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7 **Take a Walk on the Wild Side: Exploring, Identifying, and Developing Consultancy**

8 **Expertise with Elite Performance Team Leaders**

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1 **Abstract**

2 *Objectives:* Stemming from sport psychology's recent shift to examine the effective  
3 management of elite sports team organizations, the extensive, significant, and complex  
4 challenges faced by those with responsibility for team performance have been emphasized.  
5 Recognizing that most work in this budding area has been theoretical in nature, our  
6 contribution to this special issue consequently identifies and critically evaluates some  
7 implications for excellence in practitioners who support leaders of elite sport performance  
8 teams.

9  
10 *Method:* Narrative review and commentary.

11

12 *Results and Conclusions:* To survive and succeed, leaders of elite teams must: (a) negotiate  
13 complex and contested socio-political dynamics both within and outside their performance  
14 department; (b) make impactful and consistent real-time decisions; and (c) continually  
15 reinforce and protect their programme. To provide an optimally impactful and valued  
16 service, sport psychologists must therefore be able to advise on a broad and politically-astute  
17 leadership style and, most critically for consultancy excellence: (a) work within a  
18 professional judgment and decision making model; (b) facilitate the leader's adaptive  
19 expertise and nested decision making; and (c) operate a proactive, forthright, and straight  
20 approach to ethical considerations. Based on these implications, we conclude by providing  
21 suggestions for the training and development of applied consultants.

22 *Keywords:* applied practice, complexity, covert, decision making, nested action

1     **Take a Walk on the Wild Side: Exploring, Identifying, and Developing Consultancy**  
2                     **Expertise with Elite Performance Team Leaders**

3             Once upon a time in the recent past, sport psychology was often conceptualized and  
4 operationalized as the teaching, application, and promotion of mental skills with performers.  
5 In this simpler world, *mental skills training* (or MST) was the stock-in-trade of the sport  
6 psychologist, and expertise in sport psychology was related to the skills of defining, teaching,  
7 and facilitating the application of a bespoke subset of these skills for the performer's domain.  
8 Notably, however, things have moved on and the role of the sport psychologist is now seen to  
9 encompass a much wider and deeper remit. Indeed, we would query whether such a simple  
10 world actually ever existed, except as a starting point with comparatively naive participants  
11 or with un(der)-qualified consultants. Accordingly, the skills and techniques of sport  
12 psychology (and sport psychologists) have been extended in range across a plethora of  
13 performance environments and in depth to encompass a broader scope from the many sub-  
14 divisions of psychology (for a more comprehensive consideration of these evolutions, see  
15 Collins & Kamin, 2012).

16             As one such evolution, sport psychologists have recently broadened their research  
17 lens, and therefore capacity for applied impact, by moving to explore the organizational and  
18 management factors which aid (and hinder) optimal performance in elite sports teams. More  
19 specifically, since Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) defined the "twilight zone" (p. 428) between  
20 the chiefly individual-level, MST-focused endeavors of sport psychology and the macro-  
21 level, policy-focused work of sport management, two strands of study have developed:  
22 namely, that on the optimal management and functioning of entire elite sport organizations  
23 (e.g., Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012; Wagstaff, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2013) and that,  
24 more precisely, on the optimal management and functioning of these organizations'  
25 performance departments (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Cruickshank, Collins, &

1 Minten, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). While the merits of both research lines have been  
2 acknowledged (cf. Cruickshank & Collins, 2013), this paper focuses upon the leadership of  
3 the elite sport organization's performance department and, specifically, how this may be best  
4 supported by sport psychologists<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, given the regularity of team leader sackings  
5 around the world – with few in professional sport lasting longer than two seasons and those  
6 overseeing Olympic teams often replaced post-Games (cf. Bruinshoofd & ter Weel, 2003;  
7 Flores, Forrest, & Tena, 2012; Magnay, 2013; Zinser, 2008) – excellence in this area is a  
8 highly relevant and marketable skill. With this point in mind, we therefore adopt a discursive  
9 approach to firstly present a theoretically-underpinned overview of some key challenges  
10 faced by elite team leaders. The paper then moves to propose some evidence-based  
11 recommendations – as grounded in the aforementioned challenges, current literature, and our  
12 own applied experience – for the development and deployment of expertise in elite team  
13 leaders' supporting psychologists.

#### 14 **Part 1: The Challenge – What do we Need to Help Elite Performance Team Leaders do?**

15 To best contextualize the requirements for practitioner expertise in this area, and  
16 reflecting the major elite sport systems in Europe and beyond, we now present a synopsis of  
17 the challenges commonly faced by the managers<sup>2</sup> of professional sport performance teams  
18 and the performance directors<sup>3</sup> (hereafter PD) of Olympic sport performance teams.  
19 Ensuring integration with current theory, these challenges are rooted to the *multidirectional*  
20 orientation recently suggested and corroborated as critical in elite sports team leadership

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, “sport psychologist” refers to a practitioner who is fully accredited/regulated by a recognised professional governing body, and who has the appropriate experience and expertise to perform at this level. We should point out that, just as only some can become high level athletes, so only some should work with them.

<sup>2</sup> Please note that “manager” is used as a general label for any figure with responsibility for a professional sport organization's performance department (therefore encompassing the range of titles used by different sporting systems: e.g., team manager, head coach, director of sport).

<sup>3</sup> The performance director is the figure responsible for an Olympic sport organization's performance department.

