"Just Going Through the Motions….": A Qualitative Exploration of Athlete Perceptions of Social Loafing in Training and Competition Contexts – Implications for Team Sport Coaches

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ABSTRACT
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty team sport athletes representing a range of different sports with the aim of investigating their views relating to social loafing in training and competition. General themes investigated and subsequent content analysis highlighted factors that promote or reduce the extent of social loafing. Determinants of self-loafing were grouped according to three distinct categories: Group processes; Task characteristics and Individual perceptions. Social loafing among others was perceived to be prevalent in both the training and competition scenarios with more examples of social loafing provided in the training situation. The signs of social loafing were grouped according to the following themes: Cognitive & Emotional, Behavioural, Communication and Player Intuition. Consequences of social loafing were found to be detrimental to the effort and performance of both the individual and the team. Athletes were also able to differentiate between perceived social loafing and the perceived use of 'strategic rest' in team sports. Implications for the coaching process are far reaching with the need to develop an effective team culture and to provide training sessions that are interesting, engaging and relevant.

Keywords: Coaching Strategies, Social Loafing, Team Sport

INTRODUCTION
Social loafing, or the 'reduction in individual effort when people work in groups' [1], has been well documented in numerous studies [2,3]. In the sporting arena, a number of studies have addressed the detrimental impact of social loafing on performance, primarily in

coactive groups [4-11]. Research is moving towards interactive team sports where the individual contribution is decidedly difficult to quantify [12]. Evidently, this notion of social loafing is an area of interest and potential concern for sports teams and coaches [13]. Indeed, the mere perception that other members of a team are social loafing (perceived social loafing) has also been found to result in reduced team performance [14]. Clearly, an investigation of interactive team sport athletes' views relating to social loafing in both training and competition is of paramount importance to coaches of team sports. For coaches, two distinct contexts exist: Training and Competition. Both settings rely on team effort, focus and commitment in order to achieve their goals, for example: in training, the priority will be on individual and team learning, development and preparation; in competition, the emphasis will be on winning! With evidence of social loafing having a detrimental impact upon effort and performance in competitive environments [14], a qualitative investigation into the existence and indeed impact of social loafing in both the competitive and training scenarios is warranted, in order to further develop the coach's understanding of this phenomenon. Why does social loafing occur? How does it manifest itself? Gaining an understanding of these important questions is crucial for coaches in order to ensure utmost productivity in both the training and competition environments.

An 'untested' area in social loafing research within interactive team sports has highlighted the problems associated with assessing individual effort independent of the collective [15]. Indeed, the actual contribution of a team player to the overall performance is extremely difficult to measure as "optimum effort may not always be synonymous with maximum physical exertion" [15, p. 3]. The literature, thus far, has primarily focused on the objective quantification of social loafing through results (e.g, how fast, how far etc) as the principal indicator of performance. It is true that the result of a performance is extremely important, but, in interactive-type sports the involvement of a team player in the overall performance is highly complex. In both training and competition, how do coaches know that their players are putting in their maximal effort and not engaging in social loafing?

An alternative approach [15] was to focus the investigation on 'perceived social loafing' that this phenomenon has the same effect on athletes as actual social loafing [16]. Whereas social loafing refers to the actual reduction in effort, perceived social loafing is recognised as the team members' estimation of the contribution of their other team members [14,16]. As a result of the shift in focus to perceived social loafing various psychometric instruments have been developed. In a study involving twenty four male recreational floorball players the 'Perceived Social Loafing Questionnaire (PSLQ)' [15] was utilised. The questionnaire consists of five items with a five point likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) – an example item is "Members in my team are contributing less than I anticipated". A key finding from the experiment was that under high identifiability conditions the team members perceived less social loafing among their team mates. Validity and reliability of the questionnaire has been demonstrated in a number of studies [10,17]. The PSLQ was also used in a study focusing on the relationship between group cohesion, group norms and perceived social loafing in Norwegian youth football. It was discovered that perceptions of social loafing were amplified by high social cohesion, low task cohesion and low team norms [17]. An investigation using the PSLQ, investigated the relationship between motivational climate, personal achievement goals, and different aspects of social loafing in Norwegian male competitive football also utilised the 'Anticipated lower effort' and 'Anticipated effort reduction for oneself' scales and found that motivational climates moderated team members' efforts in relation to the perception of social loafing among others [10,16].

