



Exploring the barriers to athlete personal development within UK Olympic and Paralympic sport

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ABSTRACT

Elite athletes face a range of challenges throughout their careers including injury, selection, funding status, and retirement. To support athletes to plan for and overcome these challenges, Career Assistance Programs (CAPs) have been developed to support personal and professional development, yet engagement with these services remains low. The aim of this study was to explore the perceived barriers to athletes' engagement with personal development within the UK High-Performance sport system. Underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological constructivism, 15 elite athletes who were on a funded UK Sport World Class Olympic or Paralympic Program participated in semi-structured interviews. The dataset was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were developed: *The Athlete Bubble*, outlines the barrier of the performance-driven culture, *Head in the Sand* reflects the fear of retirement, and *Bridging the Employment Gap* highlights the tension of meeting training demands with work opportunities. Findings reveal how cultural expectations, elite sport environments, coach-athlete relationships and scheduling conflicts inhibit athlete engagement with personal development. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and systemic barriers that shape how athletes interpret and navigate their development journeys and offers direction for developing more integrated, athlete-centered CAPs.

In the competitive and often volatile world of elite sport, career longevity, elevated media attention, performance outcomes, retaining funding, injury and preparing for life after sport can be the course of uncertainty and unique pressures for elite athletes (Rice et al., 2016). This study is situated within the UK high-performance system, that consists of a World Class Program (WCP), that has seen sustained medal success in Olympic and Paralympic Games, since its inception in 1997. Athletes are selected onto the WCP by their sports as having medal potential at a future Games. The WCP comprises of podium and podium potential levels that provides access to a range of support services that are part of a sports performance support team (PST), via the UK Sports Institute that includes medical, physiotherapy, strength and conditioning, nutrition, performance analysis, performance data, performance psychology and performance lifestyle (PL). The PL service supports athletes with mental health, career development, learning and development, financial health, transition and education. There are currently 35 practitioners embedded within each Olympic and Paralympic sports, and is centrally funded directly by UK Sport, to ensure every athlete has

access to personal development (Holden et al., 2025). In this study, personal development refers to the ongoing process through which athletes grow and evolve in areas beyond their sporting role. Personal development may involve the engagement with structured support (such as career guidance, educational support via the PL service) but can also include informal self-directed experiences that contribute to a broader sense of self and wellbeing.

A sports funding is closely tied to medal targets, with athletes and sports being held accountable for results. The dominant performance narrative that exists within UK WCPs has led to some elite sport environments deprioritizing athlete personal development (Poucher et al., 2021). Whilst the UK system has created impressive results on the world stage, it raises the issue of balancing medals with long-term wellbeing of athletes. Following several high-profile athlete welfare disclosures after the 2016 Rio Games, the UK Government instigated a Duty of Care report that noted concern regard an imbalance between "winning and welfare" (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 4). During the Paris Olympic cycle, UK Sport adopted a new strategic plan that outlined a holistic view of

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success, whilst maintaining the “highest standards of ethics, integrity and athlete welfare” (UK Sport, 2021, p. 7).

The performance-first approach that has historically dominated elite sport is receiving growing scrutiny (Fedderson et al., 2019), especially considering the increasing acknowledgment of mental health for sustainable performance (Schinke et al., 2017). Aligned with a holistic view of success, the term *athlete career excellence* has emerged that highlights the importance of supporting athletes through their entire careers, rather than solely performance outcomes. Career excellence views athletes as a whole person with other “spheres of life” (Stambulova et al., 2021, p. 539) that support an athlete’s growth within and beyond sport. Guided by Wylleman’s Holistic Athletic Career Model (HAC) and Henriksen’s Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA), this study explores the perceived barriers that athletes encounter, when engaging in personal development within the UK high-performance system.

The *athlete career discourse* comprises of a foundation of accepted assumptions by practitioners and researchers (whole person, athlete development environment is holistic, athletic career is part of life career) with two interconnected areas, career development and career transitions. The early career development frameworks focused purely on sporting careers. Wylleman’s HAC Model expanded this perspective, by including sport and non-sporting domains, including sport, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, financial and legal domains throughout their lifespan (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). This framework identified changing need throughout an athlete’s sporting journey and into their next careers, reflecting the importance of long-term person-centered support.

Athlete career transitions can impact an athlete’s wellbeing, identity and future opportunities. Researchers and practitioners have used transition frameworks to better understand how athletes cope with changes such as injury, deselection and athletic retirement (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova et al., 2024; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). These models laid the groundwork for more dynamic, personalized and context aware approaches such as the cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2016), the Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011) and the Integrated Career Change and Transition Framework (Samuel et al., 2019). The evolution of transition models provides contextual and nuanced understanding of athlete’s transitions. Most recently, the Meta-Model of Adaptation in Sport (Samuel et al., 2024) has been proposed, offering a process-oriented perspective that integrates multiple transition experiences and highlights the interplay between individual, relational, and environmental factors. This evolution reflects a growing recognition of the complexity and diversity of athletes’ transitional experiences.

Stambulova et al. (2021) identified a number of emerging trends within athlete career research. One key area is dual career, defined as the combination of an elite sporting career with education and/or work across the athlete’s lifespan (European Commission, 2012). Dual career literature has explored how athlete balance their sporting demands alongside education or career and the benefits and tensions they may experience (Aquilina, 2013). Further, researchers adopting a lifespan perspective have highlighted that an athlete’s dual career is not fixed or linear and but evolves over different life stages, transitions and competing demands (Debois et al., 2015; Tekavc et al., 2015).

