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## Developing an Evidence-Base for a National Police Agency to Address Competition Manipulation in Sport

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe the processes undertaken in the development of an evidence-base related to competition manipulation in sport for a national police agency. The research reported underpinned the creation of a film to deter the involvement of young athletes in serious organized crime. The environmental contexts, including the police environment and the sporting environment that the film was being developed for, are presented and reflected upon. Our approach is outlined, including a research phase employing focus groups and a development phase examining how to communicate the underpinning evidence. The paper concludes with reflections on the project novelty and applications for practitioners looking to apply their professional skills in a similar or related context (e.g., tactical profession populations, including military personnel, paramedics, and firefighters) based on our experiences in working with a national policy agency. The takeaway applications focus on gaining entry, planning interventions involving role models, and helping to promote optimal organizational functioning.

### KEYWORDS

Match fixing; police; sport psychology; youth sport

Corruption, defined as "any course of action or failure to act by individuals or organizations, public or private, in violation of law or trust for profit or gain" (Interpol, 2015), has been on the increase in sport around the world in recent years (Kuwelker et al., 2022). Competition manipulation, or "match fixing," is a particularly important type of corruption for sport psychology practitioners working with young people to be aware of. The risk of competition manipulation has been identified as occurring at lower sporting levels (Kuwelker et al., 2022), and involvement can threaten future sporting participation of the individuals concerned and/or the achievement of career excellence (i.e., an individual's ability to sustain a healthy, successful long-lasting career in sport and life; Stambulova et al., 2021). There has, however, been little attention given to providing guidance to practitioners in this area. In order to help fill this gap in the literature, we worked with a national police agency interested in deterring the

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involvement of young athletes in match fixing through serious organized crime.

In this paper, we report the research we conducted in the area of competition manipulation that underpinned the production of a film (entitled “The Fix”) by a national police agency in the United Kingdom (Police Scotland, 2022). We drew upon Whitley’s (2022) recent paper, and specifically how small influences (i.e., nudges) can lead to a “tipping point” for young athletes who may have hidden preferences against an existing norm. We also took influence from the concept of perceptual deterrence (Strelan & Boeckmann, 2013). Namely, the more certain or severe potential punishment for decision-making resulting in corrupt activity is perceived as being, the more likely an athlete will judge said behavior to not be in their best interest and consequently choose to not engage.

## Contexts

Our experiences have been informed by our approaches to research and practice. The first author has a psychological undergraduate and postgraduate academic background and, at the time of the research, was completing a professional doctorate in sport and exercise psychology. The second author is a sport scientist and a registered nurse with a long history of community engagement with charities promoting sport and physical activity to youth groups. The third author’s experience has been shaped through his applied research in sport settings over a 25-year career. We value research that can have an impact on practice, and our approach asserts learning is contextual and an active process in which individuals are influenced by the interaction of their prior knowledge, sensory input, and new information.

There were two environmental contexts we needed to consider. The first, that we were more familiar with, was the sporting environment for which the resource was being developed. The second environment involved a national police service, a very large and complex organization, and a specialist division focused on serious organized crime. A focus of the specialist division is to divert people from becoming involved in organized criminal activities. They had identified sports competition manipulation as a strategic area they wanted to focus on, and awarded a grant to the second and third authors to develop underpinning evidence, based on sport psychology theory, research, and practice, to inform the content for the resource they were interested in developing. The purpose of the present paper is to describe and report the research we undertook in providing the evidence-base related to competition manipulation in sport for a national police agency, including data collection, development of a vignette profile, and reflections. We also present takeaway applications for sport psychology practitioners.

## Data collection

Following approval from a university ethics committee, 10 focus groups were conducted with 84 participants (13-22 years of age). To ensure anonymity, and at the request of the police agency, demographic data relating to the gender and ethnicity of participants was not recorded. The participants were recruited from local sports clubs (rugby = 18; swimming = 12), high schools (young ambassadors = 12; sport scholarship athletes = 11), universities (undergraduate students = 25), and a professional soccer club (Academy players = 6). Focus groups lasted between 60-90 minutes and took place either at the relevant sports training location or on school/university premises.

Each focus group was facilitated by 2-3 of the authors. All focus groups began with a short presentation delivered by a Detective Constable from Police Scotland about the purpose of the project. Participants were then invited to complete a series of individual and group activities. The first activity involved participants individually identifying the qualities of role models in sport by responding to the following question: “what does being a good role model in sport mean to you?” Results across the focus groups highlighted 38 different role model qualities (see [Table 1](#)).