1 processes (cf. Collins & Cruickshank, 2012; Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Cruickshank et  
2 al., 2014a, 2014b). More explicitly, our consideration focuses on elite teams' internal power  
3 dynamics and external interactions/interferences, which consequently require leaders to  
4 acknowledge and address bottom-up (i.e., performer and support staff), top-down (i.e.,  
5 Boards of Directors), and lateral influences (i.e., the media, fans/public). Additionally, these  
6 presented challenges are also rooted to the principles of decentred theory; a perspective  
7 recently applied in research on elite team leadership activity (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2013).  
8 Specifically, this approach rejects the notion of unchallenged, top-down leadership processes  
9 and instead asserts that all individuals in a social system work to their own situated interests  
10 (which may or may not align with the leader) and therefore generate an inherently contingent,  
11 conflicting, and contested mode of interaction.<sup>4</sup>

12 Evidence for the relevance and significance of internal power dynamics and external  
13 interactions/interference is now offered through original data which we have gathered for our  
14 published and on-going work in elite team leadership processes. Additionally, and to convey  
15 the pervasiveness of these challenges, pertinent media reports are also included. While the  
16 majority of this evidence is set within our own British context, our experiences of working in  
17 elite team performance around the world, the perceptions of our international colleagues, and  
18 a regular perusal of global media reports suggest that these fundamental social challenges are  
19 common to elite sport systems across a host of different countries. Additionally, and despite  
20 variation in how these factors are specifically "played out" within and across professional and  
21 Olympic team environments (which must of course be considered for contextually-sensitive  
22 practice), their shared general nature provides a basis on which to explore the core requisites  
23 and features of practitioner expertise in high performance domains.

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that this does not mean that conflict is always present in elite sport performance teams. Rather, as stakeholders continually work to meet their own personal needs and can act in novel and unpredictable ways, the team's culture and practices will reflect a composite of its members' varied ideals and interests rather than its leader's ideals and interests alone.

## 1 **Contexts and Challenges of Elite Sport Performance Departments**

2           **Internal Power Dynamics.** Distinct from top-down or flat organizational structures,  
3 power and control in elite sport performance departments commonly flow within and across  
4 their constituent groups (i.e., team management, support staff, performers: Cruickshank et al.,  
5 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Indeed, given the potent mix of high egos, (extremely) high salaries,  
6 and high media prominence, many elite performers possess significantly greater authority  
7 over their team's direction, functioning, and performance than those at sub-elite levels. In  
8 this manner, and relative to the prevailing contexts, performance departments encounter a  
9 continually evolving blend of top-down, shared, and bottom-up influence (cf. Cruickshank et  
10 al., 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Consider, for example, the following quote on the scale of modern  
11 "player power" from a professional football team manager interviewed for our grounded  
12 theory study on team manager-led culture change (Cruickshank et al., 2014b):

13           [Player X] said "I don't want to come back [from holiday to start pre-season earlier  
14 than the date set by the previous manager]; just take the [two week's] wages [fine]."  
15           Rather than turn up for a week's training he's given £64,000 away! . . . . People die  
16 for £64,000! . . . But that was their mentality.

17 With many professional team performers earning more than £3.5 million *on average* per year  
18 (Harris, 2011), it is clear that the differential rewards for managers and performers has major  
19 implications for social functioning. For instance, the high investment and attention placed on  
20 performers by an organization, the media, and the fans/public can propagate scenarios where  
21 individuals may work against their team in continued pursuit of their own interests. One such  
22 high profile example was when Red Bull's Sebastian Vettel ignored team orders and  
23 overtook his teammate, Mark Webber, in the closing stages of the 2013 Malaysia Grand Prix:

24           Had I understood the message, reflected on it, and thought about what the team  
25 wanted to do, I probably would have done the same . . . You could say that, indirectly

1 [I got payback] . . . . I never had support from [Webber] . . . . [and] there was more  
2 than one occasion in the past where he could have helped the team and he didn't . . . .  
3 [If you think I was sanctioned for ignoring team orders] maybe it is a bit of dreamland  
4 that you [i.e., the media] all live in. What do you expect to happen? (Weaver, 2013)

5 In a similar vein, many high profile Olympic athletes receive substantial sponsorship  
6 fees on top of significant prize money (Goodley, 2012) and, in some cases, do not technically  
7 have to comply with, or meet the standards set by the national governing body of their sport  
8 to be selected to compete at the Olympics by their National Olympic Committee (e.g., the  
9 BOA). Thus, and once again, conventional social hierarchies seldom prevail in these  
10 environments. As a particular example of the power held by high status Olympians, it is  
11 notable that many British athletes have recently succeeded in their rejection of UK Athletics'  
12 preference for them to relocate to Loughborough as part of the drive for programme  
13 centralization (Riach, 2012).

14 Beyond rejecting or resisting management preferences, decisions, and actions, elite  
15 athletes also often play an *active-disruptive* role in pursuit of their own interests and agendas.  
16 At the extreme end of this agency, take the player-driven revolt which led to the sacking of  
17 the New Zealand Rugby League Coach in 2008 (Mascord, 2008) or the French national  
18 football team's refusal to train during the 2010 World Cup after a teammate had been  
19 expelled from the squad; as explained by goalkeeper Hugo Lloris:

20 We acted as a team. To strike was the decision of a squad who felt lonely, who  
21 believed that no-one had stood up for them and who had a message to convey. We  
22 went too far. It was a very awkward decision, a big mistake. It was completely stupid.  
23 But there were so many problems (Brookfield, 2010).