Another emerging area of research is talent development environments. Henriksen et al. (2010) introduced the HEA, to understand talent development environments, that extends beyond the individual athlete to broader system and relationships that influence development. This study explored how athlete growth was not only shaped by coaching and performance strategies but also by interpersonal factors (e.g., family, peers, mentors) and structural factors, such as organizational culture. Effective talent development environments were characterized by a whole person approach, coherence across support systems and alignment of short term and long-term goals. The present study was informed by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Wylleman’s Holistic Athletic Career Model (HAC model; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and

Henriksen’s Holistic Ecological Approach to Talent Development (HEA; Henriksen et al., 2010). Wylleman’s model maps athlete development across different life domains of an athlete’s lifespan, and highlights how needs can change over time. We used this model to explore the multi-domain nature of barriers athletes experience to personal development. The HEA takes a systemic perspective of the environment in which athlete development takes place, shaped by the dynamic interplay of micro and macro environmental factors and how these shape the conditions for athlete growth, wellbeing, and performance. Within this study we used the HEA to explore athletes perceived barriers to personal development, within the context of their broader performance environment to include factors. This provided a framework to consider the influence of coaches, performance staff and the organizational structures impact on an athlete’s growth, enabling a deeper exploration of whether personal development was embedded, aligned and aligned with performance goals and supported in a way athletes could access and trust. It is worth noting that we also drew from the organizational sport psychology (see Wagstaff & Fletcher, 2009; Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2023) literature to inform our approach, and used this body of work to inform how we viewed individuals as key collaborators in complex, interdependent high-performance systems.

Building on these theoretical frameworks, there has been a growing presence of CAPs within Olympic, Paralympic and Professional sports to support athletes to plan for their futures and to overcome the challenges of elite sport (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Torregrossa et al., 2020). Sporting organizations and player associations have been responsible for developing and implementing CAPs, with over 60 programs being identified globally (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). CAPs support athletes with their personal development, including career related issues, both within and beyond sport consisting of a variety of interventions (Stambulova & Wylleman & Lavallee, 2014). A range of support areas have been identified, including transitions, career development, financial literacy, taxation, brand management, mental health, life skills, sustainability/environmental issues, academic and vocational support, with a range of delivery mechanisms including workshops, programs, one to one coaching and counselling (Stambulova et al., 2020). Early research helped to identify athletes needs and perceptions of CAPs within specific context, including Australia (Gorely et al., 2001) and within the UK (North & Lavallee, 2004) highlighting the importance of targeted and accessible support. Elsewhere, Mateos et al. (2010) found attention to identity and career exploration using tailored intervention increased athletes’ satisfaction with CAPs support. These findings highlighted the need for culturally informed CAPs that are integrated and aligned with the diverse needs of elite athletes.

In addition to understanding how athletes navigate transitions, there is a growing recognition of the critical role of proactive career planning to mitigate the risks of transition and post sport adaptation. Pre-retirement planning has been shown to positively impact an athlete’s wellbeing, identity construction and post sport career outcomes (Torregrossa et al., 2015; Kuettel et al., 2017). For instance, Barriopedro et al. (2019) suggested that athletes career trajectories are influenced by the nature of their sporting experience and their level of career planning. Similarly, Lavallee (2019) concluded that engaging in career planning was positively associated with increased selection, team tenure and career tenure. Collectively, this body of work highlights the importance of integrated and meaningful career planning to support transitions within and beyond sport.

Despite the growing evidence of the benefits of career planning, globally, elite athletes’ engagement with personal development remains low (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Lane et al., 2020). Findings from the B-WISER project highlighted limited time, lack of awareness and limited integration of dual career contributed to low engagement levels (De Brandt et al., 2018; Ryan, 2015) conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 elite athletes from New Zealand and found lifestyle conflicts, career stage and sporting environments impacted athletes’ engagement with activities outside of sport. This study recommended further coach

education of holistic athlete development to better support athlete engagement. Within the UK context, Bradshaw et al. (2021) found that while support services were available, athletes often experienced limited psychological safety and limited clarity around athlete support structures, particularly during transitional moments such as deselection, injury, or post-Games periods. The work of Howells and Fletcher (2016) and Howells and Lucassen (2018), which explored Olympic participation and post-Games experiences, also provides valuable context. These studies identified emotional strain, lack of emotional support, suppression of vulnerability, identity disruption and structural precarity that athletes can face in performance first environments.

Despite athletes' central role within elite sport, many sporting organizations continue to adopt a top-down approach to policymaking, often limiting athlete insight (Willson et al., 2022). Embedding athletes' voices into policy making and practice could lead to more impactful, relevant and sustainable support. With the evolving focus in British elite sport on "winning well" (UK Sport, 2021) this study offers a timely exploration of athletes' perspectives to foster a deeper cultural understanding of holistic athlete development. This aligns with calls for culturally responsive and context driven research and practice which recognize that wellbeing and development are shaped by the environments in which athletes live and train (Ryba et al., 2017; Schinke & Stambulova, 2017; Henriksen et al., 2020). As the emphasis shifts from a win-at-all-costs mentality towards balancing performance excellence with wellbeing (Poucher et al., 2021; Schlawe et al., 2025), exploring athletes perspectives helps to address this imbalance, ensuring their need shape future support. Qualitative methods provide a nuanced lens to uncover the complex interplay between personal, social, and cultural factors influencing athletes' meaning making. By exploring the subjective meanings athletes assign to their environments, this study contributes valuable insights to inform evidence-based policies and practices that support sustainable success and long-term development in sport. The aim of this study was to explore the perceived barriers to athletes' engagement with personal development within the UK High-Performance sport system. We sought to better understand what barriers elite UK athletes perceive when engaging with personal development during their athletic careers. These insights can inform culturally responsive and athlete-centered strategies, ensuring the needs of Olympic and Paralympic athletes are better addressed.

1. Methodology

1.1. Philosophical beliefs and sampling

This study was underpinned by a relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology, emphasizing the construction of knowledge through interaction and shaped by context and culture (Sparkes and Smith, 2013). This philosophical orientation aligns with the study's aim to explore individual athletes' perspectives of personal development within the UK's high-performance system. This approach informed the use of reflexive thematic analysis that acknowledges the researchers' active role in interpreting meaning and generating knowledge through an iterative, reflective process (Braun et al., 2019). Following procedural ethical approval from the University's ethics committee, including measures to ensure informed consent and confidentiality, participants were recruited through criterion and maximum variation sampling.

