| | ‘Second chances’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dynamic of redemption • Promise of future victory as atonement for loss |
| ‘Being Super Human’ | ‘Naturally unnatural’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athletes skills positioned as natural, innate, and magic • Athletes skills as a ‘gift’ rather than earned |
| | ‘Hero’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athletes as heroes • Heroic, bravery, gallantry, valour |
| | ‘The final stand’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation of athletes’ retirement as valiant or obsolete |
| ‘Players as Pawns’ | ‘Gossip’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest in athletes extends beyond the field • Celebrity, publicly owned figure, entertainer |
| | ‘It’s just business’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport as a commercial commodity • Athletes as key resource • Consumer of sport prioritised over players of sport |

The headlines served as a summary representation of the public discourse within which sport was embedded. Key findings positioned elite level athletes as, not only players of their sport, but players in a larger game (system). An overt focus on winning pervaded representations of athletes, and athletes were 'sacrificed' to this focus. Winning and losing was constructed as a dichotomy; first or nothing. This conceptualisation was fundamental to a series of tensions that underpinned representations of 'the athlete' that have to be navigated; these are winner or loser, hero or zero, we won you lost, role model or celebrity. This discourse celebrated achievements, while simultaneously undermining them. Such discourse is likely internalised by both athletes and the Australian public. While these findings further contribute to understandings of the potential impact of cultural representations of elite level athletes at an individual level, higher order findings are also evident and pertain to the broader conceptualisation of the Australian sporting culture.

10.5.1 Individual level

At this level winning was the focus, and victory was central. The Australian public was positioned to expect victory, and Gold was the only acceptable outcome. This supports findings by Carless and Douglas (2012) and McKay and Roderick (2010) who found that not winning was seen as failing and loss was constructed as shameful. Athletes who did not achieve victory were openly condemned, blamed, and held to account, and unsuccessful outcomes required an explanation. Alongside this conceptualisation of loss, in victory, athletes' skills were constructed as 'super powers' and a 'gift.' This served to depersonalise the athlete, positioned their abilities as something given to them, rather than a product of their individual effort, and demanded athletes live up to this gift. These dynamics are consistent with the conceptualisation of athletic loss as un-Australian and taboo (McKay & Roderick, 2010), and introduced an additional cultural pressure for Australian athletes to navigate (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Beyond the pressure to perform athletically (e.g., Cooke et al., 2010; Gucciardi & Dimmock, 2008) was the pressure to win.

As a consequence of this 'win or lose' environment Australian elite level athletes are judged in every performance and athletes are ascribed to particular categories. This reflects findings from a number of researchers (e.g., Cosh et al., 2015; Douglas & Carless, 2006; McGannon et al., 2012; McGannon et al., 2015) who have found that identities available for athletes are limited and temporary. Chase and Machida (2011) highlight that if an athlete wins, they are publicly commended. However, if they lose they are deemed to be a failure. Subsequently athletes are constantly shifted between 'hero' or 'zero', and their worth to

society determined by their victories. This constructed duality of identity was apparent until the end of athlete's career, where they are either celebrated (hero) or condemned (zero).

The availability of the 'hero' identity for Australian elite level athletes was of particular interest. Superficially, the construction of a victorious athlete as a hero is consistent with the conceptualisation of successful Australian elite level athletes as national heroes: quintessential sporting icons and role models fundamental to Australian sporting culture (Adebayo, 2013; Chase & Machida, 2011; Hassan, 2013). As articulated by Toohey and Taylor (2009), such discourse may also function to legitimise the Australian sporting identity. However, deeper consideration reveals this representation of Australian elite level athletes as heroes was literal, rather than reflective of the metaphoric iconic sporting hero. This construction of the 'hero' athlete identity functions to invalidate athletes' training, skill mastery, and hard work. Consequently, success is undermined and constructed as merely the result of genetics, innate natural talent or inherent personality traits, rather than being earned. This positions athletes as 'gifted', but this gift has to be lived up to. As such, the construction of the athlete as 'hero' is temporary.

The ascension of athletes to public figures within society governed by their athletic capabilities and the subsequent construction as 'celebrity' rather than a behavioural, moral, ethical or intellectual directive, reflects work by Adebayo (2013). Yet athletes were open to scrutiny within and beyond the competitive domain. This gave rise to an implicit behavioural mandate imposed on athletes, and it was clear that it was their responsibility to adhere to it. This suggests that the construction of 'good' athlete, or the quintessential sporting hero, is not solely anchored to the traditional notions of winning, or the expectation of success, rather it is also tied to 'good' behaviour, which reflects findings by Adebayo (2013) and (Hassan, 2013). This gives rise to multiple cultural roles elite level athletes are expected to portray: successful athlete, role model, and entertainer. Athletes have to adhere to all the roles to avoid criticism or backlash, setting them up to fail.

10.5.2 Cultural level

At the cultural level the expectation of success and the pressure on athletes to win emerged as a collective voice. However, the achievement of victory is not portrayed as the individual athlete's success, but as a national success. In contrast to the blame and accountability imposed on individual athletes in loss ("you lost"), victory was often constructed part of being Australian and credited to Australia ("we won"). Only when athletes saved the day were they recognised for their individual achievement. Such discourse served to conceptualise victory as the correct outcome and reflects the notion that to be

Australian you have to win, as articulated by McKay and Roderick (2010). This likely feeds and reinforces Australia's perceived national identity as a great sporting nation (Horton, 2012; Maguire, 2011; Melnick & Wann, 2010; Toohey & Taylor, 2009). This dynamic is consistent with research that has demonstrated media and newspaper coverage can influence public opinion on particular issues, events and/or personnel, for example climate change (Brulle, Carmichael, & Jenkins, 2012), national security (Baum & Groeling, 2009) and presidential candidates (Domke et al., 1997). Therefore, the patterns evident within newspaper coverage of Australian sport and athletes would likely contribute to, and even manipulate, public opinion of athletes and particular sports. Here, athletic victory is more about maintaining a façade than celebrating individual athletes. This speaks to an inherent tension between representations and attributions of Australian athletes as individuals (in loss), or representatives of the Australian collective identity (in victory).

Alongside a focus on winning is an apparent interest in gossip. Treating athletes as 'celebrities' has been highlighted by Hassan (2013) and L'Etang (2006). This results in the front page being inescapable. This also reflects findings that sporting 'celebrities' are targets for soft news, and their personal lives are fair game (Summers & Morgan, 2008). Win, loss, good behaviour, and poor behaviour are all considered issues of public interest, which speaks to an underlying cultural propensity to consider athletes as a source of entertainment rather than, respected professionals. This is inconsistent with the consideration of the Australian sporting culture as one that celebrates and idolises victorious athletes as described in previous research (e.g., Adebayo, 2013; Hassan, 2013; Melnick & Wann, 2010). Further, this suggests that the reality of Australian sporting culture is more consistent with understandings of the colloquially named 'tall poppy' syndrome (O'Neill, Calder, & Allen, 2014; Smith & Phillips, 2001; Tranter & Donoghue, 2015) and cutting athletes down to size. National identity is prioritised over individual athletes' needs and performance.

Headlines further positioned elite level sport as a commercial commodity, a business venture with stakeholders (the media, the public), and resources (athletes). Athletes are required to be 'value for money', and do what they are paid to do, which is win and entertain (Summers & Morgan, 2008). This dynamic presents another explanation for the interest in athletes' behaviour both on and off the field, beyond the cult of celebrity. If athletes are not winning on field, their off field behaviour becomes the vehicle through which athletes can be 'of value' (entertain) to the stakeholders and still be considered a worthwhile investment. Additionally, this also feeds the behavioural mandate imposed on athletes, as athletes' on field success and off field behaviour is likely to determine the success of the 'business' or

brand. Such dynamics demonstrate the priority for business owners over athletes, positioning athletes as pawns and puppets within a larger game. Further, the comparison of media coverage with sporting achievements (i.e. a gold medal) and the suggestion of sport being 'for sale' challenges the cultural value of sport and sporting achievements within Australian sporting ideology. This further serves to undermine athletes' efforts, hard work, and achievements at large, and reduces sport to an industry, where athletes, and sport, are used to sell newspapers and business make a profit.

