

**Position Paper: Rationale for a Focused Attention on
Mental Health of High-Performance Sports Coaches**

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Abstract

High-performance (HP) coaching has been described as “a complex, social, and dynamic activity that is not easily represented as a set of tangible and predictable processes” (Mallett, 2007; p. 419). Coaches are not only responsible for extensive planning, monitoring, and leadership in a dynamic and complex environment (Mallett, 2010), but also have responsibility for supporting athlete development and safeguarding their athletes’ overall health, well-being, and psychological and physiological safety (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). However, HP coaching is often considered an unsustainable profession, due to the levels of stress and subsequent mental health challenges that are frequently part of the role (Hägglund et al., 2022a). Therefore, this position paper will focus attention on the concerns, challenges and resources needed to prevent and manage mental ill-being and support the mental well-being of sport coaching professionals in HP sport and provide recommendations for individuals, systems, and organizations that work with HP sport coaches.

Keywords: Coaching, Well-being, ill-being, mental health, stress, sustainability

25 **Position Paper: Rationale for a focused attention on mental health of high-**
26 **performance sports coaches.**

27 Sport coaching is still a somewhat blurred profession grounded in teaching praxis
28 and the development of relationships. At the core, coaches are responsible for supporting
29 athlete development and sport performance as well as safeguarding their athletes’ overall
30 health, well-being, and psychological and physiological safety (Côté & Gilbert, 2009).
31 Across all levels of competitive sport, the demands and expectations on coaches from the
32 sport culture, various stakeholders, organizations, entourage members, and highly
33 committed athletes have been steadily increasing. Altogether, this pressure is particularly
34 intense on coaches in high-performance sport settings since competitive demands and
35 several stressors peak at this level. Thus, a growing attention has been placed on coach
36 stress and burnout within the coaching literature (e.g., Norris et al., 2017; Olusoga et al.,
37 2019; Potts et al., 2021). However, the broader topics of mental ill-being¹ and well-being
38 with the sport coaching profession have, until recently (e.g., Pilkington et al., 2022; Smith &
39 Runswick, 2020), been largely overlooked in research, practice, and within the profession
40 itself.

41 High-performance (HP) coaches are typically engaged in professional, semi-
42 professional, and Olympic sports and receive an income for their work (Mallett, 2010).
43 While coaches in many contexts, including collegiate and high-school coaches, might well
44 be considered “high-performance,” we tentatively adopt Grey et al.’s (2020)
45 conceptualization of the HP coach as one who leads athletes and teams “who are either
46 officially Olympic or world championship qualified (i.e., who reach stringent qualifying

¹ The World Health Organization conceptualizes mental health as a continuum from poor mental health to good mental health. This is the most widely adopted conceptualization, used extensively within the extant literature. However, to use language that is explicit and easy to understand by stakeholders, organizations, coaches and their entourage members, we have deliberately chosen well-being and ill-being as synonyms to good and poor mental health and will use them throughout the remainder of the paper.

47 standards) or who play in elite professional leagues around the world in culturally
48 significant sports... High-performance coaches are positioned at one extremity of the
49 performance-coaching spectrum and are typically tasked with leading athletes and/or teams
50 to success at the highest levels” (p.344-345). HP coaching has been described as “a
51 complex, social, and dynamic activity that is not easily represented as a set of tangible and
52 predictable processes” (Mallett, 2007, p. 419). The work of HP coaches involves many
53 elements, including extensive planning, monitoring, leadership and management of people
54 and resources in a dynamic and complex environment (Mallett, 2010). However, HP
55 coaching is often considered an unsustainable profession, due to the levels of stress and
56 subsequent mental health challenges that are frequently part of the role (Hägglund et al.,
57 2022a). More specifically, when costs outweigh benefits, this will typically, over time, have
58 a detrimental impact on mental health, performance and motivation and ultimately lead to
59 burnout and withdrawal (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