24 As well as the significant interplay of "player power" through groups, active disruption from  
25 individuals is also well acknowledged in elite sports teams. For example, a former English

1 Premiership football player has recently detailed the strategies used by himself and his peers  
2 to engineer transfers to another team; including feigning injury, undermining the manager,  
3 fighting with team mates, withholding effort in matches, and complaining to support staff:

4         At one club, I was sitting in the physio room and let it drop that I wanted to join  
5         another club. I added that I was so confident of a deal happening that I insisted I  
6         would be playing for that club the following week. Lo and behold, the manager  
7         called me in the following day and asked me to explain myself. (Savage, 2013)

8 As shown here, and beyond eliciting direct confrontation or resistance, the divergent agendas  
9 and subversive actions of elite performers are also manifested through more discreet channels  
10 – in this case, by sending “messages” through individuals and groups who are expected  
11 and/or keen to display loyalty to the manager by reporting back on performance-relevant  
12 information. However, while support staff members are (generally) closer to managers and  
13 PDs than performers – at least on a structural and operational level – these groups are also  
14 (partly) driven by their own personal agendas, such as adherence to the practices, standards,  
15 and ethics of their profession (e.g., psychology), their own personal progression, and their  
16 opinion on how the team should be prepared and managed (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012).  
17 Of course, these features are usually most evident (at least publicly) when the team is not  
18 delivering results and/or lacking clear leadership:

19         [After I was appointed as PD], it was clear that there were steps forward that could be  
20         taken if the communication and the trust were better improved . . . Even *within* the  
21         programme there were staff having little meetings behind other people’s backs. It  
22         wasn’t a cohesive, happy environment. (Olympic sport PD interviewed for  
23         Cruickshank et al., 2014a)

24         **External Interactions and Interferences.** Beyond the unique and challenging power  
25 dynamics inside elite sport organizations’ performance departments, another key factor which



1 leaders need to negotiate is the interactions with, and interference from, a variety of external  
2 stakeholders. Principally, given their ultimate authority over the direction and functioning of  
3 a performance department, organizations' Boards of Directors (or oligarch owners in the case  
4 of many professional sports teams) represent one such group. However, and complicating the  
5 relationship between team management and their employer, directors (or oligarch owners) are  
6 rarely experts in elite performance (cf. Gilmore & Gilson, 2007):

7 Board members very often haven't got a \*\*\*\*\* clue about techniques and tactics.

8 They just come to the game and watch [matches] as a [fan] . . . . [If you want to sign a  
9 player just tell them]: "He's a good defender" . . . that's all they need to \*\*\*\*\*

10 know! (Professional rugby team manager interviewed for Cruickshank et al., 2014b)

11 As one of elite sport's most challenging features, the necessary division of expertise between  
12 sport and business matters (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2013; Gilmore & Gilson, 2007) is,  
13 however, often overlooked or blurred by Boards. It regularly seems that, compared to the  
14 complexities of their business world, directors perceive the sport challenges to be easier; a  
15 human trait related to our ability to see the complexities in what we know, but to ignore, fail  
16 to acknowledge, or just downright dismiss the complexities in someone else's world (cf.  
17 Owen & Davidson, 2009)! Indeed, borne from the apparent "simplicities" of competitive  
18 sport and the opportunities for *anyone* to have (and air) an opinion on performance – as  
19 fuelled by the regularity of fixtures/events and their coverage by the mass media – elite team  
20 managers are constantly under scrutiny:

21 You have to have a sense of perspective and often owners and boards don't have [it] .

22 . . . We've lost the first two games of the season [and Board members are already  
23 saying]: "Oh, we're going to get relegated". Whoosh, [they go] right to the future . . . .

24 For team managers to sustain] a sense of perspective under [this] pressure is not easy .

1 . . . [as] the result is in the paper, it's on the news, and it's on the television.

2 (Professional rugby team manager interviewed for Cruickshank et al., 2014b)

3 While this quote is a British-based view, inspection of the current sacking rate of professional  
4 sports team managers around the world conveys the ubiquitous nature of Board-level short-  
5 termism. As a recent example, when Maurice Cheeks became head coach of Detroit Pistons,  
6 the organization's President asserted that "the leadership and player development qualities he  
7 brings . . . blends nicely with the roster we are building for the future . . . . [and he has]  
8 mentored some of the top young players in the NBA." Yet, after only 50 games (roughly half  
9 a season), Cheeks was sacked and the organization's owner stated: "Our record does not  
10 reflect our talent and we simply need a change . . . . This is a young team and we knew there  
11 would be growing pains, but we can be patient only as long as there is progress. (Both, 2014)

12 Of course, while most professional sports teams usually compete on a weekly basis,  
13 Olympic teams perform less frequently. As such, with the pressure surrounding PDs (for  
14 most sports) concentrated around a few competitive events (with differences in the pressure  
15 often related to the volume of media coverage), the reaction of top-management structures to  
16 underperformance is more sporadic but often more severe:

17 We went to the Olympics and didn't do particularly well . . . and [the Board members]  
18 wanted to know why . . . . They had a big inquiry . . . . but unless you're [among the  
19 athletes and support staff you can't really determine] what went wrong . . . . A lot of  
20 the time [inquiries are led] by the people who are funding the programmes [and they  
21 inevitably just fire the leader]. But I say a lot of the time it's the [athletes] who didn't  
22 take responsibility . . . but it's difficult to say that because nobody wants to blame the  
23 [athletes]. (Olympic sport PD interviewed for Cruickshank et al., 2014a)

24 While pointing to the challenges of top-management teams who are transfixed by outcome  
25 over process (rather than outcome *plus* process), the preceding quote also alludes to a critical

1 paradox in elite sport organizational dynamics; expressly, that of team management needing  
2 to defend their performance programme from Board interrogation but *without* compromising  
3 their credibility *or* their relationships with often self-interested and/or fragile performers.  
4 Problematically, this quandary is often worsened by the glare of a highly critical media and  
5 public audience as well as when those “above” (i.e., the Board) and “below” (i.e., the  
6 athletes) interact directly over performance issues. For instance, after his sacking by Chelsea  
7 FC, Luiz Felipe Scolari noted: “some things are known, like the relations with the owner,  
8 who has the relationship with some players before the coach” (Murrells, 2012).