The notion of sport as a business has a ripple effect from the social constructions and expectations of athletes that subsequently impacts on sport itself. The focus of coaching, supporting, and other systems that are embedded with sport must be driven by the agenda and rhetoric as perpetuated by public discourse (and the media). It is therefore difficult for the management within the business of sport to move away from this model that focuses on winning, or move to a holistic perspective, despite the broad potential benefit in doing such.

10.6 Implications and Contributions of the Research

A number of practical implications for mental health emerged from the current research. First, the findings of the current research indicate that psychological interventions need to be tailored to individual athletes rather than, or at least alongside, blanket or a "one size fits all" approach. It was clear athletes' individuality typically rendered such blanket approaches ineffective. It was apparent that athletes were well supported and prepared as an athlete on the field and that a number of interventions and coping strategies existed that targeted and prepared athletes for competitive performances and the many and varied conditions of performance. However, preparation for the lifestyle is lacking.

The findings of the current research also elucidated a number of factors that may precipitate mental health concerns for athlete populations may not stem from training and competing as an elite level athlete, rather from living as an elite level athlete. A key implication of these findings is the extension of performance pressure beyond the field. It was clear athletes are not adequately prepared for and, as such, may not cope with, the nature of this 'athlete' lifestyle. Preparation for elite level sport needs to be more holistic, rather than such a targeted focus on being ready for the conditions of competitive performance. Extending athletes' preparation for the additional stress and stressors associated with the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes would likely be beneficial to their mental health. Further, genuine development for the human-side of athletes off the field also appeared to be lacking. It was apparent that genuine support for the personal level development of athletes off the field is not only important as a coping strategy for current

athletes, but also important to prepare athletes for the move out of sport and mediate mental health concerns associated with this transition period. Further, the discrepancy between how support staff viewed themselves and how they were experienced by athletes is also an important consideration in the provision of support to this population.

The findings of the current research elucidated that psychological support for athletes was not always perceived as accessible. A number of factors played a significant role in limiting the accessibility of support, such as stigma, fear of consequence, and the ideology of coaching staff. This suggests the provision of support could be improved by attending to the issue of accessibility. For example, it was apparent it was individual athletes' responsibility to seek out psychological support when they identified within themselves they may need it. A mandatory system, where athletes have to engage with the psychologist associated with their sport, club, or organisation, on a monthly basis would serve to eliminate the need for athletes to only seek support when they felt it was required. Alternatively, athletes' symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress could be monitored and, when they exceed an identified threshold, it would trigger an appointment with a psychologist. These types of systems would likely have a preventative function for mental health concerns for athlete populations and is consistent with recommendations posed by Moesch et al. (2018) who noted the importance of visible and accessible mental health programs. Frequent engagement with a psychologist, or support provider, would likely promote trust within these relationships, which was a key consideration for informants. Further, such a system may also function to decrease the stigma that underpins seeking this help more broadly within athlete populations, which is important to facilitate positive help seeking behaviour, particularly in young populations (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005).

The consideration of the principle of goodness of fit (Kelly, 1968; Murrell, 1973; Murrell & Norris, 1983) alongside CLA methodology (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; Inayatullah, 2004) further suggests that to improve the fit between athletes and support staff with their environment, interventions may need to be targeted at changing the context of athletes, rather than the individuals (Murrell, 1973). Alongside this, CLA positions the social causative factors as the easiest to change (Inayatullah, 1990; Inayatullah, 2004), which suggests there is opportunity to effect real change at the systemic level of athletes' experience. The findings of the current research elucidated a number of dynamics, processes, and factors that exist at the social causal level that can be changed to improve the provision of support to athlete populations.

The findings of the current research also challenge a central narrative of the lived experience of elite level athletes labelled as “control the controllables.” A key finding revealed the notion that factors being controllable was not the reality. This suggests that rather than the continuous promotion of the importance of being in control, support interventions and preparation strategies may be more helpful if they fostered athletes’ flexibility and ability to cope with the unexpected.

Reflecting on the messages and rhetoric highlighted across the analyses, at each level of understanding and between each level of understanding, presented a number of key issues which construct the lived experience of elite level athletes in Australia as a “wicked” problem (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014). This presents as a methodological implication of the research, as CLA methods and methodology was well suited to the exploration of this social phenomena. CLA proved useful in terms of incorporating various perspectives, and lenses into the understanding of athletes’ lived experience.

With respect to theoretical implications of the current research, linking CLA methodology and methods with systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) enabled deep exploration of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes during their careers and an exploration of the context of the lived experience. These two provided an ecologically valid and holistic account of athletes’ lived experience. This was further enhanced by the use of field data in phase two. This framework highlighted the proximity of athletes’ exo- and macrosystems within their lived experience which underscore the increasing importance of continued consideration of athletes’ interactions with socio-contextual factors as important. Further the use of this bricolage of perspectives is a useful way forward for future research and for researchers to explore under researched areas or phenomena.

10.7 Research Parameters and Theoretical Recommendations: Notes for future research

The sample size of the support staff informants in phase one presents as a potential limitation of the current research. Despite the small sample ($n = 5$), the support staff recruited offered in-depth knowledge and a sophisticated and complex understanding of the lived experience of elite level athletes. The depth of insight that support staff informants were able to provide was unexpected and likely a product of the qualitative methodology and analytic methods used that afforded the consideration of the data via multiple lens. As such, future research would like benefit from further exploration of such insights, from support staff, to explicate the systemic relationships that affect athletes’ lived experiences. Future research may also benefit from a deeper exploration of why support staff were not aware of how they

are perceived by athletes. However, it is acknowledged that this finding may have been a result of the small sample size of support staff compared to athletes in the current research.

I acknowledge that the findings associated with the current research are dependent upon, and relevant to, the context within which data was collected and analysed (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). This has a number of implications. The findings derived from the current research are Australian centric and do not have global applicability. However, they do speak to the importance of the consideration of the impact of broader culture, ideology, and conceptualisations of national identity on the lived experience of elite level athletes internationally. This consideration has particular salience with phase three of the research. The review of print media considered in this phase was embedded in Australia and Australian sporting culture during an Olympic year, which presents a number of implications. Although findings may be applicable to similar comparable contexts, it would be interesting to examine print media beyond an Australia-centric setting to an international context. Furthermore, these data provided only a snapshot of the discourse and commentary as portrayed through the media. A longitudinal, cross sectional or prospective methodology would contribute to a deeper understanding of these tensions and would capture any fluidity of discourse, expectations, and presentations of athlete identities. Finally, it is acknowledged that the use of an Olympic year may have presented a narrower focus than intended and limited the generalisability of these findings. While this was not the intention of selecting a single Olympic year for analysis, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the implications of such. Exploration of the messages portrayed by print media across various years may have presented alternate narratives, and stories and/or been able to capture any change/s in such messages across different years and key competitions, such as a non-Olympic year, a Winter Olympic year, and/or other important international events as such the FIFA or Rugby World Cup.

The current research explored athletes' lived experience and, as such, the conceptualisations of the worldviews, cultural ideologies, and societal expectations presented reflect only athletes' experience of these constructs and cannot be considered a full reflection of Australia's sporting culture. To obtain a more complete account of the values, attitudes, and ideologies that underpin sport in this country, it would be important to engage directly with members of the public and explore public discourses.

Further, I acknowledge the review of public discourse in the current research was constrained to front page newspaper headlines. The depth of insights was limited. However, readers are more likely to scan headlines rather than read whole articles (Dor, 2003). Further,

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despite selecting a newspaper that would represent national ideologies (rather than state based preferences) I acknowledge the readership of *The Australian* is limited and is not free of other publishing biases. As such, the insights derived cannot be considered representative and the generalisability limited. This particular broadsheet newspaper likely conveys news differently to other print media outlets, such as tabloid newspapers or online modalities. Different results would likely be obtained if this study was replicated across other print media formats. In the same vein, adopting a discourse analysis framework to the exploration of public and collective discourses to full newspapers articles, and/or examination of additional and/or varied modalities of public discourse beyond newspapers, including social media forums (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and sport specific only media forums, would provide additional depth and insights with respect to the public discourse that surrounds sports and athletes in Australia. This would also enable exploration of informal commentary (i.e., comments posted by the public on public social media forums) as well as formal commentary (i.e., newspapers, online commentary). This would enable a comparison across the two rather than the congregative approach of the current research.