Invitations were sent to all athletes (~1200) on a WCP via the British Elite Athletes Association, that is an independent representative body available to all athletes on a WCP. In total, 15 athletes ($M = 29.6$ years, $SD = 4.8$) that were currently on a WCP, accepted our invitation and provided their written informed consent. Being selected for a WCP means athletes are performing at the highest level in their sport (i.e., an Olympic, Paralympic program; Swann et al., 2015). Examples of participants performance achievements included nine gold medals, two silver medals and three bronze medals at Olympic and Paralympic Games. Aligning with maximum variation sampling, participants

represent nine sports across both individual ($n = 9$) and team ($n = 6$) disciplines, spanning men's ($n = 6$) and women's ($n = 9$) categories in Olympic ($n = 10$) and Paralympic ($n = 5$) disciplines, from both Summer ($n = 13$) and Winter ($n = 2$) Games. Of the 15 athletes, 8 trained full-time, meaning their sole focus was their sport with no concurrent educational or employment commitments. The remaining 7 were engaged in dual career, combining their education or work commitments. This diversity ensures a comprehensive understanding of the unique and shared experiences within high-performance sport. Experiences ranged from 3 to 20 years as a funded athlete selected onto a WCP, at this performance level (>136 years in total). Participants engagement with the PL service was varied. In this study, engagement with the PL service refers to the extent to which athletes' access, interact with, and make use of the support provided by PL Practitioners. this ranged from frequently engaged (once monthly, $n = 4$ participants) as required (2–3 times a year, $n = 7$ participants) and rarely (less than once a year, not engaging $n = 4$ participants). To preserve the anonymity of participants, sports are not identified.

1.2. Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method due to the suitability for exploring nuanced and context-specific scenarios, allowing participants to explore topics in their own words. The first author followed a standardized yet flexible interview structure while enabling athletes the freedom to elaborate on questions they felt were important to their subjective experiences (Sparkes and Smith, 2013). The semi-structured interview guide was developed in alignment with the studies aim to explore perceived barriers to personal development among UK high performance athletes. The interview guide was informed by relevant extant frameworks (e.g., HAC and HEA), and was designed to explore how aspects of the athlete's environment, such as institutional structures (e.g., funding and selection processes), interpersonal relationships (e.g., with coaches and support staff), and embedded cultural expectations around performance shaped their willingness and ability to engage in personal development. The guide was also informed by literature exploring athletic identity and transitions, as well as the first authors experience as a PL practitioner. The questions were piloted with two athletes, one from Olympic sport and one from Paralympic sport, adjustments were made for clarity and contextual relevance. All interviews were conducted on zoom and data collection took place over one month. Interviews lasted between 32 and 82 min ($M = 42$ min, $SD = 13.2$) with a total of 635 min. Example questions from the interview guide included: "How do the demands of your sport environment (e.g., training, competition, team culture) impact your ability to engage in personal development?" "What role do coaches and support staff play in encouraging or discouraging personal development?" "How does the culture within your sport influence attitudes toward life outside of sport?" "What are your biggest challenges in engaging with personal development?". At the point of data collection, the first author was a Senior PL Practitioner within the discipline's leadership group, with 15 years of experience of working with two sports and line managing practitioners. The remaining three authors brought extensive expertise as scientist-practitioners, with two having previously held non-PL senior national leadership roles (Head of Psychology and Head of Knowledge) and one having conducted a number of research projects within the UK High Performance system.

1.3. Data analysis

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2019), aligning with our interpretivist philosophical stance. This approach was chosen for its flexibility, allowing data analysis to proceed inductively (e.g., uncovering new experiences), deductively (e.g., informed by existing research), critically (e.g., interrogating social norms such as the

performance narrative), and reflexively (e.g., acknowledging the researchers' positionality). RTA follows a six-phase process (familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and summarization) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). In the first phase, the first author immersed themselves in the data by listening to recordings, making corrections, and transcribing interviews. This process allowed the first author to fully engage with the data, ensuring an intimate understanding of the nuances, tone, and context of participant responses. Notes and initial observations were documented to guide subsequent analysis. Next, initial codes were generated, in this phase, the researcher identified patterns and meaningful features within the data, creating initial codes, of "Engagement," "Retirement," "Culture," "Performance narrative," "Employment," "Athletic Identity," and "Paraspecific Considerations". These codes act as labels summarizing key aspects of the data. This coding process, both descriptive and interpretive, laid the foundation for theme development.

Codes were grouped into broader, latent themes that captured deeper meanings and relationships across the dataset. This stage involved organizing codes, clustering them into potential themes, and discarding or merging those with overlapping content. For instance, codes related to "engagement" and "performance narrative" informed a larger theme about elite sports environments. Three key themes were identified based on their prevalence and resonance with the data, with careful attention paid to naming them in ways that are both relevant and accessible to readers (Braun & Clarke, 2016). Quotes were selected on their ability to illustrate the essence of each subtheme. The selection was guided by relevance, clarity and diversity of participant experience, ensuring the selected quotes reflected typical and divergent perspectives across gender, sport and career stage. The final selection of quotes was then cross checked with the wider dataset to ensure they were grounded in the wider narrative. The last phase involved summarizing the findings in a coherent narrative that linked the themes back to the aim of the study. This stage aimed to demonstrate how the themes provide insight into athletes' perspectives, with quotes from participants used to exemplify key points.

1.4. Ensuring quality of data analysis and interpretation

This study adopts a relativist approach for judging the rigor of qualitative research (Sparkes and Smith, 2013). Readers are invited to consider the following quality indicators, rich rigor, worthy topic, credibility, sincerity and significant contribution and coherence. Two strategies supported this alignment. The first author met regularly with the second and third author as critical friends to challenge assumptions, biases, and interpretations throughout the data analysis, which was essential considering the 'insider' position. Secondly, to enhance generalizability (Smith & McGannon, 2018) we sought external reflections from athletes currently on an Olympic or Paralympic WCP who did not participate in the study. Four athletes (Olympic and Paralympic) were contact (2 female and 2 male) and individual meetings were arranged. They were asked initially about their reflections and invited to discuss their reactions. The Athlete Bubble theme resonated with all participants, with one participant outlining the risks "young athletes are fully immersed in their sport, roll on another 10 years, they have never had a life outside of sport". Paralympic participants shared their thoughts about career development and employability "It's harder for disabled people to get jobs and we should have further support". Finally, participants shared their thoughts about athletic retirement "It is terrifying thinking about retirement, it makes you question who you are at the core".