A 'self-reported Social Loafing Questionnaire' (SRSLQ) [12] based on the PLSQ [14] has been administered in a study with elite female handball players. This four item questionnaire with a five point likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) – an example item is "I do not do my share". Structural equation modelling indicated that this measure was psychometrically sound. The results indicated that the players reported role ambiguity, were less satisfied with their responsibility within the team and therefore perceived more social loafing.

Clearly social loafing among interactive sport teams is very difficult to identify and subsequently gauge. The issue associated with the relationship between actual and perceived social loafing within teams where athletes may be oblivious to the relative efforts of others and that perceived social loafing and the actual level of effort may not always be accurately interpreted [14]. Given the methodological complexity associated with identification and evaluation, the relationship between perceived social loafing and the productivity of the individual and that of the team is an interesting area for careful consideration. Despite social loafing being a vast area in terms of research there has been very little in the way of qualitative studies or research including elite-level interactive team sport performers particularly women [12].

Social loafing has been researched extensively and demonstrated that it is a 'robust phenomenon' that generalises across tasks, gender and is even apparent in discrete cultures [3]. Fundamentally, a clear rationale for this investigation is that, despite there being short quantitative measures available to examine perceived social loafing and self reported social loafing (e.g: PSLQ,[14]; SRSLQ, [12]) there is little research that has explored from a qualitative perspective how social loafing manifests itself. Key areas to be addressed include: How do athletes identify if team-mates are social loafing? What are the key indicators of this perceived behaviour? Why do some athletes loaf and what do they themselves think about when doing so? How evident are the various forms of social loafing? What are the perceived consequences of social loafing? What can coaches learn from the views of the athletes involved in this study? It is also vitally important to further extend and broaden the research of perceived social loafing to a variety of interactive sports rather than those already considered [10,14,15,17] and also to contextualise the basis of this phenomenon; e.g, further explore, through a rich qualitative investigation, the key indicators of social loafing. In each context (training and competition) this research articles seeks to: help coaches identify how players loaf; understand how perceived loafing can impact on an individual's effort; and understand how perceived loafing can impact on the team effort. Clearly, an investigation of interactive team sport athletes' views relating to social loafing in training and competition is of paramount importance to coaches of team sports. There could be opportunities to use this knowledge in the planning, observation and evaluation phases within the coaching process.

Therefore the aim of the present study was to provide athlete's perspectives on the phenomenon of social loafing in interactive sports teams

METHOD
PARTICIPANTS
The participants were twenty athletes (twelve men and eight women) representing a range of different sports including Basketball, Football, Rugby Union, Netball, Hockey and competing at top University level, elite national level and or professionally/semi-professionally. The average age of the athletes was twenty three years with an age range from eighteen to thirty five.

PROCEDURES

The dominant qualitative template within sport and exercise psychology research [18] is that of the combined protocol of semi-structured interview and content analysis [19]. The semi-structured system was selected for the present study in order to prevent rigidity in the interview process and to ensure that the athlete's experiences of social loafing could be effectively captured. "Content analysis organises the raw data (from transcribed interviews) into interpretable and meaningful themes and categories" [20, p.68].

Many researchers have primarily focused on an inductive approach to content analysis where themes emerge from the quotations [19], whereas a deductive approach advocates the use of pre-determined themes in order to organise the information. However, much qualitative analysis carries with it a degree of both the inductive and deductive processes [21, 22]. The present study has utilised the mixed approach where some fixed themes were identified prior to the transcription process and other themes have emerged from the thematic content analysis.

