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Organizational Stress and Coping in US Professional Soccer

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Abstract

The present study was an exploration of organizational stressors perceived by US professional soccer players, and the coping strategies they employed to manage these stressors. Eight players (four female and four male) were interviewed during pre-season training camps. Results of data analysis revealed that contracts, draft, league and team structure, coach-athlete interaction, salaries and travel demands were the most commonly cited areas of stress. Participants used avoidance, problem-focused, and social support coping strategies to manage these organizational stressors. In conclusion, more concern should be placed on the impact that organizational stressors can have on athletic performances.

Keywords: coach-athlete relationship, social support, mastery climate

Organizational Stress and Coping in US Professional Soccer

Athletes must learn to cope with stressors if they are to pursue professional sports careers (Holt & Dunn, 2004). This is because elite athletes experience a mixture of stressors that originate from competitive, organizational, or personal sources (Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; McKay, Niven, Lavallee, & White, 2008; Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2009; Thelwell, Weston, & Greenlees, 2007). Stressors can also manifest in the form of environmental demands or stimuli encountered by an individual. Organizational stressors are the environmental demands experienced by an individual associated with an organization (Fletcher et al., 2006). Past research has revealed that, in their day-to-day lives, athletes experienced and recalled greater amounts of stressors associated with sport organization than with competitive performance (e.g., Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu et al., 2009): The purpose of the present research study was to conduct a qualitative investigation of the ways US soccer players perceived and coped with organizational stressors. Data analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted here may contribute to a better understanding of the impact that organizational stressors can have on elite athletic performance, as well as provide evidence-based information for practitioners working with team sport athletes.

Given the cultural space soccer occupies on the US sport landscape, special attention here was paid to the perception of environmental stressors intrinsic to US professional soccer. As noted by Noblet and Gifford (2002), it is important to consider the cultural fabric of a given sport in order to understand the circumstances that may be particularly stressful for the athletes. Even though soccer [known as football outside the US] is “the most successful and wealthiest sport in the world” (Nesti, 2010, p. 2), the experiences of professional athletes in this team sport are under-reported in previous research (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Hence, this investigation on professional soccer in the US may expand research and discussion on stress and coping in team sports.

Conceptual Framework

Recent sport psychology research on *organizational stressors* (e.g. sport organization politics, coach strategies, team selection criteria, and planning) has focused on the “critical issues surrounding, and cognitive processes underpinning, a performer’s relationship with his or her sport organization” (Fletcher et al., 2006, p. 327). This research on organizational stress started in the early 1990s, and in particular British sport has been examined from this angle (e.g., Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Fletcher et al., 2006; Levy, Nicholls, Marchant, Polman, Fletcher, & Hanin, 2009; McKay et al., 2008; Mellalieu et al., 2009; Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008a; Weston, Thelwell, Bond, & Hutchings, 2009; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). In general, the evidence suggests that categories of organizational stressors can disrupt athletic performance (see Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, for an overview).

Current researchers argue that it is essential for sport organizations to adopt a systematic and strategic approach to better understand the role they play in preparing elite athletes for competition (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2008). Consequently, the understanding of organizational issues becomes pivotal. By doing so, we overcome the limitations of earlier research on psychological preparation focusing on only individual performers (Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996), failing to see that group dynamics, and social and organizational factors might influence performance as well.

Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional model of stress appraisal and coping relationship provides the theoretical framework for the present investigation. In addition, research was guided by Nicholls and Polman research on the importance of examining coping strategies together with the specific stressors causing harm/loss, threat, or challenge in a given situation (Nicholls & Polman, 2007).

However, the coping strategies used by people to manage different stressors change over time, and in accordance with the situational contexts in which the stressors occur

(Lazarus, 1993). Numerous coping behaviours or strategies may be exhibited as responses to stressors, packaged with a “bewildering richness of behaviour relevant to it” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 4). While some researchers tend to group strategies in two dimensions (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), or three dimensions (e.g., Kowalski & Crocker, 2001), current research (Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Weston et al., 2009) suggests five general dimensions of coping strategies (problem, emotion, approach, avoidance, and social/personal). Additionally, it is important to note that some researchers have argued against groupings of coping behaviours into general dimensions because classification may oversimplify the dynamic ways in which coping strategies are used (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). In other words, there exists a “bewildering richness” in *classification* of the coping strategies, especially when using quantitative measurement.

In a qualitative research study of players’ experiences with stress and coping at a FIFA Women’s World Cup, Holt and Hogg (2002) reported that the female players used reappraising, use of social resources, performance behaviours, and blocking when coping with categories of organizational stressors such as the coach-athlete relationship. In another study, soccer players coped with media stress by using coping strategies such as social support, avoidance, and problem-focused strategies (Kristiansen, Roberts, & Sisjord, in press-b).