9       Top-management challenges in Olympic sport are at times further complicated by the  
10 involvement of external funding agencies, even though recent changes in several countries  
11 have purportedly unified the agency with which the PD must negotiate! For example, the  
12 management and support roles played by the Australian Institute of Sport or High  
13 Performance Sport New Zealand. In a British context, the growing role of UK Sport in  
14 Olympic performance systems causes many issues for PDs. Indeed, the strict and incessant  
15 outcome-orientation of this group is often a significant drain on the PD; ironic in that the PD  
16 is the individual whom this agency needs to perform at their best to optimize medal return!  
17 For example, take one PD’s reflections on their UK Sport representative’s negative  
18 assessment of the team not securing a medal at the 2008 Beijing Games, despite a significant  
19 increase in finalists from Athens four years earlier:

20       It shouldn’t be like that, these people [i.e., UK Sport representatives] need to  
21 understand [the complexities and challenges of performance] and they don’t . . . . If  
22 there’s no medal they think it was no good, and that was really frustrating. I was  
23 actually quite buzzing [after significantly increasing our number of finalists in  
24 Beijing] . . . what a stepping stone for London! . . . Then I come home and deal with

1           some of these \*\*\*\*\* and you're just deflated (Olympic sport PD interviewed for  
2           Cruickshank et al., 2014a)

3   As another example of the challenges of UK Sport, the pressure exerted by this agency to hit  
4   targets and employ an abundance of mechanisms and markers in an attempt to "control"  
5   outcome can also significantly interact with the perceptions and motivations of performers:

6           Funding is an interesting aspect . . . . because [UK Sport] don't allow you to define a  
7           team, they talk about *athlete places* on world class funding . . . . Sometimes it can  
8           interfere with the process of [performance] review[s] because athletes will clinically  
9           strive to be on funding as opposed to striving to be the best that they can be: "I met  
10          the criteria to be on funding, I'm getting my money" . . . . It clouds the performance  
11          discussion [so that when modifications are proposed they can respond by saying] . . . .  
12          "Well, do I have to do [proposed modification] because I'm on the programme?" "No,  
13          you have to do that because you want to get better." "What happens if I don't do  
14          that? Will I come off funding?" "No you'll go slower!" (Olympic sport PD  
15          interviewed for Cruickshank et al., 2014a)

16          Beyond those operating at the strategic, policy, and administrative levels of elite sport  
17          organizations, and as suggested above, performance department leaders must also effectively  
18          manage the major challenge of a powerful media. Indeed, and emphasizing the inherent  
19          social complexity of elite sports teams and the dangers of performers' perceived (and actual)  
20          importance, the media's selective and manipulated lens can in turn trigger key modifications  
21          to the functioning of performance departments. For example, Roy Hodgson, current manager  
22          of the English football team, has openly recognized this threat to traditional social order:

23                 [Consider the club as a church], which is often embodied in the manager. . . . Once  
24                 you get difficult players, backed up often by a sympathetic media who are happy to  
25                 see the church get moved around, then it becomes very difficult. You're taking the

1 power from where it should be, in the hands of someone who represents the club, the  
2 fans, the owners and the team. You're giving it to someone who may have very  
3 personal, egotistical reasons for wanting to change things. (Williams, 2012, para. 3)  
4 Problematically, and revisiting our prior example of professional football players' attempting  
5 to initiate transfers to other teams, the media can also be *proactively* harnessed to support the  
6 realization of powerful individuals' agendas:

7 When I wanted to put pressure on one manager, I arranged for a camera crew to meet  
8 me at the training ground when I knew everyone was enjoying a day off. I wanted to  
9 give the impression I was being forced to train on my own. (Savage, 2013)

10 Beyond the media, elite sport performance team leaders must also meet the challenges  
11 presented by fans and, more so for Olympic PDs, the general public. Certainly, these groups  
12 carry significant weight in shaping leaders' programmes, especially in professional sport:

13 Your perception might be different from perceptions [of those with longer histories of  
14 involvement with the club] and . . . you've got to accept there are traditions. If you  
15 coached at [team] you would have to coach the team to play in a certain way because .  
16 . . . they're expected to play that [way] and . . . there's a demand from the spectators  
17 for you to play that certain way. (Professional rugby team manager interviewed for  
18 Cruickshank et al., 2014b)

19 Finally, and further alluding to the complexity within and around the elite sport performance  
20 department, a variety of other significant stakeholders are also implicated in the processes of  
21 successful leadership. Playing a lesser yet significant role in the endless construction of team  
22 values, norms, practices, and expectations, these groups are bespoke to each environment and  
23 may include, among others, national Olympic committees, service providers (e.g., institutes  
24 of sport, facility owners), sponsors, the local community, a sport's wider (non-performance)  
25 membership, and potential investors (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2014a, 2014b). Notably, and yet

1 again, it is those with greatest media profile and/or social standing who have the greatest  
2 opportunity to provide a distraction or interference to the leader's programme. For example,  
3 David Campese was a particularly outspoken critic of Robbie Deans' tenure as head coach of  
4 the Australian national rugby union team:

5 Deans has destroyed Australian rugby and I want him to go . . . . We've got a team at  
6 the moment that can't catch and can't pass. Wallaby teams in the past were never like  
7 this. Anyone who knows anything about Australian rugby knows what it's famous for  
8 – loops, angles, switches, counter-attack, creative play. Where's all that gone? . . .  
9 He's the worst thing that has ever happened to Australian rugby. (Cleary, 2012)

### 10 **Summary and Implications for Practitioner Expertise**

11 As illuminated by the preceding overview, elite sport performance teams are socially  
12 complex and dynamic systems which rapidly generate and proliferate a plethora of significant  
13 and multifaceted challenges. Indeed, given the interaction of a range of powerful stakeholder  
14 groups, each with their own bespoke interests, agendas, and opinions (and often exaggerated  
15 by a selective and sensationalist media), establishing and then maintaining control over one's  
16 environment is an intimidating task for elite team leadership. Notably, and in contrast to the  
17 positive psychology lens used for study on the functioning of holistic elite sport organizations  
18 (e.g., Wagstaff et al., 2012; Wagstaff, et al., 2013), initial work has shown that performance  
19 departments (at least) are usually politically-charged and highly contested settings (cf.  
20 Cruickshank et al., 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004; Thompson, Potrac,  
21 & Jones, 2013). Moreover, the inherent threat of elite teams spiralling out of control when  
22 leaders fail to manage these challenging dynamics is also well-documented. For example,  
23 take an independent inquiry's report on Australia's swimming team at the 2012 Olympics:  
24 Situations were left to bleed with not enough follow through for fear of disrupting  
25 preparation for competition. Although few situations were truly grave in nature, they