2. Results

Three themes were identified: The Athlete Bubble, Head in the Sand and Bridging the Employment Gap. Each theme is supported by a series of sub-themes that illustrate the nuanced ways in which these barriers

manifest in athletes' lived experiences (see Table 1).

2.1. The athlete bubble

The "athlete bubble" represents the socially constructed and complex environment, where athletes are immersed within a high-pressure setting that prioritized sporting outcomes above all else. This is often at the expense of personal development that is frequently side-lined.

2.1.1. Structured uncertainty

This subtheme highlights the complex interplay between supportive and restrictive elements within sporting environments. For athletes, the training environment can create a familiar structure, striving towards shared performance goals, with the safety of their peers and practitioners. Yet, despite this perceived safety, participants experienced a persistent sense of precarity including selection, funding and injury (e.g., coach-athlete relationship, institutionalized, safe-haven, routine, false dream). The complete immersion within the athlete bubble can create a number of barriers to engaging with personal development. One participant shared their perspective of the athlete bubble:

You get kind of institutionalized in sport. You follow the same routine of training and being on the road. There is always an Olympic Games, and every cycle has a known pattern of competitions and goals. You feel safe in it, yet it's one of the most turbulent things you'll ever do. (Lee)

These contrasting realities highlight the multiplicity of truths that coexist within an elite sports environment, emphasizing that what feels supportive to one athlete may be experienced as precarious or limiting to another. One participant described it as "safe" yet also a source of significant personal and professional challenges, reflecting the dynamic interplay of structure and agency within this socially constructed space. Despite several participants highlighting the performance benefits of being in the athlete bubble, many of the participants also noted inherent risks. The intense performance focus impacted some participants well-being. One participant shared their frustration of being viewed in terms of their performance achievements, rather than a "person first" approach.

Table 1
Summary of themes.

Superordinate themes	Subthemes	Supporting extract
Theme 1: The Athlete Bubble , performance driven environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured uncertainty • Permission to develop • Who can I trust? 	<p>"Never get too comfortable, you never know what's going to happen next" (Lee)</p> <p>"I don't want to be disloyal" (Sam)</p> <p>"You need to be careful who you tell" (Charlie)</p>
Theme 2: Head in the Sand , athletes' fear of retirement and life beyond sport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's all I've ever known • No easy way out 	<p>"Its 100 % sport" (Drew)</p> <p>"I'm dreading it, but you just have to go through it" (Lily)</p>
Theme 3: Bridging the Employment Gap , difficulty with balancing training demands with employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athletes welcome – until camp season • Medals open doors • Lack of integration in performance planning • Missed opportunities during downtime • Access to gold, not to work 	<p>"Lovely transferable skills but you do need to be here" (James)</p> <p>"I'm a GB athlete, I'll get a job" (Lucy)</p> <p>"If it's not on the plan, it's not happening" (Asher)</p> <p>"I need to take advantage of the months downtime" (Charlie)</p> <p>"The workplace is an uneven playing field" (Helen)</p>

I've heard coaches say you are a person before performance but in training that's not how we are treated and that's not how things really are. I've been treated really badly, and I can't stand to be in this environment any longer. (Jo)

This disconnection between actions and words was suggested by this participant to create a "toxic culture" in which athlete wellbeing was not prioritized.

2.1.2. *Permission to develop*

Within the athlete bubble an athlete's experience is shaped by their relationship with performance and power dynamics, especially the 'coach athlete' relationship. Participants described a positionality that exists within the athlete bubble, often linked to their performance and relationship with the coach. One participant shared that their coach would ask "are you all in?" which they interpreted as needing to make "sacrifices" with the focus on medals taking precedence over all other facets of life. One participant described the feeling of "not wanting to let my coach down" and described a feeling of "disloyalty" if they engaged in activities that did not directly relate to their performance. The athlete bubble does not appear to be a homogeneous experience. Some participants noted that their coaches did not value or understand personal development initiatives such as performance lifestyle, some participants saw this as a barrier to their growth. One participant highlighted personal development was crucial for "everyone" within the sporting environment to create a "supportive climate" where athletes and the wider support team can thrive.

Participants described a hierarchy that exists amongst the PST. Several participants emphasized many conversations in the training environment were framed around performance, with the majority of interactions being "angled towards performance". Despite this focus on performance, several participants advocated for greater athlete agency and voice within the athlete bubble. One participant highlighted the importance of listening to athletes' perspectives:

I think it's time to listen to all types of athletes from Olympic and Paralympic gold medalists, right the way down to juniors that are beginning on a pathway to understand the vast experience of every individual from different backgrounds and exposure to sport. (Sam)

Sam referred to the agency of athletes within the athlete bubble and the importance of listening and amplifying the athlete voice to shape more inclusive and supportive environments in elite sport.

2.1.3. *Who can I trust?*

Trust within the athlete bubble appeared to be a central concern for participants, with the importance of athletes being able to "completely trust" members of the PST. One participant shared their thoughts of the importance of trust between athletes and practitioners:

Talking to a practitioner about life beyond sport means they have a lot of information on me, that I wouldn't want shared with the coach. I've seen athletes talk to psychologists and then two weeks later the coach says, "I've heard you are working on this". The head coach is the most important person, and you want to choose what information you share with them and you certainly don't want it coming from an external source. (Charlie)

Charlie shared the importance of the coach-athlete relationship and the necessity to control the flow of personal information. In this instance, how "close" a practitioner was perceived to be in relation to the coach impacted the level of information the athlete was prepared to share about their personal development and life plans. While some participant shared positive experiences and thriving within a performance focused environment, others struggled with the overemphasis on performance, that created a barrier for their engagement with personal development. The variety of experiences within the athlete bubble reflects the subjective nature of reality within a highly complex socially

constructed environment where individual's perspectives shape the experience and outcomes.

2.2. *Head in the sand*

This theme outlines the subjective realities and socially constructed fears athletes face, regarding athletic retirement and life beyond sport, that is shaped by their unique perspectives. The fear of leaving their sport, compounded by a reluctance to plan for the future, often acts as a barrier to engaging in personal development. For many, meaningful engagement describes going beyond a "box ticking" level of engagement with the PL service, it required active engagement with areas of their development that "is actually making a difference" and has a tangible impact on their lives (e.g., overwhelming, denial, struggle, a "fear factor", and "future-me" problems). Participants described a "reluctance" and "avoidance" to consider and prepare for their next careers, often resulting in athletes "feeling anxious" about their next steps and "hanging on" for another major competition.