It has been argued that elite athletes need to learn a *variety* of coping strategies (e.g., Gould & Maynard, 2009; Nicholls & Polman, 2007), yet problem-focused strategies may be more useful to manage organizational stressors in particular. *Problem-focused* strategies manage or alter stressors in person-environment relationships by acting on the environment or oneself (Lazarus, 1993). Athletes use a variety of these types of coping strategies to manage stressors related to elite performance (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1998).

Two additional commonly-used coping strategies are avoidance and social support strategies. *Avoidance* coping strategies can consist of both behavioural blocking strategies

(removal from situation) and cognitive blocking strategies (avoiding thinking about a stressor) (see Krohne, 1993). In addition, *social support* is considered to be a buffer to stress, as well as being a coping resource (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) that helps people to manage the negative effect of stress (see Holt & Hoar, 2006). Crocker (1992) argued that social support is an important coping strategy in sport to deal with competitive stress, which has been verified by subsequent research on coping and social support (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medberty, & Peterson, 1999; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Rees & Hardy, 2004; Rees, Hardy, & Freeman, 2007). Social support is a complex construct that Schaefer and colleagues (Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1982) divided into three types: *emotional support* (love and care), *tangible support* (direct aid through loans and driving to competitive venues), and *informational support* (feedback).

Brief Sociological History of Soccer in the US

As asserted earlier, because of the unique space soccer occupies in the US sport landscape, it is important to attend to the organizational stressors unique to US professional soccer. Critical sport studies scholars have suggested that *limited sport space theory* and U.S. cultural nativism are important constructs in accounting for professional soccer's relegation to the sidelines of the U.S. sport market, and practice/consumption within primarily ethnic communities during the 18th and 19th centuries (Markovits, 1990; Sugden, 1994). According to this approach, soccer was marginalized during the late eighteenth century due to a collision of factors including mainstream social identification of soccer as a foreign sport, U.S. cultural nativism, and a limited space in U.S. society for public consumption of team ball sports.

As a result, there have been numerous soccer leagues that have grown and declined over the past 150 years of the game being played in the US. The professional game was incubated in early ethnic immigrant communities in the US throughout the early-to-middle 20th century (Oliver, 1996; Waddington & Roderick, 1996). In the late 1960s, the North

American Soccer League (NASL) was developed, which brought professional soccer to mainstream audiences in the United States. Unsustainable business models, over-priced players, and lack of developmental systems, in the main part led to the decline and eventual contraction of the NASL in the early 1980s. In 1996, the current top flight men's domestic league, Major League Soccer (MLS) completed its inaugural season, and has since operated on a slow growth model with a focus on sustainability and sponsorship. MLS has now entered its 16th season of operation and is by far the most profitable and long-lasting professional soccer league in the United States over the past century.

Not as yet profitable, the Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) began play on March 29, 2009. In its third season, the WPS replaced the now defunct Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) that operated from 2001-2003. The development of soccer-specific stadia, tours from marquee international professional club soccer teams, growing television coverage of the domestic game on cable sports networks, and expansive coverage of FIFA 2010 World Cup in South Africa, all collectively point toward the slow, but growing presence of professional soccer in the US.

Leading into the 2010 season, MLS and the MLS Players Union were engaged in protracted contract negotiations at the end of a five-year collective bargaining agreement (CBA) that was scheduled to expire January 31, 2010. The CBA negotiations almost led to a MLS player strike prior to the beginning of the 2010 season. The league operates as a single-entity corporation where player contracts are owned by the league rather than individual teams. The purpose of the league's strategy was to control player contract spending in order to ensure that salaries did not outweigh traditional forms of revenue including game day ticket sales, merchandise, sponsorships, and television contracts – reasons why the NASL failed twenty years previously. The MLS Players Union wanted players to have the freedom to negotiate with any club once their contract expired, the ability to negotiate longer guaranteed

contracts, a retirement plan, an increase in the league-mandated minimum salary, and a larger salary cap for each of the league's 15 teams ("Major League Soccer", 2010). These labor demands and operating procedures are standard in the other US professional sport leagues.

The purposes of the present study were two-fold: (a) to analyse the complex relationship between stress and coping through the experiences of elite soccer players who work in the unique operating environment of US professional soccer; (b) and to critically analyse narratives in an effort to develop a deeper understanding of the coping mechanisms used by professional players to manage stressors in the dynamic environment of professional sport.