60 Arguably, the absence of conversation around coach mental ill-being and well-being
61 becomes even more prominent when considering a recent review of papers regarding mental
62 health in sports, including 13 papers published between 2017 and 2020 (Vella, et al., 2021).
63 Only two of the papers included in the review (Breslin et al., 2019; Van Slingerland et al.,
64 2019) explicitly addressed the mental health concerns of coaches. However, Breslin et al.
65 (2019) directed attention towards *all* participants in sports with a focus on non-elite
66 participants and Van Slingerland and scholars (2019) only briefly acknowledged the need to
67 also consider the coach. Therefore, this position paper will focus attention on the concerns,
68 challenges and resources needed to prevent and manage mental ill-being and support the
69 mental well-being of sport coaching professionals in HP sport and provide
70 recommendations for individuals, systems, and organizations that work with HP sport
71 coaches.

72 **Mental Health Covers a Continuum From Ill-being to Well-being**

73 Despite a growing conversation around topics like mindfulness and well-being in
74 coaching populations (e.g., Hägglund et al., 2022a, Longshore & Sachs, 2015; Pawsey et al.,
75 2021), these topics are often still clouded by cultural stigmas, misunderstandings, and
76 misconceptions. From an organizational perspective, to develop high-performance coaches
77 is a high-cost investment that also requires extensive experience, however resources and
78 education to support sustainable well-being are not offered and well-being issues are often
79 not discussed until there is a visible problem. Indeed, the pressures and expectations in HP
80 settings can create a difficult and psychologically unsafe space for coaches (Bentzen et al.,
81 2020b).

82 To better address and evolve critical conversations about supporting those within the
83 HP sport coaching workforce, this paper will aim to have a balanced focus on mental health
84 across the continuum from ill-being to well-being. This continuum is typically dynamic and
85 ranges from a high level of mental health and well-being with the absence of mental ill-
86 health symptoms, to mental illness and ill-being, with severe symptoms that typically can be
87 diagnosed with mental health disorders (WHO, 2022).

88 **High-Performance Work Environment**

89 There is no escaping the fact that competitive sport has evolved into a multi-billion
90 dollar global industry, with a “winning at all cost” culture at the highest level. As a natural
91 consequence, the pressure to constantly develop performance and to achieve results has
92 intensified across *all* competitive levels of sport, especially evident at the Olympic-,
93 Paralympic-, and professional-levels since funding, resources, and public attention are
94 largely determined by competitive results. Importantly, while it is the athletes who compete
95 under the spotlights, the burden of performance outcomes is shared; coaches, support staff,
96 and other entourage members (e.g., physical trainers, medical staff, sport scientists; IOC,

97 2021) are all under increasing pressure to “perform” in their roles. Thus, it is critical to
98 better understand the complex and unique nature of the high-performance context and the
99 stressors related to producing high-performance results (Cruikshank & Collins, 2012). In
100 particular, sports coaching is a highly demanding and oftentimes exhausting profession
101 (Didymus, 2017) where the HP expectations create a work culture in which long hours and
102 singular focus are the norm. This mindset can create a work-home imbalance that can
103 damage personal relationships as well as personal well-being. Indeed, research has
104 highlighted the multi-faceted, conflicting, interpersonal and professional demands that
105 coaches encounter (e.g., Norris et al., 2017; Olusoga et al., 2009; Thelwell et al., 2008), and
106 the impact of such demands on coaches’ personal and professional lives (e.g., Bentzen et al.,
107 2016b; McNeill et al., 2016; Olusoga et al., 2010).

108 Furthermore, the particular nature of the high-performance environment seems to
109 present a significant challenge for coaches’ well-being. The coach’s role in HP contexts is
110 constantly evaluated and under threat, with job-insecurity, the threat of firing, and potential
111 funding cuts being perennial concerns (Bentzen et al., 2020a; 2020b; Mallett & Lara-
112 Bercial, 2016). In addition, the precariousness of coaches’ continued employment is
113 commonly a public rather than a private affair, with their conduct, decisions, team
114 selections, tactics, and the relationships with their athletes under constant media and public
115 scrutiny.