2.2.1. *It's all I've ever known*

For many, sport has been constructed into their "number one priority" and can result in the creation of "one identity". One participant shared their thoughts about engaging in development activities to prepare for their next career:

You definitely see it in sport, those that have one identity get so bogged down and just focus on sport, telling themselves I'll be an athlete for the next 5 years and then get a job but one year, becomes two, then three and before you know it five years is up and you are I like, shit, I've done nothing to prepare for life after. (Chris)

Chris reflected, "sport can consume you," noting that many athletes deprioritize this aspect of their lives, viewing it as unrelated to their immediate sporting performance. The deprioritization of non-performance areas of life can be self-imposed by athletes, influenced by coaches and peers.

The avoidance of retirement discussions was compounded by the social narratives surround athletes' identities both within their personal networks and wider society. Participants shared how conversations with family and friends were often focused around their sporting performance and conversations often start by asking "about the latest competition" or "how training was going".

My dad isn't the most emotionally intelligent bloke and we only ever talk about my sport, so when I got dropped from the program, he found that really hard and what are we going to talk about now? The story just got really awkward and I'm not sure how it ends. (James)

James describes the challenge of managing family relationships after not being selected and outlined how an athlete's support network can reinforce a narrow identity based on performance, making the transition away from sport even more challenging. The relational construction of an athlete's identity often makes it challenging for them to imagine a self beyond their sporting role.

The social narratives extended beyond the athlete's personal network into broader society:

I felt like if you ever met somebody new and they asked you who you were and you would say I'm a GB athlete. Their eyes would light up and they'd ask hundreds of questions. When I came off program, I felt like that was removed. Who and what is left standing there to answer those questions? And I really wasn't sure. (Lucy)

Lucy described the impact on their self-worth and shock of leaving a World Class Program and reflected the challenge of "managing the difficult story" when interacting with others outside of sport. This participant reflected on how they hadn't realized the importance of a "broader identity" and preparing for life after sport, suggesting "you don't know, what you don't know" with regard to athletic retirement.

Participants described a denial of athletic retirement by “pretending it’s not going to happen” with no desire to explore other options outside of sport outlining the barriers of not being on their “critical path” to performance or not wanting to “dig into recovery time”.

2.2.2. No easy way out

For some participants there was an awareness of the challenges of retirement. One participant shared their thoughts of how other athletes experienced retirement “I’ve seen so many athletes across my career leave sport and struggle, it’s such a unique experience that makes it challenging to prepare for”. This participant described the process of retirement as predetermined and described a feeling of “dread” and whilst acknowledging athletes can try and prepare, “ultimately it’s one of those experiences you just have to go through”. This sense of predetermined difficulty, acted as a deterrent for proactive preparation, with many athletes feeling powerless to mitigate the transition’s challenges. Despite a number of participants describing a fear and avoidance of athletic retirement, there was an awareness about the inevitability that their “sporting career will come to an end at some point” irrespective of their athletic career retirement preparedness.

Varying levels of fear and denial were expressed by participants about athletic retirement, reflecting complexity and individuation, influenced by social, cultural and personal constructs that shape an athlete’s understanding of life beyond sport and engagement in personal development. Participants also outlined a range of dynamics that reinforced a performance focus, including pressure from peers, expectations from coaches and the wider societal narratives that contribute to a reluctance to explore other career paths or personal development outside of the athlete bubble.

2.3. Bridging the employment gap

This theme reflects an athlete’s subjective and socially constructed reality of balancing the tension of rigorous training and competition demands with employment opportunities, a tension that often limits work experience and engagement with personal development (e.g., employability, distraction, work experience, perspective and the real world).

2.3.1. Athletes welcome, until camp season

While some participants highlighted the benefits of engaging in employment, as it enabled them to “switch off” from the pressures of elite sport, others described significant barriers that included conflicting schedules, difficulty in finding flexible employers that could accommodate the unique demands of elite sport:

Saying you are available for 6 out of 50 Wednesdays, most employers are going to say I’m ‘sorry it’s just not worth it, you have great transferable skills, but it’s not enough’. (Alex)

Alex expressed the difficulty of find employment with their sporadic availability, emphasizing the challenge of engaging with the traditional jobs market while being on program. There is a relational aspect of navigating employment within the athlete bubble, where trust and understanding from employers are pivotal. In addition to the limitations of employment, participants felt even when sports were supportive of their employment there were often challenges for them such as “last minute changes” to training schedules that results in participants “having to let work down” which they described as “stressful” having to manage conflicting goals and feeling as though they were letting employers down, that may result in losing their job.

Some participants described not wanting to push too hard against the “unsaid rules” of performance expectations where the sole focus was on performance. Long term planning and “transparency” within their sports were essential for effectively managing work commitments alongside training. Yet, some expressed concerns that asserting these priorities too strongly could lead to “pushback” from coaches, who might question

their commitment with statements like “are you all in or are you out?”. One participant described how senior athlete in their sport reacted to them working alongside their sport, “when I first got selected for the GB squad the senior athletes weren’t happy with me working, they felt I wasn’t committed”. This participant describes the peer pressure they experienced when they first joined a senior squad.

2.3.2. Medals open doors

Some participants believed being a GB athlete would “open doors” in the job market:

I think it’s fair to say many people from our sport have a privileged background and for some athletes there is an assumption that a job will just fall into their lap and I think that position of privilege could fall across many sports, I’m a GB athlete and I’ll get a job. (Asher)

Asher felt some athletes believed their athlete role would enable them to enter the workforce more easily but suggested this was not the case “in the real world” and was perceived as a “future me problem”. One participant acknowledged that being an athlete brings many transferable skills but, in their experience, “you have to evidence those skills”, which they felt was a real challenge for athletes.