Stratified purposive sampling was used to select the athletes who all display similar characteristics in terms of playing an interactive team sport at a competitive level and to ensure that both genders and a range of sports were represented. The function of such an approach was to ensure that the sample would capture variations rather than just identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis [23].

The study received ethical approval through University procedures conducted at Institute level. Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study and signed an informed consent form. The athletes were either approached directly or through their clubs.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, lasting between twenty two and forty three minutes. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using content analysis [24,25].

The method used in this study [20] allowed for themes and categories to emerge from the 'raw' quotations in conjunction with the predetermined themes. Similar meaning quotations (basic units of analysis – a quote that identifies subjective experience [19]) were grouped together and subsequently ordered and classified as lower order themes (unification of quotes with similar meanings [20]). These themes were similarly grouped and carefully categorised into a number of higher order themes using the same comparing and contrasting process, with the higher order themes ultimately linking to four general dimensions [18-20, 24, 25].

In terms of establishing trustworthiness, an independent coder (an academic researcher with 15 years experience) was given the research objectives and some of the raw text (from which the categories were developed) and subsequently asked to create categories from the raw text. This process ensured that the themes identified from the raw data were not biased by the researcher's own experience and presuppositions [25].

INTERVIEWS

Prior to the interview, the interviewees were shown the definition of social loafing as 'a reduction in motivation and effort when individuals work collectively, as opposed to when they work individually' [1] to ensure that their subsequent responses were clearly focussed on the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion of the identified themes was principally based on the quantitative measures previously outlined. For example: Self-loafing [12]; Social loafing in others (Perceived Social Loafing Questionnaire, [14]); The impact on the team effort and performance (Anticipated Lower Effort Questionnaire [16], and author identified theme); Strategic rest [14]. All participants were encouraged to elaborate on the answers given and to, where possible, give specific examples allowing each

athlete to richly describe their experience of social loafing in both the training and competition scenarios.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All participants identified that they themselves engaged in social loafing and all could identify social loafing in their team-mates.

Several themes emerged from the raw data quotations and these themes were systematically related to four overarching pre-determined general themes (dimensions) as identified by the research aim: Self Loafing behaviours; Social loafing in others; The impact of social loafing on team effort and performance; Strategic rest.

The major finding from the content analysis, consistent across sports and levels, was that the athletes identified more social loafing in the training situation as opposed to the competitive environment. It was found that behaviours reported could be divided into either those behaviours that promoted social loafing (promoters) or behaviours that reduced social loafing (reducers).

SELF-LOAFING BEHAVIOURS IN BOTH THE TRAINING AND COMPETITION SCENARIOS

Determinants of self-loafing have been categorised as three higher order themes [26] namely: Group Processes; Task characteristics and the Individuals' perception.

Table 1. Promoters of social loafing behaviours in both the training and competition scenarios

Promoters of social loafing behaviours	Representative quotes
1. Group Processes	
Team Factors (Success/ Failure; Cohesion)	Training: 'We have one player who starts arguing with the coach and then we all blame each other and things go wrong..' Competition: 'I am playing for a team at the moment…not doing that well.....that's when we have a lack of effort' 'I am playing for a team at the moment and we don't really gel as a team....we don't help each other out....'
2. Task Characteristics	
Task Attractiveness & Significance	Training: 'Sometimes I really cannot be bothered....especially if the training is boring' 'Sometimes you wander off........when the training session goes on a bit....when we go over the same old thing again and again.....'
Individual's Perception	
Motivation	Training: 'I need to be motivated to work hard in training......' 'I would say that I go through the motions in training....' 'Motivation to train is definitely less than the motivation to play.....' Competition: 'I can recall a time when I did not put 100% in....when you think to yourself that theoretically the game is lost..'