116 High-performance sport systems are fast paced and complex as they reflect the
117 communities in which they operate (De Bosscher et al., 2006). Meeting the high
118 expectations and demands of the coaching profession can create a sense of always being on
119 duty and needing to “take care of everything,” described as Superhero complex by Olusoga
120 & Kenttä (2017). This intense coach identity can lead to individuals feeling compelled to
121 work long and irregular hours, with significant periods of time being spent away from

122 homes and families (Norris et al., 2017). Work-home interference (Bentzen et al., 2016b)
123 and feelings of isolation and loneliness (Olusoga et al., 2009) are both natural consequences,
124 but also create further demands on HP coaches. Specific challenges have also been reported
125 by various minority coaching populations, such as novice coaches making the transition
126 from athlete to coach (Chroni et al., 2020), women high-performance coaches (Carson et al.,
127 2018; Kenttä et al., 2020), coaches of color (Cunningham, 2021) and para coaches (Bentzen
128 et al., 2021).

129 Finally, the culture of HP sport is typified by constructs like toughness, strength,
130 grit, and resilience, all generally positive characteristics, but also ones that make showing
131 vulnerability and engaging in help-seeking behaviour more challenging. Indeed, in the face
132 of all the challenges described here already, this hyper-masculine environment of HP sport
133 can contribute to coaches' stress and experiences of burnout (Hägglund, et al., 2019; Kenttä
134 et al., 2020), and encourage coaches to mask emotional difficulties to project an outward
135 appearance of stoicism and control under immense stress (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

136 **Personal and Systemic Consequences of Inadequate Professional Support**

137 Unlike coach well-being, the experience of coach burnout has been examined from
138 multiple theoretical frameworks within the literature (Olusoga et al., 2019). The HP work
139 environment previously described (i.e., job-insecurity, media scrutiny, work-home
140 interference, high-stress, high-pressure) has been associated with work-related burnout
141 (Bentzen et al., 2014, Olusoga et al., 2017). Moreover, the experience of burnout can have
142 far-reaching personal and professional consequences for coaches. In addition to the physical
143 and emotional exhaustion that characterizes the burnout experience, coaches have also
144 reported depressive symptoms, sleep-disturbance, alcohol-related issues, negative impacts
145 on familial relationships and, ultimately, withdrawal from the coaching profession (Bentzen
146 et al., 2014; Bentzen et al., 2017; Kegelaers et al. 2021; Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017; Roberts et

147 al., 2019), all of which can attract media attention and subsequent negative public
148 narratives, placing further stress on coaches.

149 In contrast to the rapidly evolving body of published research on mental health
150 problems and psychiatric disorders for athletes, the same literature on coaches' mental ill-
151 being beyond stress and burnout is scarce. One study with elite level coaches in New
152 Zealand reported that 14% of coaches experienced at least moderate symptoms of
153 depression based on conducting a cross-sectional on-line survey using The Centre for
154 Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale-Revised to measure symptoms of depression
155 (Kim et al., 2020). Another cross-sectional on-line study with elite level coaches from
156 Netherlands and Belgium reported symptoms of common mental disorders were prevalent,
157 ranging from 39% for depression/anxiety to 19% for distress and adverse alcohol use. This
158 study measured symptoms of depression/anxiety using the 12-item General Health
159 Questionnaire and Alcohol consumption using the 3-item Alcohol Use Disorders
160 Identification Test (Kegelaers et al., 2021). Finally, another cross-sectional on-line study
161 from Australia found more than 40% of coaches from Olympic sports reported mental
162 health symptoms at a level that would warrant professional treatment, but fewer than 6%
163 reported seeking treatment at the time. In this study mental health symptoms and probable
164 caseness were measured using the 28-item General Health Questionnaire (Pilkington et al.,
165 2022). To our knowledge, so far only one study has reported psychiatric disorders among
166 HP coaches assessed by a licenced caregiver (Åkesdotter et al., 2022). This study reported
167 that co-occurring affective and anxiety disorders were prevalent in a sample of 34 HP
168 coaches that received treatment for psychiatric disorders, with 91% anxiety disorders and
169 72% stress-related disorders.