The exploratory nature of the current research generated a lot of data across the interviews. Although this was positive for the research in terms of the rich, comprehensive, and nuanced data that enabled a holistic account of athletes' lived experience, it also presented some challenges. First, difficulty arose in condensing, synthesising, and interpreting the data, which had implications for the analysis. I acknowledge that the analysis was conducted through a particular lens, and, given the amount of data garnered, it is inevitable that some of the decisions made were coloured by that lens. However, it is important to note that the decision making processes are clearly documented within the audit trail. Future research could focus on one aspect of the lived experience, for example athletes' experiences with the media and implications for identity formation. Given the aim of the current research was broad and functioned as a first look at the lived experience of elite level athletes in Australia, the findings provide a framework that can guide and inform future research in a variety of domains related to the athlete experience.

A key inclusionary criteria of the current research was Australian citizenship. This resulted in athletes who had played at the top level of elite level sport in Australia, but who were not eligible to play for Australia, not being able to participate in the research. One such athlete was recruited for the current research. It was not apparent this athlete did not meet this particular selection criteria until mid-way through the interview process. Given the interview was already partially complete, it was considered unethical to stop the interview at that time,

especially as the informant wished to continue. However, this data could not be included within the full data set.

Retirement emerged as an issue for a number of informants but there were insufficient data to capture this experience fully. It is acknowledged that athlete transition and retirement has gained increased attention in recent years. Exploration is often focused on understanding the experience of retirement, its repercussions, and the development of strategies that may support athletes' coping and effective adjustment to life after sport (e.g., Cosh et al., 2013; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Hansen, Perry, Ross, & Montgomery, 2018; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). Insight shared across this research suggests such inquiry may benefit from extending the current scope to include the lens of loss and grief, and particularly understandings of non-finite or living loss (see Bruce & Schultz, 2002; Harris, 2011; Roos, 2002). This perspective positions this loss experience as grief and, as such, the utility of integrating grief and bereavement interventions into therapeutic interventions (see Neimeyer, Harris, Winokuer, & Thornton, 2011) would be an important line of inquiry.

10.8 Conclusion

This exploratory research garnered an account of athletes' lived experience from the perspective of athletes themselves (as it is lived) and from support staff (as it is observed). The CLA employed on the data revealed not only the litany level experiences, the obvious reality of training, competing, and living as an elite level athlete in Australia, but deep level discourses, worldviews, and cultural archetypes that both drive and legitimate this experience. Key to the understanding of athletes' lived experiences derived from the current research was the foregrounding of how athletes' experience particular litany level and socio-cultural factors, particularly with respect to performance pressure, the media, and public perceptions of athletes. Such insight provides novel findings to add to current understandings.

The experience of being an elite level athlete is complex and multidimensional, and extends beyond an individual athlete's athletic performance. The impact of broad exo- and macrosystem factors on athlete wellbeing, athlete identity and identity formation was major. Interactions with the macrosystem, via the media (exosystem), stripped athletes of identity and reduced them to merely a representation of their sport and exemplar of 'athlete' at the exclusion to all else. This functioned to impose a behavioural mandate on athletes to adhere to the sociocultural expectation of being an athlete and failure to do so had consequences. Thus, the macrosystem, rather than being a distal system, is proximal, seemingly having equivalent influence as micro- and mesosystems.

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The discourses that surrounded Australian elite level athletes influenced their lived experience. At the individual level, the discourse in which athletes were embedded limited the athletic identities available to them, and functioned to minimise their individual efforts. At the cultural level, particularly from a systemic level perspective, findings challenged the utility of the values, attitudes, and beliefs of Australia being a great sporting nation that celebrates and idolises champion athletes, considered central to the Australian sporting culture. However, Australia's athletes' successes or failures at performing as 'the athlete' on field and off field determines how they are then constructed and represented via public discourses. Further, they are not just portrayed by the media, but examined and scrutinised. Their talents, and skills are positioned as a gift, and they were in turn evaluated on how well they lived up to the responsibility of that gift. Fault and blame were assigned to failings with disregard for the impact of this discourse on athletes themselves.

The need to consider and reconceptualise athletes as human is clear. Athletes' lived experiences are pervaded by a number of cultural ideologies, social dynamics, and discourses that serve to disempower athletes and minimise their humanness. It is likely such dynamics, and the day-to-day interactions with these factors with their socio-cultural environment give rise to significant stress that detracts from their overall wellbeing and mental health. The findings demonstrate that athletes need to be enabled to access support, rather than positioned as not needing support and that an athlete that needs support is different and defective. Athletes' poor mental health is positioned as different and, weak, and accessing support is stigmatised. While cultural ideologies are hard to change, the systemic value put on psychological support and intervention for athletes can change. It is likely more targeted interventions, that are tailored to the factors that give rise to athletes' stress and distress will contribute to a more positive lived experience overall.

“It's not as bad as it seems,
it's not as good as it seems.”

– Nick Kyrgios, Australian Tennis Player

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Appendix A HREC Approvals



Memorandum

| | |
|----------------|--|
| To | A/Prof Brian Bishop, Psychology and Speech Pathology Jemma Dessauvagie, Psychology and Speech Pathology |
| From | Professor Peter O'Leary, Chair Human Research Ethics Committee |
| Subject | Protocol Approval RD-39-14 |
| Date | 18 November 2014 |
| Copy | Dr Peta Dzidic, Psychology and Speech Pathology |

Office of Research and Development
Human Research Ethics Committee

TELEPHONE 9266 2784
FACSIMILE 9266 3793
EMAIL hrec@curtin.edu.au

Thank you for your "Form C Application for Approval of Research with Low Risk (Ethical Requirements)" for the project titled "*What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.*". On behalf of the Human Research Ethics Committee I am authorised to inform you that the project is approved.

Approval of this project is for a period of four years **20-11-14 to 20-11-18**.

The approval number for your project is **RD-39-14**. Please quote this number in any future correspondence. Your approval has the following conditions:

- i) Annual progress reports on the project must be submitted to the Ethics Office.
- ii) **It is your responsibility, as the researcher, to meet the conditions outlined above and to retain the necessary records demonstrating that these have been completed. See: Western Australian University Sector Disposal Authority (WAUSDA).**

Applicants should note the following:

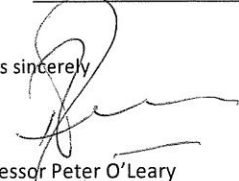
It is the policy of the HREC to conduct random audits on a percentage of approved projects. These audits may be conducted at any time after the project starts. In cases where the HREC considers that there may be a risk of adverse events, or where participants may be especially vulnerable, the HREC may request the chief investigator to provide an outcomes report, including information on follow-up of participants.

The attached **Progress Report** should be completed and returned to the Secretary, HREC, C/- Office of Research & Development annually.

Our website https://research.curtin.edu.au/guides/ethics/low_risk_hrec_forms.cfm contains all other relevant forms including:

- Completion Report (to be completed when a project has ceased)
- Amendment Request (to be completed at any time changes/amendments occur)
- Adverse Event Notification Form (If a serious or unexpected adverse event occurs)
- Western Australian University Sector Disposal Authority (WAUSDA)

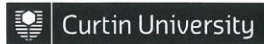
Yours sincerely


Professor Peter O'Leary
Chair Human Research Ethics Committee

Please Note: The following standard statement must be included in the information sheet to participants:
*This study has been approved under Curtin University's process for low-risk Studies (Approval Number **RD-39-14**). This process complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (paragraph 5.1.7 and paragraphs 5.1.18-5.1.21).*

AUSTRALIAN ATHLETES' LIVED EXPERIENCE

MEMORANDUM



| | |
|---------|--|
| To: | A/Prof Brian Bishop School of Psychology and Speech Pathology |
| CC: | Jemma Bonnie Dessauvage |
| From: | Dr Catherine Gangell, Manager Research Integrity |
| Subject | Amendment approval Approval number: RD-39-14 |
| Date: | 17-Apr-15 |

Office of Research and
Development
Human Research Ethics Office
TELEPHONE 9266 2784
FACSIMILE 9266 3793
EMAIL hrec@curtin.edu.au

Thank you for submitting an amendment to the Human Research Ethics Office for the project:

| | |
|----------|---|
| RD-39-14 | What does it mean to be an athlete in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain |
|----------|---|

The Human Research Ethics Office approves the amendment to the project.