Each group was subsequently asked to rank the qualities identified in the first activity (most important quality = 10; least important quality = 1). Based on the results, we categorized the data by calculating the average of each ranked identified role model quality (score) as well as the number of times (frequency) each quality was identified across the 10 groups. A total for each quality was calculated by multiplying the score by the frequency ([Table 1](#)).

Finally, the first author facilitated a group activity where participants in each focus group were posed with hypothetical scenarios related to competition manipulation. These scenarios were designed to elicit suggestions from the participants of likely locations, situations, and individuals who may engage in or be involved with competition manipulation in sport. Scenarios were accompanied by verbal prompts, informed by relevant sport psychology theory and existing literature, when appropriate ([Table 2](#)). One person in each focus group was tasked with notating the key discussion points, which informed our subsequent thematic content analysis of the data ([Table 3](#)).

## Vignette profile

Following our data collection, we reported the findings to Police Scotland. The key factors we highlighted, based on the Macolin Convention typology of sports manipulation (Council of Europe, 2020) and sport psychology

**Table 1.** Role model qualities.

Role Model Quality	Frequency	Score (Mean)	Total
Respected	7	8.43	59.01
Positive	7	6.43	45.01
Humble	6	6	36
Leader	6	6	36
Hard working	5	6.8	34
Fair	3	9	27
Confident	5	4.4	22
Honest	3	6.66	19.98
Good example	2	8	16
Resilient	3	5.33	15.99
Competent	3	5.33	15.99
Motivated	2	7.5	15
Good communicator	2	7	14
Professional	2	6.5	13
Loyal	2	6	12
Determined	4	3	12
Commitment	2	5.5	11
Doping Free	1	10	10
Disciplines	1	9	9
Friendly	2	4.5	9
Consistent	1	8	8
Responsible	1	7	7
Popular	1	7	7
Integrity	1	7	7
Willing to Learn	1	6	6
Organized	1	6	6
Independent	1	6	6
Collaborator	1	6	6
Crime Free	1	6	6
Passionate	1	5	5
Creativity	1	5	5
Ambitious	1	5	5
Strong	1	4	4
Kind	1	3	3
Advises Others	1	3	3
Unique	1	2	3
Gains	1	2	3
Dedicated	1	1	1

Note. Frequency = Total number of times each quality was identified across groups; Score = Average (Mean) rank of role model qualities across groups; Overall Total = Frequency \* Score.

theory, research, and practice, including: 1. identifying trigger points when young people make a law-breaking decision; 2. ensuring that the person's own integrity, and that of their sport, is not compromised; 3. the risks involved, including loss of career and criminal record; 4. the importance of asking for advice from trusted others if someone they didn't know approached them offering advice or representation; 5. understanding the reasons and motives behind any gifts that may be offered and the importance of being honest; 6. understanding the risks associated with an open social media account; and 7. appreciating the responsibility to themselves, their teammates, and wider sport.

Police Scotland subsequently requested that we develop a vignette profile that could be used to help them communicate the underpinning evidence through a short film. The profile (Table 4) included antecedents, behaviors,

**Table 2.** Competition manipulation hypothetical scenarios and focus group prompts.

Scenario	Focus Group Prompt
Can you think of a hypothetical situation, where you might be pressured into fixing matches, betting against yourself or taking bribes to not play fairly?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What might that situation look like?</li> <li>• Who might be involved?</li> <li>• Where would you be?</li> </ul>
What could affect your decision to engage in match fixing, betting against yourself, taking bribes and playing unfairly?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The risk of getting caught</li> <li>• Personal feelings about match fixing, unfair play, gambling/betting, bribery</li> <li>• Personal feelings about corruption in sport</li> <li>• Wanting to be a role model for others</li> <li>• Professional/legal consequences of getting caught</li> <li>• Feeling like others may disapprove or make negative judgements</li> </ul>
How would being in a hypothetical situation like this make you feel?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What emotions/thoughts/urges/memories might you experience?</li> <li>• Why?</li> </ul>
Can you think of a hypothetical situation in which you discover an athlete, who you admire a lot, has been discovered to be engaging in competition manipulation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would the opinion you currently have about the athlete/the sport change?</li> <li>• Why/Why not?</li> <li>• Is sporting/athletic integrity important for you?</li> <li>• Why/Why not?</li> </ul>
Can you think of a hypothetical situation in which you discover that a teammate or close friend who you play sport with, has been engaging in competition manipulation (e.g., taking bribes in order to fix the outcomes of competitions)? What would be your initial reaction upon finding this out?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What emotions might you feel?</li> <li>• What thoughts might you have?</li> <li>• What things might you say to them?</li> <li>• What advice might you give them?</li> <li>• What action(s) might you be inclined to take?</li> </ul>