170 Despite a growing conversation about the requirements and responsibilities of the
171 HP coach (Kegelaers et al., 2021; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016), and the importance of the

172 coach within the HP sport system (ICCE, 2013), little is known about how organizations
173 work systematically to improve the unpredictable and often chaotic work life of coaches.
174 Research has, however, pointed at the need for greater awareness and increased
175 responsibility of employers in facilitating a more sustainable work situation within the
176 coaching profession (Carson et. al, 2019).

177 Athlete, and by extension coach performance, is more often than not measured by
178 outcome metrics such as win-loss record or medal tally, and is a primary marker of
179 “success” in the HP environment. Far exceeding the financial incentive to develop healthy
180 and productive work environments for HP coaches, the sport culture at large and those
181 within it need to recognize the responsibility of the HP system to create a psychologically
182 safe, healthy, and sustainable professional identity for HP coaches through clarity of
183 conversation, education, systemic changes, support, and proactive efforts in HP coach
184 education and development programs. The 2021 Chartered Institute for the Management of
185 Sport and Physical Activity’s (CIMPSPA) Professional Standards for the Coach Developer
186 states that the work of the coach developer should “always be characterized by prioritising
187 the health and well-being of the coach” (p. 4). Ultimately, within the HP environment, a
188 professional culture that fails to adequately prepare and support essential stakeholders, such
189 as the coach, is not only psychologically unhealthy, but is also less likely to result in
190 sustainable coaching careers (e.g., Cotton & Hart, 2003; Fletcher & Scott, 2010).

191 Noteworthy, within the context of HP sport, the stressors and pressures experienced
192 by the coach are unlikely to change. Striving for peak performance in highly competitive
193 environments will always require high levels of time, energy, and resource investment.
194 Striving for performance success and surviving in this highly contested and demanding
195 context has demonstrable physical and mental consequences for individual well-being. It
196 seems imperative that concern and caring for HP coaches is prioritized. The following

197 recommendations are offered to support ongoing well-being efforts, manage ill-being
198 concerns, and encourage a shift in culture away from the dominant performance narratives
199 and towards personal growth, more values-based conceptualisations of success, and
200 sustainable mental health in coaching. We argue that a large part of the responsibility for the
201 following recommendations should be at the organizational level, but all stakeholders and
202 individual members in the HP sport community need to contribute and use their voices.
203 Moreover, we have deliberately chosen not to provide examples that could be considered
204 too specific, since best practice in one context does not necessarily fit across all possible
205 domains. Importantly, we believe that targeting the HP sport community in this paper has
206 the potential to accomplish a meaningful change in stigma, attention and resources that
207 might also benefit coaches at other levels. This is the case, simply because support systems
208 and good practice at the highest level often lead and influence the development at many
209 other levels in competitive sport.

210

Recommendations

1. Focus on the Full Mental Health Continuum as a Basis for all Practical

Recommendations for High-Performance Coaches

213 To develop a comprehensive mental health plan for coaches, it is essential to be clear
214 about the purpose and to clearly define mental health. The overall aim should be to increase
215 the attention towards HP coaches and their mental health, while considering the full mental
216 health continuum including well-being and ill-being/mental disorders. Given the focus on
217 athlete mental health within HP contexts, it is important to develop mental health literacy
218 (see Gorczynski et al., 2021) that specifically targets coaches and the unique challenges, risk
219 factors, and resources associated with HP coaching. This mental health literacy should be
220 integrated in traditional education and ongoing professional development for coaches and at
221 organizational/National Governing Body (NGB) level.