Methods

Participants

A convenient and purposeful sampling procedure was conducted (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), to recruit eight elite soccer players from two US professional soccer leagues at the beginning of the 2010 season. Access to the participants was obtained by calling and sending information to the Directors of Communication of the different teams. After permission was received from gatekeepers, researchers contacted players after training to provide information about the research project and to elicit participation in the study. Four male soccer players from Major League Soccer (MLS), and four female players from Women's Professional Soccer League (WPS), volunteered to take part in this investigation. They ranged in age from 23 to 37 ($M_{age} = 28.38$ years, $SD = 5.45$). Three of the eight players had played professional soccer in European premier divisions; four of eight players had represented their respective national teams.

Ethical Standards and Procedures

After obtaining university IRB approval for the study, as well as approval from the Norwegian Research Committee, informed consent was obtained from all participants before

conducting face-to-face interviews during pre-season training camps of the 2010 season. At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed that the information they provided would remain confidential, and that they could terminate the interviews at any time. The interviews were carried out at the training location for each team. Guidelines of the semi-structured in-depth interviews were in accordance with criteria stated by Patton (2002). The interviews ended with a process feedback question, “what should I have asked you about, and do you have anything to add?”. Every interview lasted between 45-80 minutes.

Interview Guide

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with interview guide prompts and questions developed from previous research on stress and coping literature (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Hanton et al., 2005; Thelwell et al., 2007; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). The interview guide consisted of four main sections: (a) demographic background; (b), experiences of playing soccer in the US (“what are the unique stressors related to playing soccer in the US?”); (c) types of organizational stressors perceived by the players (“what do you perceive to be the main demands of professional athletes?”); and (d), coping with the aforementioned stressors (“how do you cope with this/these demands?”). A flexible interview guide was used by researchers which allowed for reordering of questions in order to better probe participants’ responses. Follow-up questions were used in order to elicit in-depth responses from the participants.

Data Coding, Theming, & Analysis Procedures

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, which resulted in 97 pages of single spaced raw text. Question-focused analyses were used as the starting point when organizing the raw data (Patton, 2002). Segments that had similar themes and represented the same stressor were grouped together. The transcripts were analysed for meaning units according to stressors with

an organizational origin (McKay et al., 2008). Associated sub-categories were found (travel, drafting and contract, team issues, salaries, and coach issues), and placed into higher order themes using deductive content analysis procedures (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002). The stressor meaning units were then linked with the coping strategies that were employed by participants to deal with specific stressors. This process was in accordance with procedures outlined by Weston and colleagues (Weston et al., 2009).

Table 1 provides an outline of the themes that emerged from the content analysis. The table does not include a frequency count of the different sources of strain (e.g., Hanton et al., 2005; Levy et al., 2009; Mellalieu et al., 2009) and the respective coping strategies (Weston et al., 2009) employed by the players. In order to conduct a frequency count, it would have been necessary to use a less-fluid interview procedure and this may have inhibited participant and interviewer interactions and the collection of rich narrative data. In addition to the table, in-depth quotes were included in the presentation and interpretation of the data which is in accord with the transactional perspective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus (1999) advocated the use of narratives to add knowledge and understanding. The voices of Michael, Katharina, Marie, and Joseph present (and represent) the experience of strain and coping revealed through the use of qualitative research methodologies and narrative analysis. Thomas, Jim, Susan, and Kelly, who had less experience as professionals, supported the more experienced players' statements. Participants' narratives offer insight into the coping strategies used by athletes use to manage the stressors that affect performance.

In an effort to ensure to accuracy in data collection, participants were sent (via email) the verbatim transcripts of their individual interviews. Participants were able to augment answers, clarify responses, and provide additional comment and narrative. Participants' integration in the research process helped to ensure the participants' voices were clearly represented in this research. The data were cross-case analysed in order to verify athletes'

opinions of stressors and the related coping mechanisms. Anonymity was assured (Patton, 2002). This approach to research data collection, analysis, and presentation was informed by Richardson's (1994) discussion of writing as a method of inquiry, where different forms of writing lead to different forms of knowing that can add depth in the analysis of qualitative data on, in this case, stress and coping. The writing process and narrative analysis consisted of a "back and forth" process, essential to narrative inquiries (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 167).

Results and Discussion

The data analysis procedure revealed 29 higher order dimensions, five main categories of organizational stressors, and 35 higher order themes of coping responses to stressors. The three general coping strategy categories (problem-focused, avoidance coping, and social support) that participants used to cope with stress served as the main categories to organize participant responses to questions. In order to maintain focus on the *experiences* of the participants, the links between stressors and coping strategies were based on the interviewees' responses to queries. Consistent with previous research approaches, in-depth quotes were included to add rich texture in data presentation (Hanton et al., 2005; Reeves, Nicholls, & McKenna, 2009). These voices provide greater insights into how soccer players in US professional soccer leagues perceived stress and employed coping mechanisms.