Amendment number: RD-39-14/AR01
Approval date: 17-Apr-15

The following amendments were approved:

| |
|--|
| Revised Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form |
| Inclusion of short survey |
| Collection of observational data |

Please ensure that all data are stored in accordance with WAUSDA and Curtin University Policy.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Catherine Gangell
Manager, Research Integrity

Appendix B Invitation to Participate



**School of Psychology & Speech Pathology
Doctor of Philosophy (Psychology)**

What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number: RD-39-14

Researcher; Jemma Dessauvagie

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Hi there,

I am writing to you to inform you of an opportunity for you to participate in my PhD research project. I am a 2014 PhD Candidate at Curtin University and am also an ex-elite athlete, I represented Australia in Water Polo. I am currently completing my PhD and am interested in elite athletes' own perspective of their experiences of athletic performance.

Historically, socially and culturally sport is very important to Australian ideology and identity. To that end psychology has played and continues to play an imperative role in supporting elite athletes in their performance. However, to date, psychological research has not yet considered the experience of elite athletic performance from the athletes' perspective, nor considered external pressures outside of training and competition that may contribute to athletes' experiences. As such, interventions often centre on the intrinsic happenings of athletes individually, omitting any consideration of the possible influence from broader contextual factors.

It is anticipated those elite athletes who represent a club, or Australia, at the highest level of national or international competition experience stress within and beyond competition and I am interested in engaging current and retired athletes in an interview. I am writing to you to invite you to participate.

I must reiterate that I respect athletes' training schedules and other club commitments and as such they will be considered the priority at all times and will not be challenged by participation. Participation is entirely voluntary and will involve consenting to a face-to-face interview (approximately one hour) at a time and place convenient for yourself. Further, participants' identities will remain entirely confidential.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Jemma Dessauvagie

Email: Jemma.Dessauvagie@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

This study has been approved under Curtin University's process (Approval Number RD-39-14). This process complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Chapter 5.1.7 and Chapters 5.1.18-5.1.21). For further information on this study contact the researchers named above or the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee. c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845 or by telephoning 9266 9223 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.



School of Psychology & Speech Pathology
Doctor of Philosophy (Psychology)

What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number: RD-39-14

Researcher; Jemma Dessauvague

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Hi there,

I am writing to you to inform you of an opportunity for you to participate in my PhD research project. I am a 2014 PhD Candidate at Curtin University and am also an ex-elite athlete, I represented Australia in Water Polo. I am currently completing my PhD and am interested in elite athletes' own perspective of their experiences of athletic performance.

Historically, socially and culturally sport is very important to Australian ideology and identity. To that end sport psychology has played and continues to play an imperative role in supporting elite athletes in their performance. As such, gaining intimate insight with regard to the current interventions that support elite athletes in their performance is important. However, given the societal and ideological pressure that may manifest as a result of the high regard and value of sport in Australia, sport psychology may also benefit from the consideration of contextual factors.

It is anticipated those elite athletes who represent a club, or Australia, at the highest level of national or international competition experience stress within and beyond competition and I am interested in engaging current support staff associated with such athletes in an interview. Specifically, I am interested in engaging with support staff who are currently act as and/or are employed specifically as sports psychologists, wellbeing managers or wellbeing officers I am writing to you to invite you to participate.

I must reiterate that I respect athletes' training schedules and other club commitments and as such they will be considered the priority at all times and will not be challenged by participation. Participation is entirely voluntary and will involve consenting to a face-to-face interview (approximately one hour) at a time and place convenient for yourself. Further, participants' identities will remain entirely confidential.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Jemma Dessauvague

Email: Jemma.Dessauvague@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

This study has been approved under Curtin University's process (Approval Number RD-39-14). This process complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Chapter 5.1.7 and Chapters 5.1.18-5.1.21). For further information on this study contact the researchers named above or the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee. c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845 or by telephoning 9266 9223 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Appendix C Participant Information Sheet



Curtin University

School of Psychology & Speech Pathology

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A Qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number: RD-39-14

The current research is being completed as a part of a Doctorate of Philosophy (Psychology)

Researcher: Jemma Dessauvage

I invite you to participate in my PhD research project that aims to explore the experience of being an elite athlete in Australia. I am seeking both elite athletes and support staff (namely sports psychologists and/or wellbeing managers) to participate in this project.

Sport is very important to Australia and psychology has endeavoured to understand the needs of elite athletes in their performance. However, to date, psychological research has not yet considered the experience of performance from the athletes' point of view, nor considered external pressures outside of the training and competition. Talking to athletes, and associated support staff, about what it is like to be and support athletes in Australia will provide a genuine appreciation of the day to day realities faced by athletes, both the highlights and the hardships, within and beyond the competitive domain.

Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask me any questions.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to participate, in addition to this information sheet you will be provided with and asked to read and sign a consent form. Participation will involve consenting to a face-to-face interview (approximately one hour) at a time and place of your convenience. During the interview you will be asked questions that relate to your experiences as an elite athlete or as support staff to elite athletes. The interview will be digitally recorded and then transcribed by myself for analysis. Additionally, for athletes, demographic information relating to your career will also be collected via a separate survey at the time of your interview.

Your Rights

The current research complies with all requirements of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines.

Participation is entirely voluntary. While participating in the interview you may take as many breaks as required. In the unlikely event the conversation causes you some discomfort or stress, you may request to terminate the interview. Additionally contact information for some referral services are detailed below should you wish to seek any further counsel;

If you are an AIS or institute of sport scholarship holder there are psychological services available to you from your institute. Please contact your coach or administration staff

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associated with your program to facilitate this service. If you are a professional athlete, please contact the psychologist that is associated with your team or sports club. Should you deem neither of these options appropriate Relationships Australia offers counselling services and can be contacted on 1300 364 277. This number will put you in touch with the nearest Relationships Australia branch to yourself.

All information collected about you during the current research will be kept strictly confidential. Any document pertaining to your identity, such as the signed consent form and demographic sheet, will be kept in a secure, locked filing cabinet separate to other documentation associated with this project. Digital copies of the transcripts will be stored on a secure Curtin University computer in a password protected file. Only myself and my supervisors will have access to this information. On completion of the thesis, all data will be stored for a period of seven years before being destroyed.

Please note, that your data cannot be removed from the research once it has been published. Your anonymity is of the highest priority and will be protected at all times. Digital copies of interview transcripts will not contain any information that can identify you. Additionally, no identifiable information will be presented in the final thesis, or potential publications or conference proceedings and comments presented within the research findings will not specifically reference any individual or particular sporting code.

There are no further risks associated with participation in the current research. Whilst participation may not be of any direct individual benefit, you will be contributing to the literature in this area.

If you have any further questions regarding the current research please contact me, Jemma Dessauvagie, via email at jemma.dessauvagie@postgrad.curtin.edu.au. Alternatively my supervisors, Associate Professor Moira O'Connor or Dr Rebecca Anderson can be contacted on (08) 9266 3450 or (08) 9266 3012 respectively, or via email at M.Oconnor@curtin.edu.au or Rebecca.Anderson@curtin.edu.au. In the event you have queries or concerns of an ethical nature please contact Curtin University's Human Research Ethics Committee (secretary) on (08) 9266 2784 or email hrec@curtin.edu.au or in writing C/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth WA 6845.

Thank you for your time and participation. Your insights and contribution are invaluable.