222 **2. Reducing Stigma Regarding Mental Health Struggles Among (HP) Coaches**

223 Adopting a focus on mental health literacy can enhance mental health knowledge,
224 and help-seeking attitudes and intentions. However, focusing only on mental health literacy
225 has been criticized for failing to address stigma and having a limited effect on lowering the
226 threshold for help-seeking (Bu et al., 2020; Poucher, et al., 2021). To reduce the stigma
227 associated with mental health issues, organizations must take a lead and be proactive in
228 creating a culture that is psychologically safe, and that facilitates open and honest
229 discussion, where well-being, ill-being, and specific mental health issues are normalized and
230 considered everyday challenges to be addressed rather than problems to hide. A
231 psychologically safe environment refers to shared perceptions that it is safe to show
232 authentic self and psychological health and safety are prioritized in teams and organizations
233 (Vella et al., 2022). This sort of environment would encourage coaches to display
234 vulnerability and let go of their potentially damaging “superhero” identities. An example on
235 how to approach this challenge through a work-shop-setting is described in a recent paper
236 titled, “Starting a conversation about vulnerability in elite sport” (Hägglund et al., 2023).
237 Several sport organizations (e.g., UK Sport, NCAA, USOPC, and IOC) have issued clear
238 statements regarding their intentions to place athlete mental health high on their agendas.
239 Such statements could be adapted and revised to target the HP-coach and thus serve as a
240 valuable starting point. Importantly, all efforts that aim to reduce the stigma around coach
241 mental ill-being, also need to consider additional strategies that lower the threshold for help-
242 seeking for coaches.

243 **3. Coach Education Should Increase Awareness, Knowledge, and Understanding of** 244 **Mental Health Resources and the Specific Challenges of HP Coaching**

245 We identified key areas that sport organizations and all others who are engaged in
246 coach education need to consider in designing and delivering professional education content

247 and in providing opportunities to prevent ill-being and support well-being of sport coaches.
248 It should be noted that our intention is not to disregard the value of experiential and informal
249 learning. For example, informal mentoring could have a great value to develop an
250 understanding of specific challenges in coaching, but a more systematic and evidence based
251 mentoring programs that explicitly target coach needs will likely be more effective (Leeder
252 & Sawiuk, 2021).

253

254 ***3.1. Acknowledge stress from job insecurity, conflictual relationships, and Work Home*** 255 ***Interference***

256 It is important to acknowledge that for many coaches, the uncertain, insecure and
257 precarious nature of employment in HP settings creates a constant strain. Considering that
258 job-insecurity is a context specific stressor it may also put a strain on their professional
259 relationships. This may be exacerbated by both political and performance pressures that are
260 often beyond a coach's control. The development and communication of clear and
261 transparent policies and expectations that are based upon realistic assessments of resources
262 are essential for creating a professional culture that protects an individual's well-being.

263 While work-home interference has previously been considered an issue affecting
264 predominantly women coaches, it is important to recognise that the challenges of combining
265 HP coaching with family life also have an impact on male HP coaches and their mental
266 health (Sisjord et al., 2022). Coach education and development programs that prepare
267 coaches for specific challenges such as finding a sustainable harmony between their work
268 and home lives, dealing with conflictual relationships, as well as the constant threat of *and*
269 *the actual reality of* losing their jobs (Bentzen et al., 2020a) are needed.

270 ***3.2. Increase awareness about career transitions***

271 While attention has been paid to the transition out of sport at the end of an athlete's

272 career (see Agnew, 2022), there has been limited focus on the athlete-to-coach transitions
273 within the same sport, particularly within HP sport (Rynne, 2014). The impact and
274 experience of this transition varies and can be influenced by the individual's preparation,
275 access to resources needed to prepare, and the support they receive both to prepare and once
276 in their new role (see Blackett & Evans, 2018; Chroni et al., 2020). Unfortunately, these
277 transitions are often un- or under-supported, creating additional stress, particularly for
278 novice coaches who lack essential skills and knowledge that would facilitate job satisfaction
279 and performance (Chroni et al., 2020). Organizations and federations need to increase
280 awareness and knowledge regarding strategies that support preparation for going into sport
281 coaching as well as provide education, resources, and on-going professional development
282 support for transitioning coaches (Chroni & Dieffenbach, 2021).