Perceived Organizational Stressors and subsequent Coping Processes

The most common categories of organizational stressor cited by participants were *travel, drafting and contracts, team issues, salaries, and coach issues*. A collection of factors influenced athletes' perceptions of stress including personality, past experience, temperament, playing experience, repertoire of coping strategies, and age. For example, a rookie with no professional experience, and a veteran player with 15 years of experience in the league,

perceived the sources of strain differently. Accordingly, what participants considered stressful differed based on a number of psycho-social factors.

[Table 1 near here]

Travel issues. Travel issues were a major source of stress for the participants. Travel arrangements, and geographical distances between the different locations of the teams playing in the MLS and WPS, were mentioned as organizational stressors by several of the players. One participant noted that exhaustive long seasons, compounded by travel, added up to 40% of his time. Time-lags, long flights, and extended hotel living were considered intense stressors. In addition, time consuming travel demands were perceived to have had a negative effect on physical preparation. Travel issues were cited as a common source of stress among many participants. As *Jim* noted, “it takes you a day to get there and it reduces training possibilities.” Extensive travel demands due to US geography magnified this stressor. The differences in travel stress between the US and Europe were pointed out by *Michael*:

North America is a lot different than Europe; you may have to take a plane a little bit more. In many of the European countries you just take the bus and are back the same day! Or the next day. But in all the trips in the States, you are gone for three or four days.

This veteran professional elaborated how he coped with this stressor. Michael indicated that for some of the younger players, travel was an exciting part of professional soccer life; however, the adventure of the travelling seemed to diminish with age. Michael employed problem-focused strategies like establishing living routines on away games, acceptance of the stressor as intrinsic to the life of professional athletes, and the conservation of personal energy. Participants noted that family obligations and the inability to take part in the daily family life were compounded by this stressor. *Susan* stated that playing for a family-centred

team that includes the family and “sees you as a person and not only as a player helps” was a critical component to deal with this organizational stressor.

Drafting and contracts. All participants cited draft processes and contracts as major sources of organizational stress. For many US domestically-based players, the route to the professional ranks begins in earnest during college soccer years. Soccer is found in 91.2 % of all NCAA schools, and in recent years, it is also the sport that has had the most consistent growth pattern (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). For many elite youth athletes, participation in major college soccer programs is an important step to get drafted into professional leagues. Intense competition for spots in college programs, coupled with educational demands, is part of the maturation of US domestic soccer players. In the words of *Joseph*, a player with a few years of professional experience, “Only the top kids, like youth national team players, or very good regional players get scholarships... because each college’s soccer team only has ten full scholarships for the whole team.”

This contextual information is important when considering the intensity of draft related stress that US domestic players perceive. If one has not attended a university with a soccer team where pro scouts can observe and recommend that a player be drafted, the prospects of being drafted diminish. The intensity of this particular stressor is higher in pre-season when younger players are competing for roster spots and contracts. *Katharina* discussed the stressors related to the process of making the team:

Then during pre-season, every week, there are cuts that are made...and so... on the 31 of March they have to announce the 18 players that are getting paid, and then there are 4 that are developmental players, who get paid a very small amount, but get to train with the team and stuff... so, everybody that is here, could be here at least as a developmental player. None of us will know until the 31st.

The insecurity of making the team was a common stressor among all eight players; it is always hard to fight for a contract. As noted previously, breakdowns in contract negotiations between the players union and MLS almost caused a strike in January 2010 may have contributed to contract-related stress. Participants perceived a variety of factors influenced players' chances to make the roster including technical and tactical athletic ability, intelligence, age, status as an international, previous playing experience, and coach desires.

Participants cited the use of a variety of coping strategies to manage draft stress. Katharina stated, "I think the coach is huge, he is the one making all the decisions." She further noted that feeling valued by the coach and supported is extremely important for athletes who feel insecure about their spots in the line-up. As a result, the development of problem-focused strategies is both appreciated and necessary in order to cope effectively with this organizational elimination process of players.

When talking about the US professional system, Michael observed, "the cream rises to the top, and the best players will emerge over time." Several of the players agreed that there is intense competition to make it to the pro league. The inability to cope with the stress of fighting for a contract had "ended some guys' careers prematurely," *Thomas* echoed this point, noting that there were guys that "had some good soccer left," yet had left the professional ranks due to the stress. Consequently, both male and female players experienced contract stress due to competitive team environments and league contract structures. These participant comments are consistent with other research where it was shown that that the more that athletes perceived performance climates, with attendant emphasis on competition and social evaluation, the more coach- and team-stress the athletes experienced (e.g., Pensgaard & Roberts, 2000).