1           compounded in significance as no one reigned in control. There were enough  
2           culturally toxic incidents across . . . . to warrant a strong, collective leadership  
3           response. No such collective action was taken. (Magnay, 2013, para. 3)

4           Given the aforementioned contexts and challenges, a crucial implication for elite team  
5           leaders (and supporting practitioners) is the apparent need to possess a broad and politically-  
6           astute behavioral/managerial skill set. More specifically, and supported by recommendations  
7           for elite team scholars and practitioners to look beyond purely “bright and positive”, pan-  
8           situational leadership theories, such as the transformational perspective (e.g., Fletcher &  
9           Arnold, 2011), the complexity of elite team settings requires a leadership approach which  
10          both embraces and manages two-way interactions, political contests, and the relentless  
11          pressure to deliver results in the short and long term. In this way, practitioners need to  
12          develop and support leaders who can do far more than apply one type of behavioral  
13          repertoire. Notably, the current (at least at the time of writing) Chelsea FC manager, Jose  
14          Mourinho, has recently revealed:

15                As a manager, you are always a leader, but sometimes you can be a different kind of  
16                leader. [When I was first manager of Chelsea] I was a confrontational leader because I  
17                felt . . . the guys desperately needed to make the jump from potential to reality, and I  
18                think they needed the kind of leader I was. (Carson, 2013)

19          Furthermore, as internal and external stakeholders in elite team environments *always* have an  
20          opinion and the potential to pursue/actualize this opinion (or simply work against that of the  
21          management), a leader’s skill in deciding what approach to take, when to deploy it, where to  
22          deploy it, who to deploy it with, and why one way instead of others on a *day-to-day, hour-to-*  
23          *hour, minute-to-minute* basis is further critical for personal survival and success. As such, it  
24          is on a need for elite sports team leaders to (a) negotiate the complex, dynamic, and context-  
25          specific interactions of powerful stakeholders, (b) make impactful real-time decisions, and (c)

1 continually reinforce and protect their programme that our following consideration of  
2 expertise in their supporting practitioners now focuses. In doing so, we highlight the key role  
3 which a “high-expertise” sport psychologist can play in helping the leader (and the team) to  
4 meet these challenges. After all, as an “emotion expert” (cf. Gruber & Moskoswitz, 2014),  
5 the sport psychologist would seem a sensible choice for advice in this highly charged setting.

## 6 **Part 2: Meeting the Challenge: How Can We Support Elite Performance Team**

### 7 **Leaders?**

8 Through the synopsis provided above, we hope that the multiple, varied, and complex  
9 challenges of elite sport performance team environments are obvious and well exemplified.  
10 In such an environment, and with leaders who require support beyond that available from  
11 their staff, the sport psychologist should therefore be working within a *professional judgment*  
12 *and decision making* model (Martindale & Collins, 2005, 2007) since it is only such an  
13 approach which enables the complexity or “shades of grey” of action to be addressed. For  
14 example, the 360-degree nature of the management challenge described in Part 1 involves an  
15 inherent balance of attention to a “pros and cons” trade off; in short, there will usually be a  
16 number of options available and the psychologist can play a crucial support role to the team  
17 leader as critical friend, neutral sounding board, and adviser on the emotional and  
18 psychosocial elements. Accordingly, a manager/PD and, therefore, also the psychologist will  
19 need to follow a constant process of “test and adjust” to ensure that the emphasis is kept  
20 optimum towards targeted goals. Indeed, and as we have already alluded to, the optimum  
21 blend for impact may well change weekly or even, in the white heat of major competition  
22 such as an Olympics or in a media-dense sport such as soccer, daily. In this way, maintaining  
23 an optimum balance for the policy-action cycle will certainly require the sport psychologist to  
24 possess a broad expertise, a strong ability to read/react to context, and strong interpersonal  
25 skills.



1           To enable this flexibility, coupled with the need to address the wide range of possible  
2 options, the sport psychologist therefore needs a set of specific and potentially new skills in  
3 order to work effectively. For a start, consider Schön's (1991) position on the necessity for  
4 truly effective practitioners to proactively experiment with various options. Given the  
5 development of a prerequisite trust and knowledge, the psychologist can then support a  
6 manager/PD in his/her ability to perform artistically and experiment rigorously. As one  
7 simple yet hard to achieve example, the effective psychologist must provide a sounding board  
8 and an almost virtual environment through which the manager/PD can explore the  
9 consequences and merits of different approaches. Furthermore, the psychologist must also be  
10 able to assist the manager's/PD's need to identify and develop the systems that can most  
11 effectively cope with the "swampy lowlands" of practice (Abraham & Collins, 2011; Schön,  
12 1987). The point here is that the challenges of elite team leadership are so complex and the  
13 goalposts often so shifting and ephemeral that an incessant revision and tweaking is  
14 necessary (cf. the need for a "fox-like" style cited below). Accordingly, it is necessary that  
15 professional preparation and peer supervision encourages practitioners to continually reflect  
16 on and in action, develop a commitment to auditing one's decisions and actions, and maintain  
17 a simultaneous focus on short, medium, and long term agendas.