283 In addition, the range of within sport transitions (Chroni & Dieffenbach, 2021) from
284 lower to higher levels of competitions (e.g., going from national to international, or junior to
285 senior), from assistant to head coach, transitions between sports and ultimately, transitions
286 out of sport, also require attention and support (Kenttä et al., 2016). New contexts create
287 new contextual demands for the coach that may require a reassessment and realignment of
288 existing resources for mitigating and managing the stress, or the development of new ones.
289 While the recognition of the contextualized within sport transitions coaching professional
290 experience has been underexamined in the literature to date, an upcoming special edition of
291 the International Sport Coaching Journal will present a range of evidence informed
292 application and research-based insight regarding both experiences and best practices.
293 Organizations and federations need to develop and provide guidelines for support,
294 education, resources, and mentoring programs that can effectively support these transitions
295 (Bentzen et al., 2014; Lefebvre et a., 2020).

296 ***3.3. Resources and support for coaches from minoritized groups***

297 There is evidence that being part of a minoritized group within a system can have a
298 negative impact on well-being and mental ill-health outcomes (Symons et al., 2017). In the
299 high-performance coaching community, examples of minoritized and marginalized groups
300 include women, coaches of color, coaches with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ coaches. These
301 groups in the vocation of coaching should be acknowledged and appropriately supported at
302 individual and group levels. Research from a minority stress perspective (Meyer, 2003)
303 indicates that support from and connection to social networks can mitigate some of the
304 effects of minority stress on psychological well-being. Coach developers and coach-
305 educators should seek to understand the impacts of minority stress as well as the historical
306 barriers to mental health help-seeking among minoritized groups. Organizations and/or
307 NGBs should also take steps towards providing access to or creating coaching networks for
308 coaches from minoritized and marginalized groups in addition to developing guidelines that
309 strive to increase diversity and inclusion among HP coaches.

310 ***3.4. Formal coach education has an important role***

311 The professional preparation for HP coaches varies to a large extent across
312 organizations, sport cultures, and countries. In some settings, success as an elite athlete is
313 sufficient for the within-sport transition to coaching while at the other end of the spectrum
314 academic or specialized degrees are required (e.g., Millstetd et al., 2014). Across most HP
315 sport contexts however, the professional socialization into sport coaching is commonly
316 experiential rather than formal (Blackett et al., 2020; Rynne, 2014). In settings where formal
317 professional preparation is provided, the traditional emphasis is on the skills and knowledge
318 necessary to support athlete health and development. We argue that it is crucial to also
319 emphasis self-care strategies for the coach and skills to negotiate stress or manage well-
320 being. Professional preparation, whether before hiring or as part of the on-boarding process,
321 provides an opportunity to support not only occupational socialization and organizational

322 expectations but to also support the development of inter- and intrapersonal knowledge and
323 competencies (Turnnidge & Côté, 2017). These competencies are critical to professional
324 development but also fundamental to self-care and mental health. Finally, a promising line
325 of research that may be adapted to more formal coach education, is the use of various
326 mindfulness and self-compassion programs, still pre-dominantly targeting athletes, that aims
327 to build resources valuable for well-being (Cormier et al., 2023).

328 **4. Provision of Mental Health Care Should Include Screening, Clear Signposting,** 329 **Treatment, and Prevention**

330 The quality of healthcare depends on the most appropriate care, individualized, and
331 contextualized in terms of time and place, being provided by appropriately trained providers
332 (Purcell, et al., 2019; Van Slingerland et al., 2019). Development of a mental health support
333 system for coaches within the HP context might benefit from being guided in each step by
334 considering the construct of “Appropriateness,” that is, the perceived fit or relevance of a
335 healthcare intervention in a particular context for a particular target audience (Peters et al.,
336 2013).