Team issues. Several of the players noted that intense competition for team places on the roster was a major source of stress. Constant normative comparison between the players

on a team may lead to the creation of a performance climate (Kristiansen, Halvari, & Roberts, in press-a; Roberts, 2001; in press) that may directly lead to heightened perceptions of organizational stress. *Marie*, an experienced female veteran, noted that excessive competition amongst teammates had a negative impact on overall team performance and morale. In contrast, her comments indicated that a cooperative climate where players felt connected to each other served as a coping mechanism to deal with the stress of making the roster.

There are certain people on the field you just connect with better, for whatever reason, part of that might be that they don't have the ego that this person has, so I want to play to them, or, I want to prove myself to them, so I am going to combine with them, I think that stuff happens, ... maybe not super consciously.

Marie explained further that players were aware that in order to win games, they need to "be out there and play and work for each other." Players have to find a balance between interconnectedness and competition between teammates.

Participants' narratives revealed that players were *always* aware of competition for positional roster spots. The tension this creates amongst players was illustrated in a quote by Joseph. "If two guys are competing for the same spot, they are not going to be best friends". Thomas used social support strategies to manage contract stress, stating it was critical to have a, "handful of guys that you hang out with, and are close with, and you are pretty much respectful with everybody else..."

In addition, Marie used several problem-focused strategies to cope with team issues, including reframing stressful events, reading books, and sessions with a life-long therapist. The latter strategy may also be considered as informational support according to topics discussed in the sessions. Similar problem-focused strategies were also mentioned by the other soccer players which are in concordance with previous research findings where athletes used a variety of problem-focused coping strategies (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1998). These types

of strategies may be considered adaptive mechanisms (e.g., Kristiansen, Roberts, & Abrahamsen, 2008). That is crucial when coping with organizational stressors.

Salaries. Participants stated that inequities in *salaries* were an organizational stressor. This tension between the players over salary structures may be credited to the high competitive level of the league the international players brought in by the different teams in both MLS and WPS. In California, both Marta (Gold Pride) and David Beckham (LA Galaxy) were highly paid players in their respective leagues during the 2010 season. The WPS league, which struggles to become economic viable, has a non-disclosure payment system for salaries, a system that contributes to speculation. Susan, a professional with limited experiences, stated that salaries are what “all the players talk about, if they don’t tell you, they are not being honest.”

A few of the players claimed that they did not give salary inequities much thought; they assumed that international players and national team players were better paid and were helped with housing. Other players like *Kelly* and *Marie* cited stress about not earning enough “to make a living.” Insecurities about roster spots on team also lead to worries about not being paid, which some participants cited as having detrimental effects on performance.

Unlike WPS salaries, MLS player salaries are available to the public. However, high salaries add extra pressure on the players as Joseph stated in this extended narrative on dealing with salary-related stress:

... and that is an interesting dynamic, that... we have in this league, because the salaries are public knowledge, in the league I played before, it was all speculation, we did not know what the guy next to you made, here... we know what they are making, in the locker room you know how much the guys make, and that adds to the competition in practices, when you are fighting for spots... ahm... I kind of have ... you know, if this guy makes more than me, *good for him*, it is a higher salary ... in

reality, the more money you make, the more famous people think you are, that is the way you see baseball and football, they are making millions of dollars, and the fans are like *wow, they make millions of dollars, we are going to watch them*, and if salaries are higher and higher, and that guy make that much money, good for him you know, but... I am getting paid to play, and I never thought I would be doing that. I am happy where I am, I am happy with what I am making, ahm... I know guys make millions of dollars in this league, I am OK with that you know, you kind of want to prove yourself against them, and I am happy with doing that, you know, if you are the highest paid guy, *you have everybody aiming for you*, you know, everybody wants to prove themselves against you, that is tough to deal with, you know...

Both knowledge about salaries and speculation about salaries were perceived as a source of strain for athletes. Joseph used a combination of problem-focused and avoidance coping to manage salary-related stress. In addition, this quotation also revealed how the perception of this stressor may differ depending on the players' level of experience. Joseph chose to focus on personal performance improvement instead of focusing on the stressor.