Personal Factors	Training:
	'I am hardworking... obviously if I am a bit saw or achy from the game before then I will not be as committed.....'
	'and obviously with my own personal circumstances at the moment it can be quite tiring and tough...with family (new baby) etc.....'
Significant Others – the Coach	Training:
	'My coach does not exactly inspire me....and that turns me off....I then I get distracted....'
Deindividuation and Identifiability	Training:
	'When we do our group work…you can hang back….'
	Competition:
	'you can hide...especially in my position.....'
	'Sometimes you can look like you're really doing your job....especially if you get your body angle looking like you are pushing but really you are just there....not really helping out....'

Table 2. Reducers of social loafing behaviours in both the training and competition scenarios

Reducers of social loafing behaviours	Representative quotes
1. Group Processes	
Group Size and Nature of the Game	Competition:
	'You can't hide in basketball...it is a fast moving game, you know.....therefore you have to do your offensive and defensive duties......you ain't got time to hang back.....it's full on....you do and that's it.....you're exposed......'
Team Factors (Success/ Failure; Cohesion)	Training:
	'We are on a high just now.....doing well in the cup...top of the league....there is competition for places...everyone is battling hard....training has never been so intense....'
2. Task Characteristics	
Task Attractiveness and Significance / Roles	Competition:
	'..When I know my job....and I am happy with it....'
	'I rate my efforts quite highly because of the position I play...simply because as a fly half...you are the pivot in the side and if you're not performing well or your efforts are not up to scratch or you are not communicating as well as you should be then the whole team suffers....'
3. Individual's Perception	
Significant Others – the Coach	Training:
	'..when the gaffer watches training....I'm buzzing...I'm all over the place....'

PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL LOAFING IN OTHERS

Table 3. Perception of social loafing in others in both the training and competition scenarios

Perception of Social Loafing in Others	Representative quotes:
Training: 'Players..... cut corners.....you notice those people.....' 'Players... actually not putting themselves in a situation of risk and just making the safe option all the time .… they don't perceive that practice is as important enough to actually push themselves to that extent...' 'Some players in training...when they are tired...they fake injuries....so that their fitness and efforts to the group work that we do does not come into question.....' 'Some of my team-mates do not put in 100%....they coast.....you get to know them really well and know what they are capable of.....so you know when they are not working like they should be...' 'Some players might not even break sweat in their group work sessions so they are fresher for the scrimmages.....'	
Competition: 'A lot of players will cheat in terms of the prime example is with midfield players especially in our team at the moment doing the pretty side of the game well, going in and getting the ball, bringing it down..playing...joining in forward play etc...but the other side of the game tracking back...marking space...' '....players got lazy....because there was no way we were going to lose and people were primarily motivated by the results and not actually improving their performance....'	

It is clear that the athletes have identified and perceived team-mates as coasting and feigning injury in training and also players are aware of the role of others within the team. It is extremely interesting for the coach to be aware of strategies that athletes utilise in order to disguise their efforts – important information and knowledge that the coach needs to be familiar with in order to maximise productivity. Athletes have also identified opportunities to loaf in certain 'group' tasks where their efforts are no longer identifiable or indeed deindividuation occurs. It is also reported that some athletes use self-handicapping tactics avoiding effort for fear of failure and exposure [26].

SIGNS OF LOAFING

Table 4. Signs of loafing in both the training and competition scenarios

Signs of Social Loafing	Representative quotes:
Cognitive & Emotional	Training: '...when things are not going our way...some players do drop off....they get moody and snap.....'
Behavioural	Training: 'Peoples mental engagement with what we were actually doing....so there were examples from training when we would often have 'walk throughs'.… there might just be players not