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number RD-39-14). The Committee is comprised of members of the public, academics, lawyers, doctors and pastoral carers. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845 or by telephoning 9266 9223 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Appendix D Semi-Structured Interview Schedules

Athlete Informants

- Introduce myself
- Introduce the project:
'I wish to understand the experience of elite athletic performance, from the perspective of Australia's elite athletes, both in and out of the competitive domain. As such, I am interested in your experiences living, training, and competing as an athlete.'
- Present participant with information sheet. Ask if there are any questions.
- Reiterate interviews are being digitally recorded for the purpose of analysis and all information shared will remain completely anonymous to my supervisors and my final thesis
- Reiterate informants' rights (right to request a break or withdraw at any stage)
- Ask if informant is happy to continue, if so, present and ask them to sign the consent form
- Ask if they have any further questions before we commence the interview

Key for Interview Schedule

| | |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Numbered questions; | Formal interview question (1-14) |
| Alpha/roman numeral; | Subcomponent of formal question |
| Italics; | Prompts |

Areas to be explored: Questions with prompts.

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Demographic information; | Title |
| | Type of sport involved with (Team, Individual) |
| | Type of organisation associated with (Club, Institute of Sport) |
| | Years in elite athlete support |

GENERAL QUESTIONS/INFORMATION

1. Can you tell me about your sports career / journey to this point?
 - *How did you get involved with your sport initially?*
 - *Why did you choose that sport?*
2. Reflecting on your career, what have been/were the key moments?
 - *Good and less good*

PERCEIVED STRESSORS

3. Can you tell me about some of the stressors you experience/d as an elite athlete?
 - a. How do they make you feel?
4. What strategies or supports assist/ed you to perform at the elite level?
 - a. Can you tell me about a time you have used these coping strategies and how it made you feel?
5. What is/was life like for you during competition compared to out of competition?

AUSTRALIAN ATHLETES' LIVED EXPERIENCE

PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS

6. How do you think the general public perceives elite athletes?
 - *In terms of performances, behaviour, lifestyle?*
 - *Fair / unfair / just / do not notice?*
- a. How does this make you feel?
7. Do you believe you are/were a role model?
8. Why / why not?
 - *Sporting prowess, personal life, behaviour standard, personality*

ATHLETES' PERSPECTIVE OF SUPPORT NEEDS

9. Recently there have been reports of sports people suffering from mental health issues. Have you ever seen (or experienced) examples of this?
 - a. Can you tell me about it?
 - b. How does that make you feel?
10. What do you believe you need from sport psychology to ensure your mental health as well as ability to consistently perform?
 - a. What about beyond your sporting career?

THE MEDIA

11. What is your perception of how your sport is portrayed in the media?
 - a. How does this make you feel?
 - b. Does this influence you in any way? How?
12. What is your perception of how you are portrayed in the media?
 - a. How does this make you feel?
 - b. Do you feel this influences/d your performance or ability to perform?
13. Can you tell me about a time you have been/were positively portrayed in the media?
 - *What was the basis of the story? (performance, out of competition behaviour, personal life)*
14. Can you tell me about a time you have been/were negatively portrayed in the media?
 - *What was the basis of the story? (performance, out of competition behaviour, personal life)*
15. Is there anything else you wish to share with me regarding your experiences?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences with me, the information you have provided will be kept anonymous. If you have indicated you wish to receive my initial findings, they will be emailed through to you at the email address you provided. You will have the opportunity to provide feedback should you wish to clarify anything. Your feedback will deepen my understanding of what you have shared today.

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IT IS GREATLY APPRECIATED.

Support Staff Informants

- Introduce myself
- Introduce the project:

'I wish to understand the experience of elite athletic performance, from the perspective of Australia's elite athletes, both in and out of the competitive domain. In doing so, I also wish to gain an understanding of the current role and perspective of individuals engaged in elite athlete support positions, such as sports psychologists.'
- Present participant with information sheet. Ask if there are any questions.
- Reiterate interviews are being digitally recorded for the purpose of analysis and all information shared will remain completely anonymous to my supervisors and my final thesis
- Reiterate informants' rights (right to request a break or withdraw at any stage)
- Ask if informant is happy to continue, if so, present and ask them to sign the consent form
- Ask if they have any further questions before we commence the interview

Key for Interview Schedule

| | |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Numbered questions; | Formal interview question (1-14) |
| Alpha/roman numeral; | Subcomponent of formal question |
| Italics; | Prompts |

Areas to be explored: Questions with prompts.

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Demographic information; | Title |
| | Type of sport involved with (Team, Individual) |
| | Type of organisation associated with (Club, Institute of Sport) |
| | Years in elite athlete support |

GENERAL QUESTIONS/INFORMATION

1. Reflecting on your career in elite athlete support, what have been some of the key moments you have witnessed in the careers of the elite athletes you support?
 - *Good and less good*
 - a. What was your role during those times?

PERCEIVED STRESSORS

2. Can you tell me about some of the stressors elite athletes have communicated to you they have experienced as an elite athlete?
 - a. What influence, if any, do you think these have on the athletes?
3. What strategies do you feel best assist elite athletes to perform at the elite level?
 - a. Why do you feel these are the best?

SUPPORT STAFF PERSPECTIVE OF CURRENT SERVICES/ROLE

4. Recently there have been reports of sports people suffering from mental health issues. Have you ever seen examples of this?
 - a. Can you tell me about it?
 - b. If this was an athlete under your care how would you deal with such a situation?

AUSTRALIAN ATHLETES' LIVED EXPERIENCE

- *Why this strategy?*
- 5. What do you believe elite athletes need from sport psychology to ensure their mental health and ability to consistently perform?
 - a. What about beyond their careers?
- 6. Do you believe the current services offered by sport psychology are adequate in supporting elite athletes?
 - *Before, during, beyond competition?*
 - a. Why / why not?
- 7. Does the scope of your responsibilities extend to elite athletes beyond competition?
 - a. How? (*What is your role beyond competition*)

PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS

- 8. How do you think the general public perceives elite athletes?
 - *In terms of performances, behaviour, lifestyle? Fair / unfair / just?*
 - a. How does this make you feel as elite athlete support staff?
- 9. Do you believe elite athletes should be role models?
 - a. Why / why not? (*Sporting prowess / personal life*)

THE MEDIA

- 10. What is your perception of how your sport is portrayed in the media?
 - a. Do you believe this influences elite athletes?
 - *Have elite athletes you support been influenced by this?*
 - b. How? (*Performance, ability to perform, personal life, mental health?*)
- 11. What types of strategies are the current practice for assisting athletes cope with media attention?
 - a. Do you believe this is effective?
 - b. Why / Why not? (*Should we be doing more?*)
- 12. Can you tell me about a time elite athletes were positively portrayed in the media?
 - *What was the basis of the story?*
 - a. What influence do you think this had for the athlete? (*performance/personally*)
 - b. What strategies would you use for the athlete to cope with that?
- 13. Can you tell me about a time elite athletes were negatively portrayed in the media?
 - *What was the basis of the story?*
 - a. What influence do you think this had for the athlete? (*performance/personally*)
 - b. What strategies would you use for the athlete to cope with that?
- 14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding your experiences?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences with me, the information you have provided will be kept anonymous. If you have indicated you wish to receive my initial findings, they will be emailed through to you at the email address you provided. You will have the opportunity to provide feedback should you wish to clarify anything. Your feedback will deepen my understanding of what you have shared today.

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IT IS GREATLY APPRECIATED.

Appendix E Consent Forms



Curtin University

School of Psychology & Speech Pathology

What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number: RD-39-14

Researcher: Jemma Dessauvage

CONSENT FORM

I, _____, give consent for Jemma Dessauvage, a PhD Candidate of the School of Psychology and Speech Pathology at Curtin University, to ask me questions regarding my experiences as an elite athlete. I have been informed of and understand the purpose of the study and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

I agree to participate in the study as it has been outlined to me and I understand that the interview questions are about my experiences of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain. I understand that these questions are being asked as a part of a Doctorate of Philosophy (Psychology).

I understand that participating is completely voluntary and I may withdraw my consent at any time without consequence.