2.3.3. Lack of integration in performance planning

A number of participants raised the importance of embedding career development into individual performance development plans, emphasizing the importance of parity between performance and personal development, noting:

Personal development is part of my individual development plan, it’s as important as any other element connected to performance. It’s essential that everyone on the team understands that part of my life, I’m dedicated to my sport, but this makes me a better person and a better athlete. (Lily)

Including an athlete’s career aspirations alongside their performance goals was seen as essential for Lily. Sharing their plan with coaches and the wider support team ensures the athletes goals outside of sport are recognized and valued, reflecting that “everyone needs a plan”. While one participant had a positive experience with personal development integrated into their performance plan, most did not. Moreover, some participants felt their career development plans were not perceived by coaches as not as important in comparison to their performance plans, therefore the lack of parity between performance and holistic athlete development was seen as a barrier.

2.3.4. Missed opportunities during downtime

Participants shared the importance of work experience and building their CV but also described “missed opportunities” when they hadn’t engaged:

I definitely wasted some years after Rio, we got 6 months off and I didn’t do anything. It wasn’t until I didn’t get selected for Tokyo, that I thought right I’ve got to sort this out. (Helen)

Helen described the importance of “downtime” throughout the Olympic and Paralympic cycle, that ranged from a few weeks to 3 months off, when athletes could engage in work experience but often these times were not optimized. Some participants outlined they did need a rest post competition but also felt there was adequate time but didn’t prioritize or create plans. Some participants felt well supported with their career development “in theory” but did not always translate to practice. Participants highlighted the importance of career and network opportunities that exist within the system, one participant shared their frustrations on the current provision:

Oh, you’re competitive. So that means that you want to go into sales. No, because actually, the reason I’m competitive is because I love a team environment. (Drew)

Drew challenged the stereotype of athletes being competitive and “wanting a corporate job”. While the participants noted many transferrable skills that can be developed in elite sport, a greater variety of employment initiatives was highlighted as an area for development.

2.3.5. Access to gold, not to work

Participants from Paralympic sports shared their thoughts on bridging the employment gap:

I honestly don't think para-athletes always understand the impact their disability can have on getting a job and how hard it is. Within Para sport it's a level playing field, you receive funding and your disability is celebrated within elite sport. I don't think the majority of disabled athletes think about the reality of living and working with a disability (Isobel).

Isobel described the risk para-athletes face after spending a number of years on a WCP and for some entering the workplace for the first time as a disabled person, often without the same level of opportunity and support they have experienced in elite sport. For these athletes, having a “live and ready” plan for the three-month transition period after sport is crucial to ensuring they have a viable career path once their athletic career ends. Bridging the employment gap requires individual and systemic change to reduce the barriers to engaging in work experience and career development, such as scheduling conflicts, lack of flexible employment options and coach and peer expectations.

3. Discussion

The aim of this study was to provide a context-and population-specific exploration of the perceived barriers athletes face with regards to engaging with personal development within the UK high performance sport system. Three themes were identified: The Athlete Bubble, Head in the Sand and Bridging the Employment Gap. The first theme “The Athlete Bubble” describes an athlete's performance driven environment, where the pressure to succeed is prioritized over all other facets of life. Athletes described their immersion within high performance environments, while offering structure and support also fostered a sense of precarity and narrow identity development that limited opportunities for broader growth and personal development. The subtheme *Structured uncertainty* outlines the complex interplay between supportive and restrictive elements that can be a barrier to engaging with personal development. For many, the training environment is familiar, well-known structure of training and relationships with peers, coaches and support staff. Yet, despite this familiarity, there persists an undercurrent of uncertainty regarding funding, selection and injury that athletes continually navigating. There is a paradoxical nature that exists within the “athlete bubble”. Participants described their environment as a “safe haven” whilst also managing a range of stressors, such as leadership, team dynamics, performance and personal issues (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012). There appears to be dual forces of structure and pressure within the athlete bubble, this finding aligns with Henriksen's HEA model of high-performance environments both as resource rich, yet risk laden. While environments may offer external structure, it can lead to internal precarity which underscores the emotional labor for athletes of maintaining focus amid uncertainty.

A key barrier to athletes' engaging with personal development reported in this study stemmed from athletes needing “permission” to grow beyond sport. The subtheme *Permission to develop*, outlines how coach-athlete power-dynamics can restrict athlete engagement with personal development. Athletes often operate within hierarchical systems where challenging the performance narrative could jeopardize their funding, selection, or relationship with coaches (Henriksen et al., 2020). Participants shared examples of their coaches asking them “are you all in?”, with the participant interpreting such questions as an “in or out” ultimatum and that they should focus solely on their sport and not engage in any personal development activities. There were also

examples of when participant had not wanted to “let their coach down” with one participant describing the emotional strain of “staying loyal” to their coach and managing their personal development. These findings align with Henriksen's (2010) work, which reported the dynamic micro-system that consists of hierarchies, with the role of the coach being a key influencer. This barrier spans both the interpersonal and psychosocial level in Wylleman's model, where a coach's attitude towards career development and dual career can facilitate or constrain personal development and shape athlete agency.

The pressure to be “all in”, reinforces the notion of “sacrifice” (see Rhind & Jowett, 2010) where athletes are expected to unquestioningly prioritize sport over all other domains of life. This narrative is often embedded within coach-athlete relationships that promote a total commitment to sport as a prerequisite for success. Evolution within sports psychology research, has shown a shift from ‘coach centered’ approaches, where coaches lead the coaching process to ‘athlete centered’ approaches, where athletes direct the coaching process (Kidman, 2005). Jowett (2017) suggested a further shift to a ‘coach-athlete approach’ where there are joint contributions of coach and athlete. Extensive research on the coach-athlete relationship, highlights how the quality of this relationship can significantly influence an athlete's wellbeing, motivation and capacity for development (Jowett, 2017).

Vella et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of cultivating environments that prioritize psychological safety. Promoting sporting environments that support athletes to voice their thoughts, explore their identity and engage in growth activities, without fear of judgement or repercussions, could help to reduce the barriers for athletes to personal development. Some participants described the existence of “unspoken” rules that exist within the performance environment. Introducing alternative narratives for athletes involves encouraging them to explore new stories about their identity beyond the confines of sport. By shifting the focus from solely performance outcomes to broader growth and development, athletes can recognize value in areas such as relationships, education, and career preparation. This reframing of performance, challenges the dominant performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2016) and creates space for athletes to engage with personal development and other support mechanisms, fostering a more balanced and long-term view of success.