	paying attention....' Competition: '....keep touching their shirts....you can see it in their faces...frowning....little commitment.....that sort of thing....' 'When they start to become lazy.....defence is the main one.......especially if someone is not hedging...'
Communication (Non-verbal and verbal)	Training: 'You often see negative body language.....you see it players faces.......shrugging of the shoulders.... ...players will shake their heads...look at the floor....heads will go down I know that's a cliché but it does happen......and then just a general look of discontent....frowning....' 'Arms folded..looking at the ground...looking at the sky...maybe be looking at something that is going on beyond the training area...' '.....and there may small pockets of chatter (during the coach's talk)....' Competition: '....also lack of communication....when players stop talking to each-other.....some players go quiet...' 'Clear tell tale signs include...on Saturday again... by the actual look.......simple things like are they blowing hard...are they sweating..are they really putting it in or are they going through the motions... body language is a big one.....head down...slumped...lack of involvement in anything...' '.....sometimes some players actually get more verbal....I do it sometimes....I pretend that I'm really involved....it's more of a motivational thing.....I actually encourage more when I'm struggling to get in the game...and also to put my opponent off....'
Performance (player intuition)	Training and Competition:
Familiarity with Team Members	'I think from player's perspective it was quite easy to pick up whether players are not putting in the effort...' 'because especially if you see a difference between how they act in games and how they act in training....then one of the possible reasons for that is lack of effort...'

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL LOAFING ON TEAM EFFORT AND PERFORMANCE

Table 5. The impact of social loafing on team effort and performance in both the training and competition scenarios

The impact of social loafing on team effort and performance.	Representative quotes:
Social Loafing and Impact on the Individual - Sucker	Training: 'Sometimes in training...if some players don't put it in....you think ...well what's the point.....a game is different though....there you are on show.....the performance and the results matter...' Competition: '....it really winds me up when players don't do their jobs properly...' 'Sometimes I look around and think, well what's the point if others aren't trying....'
Loafing and Impact on the Team	Training: '....at our level...if players do not perform...then it has an impact on our play....cos' where we are...in the league that we're in...we cannot afford anyone not putting in effort otherwise we would get hammered very week....a cricket score....' Competition: '....it impacts on other players....mostly negative but sometimes positive...as some players may think well if you are not going to perform then I'll do your job and I'll take the credit for it at the end of the game.... but in my experience it generally has a negative impact....' '..If heads go down and lads don't put it in....it's infectious....affects the whole team....confidence and all....'

It is crucial that the coach appreciates the impact of social loafing on certain individuals and their reaction and also the impact on the collective team effort.

STRATEGIC REST

Table 6. Strategic rest in both the training and competition scenarios

Strategic Rest	Representative quotes:
Disguising Effort and Conserving Energy	Training: 'I do conserve my energy at times....' Competition: 'Sometimes I rest in the game but I do not get myself out of the action...say if I played at inside centre....if I was getting a bit tired and we have done consecutive moves where I was taking the ball up then I would perhaps switch to outside centre....' 'I may well have spells in the game where I just sit in here and just keep my shape rather than joining in or giving that little bit extra because I just don't have physical capabilities to fulfil that role to the letter....' 'There are times in the game where I definitely hold back......but still contribute ....if that makes sense....an example....is where I move into positions when I need to....I guess you can call it reading the game......getting into positions when we are defending that stops the opposition....and being in a position to help if need be in attack......'

The aim of the present study set out to examine athlete perceptions of social loafing from a qualitative perspective and this exploration has discovered that social loafing in interactive team sports is a highly complex phenomenon. It is evident that coaches can learn from the reasons given for social loafing and indeed how athletes themselves identify loafing among team-mates.

Following analysis of the interviews it was found that social loafing was evident in a range of interactive sports, in concurrence with the notion that social loafing is a robust phenomenon across both task and gender [2]. Social loafing was also identified as operating at a variety of levels although more examples were presented at the lower levels of sport, in agreement with previous handball based work [12]. An interesting point was made by two of the basketball respondents who considered that in basketball games the speed and fluid nature rendered opportunities to loaf rare. For example, 'You can't hide in basketball...it is a fast moving game, you know.....therefore you have to do your offensive and defensive duties......you ain't got time to hang back.....it's full on....you do and that's it.....you're exposed......'(Basketball, professional).