Coach issues. The coach emerged as a dynamic figure in the stress and coping process. The coach was both a major source of strain and coping resource. Marie's suggested the coach must be a *healthy* person in order to fulfil this task. If the coach is *not* a healthy person:

Then they are not going to be healthy as a coach, either, so again it is all a matter of the kind of person that you get, and how much are they trying to be healthy, for themselves and for their players. So the coach needs to deal fairly and equally in doing the right thing for each and every player.

Her sentiment has been supported extensively in research literature. Ogilvy stated that top class coaches "do possess certain qualities in their psychological make-up which

distinguish them from other coaches” (cited in Hendry, 1969, p. 303). Further, a good coach is characterized by the understanding that “different athletes require different things from their coaches at different points in their careers” (Gould & Maynard, 2009, p. 1398). Coach-related stress was also reported among adolescent soccer players by Reeves and colleagues (Reeves et al., 2009), and in research about professional female players (Holt & Hogg, 2002).

The coach is in charge of equality and fairness in team. If the team is to have collective success, the coach is also expected to see *all* the players and not just focus on the “first team line up.” According to Katharina, coach-related stress can occur when:

He puts more attention right now on the ones he thinks are the starters, but he is completely making a mistake and missing a bone on these other players that are so important too, they are obviously the ones that will have to step in, ... or also... what about giving them the right to earn the spot, but also, they are the ones training the other players too. I don't know why this is hard to do... everybody should share in this...

An athlete's self-confidence must be nourished daily, and the person with most influence in this process is undoubtedly the coach.

Effective player management by coaches was noted by all eight interviewees as a critical component in organizational stress. Michael elaborated that, “the best coaches I have found know how to deal with whatever the 24 different personalities are,” A coach's ability to manage player personalities was related to other sources of organizational strain.

Coaches stand at a nexus of stress, acting as buffers between players and organizational stressors including pressure from upper management. As one participant noted, a good coach would know how to disguise that and not let that get to the team. Joseph further pointed out: “I had not realized how important the coach is before the past few years. He sets the standard, and he decides the climate, tone, and how we behave towards each other”. In

addition, he “is the organizer, he is the motivator ... he can directly affect the team”. Marie expanded on the role of the coach. “I think we have the players to be the champion, I really think it depends on how the coach can bring us together.” Soccer is a team sport where equal parts of “moulding” and “chemistry” are needed to be successful, and the responsibility of the coach in this matter was unison.

Joseph discussed using problem-focused strategies to cope with this stressor by concentrating on his own play:

I maybe think about that, ahm... a little more than I should ... not anything that would keep me from sleeping at night, ahm ... I try to get through it by just *playing simple*, ahm... you have your team out there with you, ahm... you take any *positive feedback* they give you, ahm ... what I do is that I get out there and ... a little short pass to my team mate, and then ... *once I get in I start not to think about it, and then you are in the game and you don't think about it any more*. It is usually just in the beginning of the game, you want to get started, and that is how I do it.

Joseph used, in motivational terms, a task-oriented approach to cope with this stressor (Roberts, 2001). The coping strategies mentioned by Joseph, “to get in the game,” are interesting in that he uses game situations to explain how he coped with coach initiated stress. Undoubtedly, the pressure to deliver is high in the league, and being able to focus on the task is one way to successful management of this stressor. Experience gave the players the ability to put things in perspective and focus on what is important in the game.

The Complexity of Coping: Marie’s narrative

As noted previously, athletes often use several coping strategies in combination to cope with various situations (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993). The use of combined coping strategies can be seen in Table I, the table does not provide deeper context needed to understand the impact organizational stressors have on the development of athletes. The use

of narrative analysis a can provide rich context to better understand daily coping strategies used by elite athletes. This rich context is evidenced in a quote from Marie, who discussed the dynamic process of daily coping:

First of all I get a lot of help *outside of my own head*. I have a support group [i.e. mom, coaches, friends off and on the field], I have a therapist, he is my own personal therapist - a psychologist plus my sports trainer, he is one and the same, a lot of help from that, but you also you draw on your own strength, I mean, in this world *you are only by yourself*, whether your support group is very strong or not, you are the only one out there performing. So, you can only rely on you.

One needs help to cope in order to become mentally strong and keep self-confidence intact. Her statement echoes research by Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) that; care and support not only from friends and family but also from coaches and also sport psychologists where you get this mixture of informational support and help to problem-solving, are important for elite athletes in order to perform at a high level. Being professional players with demands of always perform at your best, is a lonely process that you have to accept and come to terms with:

And those are hard *truths*, and again, every day is different, some days you can deal with that, and it does not affect you, you go yeah, this is life, great; some days it is like – this is life, how depressing and disappointing. I have people that I work with every single day that I *cannot trust* for one second, and that makes you sad, so I think ... it is a rollercoaster of emotions and experiences that you have to recognize, you have to know very well, and *you have to be able to deal with them* every single second of every single day.