Trust was also noted as an important factor for athletes in this study, this influenced their readiness to engage in meaningful conversations about their personal development. The subtheme *Who can I trust?* outlines how a lack of trust between athletes and practitioners can create a barrier to personal development. The power dynamics and selection pressures that exist within high-performance environments, often results in athletes being hyper-aware of the consequences of sharing personal information such as personal development plans and life beyond sport (Henriksen et al., 2020). The perceived lack of trust highlights the importance of psychological safety within performance environments (Fransen et al., 2020) where even well-intentioned support can be constrained by being perceived as performance surveillance. Bradshaw et al. (2021) found similar dynamics within the UK context, where the proximity of psychosocial practitioners to coaches, shaped trust. A practitioner's positionality within the PST and a perceived close alignment with the coach, can impact an athletes psychological safety. When a practitioner is perceived as close to the performance agenda and closer to an organizations mission, athletes may withdraw, fearing disclosures could have a negative impact on selection or funding status (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Poucher et al., 2021). Within the UK context, the PL service is ring fenced and funded by UK Sport in comparison to other support service that are funded directly by sports (e.g., sport psychology). While the PL service is not entirely independent, this structural distinction, positions PL practitioners as relatively autonomous within the system, creating “a safe space to vent” and a “confidential sounding board” and enhancing the perception of neutrality. This mirrors the meso-level buffering structures outlined in the HEA model, where supportive

mechanisms protect athlete wellbeing from solely performance driven targets.

While the Athlete bubble can provide structure and familiarity, it simultaneously perpetuates performance narratives that lead to deprioritization of personal development and planning for future careers. The disinclination of some athlete to engage in personal development and transitional planning is explored in the second theme, *Head in the Sand*. This theme reflects the reluctance of participants to engage in preparations for life after sport, driven largely by fear and denial of athletic retirement. Fear of losing status, identity, and purpose often leads to athletes underpreparing for their post-sport futures. Even though athletes are aware of the “accessible support” to help them develop themselves outside of sport, many do not adequately plan and prepare for their athletic retirement, instead preferring to focus solely on their sport, resulting in a “common panic” when they approach retirement. Engaging in preretirement planning has been shown to be one of the best predictors of a successful athletic retirement, however, it is common for athletes not to utilize available support services (Poucher et al., 2021). While participants reported engaging with performance lifestyle practitioners, there was often a reluctance to move to action (Holden et al., 2025).

Avoidance of personal development across the psychosocial and vocational domains of Wylleman’s model illustrates how full immersion within the athletic domain can overshadow and delay broader life planning, this is explored further in the subtheme *All I’ve ever know*. This subtheme highlights how athletic identity can become ingrained, leading to identity foreclosure, thereby limiting the willingness or capacity to explore personal development outside of sport. Brewer and Petitpas (2017) suggested identity foreclosure occurs when athletes overcommit to their athletic identity, at the expense of exploring other roles in life. This finding aligns with Hughes and Coakley’s (1991) concept of ‘over conformity’ which suggests athletes can internalize expectations of prioritizing sport over personal needs, sacrificing wellbeing in service of the broader organizational goals. This sacrifice may include prioritization of training and competition over personal milestones such as family events, education and social engagements, playing through injury and measuring self-worth exclusively by performance outcomes, Cocker-Cranney et al. (2018). There is often an uncritical acceptance by athletes of these ‘sporting norms’ described as “positive deviant behavior” (p. 308) that may involve self-sacrificing behavior in many areas of life (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). An overcommitment to the athlete role may result in athletes deprioritizing or resisting support that is not performance related.

The acceptance of self-sacrificing sporting norm and the resulting identity foreclosure not only limits ongoing personal development, but it can also heighten the emotional toll of retirement planning. The subtheme *No easy way out* illustrates the cumulative impact of these dynamics, describing the emotional and practical challenges associated with athletic retirement. For some, there was an inevitability of the “savage nature” of leaving sport. Despite widespread fear and avoidance of athletic retirement, some participants constructed alternative realities that allowed for more engagement with holistic athlete development. These athletes highlighted the importance of broadening their identity beyond sport. One participant emphasized, “*Personal development isn’t just a nice-to-have, it makes me a better athlete.*” This reflects a socially constructed understanding of personal growth as complementary to performance, challenging traditional narratives within the high-performance system.

We recommend further education and support for coaches, athletes and the wider PST of the benefits of engaging with pre-retirement planning, including broadening identity that builds resilience that can mitigate some of the challenges faced in retirement (Stambulova et al., 2021). Exploration of life design concepts and tools may encourage individuals to actively shape their futures through reflective and iterative processes (Savickas & Rossier, 2009). Life design activities could create a pathway for athletes to align their values, skills, and aspirations with

career opportunities and perhaps most importantly, provides a road map to better conversations between athletes, psychosocial practitioners and coaches about the next chapter of life beyond sport. For athletes, whose identities are often closely tied to their sport, life design can help them envision possibilities beyond the athletic realm by exploring meaning (Oblinger-Peters et al., 2025) and extending their inner libraries.

While personal development is often portrayed as essential, the reality on the ground is that engagement with such development can often feel incompatible with performance environments that do not typically offer space and priority for personal development (Holden et al., 2025). The third theme “Bridging the Employment Gap” explores the structural constraints, cultural expectations and peer dynamics that restrict an athlete’s ability to gain work experience, employability skills and make preparations for life after sport. Participants that had chosen to work alongside their sport, reported challenges with balancing their sporting commitments with employment and communicating with their sport and in some instances their peers. *Athletes welcome – until camp season* highlights the barrier for athletes of finding employers that truly understood their sporting commitments and were prepared to offer flexible work opportunities. This finding aligns with Torregrossa et al. (2015), that suggested athletes often struggle to find an employer that will accommodate an elite sports schedule. Participants felt further opportunities into specific sectors that enabled flexible working would allow them to enter the workforce, but the current offering included a bias of “corporate roles” that may not suit the needs or aspirations of all athletes and was a barrier for some. Hong and Fraser (2023) suggested organizations should adopt athlete support as an element of social responsibility agenda. This shifts the responsibility of transition away from the individual athlete or sport, towards a shared responsibility, encouraging employers to offer flexible working practices, inclusive and athlete-informed recruitment and retention strategies. Given the importance of culturally informed research (Stambulova et al., 2021), we believe that further exploration of athletes’ longer-term careers is required to better determine the effects of being an athlete within the UK high performance system.