It is important at this juncture to contextualise the social loafing phenomenon in terms of the sports being scrutinised with basketball having the fewest participants and the game being played on a small indoor court. The size of a group has been demonstrated to be one of the most important factors contributing to social loafing [27] where, as the size of a group increases, the more motivation and coordination losses develop [28]. There is certainly nowhere to hide on a basketball court in comparison to some of the other sports considered in this study and it is evident that the basketball players interviewed see the number of players involved at any one time, court dimensions and the timing element (twenty four seconds for each play) as factors controlling the extent of social loafing. One of the

basketball players alluded to the fact that 'minutes were hard to come by in his team' therefore, given the task duration every opportunity to play on court was seized [7]. The basketball respondents were, however, still able to identify social loafing and provide lucid examples.

The major finding that emerged from the content analysis, consistent across sports and levels, was that social loafing tended to manifest itself more in the training situation as opposed to the competitive situation. The relative significance placed upon training in comparison to the competitive matches is a salient point and has implications for the preparation of sports teams. This investigation into the differences in the athlete's approaches to the practice (training) and competition (match) scenarios is particularly interesting given that in competition the effort of the athlete will have a direct impact on the performance and results of the team and that in training the effort afforded will have an indirect impact on the performance (in competition) of the team, but will certainly have a bearing over time. Players deemed modifying their effort in the training scenario as acceptable whereas in the competitive arena it was deemed more illicit. Therefore, ensuring that training sessions are informative and engaging has to be a priority for a sports coach. Athletes have to see the relevance of the practice sessions so that the development can be transferred directly to the match situation. Training sessions have to be efficient and productive so that time is not wasted. The attractiveness of the tasks to the individual and their meaningfulness is of paramount importance and clearly has an impact on the individual motivation of the athlete [29,30]. The coach's style and practice should create a learning environment conducive for success and the most effective coaches inspire their athletes accordingly [31]. A positive team culture is associated with success and minimal social loafing. To formulate this culture, the coach needs to treat all those involved with the team with respect, include them in the decision-making process, develop a rapport with the players and ensure an open and honest communication channel based on mutual respect, trust and cooperation. This dynamic process involves the frequent use of positive and process-orientated affirmations to develop collective efficacy. It is imperative that team members work together effectively and fulfil their different roles to contribute to overall team success in order reduce potential social loafing . The cultivation of a positive team culture has to be an inclusive process and not just coach driven where the involvement of the team in determining the vision, goals and values is essential [32].

Identifiability has been demonstrated to be a key factor in determining the extent of social loafing [14,15] and also within the emergent 'training versus competition scenario' of this study. Identification of athlete's effort and contribution to the team seemed to be more readily available on 'match days' as opposed to within the practice sessions where the athletes reported the use of video analysis and also at the elite level, performance analysis software packages. Athletes found that, on occasions, there were opportunities to loaf within training sessions, without being detected, whereas during a competitive game those opportunities generally did not always exist, 'where all eyes are on the game'. A fundamental issue that has arisen from this study has highlighted the athlete's perception of the importance of some of the training session tasks and that if the athlete considers the practices undertaken as being irrelevant then 'cutting corners' is completely justified. Modifying effort can provide a boost in confidence and satisfaction for the individual knowing that he/she is able to coast undetected and yet team mates (in training) will have to work harder and as a result will not be as fresh for whatever the sessions holds [33]. For example, 'It's like a little victory....you have to cheat.....to gain the upper hand....you've got to always look good....to impress....if it means cheating then so be it....we all do it...'(Football, professional). Understandably, the

general feeling among all the athletes interviewed was that competition is regarded as significantly more important than practice. However, the importance of practice should be recognised by the team and figure within the team values, as it is the values embraced and behaviours exhibited that really fashion a positive team culture. This team culture involves informal and formal communication and takes into account activities both on and off the field of play – values cannot simply be adhered to one day and discarded the next! [34] Within the training scenario, an interesting observation was made with regard to the presence of significant others. One professional football player made the point that he would increase his effort when the manager (the team selector and decision maker) as present at the training sessions as opposed to during the daily routine undertaken by the first team coach. The need to impress was certainly a priority for this footballer with respect and influence having a considerable bearing on the efforts of the athlete [2].