Marie's narrative response reflects the need for elite athletes to develop a flexible and interactive coping repertoire to manage organizational stressors:

And how you cope in dealing with that, but you might have different feelings that you cope with, that you have to... how I cope is that I *confront* it head on, inside me, with my *support group*, with my *therapist*, anything that has been a challenge, or hurdle, or depression, or disappointments, or sadness or anger, I confront it head on, I have to, and you know, that's how I cope. If I have an argument with a team-mate, I'll go to them and... when the timing is right, maybe not that second, but when the timing is right. And confront them and ask the, for again, you have people who are willing to be ... you just have to know people to, you have to *let some stuff go*, you have to be willing to confront people and *defend yourself*, and ... again, ultimately it is a very strong sense of self, and a very strong sense of *you are the only one that is going to, that cares about you*, and again... some days you can deal with that just fine, and some days you need a lot of help in order to put yourself in that position. And continue to move forward. [...]

A support group is an adaptive way to manage the negative effect of stress (Holt & Hoar, 2006), however, problem-focused strategies that include rationalizing in order to maintain focus are prerequisites at this level. Also, use of problem-focused strategies, such as, "letting go" and "confront head-on," are usually considered to facilitate performance (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1998). Marie used adaptive strategies to cope with her football career stress. Marie noted the importance of social support to cope with organizational sport stressor:

Support is important, I really trusted this old coach... he just... I just trusted him for me, everything if it was soccer, you have to understand, like trust in this ... you don't survive if there are people helping you that you really trust, and... you won't survive without that. Everybody has a different role... everybody has a different opinion and set of eyes, outside of your own head that is very valuable, and some days I might seek out help from this person, or these couple of people, for again they all have different

sets of eyes and ears to the situation. It is all valuable... in my early career I didn't rely on anybody, and that's what sunk me sometimes.

The narrative supports previous researchers who have argued that *team players* require *more* coping strategies than players in individual sports (Park, 2000). Coach support is essential (emotional *and* informational support mixed together) to manage stress. Noblet and Gifford concluded that "footballers may have less direct, one-on-one personal contact with their coaches and thus may not receive the same level of feedback as golfers and figure skaters" (2002, p. 11).

Conclusion

Informed by the transactional framework (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this study extends organizational stress research by examining how professional US soccer players perceived and coped with organizational stressors. Stressors unique to US soccer were particularly relevant to this group of elite soccer players. As evidenced in previous research, coach issues and team issues, that were widely cited as stressors by participants, belong to a core group of categories of organizational stressors (McKay et al., 2008; Mellalieu et al., 2009; Reeves et al., 2009). The perception of travel and drafting/contracts stress were culturally specific stressors for this group of soccer players. The structure of contracts and league drafting processes, were features of US professional soccer that must be considered when working with this group of athletes.

The interpersonal interaction between athletes and coaches was a common stressor amongst participants. Factors such as team selection, communication, and confidence building emerged in the data in the present study, echoing previous research on interpersonal stress related to coach expectations (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Thelwell et al., 2007), poor communication (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Noblet & Gifford, 2002), and leadership issues (Hanton et al., 2005). The findings of the present study demonstrate that considerable organizational

stress may emanate from the coach, which is supported by previous research (e.g., Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008a). Therefore, it is critical to consider coach-related stressors when analysing soccer players' perceptions of stress and use of coping strategies.

In order to cope with organizational stressors, the soccer players employed mostly use of problem-focused strategies and social support to manage the stressors. In addition, they also revealed a few examples of avoidance coping. This finding makes sense when considering the elite level of the athletes. In the short run, use of avoidance coping for example when coping with a stressor like salaries; may be almost adaptive when there is nothing the players can do about the other players' salaries. In the long run, however, some sort of acceptance of the situation and adopting other strategies to fight disruptive thoughts may be needed. To improve your own play (and value as a player) was reported in this investigation, and problem-focused coping strategies are usually considered to facilitate performance (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1998). Therefore, it has been argued that avoidance coping strategies are beneficial in the initial stages of coping, with problem-focused strategies being beneficial at the latter stages of coping from the extant literature (e.g., Roth & Cohen, 1986). Previous research has also found that avoidance coping has been commonly employed concurrently with problem-focused strategies (Reeves et al., 2009), which is also supported in the present case (see Table 1).