**Table 3.** Categories, themes and subthemes for match fixing decision-making rationale.

Hypothetical Item	Category	Theme	Sub-Theme
Rationale for decision not to match fix	Potential Punishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional consequences</li> <li>• Legal consequences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bans/fines/demotion or career loss</li> <li>• Fines/custodial/local Policy</li> </ul>
	Emotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Shame</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility</li> </ul>
	Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of losing reputation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative media attention</li> </ul>
Rationale for decision to match fix	Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amount of money on offer</li> <li>• Financial security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact on wider lifestyle</li> <li>• Age</li> </ul>
	Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normalized within sporting culture</li> <li>• Peer pressure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeing someone else get away with it</li> </ul>
	Emotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moral flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reward vs. Risk</li> </ul>
	Performance Enhancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance pressure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence/Esteem</li> </ul>

and consequences within the proposed vignette (Bruner et al., 2017). Antecedents were derived from role model qualities (Table 1) and motivations behind illegal behavior identified by focus group participants (Table 3). Subsequent behavior was determined by their rationale behind the choice to either engage in competition manipulation or not. To create a vignette that was theoretically aligned (Strelan & Boeckmann, 2013; Whitley, 2022) and thus felt authentic, the consequences of the character’s behavior were both positive and negative, and included outcomes from

**Table 4.** Vignette profile.

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A criminal looking for illegal money-making opportunities contacts a young, inexperienced soccer player through their open social media account and bribes the player by offering them an expensive pair of soccer shoes (they indicated they “liked” in their public social media account) as a gift. The player, who had been progressing well in their team and was seen as a role model to their peers, accepts the gift from this person he had never met before. The player does not tell anyone else about this. Later, the player is contacted by the criminal and is offered cash to take a yellow card in an up-and-coming game at a specific point in the match (so the criminal can place bets at a number of betting shops at high odds based on this unlikely event). The player recalls a recent newstory about a famous soccer player in the public eye that had been caught fixing matches. They received a small fine, but faced no further professional disciplinary action (thus ‘normalizing’ match fixing within the sport and reducing the perception of legal risk). The player subsequently makes the decision to do this just once, weighing up the risk and impact on themselves and their team with the opportunity to make some quick money. Over time, this escalates, and the player is later told by the criminal to take a red card in an important game. This is a step too far, but the player feels trapped and realizes they have no choice as the criminal will notify the coach and publicize the previous illegal acts. They commit to carrying this out, and their team loses the match as a result. The player subsequently is arrested by the police and banned from their sport for match fixing.

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categories and themes identified within [Table 3](#). We felt it was prudent to consider the increased influence of “tipping” youth athletes toward illegal action in environments where some are admired for not “getting caught.” However, several participating athletes across the focus groups stated they may also feel sufficiently angry and frustrated enough to report such behaviors of others and even terminate relationships with trusted individuals in the hypothetical circumstances. Therefore, developing a vignette in which someone involved “got away with” illegal behavior at a professional level was included to help communicate the key nuances to the film’s target audience.

### **Reflections: Project novelty and applications**

This project represented a novel context for the application of sport psychology. The police service concerned, who had not previously applied sport psychology in their work, welcomed the underpinning theory and research evidence. Because we were unfamiliar with their environmental context, we drew on our traditional models of consulting practice in sport psychology. For example, we conducted a needs analysis and case formulation at the outset, and then planned our overall strategy, which needed to be adjusted throughout the process (Gardner & Moore, 2005). Following the analysis of the results, we were then able to disseminate the research evidence to the police service. On reflection, this demonstrated to us that familiarity can be found in applied situations that at first appear unfamiliar.