A number of reasons for the reduction in effort when working within a team have been offered and give a useful insight into how this study can be applied in order to further enhance a coach's understanding. Examples players acknowledged included: when not quite 100% fit; complacency and expectancy to be selected; and when the team are unable to win the game given the score and time left and also the conservation of energy, again particularly in training. It is important to highlight the coach-athlete relationship and the necessity for thoughtful and respectful communication [35] and to emphasise this clear need for interaction so that the athlete learns from the coach and the coach learns from the athlete. Understanding each other can only be beneficial for both parties to be effective. It is appropriate at this point to link the various factors that are perceived as signs of social loafing to other relevant psychological or sociological constructs. Why is it that certain athletes loaf or are perceived to loaf? It seems that the athletes have offered a number of reasons linking the lack of belief in their own ability (self-efficacy) or that a change in self-influence within a group for a range of reasons can have a dramatic impact on the athlete's emotions or behaviours [26].

It was intriguing to discover how athletes perceived the difference between social loafing and strategic rest [14]. 'Going through the motions' was referred to by a number of respondents when describing their efforts, particularly in training. Players suggested that they would disguise their efforts through a variety of strategies in an attempt to conserve energy, but interestingly they could distinguish between social loafing and strategically resting [14]. Athletes recognised that particularly during a competitive situation it would be inconceivable to sustain maximal effort for the duration of the match. This notion of still being in a position to contribute is of paramount importance and clearly distinguishable from 'hiding in a crowd' and 'free-riding'. Athletes were able to differentiate between being 'out of the game' and 'resting but still in the game'. Evidently, strategic rest was considered appropriate as social loafing was not. Social loafing was seen as a premeditated attempt to withdraw personal contribution to the team effort and 'hold back' whereas strategically resting was described as the saving of energy but still being able to contribute (e.g, holding an appropriate position) to the collective effort. It was seen as conserving energy for more 'crucial' moments within a game and formed a key part of the athlete's decision-making process. Consequently it is vital that a coach is able to differentiate between social loafing (which can never be good for the team) and strategic rest (which is done explicitly for the good of the team). It is vitally important that if a player does rest within a contest that it is part of a collective strategy and that it is not simply a decision by the individual that the rest of the team are oblivious to. An open and honest communication channel based on support is essential for mutual respect and subsequently an effective coach-athlete relationship. If

players have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and have their contribution communicated effectively to the whole team then all involved should have a gauge on whether an individual has fulfilled their function or not. Here discussion of roles and responsibilities will not lead to ambiguity and misunderstanding.

The present study provides a useful insight into the thoughts of interactive team sport players at a variety of levels. The key issues raised can certainly inform the coaching process from an applied perspective and the matter of roles within a team is a poignant one. Team players suggested that dissatisfaction and a lack of understanding with their role within the team did lead to instances of social loafing. However, players who had a clear positional responsibility reported that their roles were pivotal to the effective functioning of the team and therefore it was only under exceptional circumstances that they reduced their efforts. Fundamental to the development of a positive team culture is the identification of clear roles and responsibilities so that the athletes appreciate the unique contribution of others. A cause of role ambiguity has been associated with ineffective communication with the coach [36] and therefore the nature of the coach-athlete contact is critical. It is the clarification, understanding and ensuing acceptance of the disparate roles that warrant attention in the coaching process [37].

The identification of social loafing is extremely interesting given that within interactive team sports there are so many events going on involving a significant number of players. In that previous observational studies with high level football coaches have highlighted that they would 'miss' a considerable number of key events within a game, it is therefore very difficult to be aware of the actions of other players, key events within the game and to concentrate on oneself too. A number of players interviewed were able to identify team mates who loaf, but their responses were a little vague, 'you get to know who they are'. They seemed to be reliant on their experience focusing on the time spent with colleagues especially in the professional environment where they train together on a daily basis; e.g, 'How the players act in training – competition – learn to recognise the players..'