In addition, coach *support* is also a major *coping* strategy used by athletes. Coaches might function as "problem solvers" (e.g., Frey, 2007), and the use of informational support from the coach is an important mechanism for athletes. In this study, participants' perceptions of the categories of organizational stressors were often related to the perceived quality of their relationship with the coach; if they felt secure and appreciated, their experience of the categories of stressors were reduced and vice versa. This finding was supported in a recent study testing an AGT (Achievement Goal Theory) stress model (Kristiansen et al., in press-a).

If the coach manages to keep the motivational climate mastery oriented with less focus on organizational pressures such as the negotiation of contracts, salaries, and pressure to keep the team in the elite division because of the financial repercussions, this will reduce the players experience of stress and enforce adaptive coping (Kristiansen et al., 2008; Ntoumanis, Biddle, & Haddock, 1999; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2000). In contrast, if the coach becomes more focused on the outcomes of the competitive process, this in turn is likely to increase the pressure on the players to “deliver” the performances that satisfy the coaches and management (Fletcher & Scott, 2010). The evidence of the current investigation strongly supports the influence of the coach on the total stress experience of these eight players.

The second aim of the study was to critically analyse participant narratives in an effort to better understand the perception of stress and the coping mechanisms used by these elite soccer players. The inclusion of in-depth interview transcripts from the participants provides the context and texture necessary to explain the coping process used. In narrative analysis, context makes a difference (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Coping strategies are often influenced by the cultural resources made available to athletes. Marie’s narrative reveals the daily struggle athletes experiences when coping with organizational sport stressors.

Strengths and limitations. The interviews were conducted in the middle of the pre-season, which influenced the participant responses. The participants discussed their perceptions of stress “there and then.” The types of participant cited stressors may have been more pronounced in the narratives due to cultural idiosyncrasies of US professional soccer, such as labour contract negotiations. The data collected here must be understood in this context, which may be considered a limitation. However, in support of our findings, Reeves and co-workers found similar evidence in their study with British adolescent soccer players (Reeves et al., 2009).

Analyzing the links between stressors and coping strategies (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Reeves et al., 2009; Weston et al., 2009) is a complex and important endeavour. With the words of Crocker and colleagues in mind that, “there is surprisingly little variety in the way research results on coping in sport are presented in the literature” (Crocker et al., 2010, p. 70), we have tried to expand on the presentation analysis of the data through the inclusion of narrative. Table 1 should only be considered a parsimonious interpretation of the results; an attempt to provide an overview for readers, which may consider that a limitation. The participants here spoke more fluently about their perceptions of stressors than their use of coping strategies. To provide rich texture, a few long coping quotations are included in an effort to illustrate the findings of this study that athletes in US professional soccer perceive a variety of organizational stressors, and that coping is a complex process based on available coping resources, including social support in its many varied forms.

Finally, this investigation on American soccer players adds to research on one of the world’s most popular team sports soccer. This research is warranted because it is often neglected despite wide global participation in the sport (Holt & Hogg, 2002). Data collected here show that certain stressors are unique to certain groups, in this case elite soccer players, and that cultural context may exact unique stressors (McKay et al., 2008; Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Future research on organizational stressors and cultural specificities will provide essential insight into how other groups of team athletes perceive and cope with stress. More knowledge in this area will offer important information to practitioners, coaches, administrators, and athletes on how to minimize the organisational stressors that affect athletic performance.

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Table 1

Interpreted categories of organizational stressors mentioned in the interviews and subsequent coping strategies

Higher order themes stressors →	Stressors: General dimensions	Higher order themes →	Coping strategies: General dimensions
3-4 days Long distances Flight arrangements Hotel arrangements Physical preparation	Travel	Adventure Reflection Routines Acceptance Family centred team Being together with team mates	→ Problem-focused → Tangible support → Emotional support
Scholarships College team Small and big schools Draft Try outs Preseason Part of the roster Physical demands	Drafting and contracts	Support each other Support from friends and family Help from coach Love of the game Concentration Increased effort Positive thinking	→ Emotional support → Informational support → Problem-focused
Playing at a higher level Spot on team Fighting for line-up Pass the ball International stars	Team issues	Step back – perspective Talk to each other Read books Rebuild confidence Communication Let it go Relax Friendship Coach support Staying with a family	→ Problem-focused → Emotional support → Informational support → Tangible support
Competition Speculation International players Roster Less money in WPS	Salaries	Refocusing Happy without pressure Accept the differences Do not think about it	→ Problem-focused → Avoidance
Communication Yelling Equality Manage stress Team tactics Struggle with confidence	Coach issues	Avoidance of critique Blocking Don't trust anyone Support from team mates Support from family/friends Reframe Focus on task Talk with therapist	→ Avoidance → Informational support → Emotional support → Problem-focused