18           To be clear, the ultimate decisions and actions are the team leader's; significantly,  
19 however, s/he needs strong, insightful, and confidential advice/support so that the process and  
20 outcome can be optimal. For example, team selection is a common challenge across many  
21 sports, made even more extreme when this has to be done with an intact but closely knit  
22 group such as an Olympic squad or touring team. Suitably skilled and knowledgeable  
23 psychologists can proactively aid with the design of communication systems to which all  
24 team members commit. They can also advise on the implications of certain options (e.g.  
25 choice of substitutes) and, reactively, help to calm the strong tides of passion in non-selected

1 players which can threaten team efficacy. Crucially, with sufficient skill, all of this can be  
2 achieved while working within the practitioner's Code of Conduct, especially when care is  
3 taken to publicly and openly present and clarify the psychologist's role and modus operandi.

4 As highlighted by Martindale and Collins (2013), this role, and the evolution of  
5 expertise in fulfilling it, is further complicated by the "greyness" of decisions and the lack of  
6 objective clarity (even with 20:20 hindsight) about what was actually the "right" choice. As  
7 such, and following the recommendations of Yates and Tschirhart (2006), practitioners can  
8 use a consistent triangulation to debrief actions and build expertise for the future. Thus, for  
9 example, consider the challenge of changing team culture in attitudes towards punctuality.  
10 Manager/PD and psychologist can critically consider the quality of outcome (are players now  
11 more punctual), the logic and consistency of the actions taken (how well did we plan the  
12 stages of the change against what happened), and a more detailed consideration of how well  
13 each step was executed (e.g. how well did that team meeting go?). In fact, by the use of such  
14 methods, psychologists can help managers/PDs (and vice versa) to evaluate the impact of  
15 various options much earlier in the process, enabling the "roll with the changes" style of  
16 management and leadership which Teltock's (2005) seminal work describes as fox-like. By  
17 setting waymark outcomes (e.g. "by December, I would expect to see..."), and using pre-set  
18 case conferences (i.e., focused discussion around a critical challenge or goal), the leadership  
19 team, facilitated by the psychologist and making well informed use of objective (e.g. match  
20 analysis) and subjective (e.g. player perceptions, team gossip) data, can make goal-directed  
21 adjustments to interventions as they evolve. Indeed, this "ear to the ground" style of  
22 management is essential in the dynamic performance environment (cf. Burke, 2011); both  
23 doing and facilitating it is another key component in the psychologist's armoury.

24 Of course, this requires an extremely comprehensive and insightful evaluation of the  
25 presenting conditions, coupled with an open-mindedness and lack of arrogance sufficient to

1 negate the tendency to stick doggedly to one's original solution, even in the face of data to  
2 the contrary (i.e., leaders which Tetlock labels as "hedgehogs"). Such "fast foot work" is  
3 classically best accomplished under cover, with the manager/PD (and psychologist)  
4 presenting an almost swan like serenity as other parts work like the clappers to maintain  
5 progress! This is yet another example of how the expert psychologist can advise and support  
6 the team leader. The willingness to change direction, the timing of and method through  
7 which the changes are made, and how this is communicated to all relevant stakeholders are  
8 all elements of which the emotion expert (especially an experienced and well informed one)  
9 can advise. Indeed, in this regard the psychologist may positively interact with the  
10 team/group media officer to ensure that publicly disseminated messages are coherent and  
11 consistent with the team leaders' intentions. As such, a close affinity and good working  
12 relationship between these two important individuals is, in our experience, a common feature  
13 of leadership structures that proactively and effectively optimise the perceptions of internal  
14 and external stakeholders.

15         This flexible approach, what some refer to as adaptive expertise (e.g. Klein, 2009), is  
16 often associated with the multifaceted and multi-level approach to planning and execution  
17 known as *nested action* (cf. Abraham & Collins, 2011; Martindale & Collins, 2012). Via this  
18 approach, both manager/PD and psychologist can coordinate actions against short-,  
19 intermediate-, and long-term targets; for example, a practitioner may be requested to advise  
20 on a manager's need to optimize some players' performances during the current season while  
21 actively but covertly promoting them as transfer targets for other teams and recruiting  
22 replacements. As an example, consider Figure 1 which addresses the nested layers apparent  
23 in the agenda of a professional sports team manager. Specifically, any action or decision to  
24 take action must be set against short (e.g. we need the wins), medium (e.g. I need to develop

1 their commitment to this playing style) *and* long term (we need a secure and consistent  
2 culture) agendas *simultaneously*.

3         The point here is that optimum actions (for example, how sympathetic and supportive  
4 the psychologist is with a player struggling to fit the new style) must take into account both  
5 short and longer term objectives. Notably, this is an essential feature of the PJDM system  
6 proposed to underpin expert behaviour in sport psychology (Martindale & Collins, 2005,  
7 2007, 2012, 2013). Sole attention to any one agenda (N.B. there are always inevitably more  
8 than three) will lead to a less than optimum process. Accordingly, and once again, the  
9 implication emerges that team leaders' and psychologists' action needs to be shaped to  
10 provide a decision which is coherent across team management, and which is designed and  
11 deployed as a dynamic best-fit to the demanding, high ego, high status, and self-interested  
12 individuals which often characterize elite domains (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012).

13         Of course, the operation of covert agendas (i.e., those which some performers and  
14 support staff are not aware of and which work against some individuals' interests) flies in the  
15 face of the more traditional view of sport psychologists as "everyone's friend". More  
16 specifically, promotion of the performance agenda may well be at the expense of some  
17 parties, an ethical dilemma which, especially if practitioners are also working with support  
18 staff and performers as well as team leaders (the usual situation in our experience),  
19 challenges some past ideas about the predominance of client welfare (cf. Andersen, 2009;  
20 Anderson, Van Raalte & Brewer, 2001). Consider, for example, the ethical dilemma  
21 presented by some of the Machiavellian, deliberately undermining performer and staff  
22 behaviors referenced in Part 1. In such circumstances, the psychologist (presumably focused  
23 on benefit for the majority) should be in a position to become aware of and address such  
24 actions, albeit that such challenge may be directly and uniquely linked to those causing the  
25 problem. It also follows, therefore, that practitioners must provide and continually reinforce

1 a clear understanding of their role and modus operandi to all who they consult with if ethical  
2 standards and credibility are to be sustained.