A number of athletes in the present study described their belief that success alone would translate to career capital, assuming their sporting success would seamlessly open doors to a post-athletic career. The subtheme *Medals open doors* highlights the concept of privilege as a barrier to engaging with personal development. With some athletes believing their status as a GB athlete would result in employment opportunities and would automatically “open doors” in the job market. This reflects the assumption that sporting success creates career capital that can lead to a complacency with engaging in employability skills. Aquilina (2013) found that although athletes do possess many transferable skills (teamwork, resilience and time management) they often struggle to articulate these skills to employers. One participant highlighted the importance of “evidencing” transferable skills, indicating more targeted support is needed for athletes to translate their sporting experiences, with athletes being able to recognize, adapt and apply these skills across contexts (Pierce et al., 2016). Research with Spanish athletes suggested despite valuable transferable skills, athlete face numerous employment barriers post sport (Torregrossa et al., 2015), with women facing increasing challenges with access to work and wage equity (Mateos et al., 2020). While some athletes secure better roles than their non-sporting peers, this was dependent on education and proactive career planning (Barriopedro et al., 2019). These findings highlight the importance of challenging the assumption of automatic employment post athletic career and embedding personal development prior to this transition point, with effective psychosocial support (Torregrossa et al., 2015).

While some athletes assumed their sporting success would secure their future, others recognized the importance of deliberate planning yet found limited support to do so. A significant structural barrier to bridging the employment gap was outlined in the subtheme *Lack of integration in performance planning*. Both athletes and practitioners felt

embedding an athlete's personal development alongside their performance plans was essential, with PL practitioners viewing the integration of plans as the "holy grail" to support long term wellbeing and career sustainability (Holden et al., 2025, p. 6). This subtheme aligns with previous dual career frameworks that support the integration of sport with life planning, rather than being seen as competing demands (Stambulova, Wylleman, & Lavallee, 2004; Aquilina, 2013). We recommend the integration of personal development with performance plans and initiatives that support the translation of transferable skills to support athletes to thrive within and beyond their sporting careers. In addition, highlighting success stories of athletes balancing sporting goals with career planning could encourage engagement in personal development.

Despite the recognition of the value of career planning, athletes described periods of injury, deselection and post competition periods were underutilized. The subtheme *Missed Opportunities during downtime* captures how moments that could support the engagement with personal development are instead marked by emotional exhaustion, decompression and a lack of proactive support. Participants in this study also described feeling "not in the right head space" and "wiped" after major competitions. This aligns with the findings of Schinke et al. (2023), that outlined athletes feeling emotionally exhausted, sense of loss and disorientation. Bradshaw et al. (2021) identified similar patterns within the UK context, identifying emotional burnout, limited psychological safety and unclear support structures. Decompression support is available to all funded athletes within the UK system (UK Sports Institute, 2022), designed to support athletes to process emotions through a range of stages post competition. These stages provide psychological recovery, but career planning is not systematically embedded within this framework, that relies on individual PL practitioner support. From an ecological perspective, Henriksen's HEA (2010) highlights how development is shaped by the environments capacity to anticipate and respond to athlete's needs, in this instance the system supports psychological recovery but career planning is not systematically embedded into recovery phases.

While the deprioritization of personal development can affect all athletes, para-athletes face an additional layer of complexity when transitioning from elite sport into the workforce. The subtheme *Access to gold, not to work* outlines the distinct challenges para-athletes face when bridging the employment gap and transitioning into the workforce. The challenges of high-performance sport, compounded by societal barriers and the stigma surrounding disability, creates significant obstacles for athletes as they navigate both their athletic careers and broader societal systems. Para participants in this study expressed the need for additional support in advancing their careers post sport, especially for those that have been within the high-performance system for a number of years and could be entering the workforce for the first time. Viewed through Wylleman's model, there is an imbalance between athletic and vocational domains, with inadequate integration of employability skills and career development, during a para athlete's high-performance years.

Miller et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of disability informed approaches, not only to support athletes with the sporting journey but for transitioning into broader societal and occupational systems. The findings of this study highlight the need for specialized support and access to opportunities and tailored support during their athletic career. We recommend specialized career development initiatives for para-athletes that extend beyond generic support to include accessibility support, work experience, peer mentoring with retired athletes that have transitioned into the workplace and development of employer engagement to raise awareness of the capabilities of para-athletes.

3.1. Limitations

This study focuses solely on the athletes' perspective. A multivocal approach including coaches, senior leaders and the PST could provide a deeper understanding of the barriers to personal development. The first

authors dual role as researcher and PL practitioner brought valuable insider knowledge but may also introduce bias in data collection and interpretation. While the sample provided rich insight and did include athletes that were not actively engaging with support services, a number of athletes declined to participate that could have offered a different perspective. The findings are situated within the UK WCP and may not be fully generalizable to other sporting systems.

4. Conclusions

This study highlights the perceived barriers to athletes' engagement with personal development within the UK high-performance system, highlighting the influence of performance driven environments on an athlete's ability to grow beyond sport. The results of this study outline how structural, cultural and relational factors limit athletes' engagement with personal development, such as hierarchical power relations, lack of integration in performance planning and identity foreclosure. Addressing these barriers not only requires a fundamental shift with deconstructing the narrow performance centric narrative but also specific changes in practice. This includes embedding personal development into performance plans and reviews, positioning them as performance relevant, rather than an optional extra. Further coach development support to ensure coaches can have effective and supportive conversations regarding dual careers and framing personal development as a contributor to resilience and long-term success. National Governing Bodies could be asked to demonstrate athlete development strategies, as part of funding agreements. By embedding personal development into everyday structures and practices, the system can begin to normalize personal development as a core part of performance excellence. Future research should adopt longitudinal and multivocal approaches to better understand how holistic support should evolve throughout an athlete's sporting journey.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jane Holden: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Christopher R.D. Wagstaff:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Ross Wadey:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Peter Brown:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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