337 ***4.1. Create self-screening mental health sites for HP Coaches***

338 Once again, efforts in research and practise have focused on developing screening
339 approaches exclusively for athletes (see: Gouttebauge et al, 2020; “International Olympic
340 Committee (IOC) Sport Mental Health Assessment Tool 1 (SMHAT-1) and Sport Mental
341 Health Recognition Tool 1 (SMHRT-1): towards better support of athletes’ mental health”)
342 and describing best practice of assessment and treatment of athletes with mental health
343 disorders (Moesch et al, 2018).

344 The creation of self-screening mental health websites/resources for coaches is of
345 vital importance for the protection and maintenance of coach mental health and well-being.
346 Such self-screening sites should be implemented as an additional service to specialized

347 sports psychological clinics. These sites should have the primary aim to inform and increase
348 knowledge about mental health in the profession and to lower the threshold for help-
349 seeking. Finally, screening is important since the early detection and treatment of
350 psychiatric disorders leads to a better prognosis.

351 ***4.2. Provide clear signposting and confidential referral pathway/networks***

352 It is important to provide clear signposting and confidential referral
353 pathway/networks when aiming to lower the threshold for help-seeking. Most specialized
354 sports medicine clinics that currently exist have been developed based on the needs of
355 athletes, and provide few if any resources for coaches. Fortunately, more comprehensive
356 models have begun to emerge, such as those found in Sweden (Stockholm and Malmö) and
357 Canada (Ottawa), that provide psychiatric health care for both coaches and athletes from
358 high-performance settings (Durand-Bush & Van Slingerland, 2021; Kenttä & Hyland,
359 2021). Organizations need to consider the value of creating or partnering with programs that
360 have the capacity to provide comprehensive and confidential care for those on the front lines
361 of performance as well as those who support the performers.

362 ***4.3. Mental health professional (sport psychology professional) treating mental struggles*** 363 ***among HP coaches***

364 Every coach should have access to a sport psychology professional with clinical
365 training. Having access to a mental health provider with contextual knowledge about HP
366 settings will support their ability to relate clinical treatment to performance in sport
367 contexts. More specifically, it is important to choose an appropriate and evidence-based
368 health care intervention that considers the value and importance of contextual knowledge.
369 Appropriateness has been described as the perceived fit of an intervention in a particular
370 context for a particular target audience (Peters et al., 2013). It has been argued that a sport
371 psychologist with a dual competence to work with both clinical treatment and performance

372 enhancement will provide more appropriate and valued support in comparison to care givers
373 that lack contextual knowledge and experience.

374 ***4.4. Mental health professional (sport psych) preventing mental struggles among HP***
375 ***coaches***

376 Sports psychology consultants and sports medicine teams should be encouraged and
377 supported in taking a proactive rather than reactive role in dealing with mental health issues
378 amongst HP coaching staff. Currently the focus of support teams within athletic settings,
379 including the sports medicine team focus, is on athletes with little to no consideration given
380 to the other central performers in the HP environment, the coaches. Organizational
381 management that supports high-performance and achievement have been found to be most
382 successful when systems are created that recognize and show interest in those social actors
383 who are central to the system. Additionally, providing coaches with both the skills and
384 opportunities needed to navigate their roles and responsibilities within the context of the
385 organization, creates opportunities for proactively and reactively recognizing and managing
386 challenges and threats to well-being (Wagstaff, 2016).

387 **5. Organizational Responsibility for Supporting Coach Mental Health**

388 The conversation about mental well-being and self-care often focuses on the skills
389 and resources, as well as the responsibility of the individual. However, the organizations and
390 federations that employ coaches need to consider both their obligation and duty to support
391 and protect those that serve and work within the sport system; a responsibility to show they
392 care through policy and actions.