I give my permission for the interview to be transcribed and the information from my answers be written up by the researcher in her final thesis document, and any publications and conference proceedings. I understand any information that might potentially identify me will not be published, my identity will remain completely confidential and my anonymity persevered to anybody other than the researcher and her supervisors. I understand my data cannot be removed from any publications of the research findings. I understand digital copies of transcripts will be stored in a password protected file on a secure Curtin University computer within the School of Psychology and Speech Pathology for a minimum of seven years.

I give consent for the interview to be digitally recorded. I understand that the recording will be transcribed and deleted immediately after the transcription is complete.

I give consent for to be quoted anonymously in the final thesis document and any publications associated with the current research. I understand these comments will not be attributable to me in any way.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Would you like to receive an outline of the initial findings of the research, with the opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher, before the final thesis is completed?

If yes please provide your preferred email address below.

YES _____

NO

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number RD-39-14). The Committee is comprised of members of the public, academics, lawyers, doctors and pastoral carers. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845 or by telephoning 9266 9223 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au



School of Psychology & Speech Pathology

What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number: RD-39-14

Researcher: Jemma Dessauvague

CONSENT FORM

I, _____, give consent for Jemma Dessauvague, a PhD Candidate of the School of Psychology and Speech Pathology at Curtin University, to ask me questions regarding my experiences supporting elite athletes. I have been informed of and understand the purpose of the study and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

I agree to participate in the study as it has been outlined to me and I understand that the interview questions are about my experiences of supporting elite athletes in their athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain. I understand that these questions are being asked as a part of a Doctorate of Philosophy (Psychology).

I understand that participating is completely voluntary and I may withdraw my consent at any time without consequence.

I give my permission for the interview to be transcribed and the information from my answers be written up by the researcher in her final thesis document, and any publications and conference proceedings. I understand any information that might potentially identify me will not be published, my identity will remain completely confidential and my anonymity preserved to anybody other than the researcher and her supervisors. I understand my data cannot be removed from any publications of the research findings. I understand digital copies of transcripts will be stored in a password protected file on a secure Curtin University computer within the School of Psychology and Speech Pathology for a minimum of seven years.

I give consent for the interview to be digitally recorded. I understand that the recording will be transcribed and deleted immediately after the transcription is complete.

I give consent for to be quoted anonymously in the final thesis document and any publications associated with the current research. I understand these comments will not be attributable to me in any way.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Would you like to receive an outline of the initial findings of the research, with the opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher, before the final thesis is completed?

If yes please provide your preferred email address below.

YES _____

NO

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number RD-39-14). The Committee is comprised of members of the public, academics, lawyers, doctors and pastoral carers. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845 or by telephoning 9266 9223 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au

Appendix F Athlete Demographic Questionnaire



DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SURVEY

What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A Qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number: RD-39-14

Researcher: Jemma Dessauvagie

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my PhD research.

Firstly, can I get some background information about your sporting career? This demographic information will allow me to adequately describe the participant sample. This is necessary to show the diversity of sports as well as individual experiences and achievements captured within my research. To ensure your identity remains confidential I will not collect this information verbally at the time of your interview, instead please fill out the short survey below. This will ensure your demographic information is entirely separate from your interview data. This information will be stored separately from your signed consent form and will be used only to describe the overall participant sample in the PhD thesis and associated publications. Specific details regarding your career will not be disclosed in these publications, rather, collective or group descriptions will be provided. Please answer the following.

What year were you born?

What is your gender?

What year did you debut at the highest/most senior level of competition for your sport?

Representation level: Club State National *(please circle)*

How old were you?

What competition/league did you debut at/in?

Have you competed at the Olympics Games (if yes please indicate how many)?

*Please answer the following questions only if you are **CURRENTLY** competing in your chosen sport.*

What sport do you compete in?

Please indicate what level of competition you currently compete in

Professional *(in receipt of a salary beyond sponsorship for competing in your chosen sport).*

Amateur

How many years have you competed at this level of your sport?

*Please answer the following questions only if you have **RETIRED** from competitive elite sport.*

What sport did you compete in?

What year did you retire?

Please indicate what level of competition you competed in

Professional *(in receipt of a salary beyond sponsorship for competing in your chosen sport).*

Amateur

How many years did you compete at this level of your sport?

If you have any further questions regarding the current research please contact me, Jemma Dessauvagie, via email at jemma.dessauvagie@postgrad.curtin.edu.au. Alternatively my supervisors, Dr Peta Dzidic or Associate Professor Brian Bishop can be contacted on (08) 9266 7879 or via email at Peta.Dzidic@curtin.edu.au or B.Bishop@curtin.edu.au. In the event you have queries or concerns of an ethical nature please contact Curtin University's Human Research Ethics Committee (secretary) on (08) 9266 2784 or email hrec@curtin.edu.au or in writing C/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth WA 6845.

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number RD-39-14). The Committee is comprised of members of the public, academics, lawyers, doctors and pastoral carers. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845 or by telephoning 9266 9223 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Appendix G Respondent Validation Documents



Playing the game: A qualitative exploration of the lived experience of Australian elite level athletes.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number: RD-39-14

Researcher: Jemma Dessauvagie

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your participation in my PhD research, your contribution was invaluable. Below is a summary of the key messages that emerged from the analysis. I reiterate that this is an overview from data collated from those participants who are current, or retired, elite level athletes. This is not solely a representation of your personal data. Your anonymity and confidentiality was my highest priority, and you have not, and will not, be identified. Details pertaining to the specific sports you are, or have been, involved with have been removed.

I welcome any feedback you may have with regard to the below, and any necessary changes to my findings will be implemented as appropriate. Do not hesitate to contact me at jemma.dessauvagie@postgrad.curtin.edu.au with your comments or any further queries.

Key messages from the research:

The findings below have been organised to reflect the topics that we explored within each interview. These findings present an account of athletes' lived experiences, as from the perspective of athletes themselves;

Perceived stressors:

Performance pressure

Athletes experience a myriad stressors and pressures as a result of the nature of living, training and competing as an athlete. Performance pressure was commonly identified as the most significant pressure an athlete experienced. While poor performance gave rise to intrinsic frustration, disappointment and stress, it was evident poor performances also carried broader level consequences, such as non-selection, loss of contracts, and loss of sponsorship opportunities. Such implications associated with poor performance appeared to exacerbate the experience of performance pressure, as well as the emotional response to poor performance.

Balance

Balance was positioned as a key and effective coping strategy for athletes. Despite this, the elite level lifestyle gave rise to a number of barriers such as organisational

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ideologies or lack of effective support, which resulted in a number of factors that prevent athletes achieving balance.

Uncontrollables

Despite a perceived necessity and capability to “control the controllables” with respect to elements of performance on and off the field, a number of day to day experiences were uncontrollable. Where control was seen as key to success on field, with respect to performance, and off field, with respect to public perceptions and athletes' profiles, it was the uncontrollables that gave rise to significant stress.

Support needs:

An ally

It was important for coach and support staff fostered “human” relationships with athletes. It was clear athletes valued relationships and interactions with staff that were built on bi-directional trust, rapport, and respect. Communication skills and empathy were identified as important qualities within athlete-coach relationships. With respect to support staff, it was clear athletes valued proactive engagement from support staff, where the onus was not solely on athletes to ask for help or support when it was required. Further, it was important athletes felt support staff understood them beyond the field, rather than positioning them as solely a vehicle of sporting performances that needed to be fixed.

Safety

The provision of a support system within sporting clubs or organisations that was “safe” for athletes to engage with was also important. It was evident stigma around poor mental health was still apparent, which was maintained and perpetuated by the structure of the support systems. Further, the perceived on field consequences associated with engaging with support was particularly problematic to creating a safe support setting.

Public expectations:

Win or lose

A ‘black and white’ approach seemed to underscore public perceptions of athletes, particularly with regard to performance. The public were perceived as only seeing a win or a loss, where victory was the only outcome celebrated. This presented a tension between perceptions of success of the public versus those of

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athletes. While winning was important to athletes, achievement of a personal best, or performing well without victory, were also highly valued.

Ignorant

The public were positioned as being ignorant to a number of the realities of living, training and competing as an elite level athlete. The effort, hard work and sacrifice were perceived to be neglected by the public in their consideration, and or, construction of athletes and their lifestyle.