While this type of work is less-typical than the more widely-recognized models of practice in sport psychology, this project demonstrates the possibilities for practitioners when working strategically at an indirect and systemic level with an organization. As highlighted by Sly et al. (2020), an important area for sport psychology is to develop knowledge that

supports the development of optimally functioning organizations. The authenticity of the content for the film was embedded and multi-faceted through a deliberate and iterative partnership with the police service and focus group participants. An important aspect of our role throughout the project was emphasizing how the intended messages needed to be relevant, relateable, and “feel real” to the target audience in sport (Schinke et al., 2014). Such an approach could potentially be applied in other sport contexts when an individual may intend to engage in other corrupt behaviors (e.g., performance enhancing drug use).

Participants across the focus groups noted how the outcomes of engaging in criminal behavior in sport can be both helped and hindered by perceived role models. In other words, sporting role models were seen as potentially the best-placed individuals to divert others from poor decision-making while, at the same time, also potentially being the person to tip athletes toward poor decision-making if they do not lead by example (Whitley, 2022). As such, we created hypothetical scenarios in which participants were encouraged to identify and explore the consequences of corruption, without a requirement to judge the outcomes as positive or negative. This allowed them to evaluate how favorable they viewed the behavior, without fear of self or external judgment. Practitioners should take include account this approach when including role models in any interventions.

In addition, we explored the influence of role models on behavior to assess the normative component of intent. Observing role models “get away with” corruption normalizes such behaviors and increases the likelihood that the individual may approve of the behavior and/or perform it themselves in the future. We analyzed this role model effect through perceptual deterrence theory (Strelan & Boeckmann, 2013), which is concerned with how individuals may respond to the perceived rather than objective costs of law-breaking decisions. Focus group participants remarked how they may base their assumption of punishment through observing the experiences of others. In instances where role models faced little to no consequence for their actions, participants were more likely to view risky, even law-breaking, behavior as being in their best interest. Contrastingly, seeing role models speak out about the negative consequences of illegal behavior in sport can be a tipping point and increase the perception of punishment certainty and severity.

Internal and external performance pressures, as well as the specific bribery amount on offer, are other notable tipping points for corruptive behavior related to match-fixing. The exact figure deemed “enough money to say yes” is idiosyncratic and therefore highly variable, although a “life changing amount” relative to the person’s current circumstance was



consistently identified regardless of the exact value. In addition, the point within the person's sports career (i.e., beginning or end) is a key consideration in relation to competition manipulation. Practitioners may wish to draw upon the concept of career excellence (Stambulova et al., 2021) in their work with athletes in this area.

Following the production and release of the film in 2022, Police Scotland initiated a formal evaluation of the impact of the film, including on increasing young people's awareness of competition manipulation in sport.

### Takeaway applications

To conclude, we provide several takeaways for applied sport psychologists looking to apply their professional skills in a similar or related context (e.g., tactical profession populations, including military personnel, paramedics, and firefighters) based on our experiences in working with a national policy agency.

1. We experienced no barriers to gaining entry with this national policy agency. We perceived they viewed sport psychology as a mature and established discipline, and we found this population highly interested in engaging with sport psychology theory, research, and practice throughout the project. In addition to interventions with law enforcement officers in the areas of performance enhancement (e.g., Raabe et al., 2021) and stress management (e.g., Le Scanff & Taugis, 2002), and our work suggests sport psychology practitioners are also positioned to work with police agencies to help promote optimal organizational functioning.
2. Police agencies are large and complex organizations that are often structured within divisions that each focus on a specialist area. For example, in respect of serious organized crime, specialist divisions can focus on the following four areas: *diverting* people from becoming involved in serious organized crime and using its products; *detering* serious organized crime groups by supporting organizations to protect themselves and each other; *detecting* and prosecuting those involved in serious organized crime; and *disrupting* serious organized crime groups. We believe there is potential for applied sport psychologists to work across each of these areas, but the client (i.e., the specialist division with the police agency) should be seen within each highly contextualized setting (e.g., in our case, it involved diverting young athletes from becoming involved in match-fixing).
3. Applied sport psychologists who have the unique consultation opportunity to work with a national police service might be unacquainted

with the environmental context. We recommend practitioners draw on their traditional models of sport psychology, as we did in this project, as it allowed us to find familiarity in a situation that at first appeared unfamiliar.

4. Practitioners planning interventions involving mentors (Hoffman, 2019) should take into account how athletes can “tip” toward law-breaking behavior (e.g., match-fixing) after seeing or perceiving role models get away with the same behavior. However, because role-models are also some of the best placed people to deter young athletes from making poor decisions, applied sport psychologists could explore the resulting consequences of perceived role-models being both a “helper” and a “hinderer” in group-based interventions.

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