The majority of respondents were able to give clear examples of how they are able to identify social loafing in their team mates. The signs of disengagement with the collective effort have been shown to take a number of forms, for example: cognitive and emotional; behavioural, non-verbal and verbal. The various forms of communication during training sessions and competition are therefore critical to the harmonious functioning of the team and players and coaches alike have to be aware of the signals they are emitting and the subsequent impact on others. It is important at this juncture to gain an insight into the perception of social loafing and elucidate the difference with contributing slightly less and really not engaging. For instance in the previously used quantitative measures such as the 'Perceived Social Loafing Questionnaire (PLSQ)' [14] why would an athlete score a 5 as opposed to a 3 on the likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) when answering the following item "Members in my team are contributing less than I anticipated"? It is clear that the athletes are able to recognise indicators of social loafing such as: negative body language; shrugging of the shoulders, looking down; becoming unusually quiet; moody disposition; disengagement with tasks (arms folded, distracted, and chatting when they should be focused on the task in hand). The familiarity with their peers and the clear tell-tale signals help form the athlete's perception of the contribution of others. The majority of players indicated that they would not modify their efforts in competitive matches if they perceived others to be being doing so but would do so in a training situation. The consequences of social loafing emphasise the need to identify this issue particularly in the training environment in order to enhance group productivity. Predominately respondents

referred to examples aligning with the 'sucker effect' [16], for example: 'Why should I bother if they are not!' It therefore would be extremely useful to have more information on this context-specific identification of social loafing as the current quantitative instruments only focus on the general issue without a precise 'training versus competition' focus.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR COACHES

Specific examples on how to lessen the potential occurrences of social loafing would clearly be up to the individual coach and the nature of the sport, but could include the following athlete-centred practical ideas: Empower athletes during the training sessions so that they are the architects of their own learning by allowing athletes to make more decisions for themselves; Challenge athletes regularly with resolute and purposeful questioning; Ensure that an empathetic approach is developed and that consideration is given to 'all' athletes; Communicate regularly with all athletes to ensure that no social cliques develop and that any issues can be resolved at an early stage (some sport squads have player management committees); Give the athletes responsibility of maintaining standards and policing certain activities during practices – for example devolving responsibility to athletes for warm-up activities; Incorporate peer learning activities within the training sessions so that athletes focus on development of others as well as themselves; Create opportunities for the athletes to unite and develop team cohesion through team building and bonding activities; Create healthy competition in the training scenario to ensure that all team members are contributing and enjoying the sessions; Utilise video and other performance analysis tools for both competition and training purposes and involve athletes in the learning and development process. These are just some of the many methods that coaches could incorporate into their practice in order to diminish the impact of social loafing.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative exploration has provided a valuable insight into athlete perceptions of social loafing in interactive team sports. Determinants, perceptions, signs and consequences of social loafing can now all be better understood with the examples offered by team athletes in a variety of sports and at different levels. It was confirmed that generally social loafing does exist, but is far more prevalent in the training scenario as opposed to in the competitive environment. It is important that the quantification of social loafing is contextualised and that the development of future questionnaires should take into consideration the training and competitive scenarios.

The implications for coaches are extensive. Coaching strategies should create opportunities to unite the team and ensure harmony. The coach has to communicate effectively through conducting periodic meetings, develop a sense of pride in the group, set challenging group goals, avoid the formation of social cliques, plan get-togethers, share inspirational words and consolidate a group identity [38]. The need to create training sessions that are interesting, engaging and relevant is of paramount importance in order to enhance the coaching process. The development of a positive team culture should include strategies to develop team cohesion and alleviate social loafing. Strategies such as having a greater understanding of the impact of social loafing and being able to identify the 'tell-tale' signs will only assist the coach in ensuring that maximal productivity in both training and competition is achieved. The team climate has to ensure that the environment is such that 'reducers' of social loafing are prevalent in order to ensure team concentration on the tasks in hand.

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