Fickle

The public were also positioned as fickle in their consideration of athletes. Athletes were judged as either good or bad dependent on their capacity to fulfil the public's expectations on the field (i.e., winning) or off the field (i.e., being a "perfect" role model). Where athletes failed to meet these expectations they were met with a public commentary/discourse underpinned by negativity, disappointment, and a lack of empathy.

The media:

Under the microscope

The media was placed as inescapable where athletes are constantly 'under the microscope.' Nothing is private, and the media were understood to exploit and profit off athletes' humanness: their mistakes. Drama and controversy were perceived to be prioritised. As such, the media had a significant role in how athletes, individually and generally, were represented to, and considered by, the public. Alongside this role, the media also had an influence at the systemic/ organisational level of sport and the media's approach to particular athletes at a particular time were played a role in the longevity of that athlete's career.

In addition

Just humans who play sport

Athletes consideration of the athlete as human was pervasive across the analysis. Despite the rhetoric and a number of tensions, dynamics and discourses athletes are embedded within that contradict this, it was evident that athletes had an intrinsic understanding that they were only human: nothing more, nothing less. Athletes are not perfect, they are just humans who work incredibly hard to be experts at their sport.

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These findings contribute to an authentic account of the hardships faced by athletes, as well as provide insights as to how athletes feel they could be better supported, on and off the field.

As previously advised, your identity will remain confidential and all the information you shared during your interview will remain anonymous.

Again, I thank you again for your participation, your time and willingness to participate was greatly appreciated.

Kind Regards,

Jemma Dessauvague

What does it mean to be an elite athlete in Australia? A qualitative exploration of the experience of elite athletic performance within and beyond the competitive domain.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number: RD-39-14

Researcher: Jemma Dessauvague

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your participation in my PhD research, your contribution was invaluable. Below is a summary of the key messages that emerged from the analysis. I reiterate that this is an overview from data collated from those participants who are currently, or who have previously, been engaged in a role that supports elite athletes. This is not solely a representation of your personal data. Your anonymity and confidentiality was my highest priority, and you have not, and will not, be identified. Details pertaining to the specific sports you are, or have been, involved with have been removed.

I welcome any feedback you may have with regard to the below, and any necessary changes to my findings will be implemented as appropriate. Do not hesitate to contact me at jemma.dessauvague@postgrad.curtin.edu.au with your comments or any further queries.

Key messages from the research:

The findings below have been organised to reflect the topics that we explored within each interview. These findings are positioned as the perspective of support staff working with elite level athletes;

Perceived stressors:

Just like you and me

Athletes are humans and as such experience the same anxieties, adversities and challenges non-athletes do. Additionally, the nature of the elite athletic lifestyle functioned as a further risk factor to poor wellbeing, where the one-dimensional lifestyle (i.e., performance focused) and constant scrutiny (internal and external) can exacerbate individual maladaptive predispositions, and/or unhealthy cultural environments an athlete is embedded in.

Off field

A myriad stressors were experienced by elite athletes beyond athletic and competitive performance; financial stress, academic pressures, social networks, informal support systems (familial and romantic relationships), proximal expectations (team, coach) and public approval, expectations, and perceptions (the media).

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The impact of many of these off field stressors was twofold. While they had the capacity to serve as a protective factor for athletes (i.e., supportive relationships, multi-dimensional existence), they also functioned as a risk factor; help or hindrance. Put simply, the lived experience of elite athletes outside of competition was deemed complex.

The media

The inescapability of the media was accepted as just 'reality' and athletes, with time, have come to terms with this. The hardships faced with regard to the media stemmed more from the content of stories, where athletes seemingly internalised these narratives, rather than the physical (or metaphoric) presence of media day to day.

Interventions

Therapies, interventions and support strategies that were deemed most appropriate for athletes were largely understood from a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) perspective. Cognitive re-structuring (explanatory styles), attentional strategies (e.g., compartmentalising) and behavioural approaches (i.e., developing routines) were apparent. Fostering, and encouraging, opportunities for athletes to have a sense of control was also important; including choice, accountability and responsibility.

Perspective of current services and role:

Ally

In addition to providing formal support (i.e., therapies, interventions etc.), the role of supporting elite athletes was underscored by the notion of 'trusted confidant', where support staff acted as liaison, soundboard, confidant, and protector to their athletes.

Future proofing

Nurturing the development of athletes as people was central, and, in terms of perceived importance, superseded the development of an athlete as an athlete. This was particularly clear with respect to the inevitable transition of from 'athlete' to 'ex-athlete'; person. Providing support and a platform that enabled athletes to maximise their potential as a person, rather than an athlete per se, was key.

Within the bounds

It was apparent that practitioners had to work within the parameters of their own skills (i.e., not be afraid to refer to other professionals). In addition to this, practitioners were also subject to the bounds of the structures, systems, and operations (cultures, philosophies, and

personnel) of the organisation/s within which their position, and the expectations of that position, were defined.

Public expectations:

What is an athlete

A generalist approach seemed to underscore the perceived public perceptions of elite athletes, where athletes were subjected to dichotomous interpretations of themselves, their behaviours, or their performances as good or bad. Athletes were perceived to be judged by the public from an individualised perspective, rather than a contextualised consideration, where athletes' age, experience, personal circumstance were often neglected. It was also apparent that the actions of individual athletes tarnished the public conceptualisation of 'athlete.'

Role models

The athletes acting as a role model was positioned as an obligation of being an athlete, and, as such, athletes were targets of an implied behavioural mandate, where their off field behaviour was of public interest and concern. Whether an athlete was doing 'the right thing' was often judged in terms of the question: 'how should a role model behave?' This fed a double standard imposed on athletes, where athletes' behaviour could be considered appropriate conduct for people generally, but deemed inappropriate conduct for an athlete. This dynamic was pervasive across the analysis.

The media:

Just a reality

The presence of the media is considered merely the reality of being an elite athlete, it is the degree to which the media is involved (or interested) in particular athletes that is variable; professional vs. amateur, high vs. low profile. However, athletes still had to proactively develop strategies to manage and cope with the media. Mere acceptance or recognition of its presence was not enough to protect athletes from negative experiences when interacting with the media.

Judge and jury

The media used athletes as entertainment; not an athlete, not a person, but a story. Further these stories either celebrated or crucified athletes, and thus the media played a significant role in how athletes were considered within the public discourse, both generally and individually.

AUSTRALIAN ATHLETES' LIVED EXPERIENCE

These findings contribute to an authentic account of the hardships faced by athletes (as observed and experienced by those supporting elite athletes; support staff), as well as an understanding how support staff conceptualise their role and the role of psychology within the sporting domain.

As previously advised, your identity will remain confidential and all the information you shared during your interview will remain anonymous.

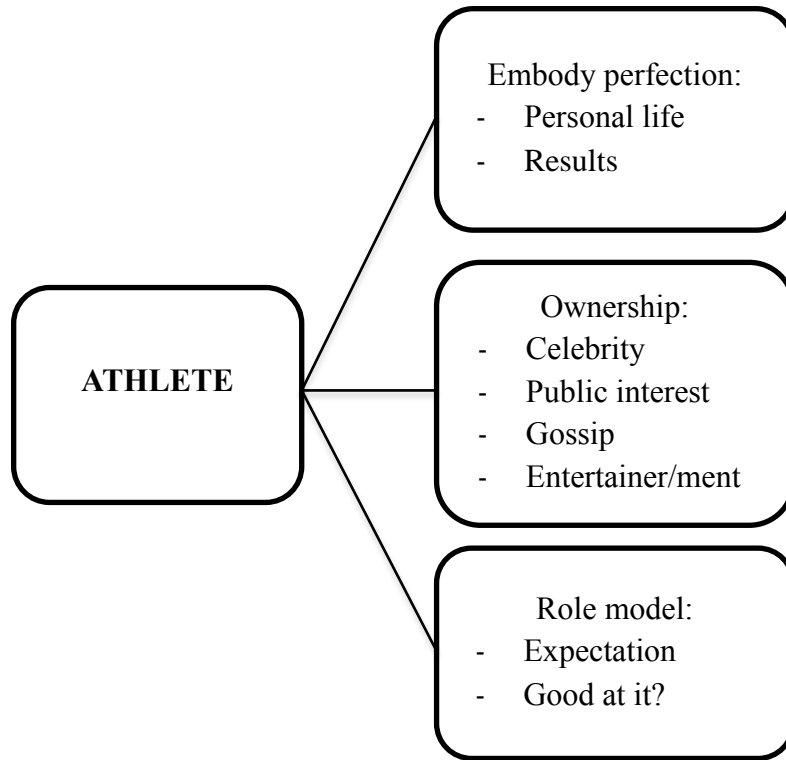
Again, I thank you again for your participation, your time was greatly appreciated.