3         We briefly consider some of the “code of conduct” issues which such an approach  
4 inevitably raises in the next section. For the moment, however, we suggest that there will  
5 almost inevitably be times when a psychologist operating in elite sport will be required to  
6 take, or at least advise on and keep confidential, actions which may well be professionally or  
7 even personally harmful to some parties. In such an environment, maintaining client trust  
8 *and* personal integrity will, especially in the long-term, necessitate a more forthright and  
9 “straight” approach than the *chameleon* style self-interest (cf. Kilduff & Day, 1994) which is  
10 apparent to us within the world of sport, especially in the upper echelons. If not, then the  
11 psychologist may well become another of the team which follows the manager/PD from job  
12 to job, loyalty proven upwards but with genuine difficulty to establish optimal relationships  
13 with the performers. Of course, this infers the need for separate sport psychologists for  
14 management and performers. While this might appear the most convenient solution on initial  
15 inspection, it is, we suggest, somewhat impractical due to the extra resource required, an  
16 almost inevitable ego-clash between psychologists working with the different sub-groups  
17 (potentially worse than that between coaches and players!), plus the further and obfuscating  
18 subdivision of responsibility. This last dimension is particularly important, especially since  
19 our profession is already witnessing a proliferation of sub-specialists in the almost complete  
20 absence of evidence-based practice (e.g., talent scientists: Collins, Collins, MacNamara, &  
21 Jones, 2014). This is not to say that a “team of psychologists” approach will never work;  
22 indeed, the first author established such a system to cater for support across a multi-centre  
23 environment, as is increasingly common in large Olympic sport programmes. In the  
24 competitive setting, however, this approach is unlikely to work well unless practitioners are



1 to address the weaknesses of this method elsewhere, noting its common usage in sport  
2 (Collins, Burke, Martindale & Cruickshank, 2014). For the present purpose, however, we  
3 suggest an immediate move towards more expertise-based evaluation and training as the best  
4 way to prepare psychologists for the complex challenges they face in performance sport (cf.  
5 Martindale & Collins, 2005, 2007, 2013). In short, the competency approach is just too tidy  
6 for the complexities we face; indeed, we would suggest that this is the case in any people-  
7 related (which surely equals complexity-propagating?) profession.

8         It is worth considering albeit briefly due to space limitations, what such an approach  
9 would look like. Useful models are already available in parallel professions such as nursing  
10 (Giroto, 2000) and medical education (van der Vleuten & Schuwirth, 2005). Notably in these  
11 settings, development is driven by the practitioner's ability to make increasingly complex but  
12 balanced and rationalised decisions against realistic challenging scenarios; in short, just what  
13 we have been describing in this paper. Such a programme would firstly introduce trainees to  
14 the inherent complexity through a series of case study exemplars, with programme leaders  
15 stressing the trade-offs inherent in exploring solutions and the interactions between relevant  
16 factors. Secondly, and as a consequence, the need for various bodies of knowledge would  
17 become apparent, providing the impetus and motivation to explore these topics. This cycle  
18 would continue, with regular blocks of integration interspersed with knowledge blocks, as the  
19 trainee gained greater expertise. Parallel supervised experience would involve both  
20 observation (by and of more experienced practitioners and through peer supervision) and  
21 frequent debate in which decision making processes and outcomes would be shared and  
22 evaluated. Accreditation would occur in a similar fashion to these developmental processes,  
23 once again emphasising the "shades of grey" type solutions which should characterise all but  
24 the most basic interventions in human behaviour. The role played by such debate is crucial,  
25 enabling developing practitioners to more fully appreciate the complexities of situation and

1 solution. This is definitely not something which is achieved by setting requirements for a  
2 stipulated number of hours!

3         A second implication relates to the breadth of knowledge and experience which must  
4 be covered in professional preparation. The value of industrial/organizational psychology in  
5 performance has been highlighted throughout this paper. However, we consider this but one  
6 of several crucial skill-sets which need to be added on to the existing diet of training. As  
7 another example, the psychologist must learn enough about the coach role and methodology  
8 to enable them to advise and work with (and through) coaches in support of the athlete and  
9 team's performance. Furthermore, the psychologist requires a sound working knowledge of  
10 skill acquisition, execution, and refinement since, at least for sport, this often represents the  
11 biggest source of error in performance. In our view, the separation between sport psychology  
12 and motor control, which could arguably be traced to the late 1960s, is something which has  
13 often limited practice in applied settings. Further, the effective practitioner needs to know  
14 enough about the other sport science disciplines to be able to recognise the need for and  
15 potential benefit of such expertise, as well as the ability to develop integrated and  
16 interdisciplinary solutions. Plus, of course, all of these additional knowledge sets enable  
17 better advice and support to the leadership functions which have been the main focus of this  
18 paper.

19         Our final point relates back to the potential ethical quandary which performance  
20 environments may generate. Consider, for example, a genuine situation from our experience.  
21 Appointed to support the members of an athletics relay team, it becomes apparent that one  
22 member is manipulating the others to preserve his/her status by constantly breaking and  
23 making alliances. Where does the psychologist's "loyalty" belong? What is his/her code of  
24 conduct responsibility to the members of the team, the coach, the Performance Director, and  
25 the overarching organization which pays his/her wages? In these dilemmas, we suggest that