393 ***5.1. Stakeholders, policy makers, and coaching organizations should promote***
394 ***occupational well-being and consider working conditions for coaching staff***

395 Coaching groups have an opportunity and an obligation to serve as the voice for the
396 community of coaching professionals and are able to open essential conversations about

397 working conditions and resource needs that individuals alone often do not have the power or
398 platform to do. Developing and advocating for “labour laws” that address sustainable
399 working conditions for coaches and promoting occupational well-being should be primary
400 goals for the stakeholders, policy makers, organizations, and unions that have the system
401 power to do so. A basic starting point would be to develop guidelines for best practise that
402 target vacation, holiday and the ability to have sufficient recovery in a culture that often
403 lacks boundaries for work and expects 24/7-engagement.

404 *5.2. Sports organizations and other employers need to take responsibility for occupational* 405 *health*

406 Globally, even prior to the pandemic, conversations about the broader issues related
407 work-home boundaries and balance can be seen in both the academic literature and public
408 discussions (e.g., Bird, 2016; Kobayashi & Middlemiss, 2009). In response to these
409 concerns and growing cultural expectations and valuations of personal well-being, countries
410 and companies have begun considering and passing laws and mandates to protect workers
411 from exploitation and overwork that damages personal well-being. High performance sports
412 settings are not immune from the concerns related to the negative impact of occupational
413 stress on sport coaches and others (e.g., Hanton et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 2020). Further
414 conversations to both raise awareness and discuss leadership responsibilities for supporting
415 and protecting workers are needed within the HP sport settings to reduce sources of
416 organizational stress that have been associated with negative short- and long-term health
417 consequences.

418 **Summary**

419 The coach’s role, particularly in HP sport, can be extremely demanding, challenging,
420 and stressful. Research has consistently highlighted the multiple, varied, overlapping
421 demands placed on coaches in HP sport, emanating from both the highly-charged nature of

422 the performance environment itself, and from the culture of HP sport that emphasises
423 emotional control and resilience at the expense of vulnerability and help-seeking. Research
424 has also clearly highlighted the deleterious impacts of these demands on coach well-being
425 and mental health outcomes, and on the sustainability of coaching as a career.

426 Coach-level interventions alone can no longer be thought of as a sufficient fix for
427 tackling the complex issue of coach well-being and ill-being. Not only do such
428 interventions, usually aimed at improving stress management, teaching mindfulness, or
429 developing specific psychological “skills,” fail to address the systemic, organizational-level
430 factors that underpin poor mental health and ill-being in coaching, it is our contention that
431 they can actually exacerbate the problem, by inadvertently blaming the coach for their own
432 lack of self-care ability.

433 While coach self-care is still an important part of the well-being picture, the
434 responsibility for coach well-being should be shared. Thus, we argue for more systemic,
435 organizational-level approaches to enhancing and maintaining coach mental health and well-
436 being. We emphasise the need for organisational-level interventions to reduce the stigma
437 associated with poor mental health, for coach education to acknowledge the demands of job-
438 insecurity, career transitions, and minority stress, and for tangible mental health support in
439 the form of screening and access to appropriate support. Moreover, while we highlight
440 coach education in these areas as crucial, we also emphasise the education of coach
441 educators, coach developers, and other key stakeholders, that they might be better placed to
442 support the coaches for whom they have a duty of care.

443 We suggest that research is also needed to explore and evaluate organisational-level
444 interventions aimed at improving coach-wellbeing and that funding should be directed
445 towards such research. Studies exploring specific populations such as coaches from
446 minoritized groups or more cross-cultural research might also tease out the nuances of

447 different performance environments and their impacts upon coach mental health and well-
448 being, ultimately leading to broader understanding and the provision of more bespoke
449 intervention strategies.

450 This paper serves as a concise summary, not only of the intense nature of HP sport,
451 but also of the resultant mental health implications for sport coaches. However, it is
452 imperative to venture beyond individual/coach-level mental health and well-being provision,
453 and the comprehensive set of evidence-based recommendations for systems/organisational-
454 level change provided here, are intended to enhance the sustainability of coaching as a
455 profession.

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