Kind Regards,

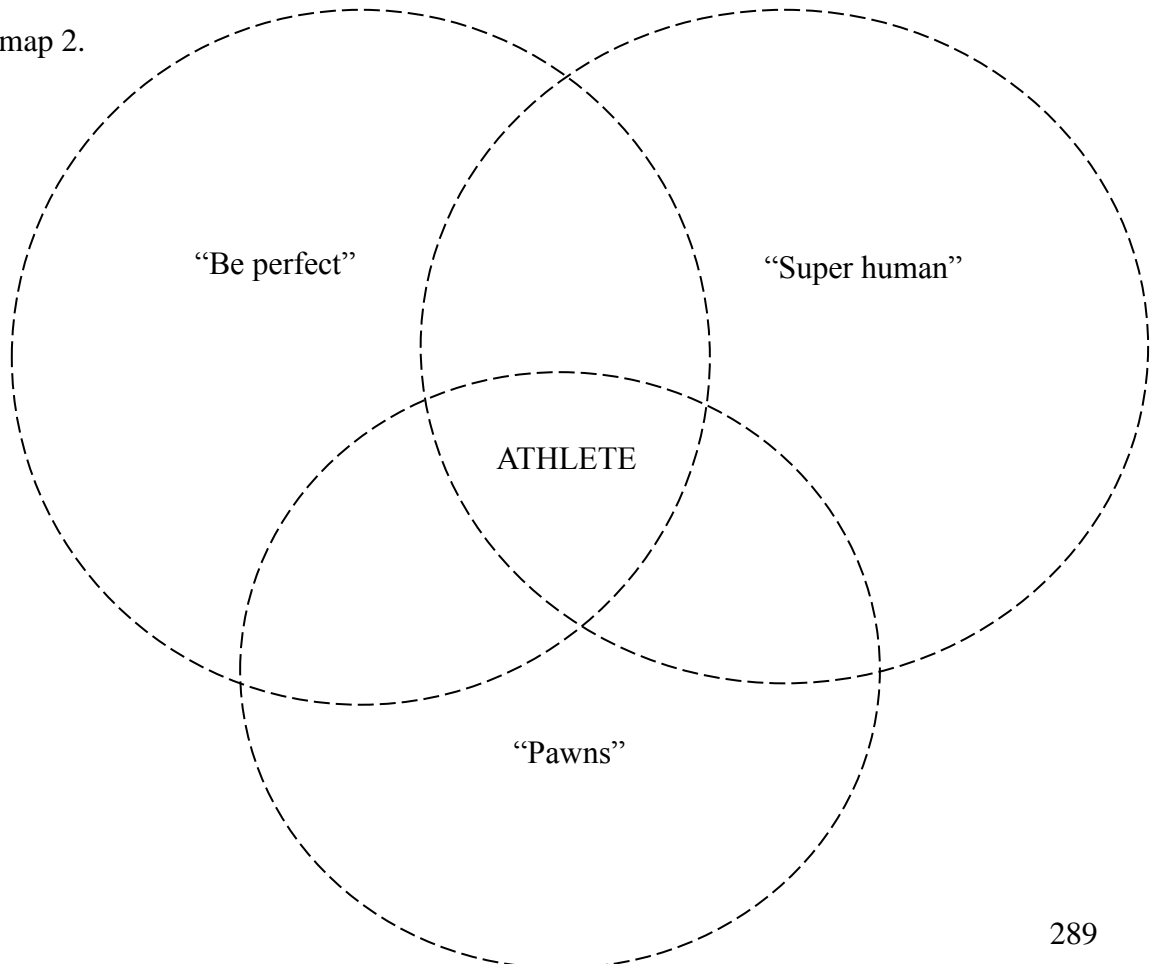
Jemma Dessauvagie

Appendix H Phase Three Analytic Mind-Maps

Mind map 1.

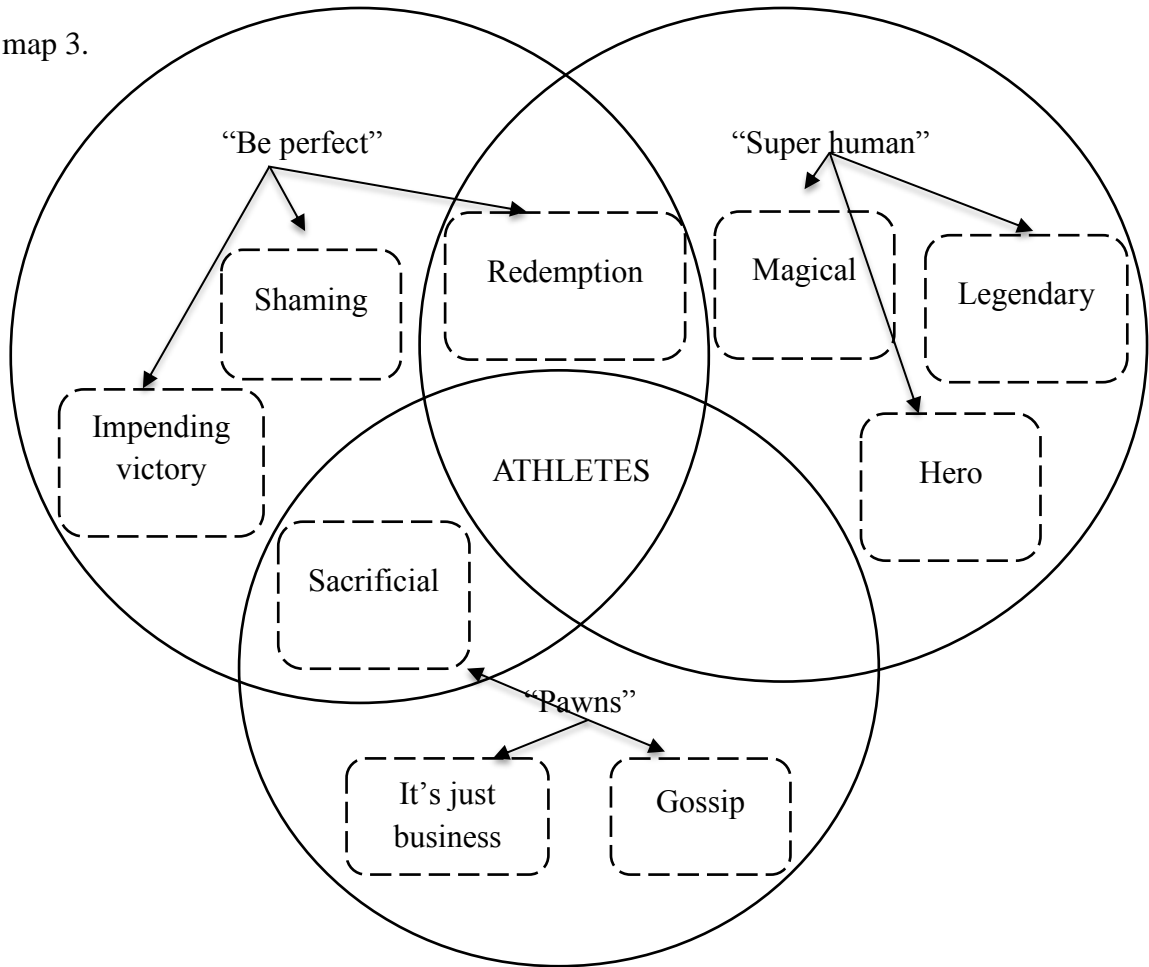


Mind map 2.



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Mind map 3.



Mind map 4.