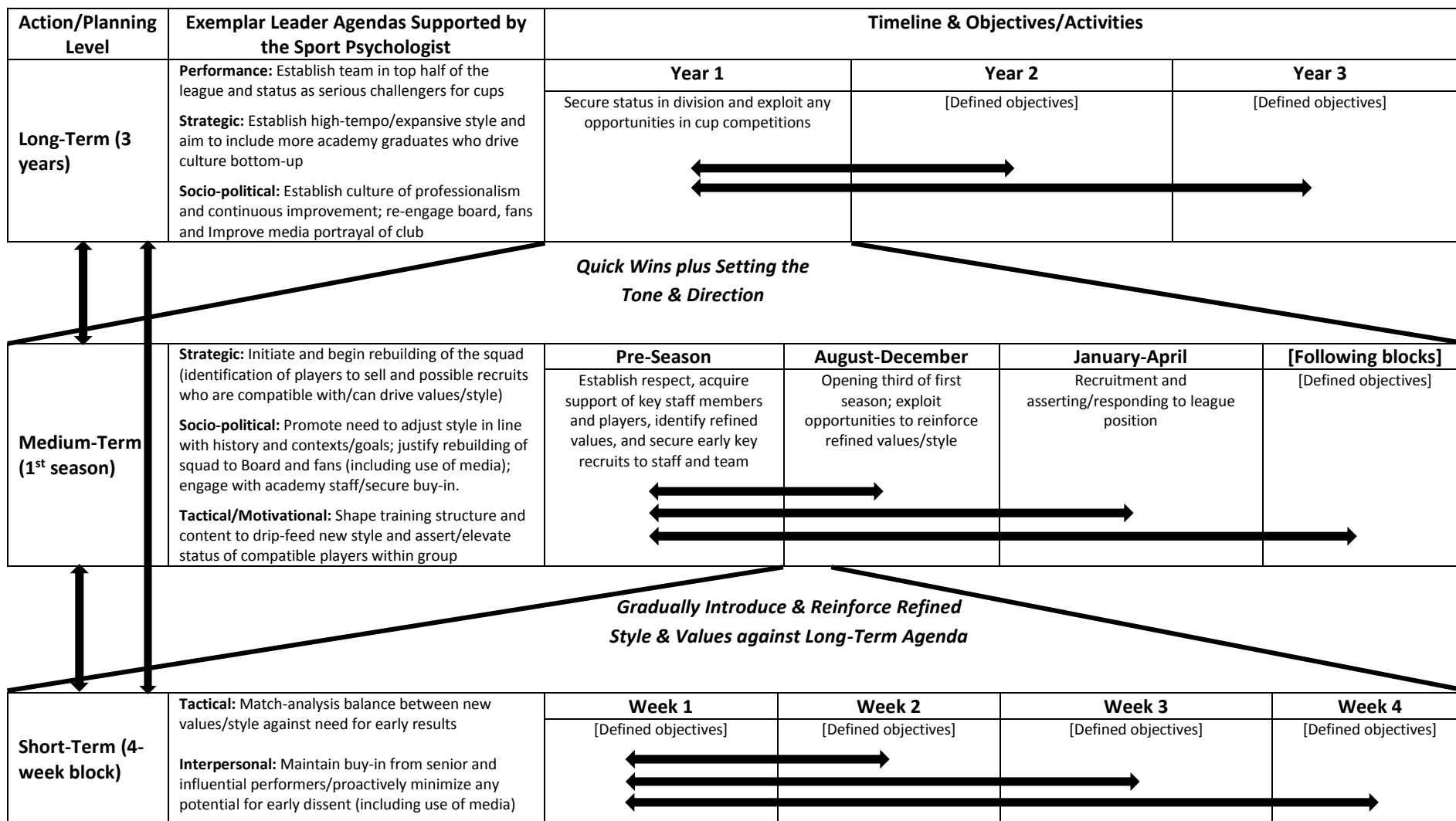


1 the application of PJDM, together with consideration of other parallel codes (for example, the  
2 explicit and formalized waiving of a doctor's duty for client confidentiality under certain  
3 preannounced conditions: cf. Collins, Moore, Mitchell, & Alpress, 1999) can offer solutions  
4 which are both ethically robust and consistent. These sorts of challenges are quite normal,  
5 however, and should form another central part of training for those interested in working  
6 within high performance. In short, careful consideration of the pros and cons of specific  
7 options (yet again, the shades of grey argument presented above) against the specifics of role  
8 and targeted outcome should be a central part of professional preparation, particularly given  
9 the complex dilemmas which can be faced by applied practitioners. Also once again, very  
10 clear a priori discernment and constant clarification of ethical working practice will support  
11 the practitioner in what is a very delicate but essential balancing act.

### 12 **Concluding Comments**

13 In presenting the challenges of elite sport environments and the needs of performance  
14 team leaders, it is clear that the development of such high levels of expertise in supporting  
15 sport psychologists is a complex and lengthy process. Indeed, operating at this level requires  
16 much more than MST and counselling skills, as emphasised, for example, by the need for  
17 understanding in political and strategic planning practices. Practitioners with the desire to  
18 acquire and sustain expertise in this domain would therefore be wise to adopt a broad and  
19 long-term approach to their on-going development. Accordingly, pursuit of such specialist  
20 expertise should move way beyond the training and literature-based *competencies* which  
21 problematically shape (and constrain) many views over what sport psychology is, and  
22 potentially can be. In the case of meeting the performance-oriented needs of elite team  
23 leaders, we encourage practitioners to consider and work on the "additionalities" detailed  
24 within this paper; in short, if we don't do them, who will? If another psycho-socially  
25 orientated professional (e.g., a political consultant), who will inevitably hold different views

1 on best courses of action, what would this then mean for the extent to which leaders receive  
2 streamlined, coherent, and consistent advice? We hope that readers appreciate our slightly  
3 provocative but evidence-based stance here and throughout. As we feel there is a genuine  
4 need for debate on several of the issues which we have highlighted, this was deliberate. If  
5 only applied work was considered as publishable more often by high impact journals such as  
6 this, then progress would be further enhanced. Our thanks to the Editors and *PSE* for this  
7 opportunity.



1

2



= feed-forward and feed-back loops between nested levels;



= feed-forward and feed-back loops within nested levels

- 1 *Figure 1.* An exemplar professional team leader's nested plan as supported by the sport
- 2 psychologist.

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