Stress in Elite Sports Coaching: Identifying Stressors

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This paper presents the first in a series of studies exploring coaches’ experiences of stress within the unique culture of world class sport. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth account of the stressors encountered by elite coaches in the United Kingdom. Six male and six female coaches with international experience were interviewed. Transcribed interviews were inductively content analyzed by three independent researchers. Ten higher-order themes emerged, demonstrating that coaches experienced a wide range of stressors (e.g., conflict, pressure and expectation, athlete concerns, competition preparation, isolation). Conflict within the organization emerged as a key theme, indicating that communication skills might be important in helping coaches function effectively as part of a wider organizational team. Findings also highlight the importance of psychological skills training for coaches to help them cope with the diverse demands of world class coaching.

Whatever else changes, coaches and coaching will remain at the heart of sporting performance at every level.

(UK Vision of Coaching, n.d., p.2)

Several authors have commented on the stressful nature of sports coaching (e.g., Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung, 2002) and, although the coach-athlete relationship appears to be a central and a challenging aspect of coaching, coaches have additional roles to perform. Indeed, coach education programs commonly describe how coaches must adopt multiple roles including that of instructor, mentor, friend, organizer, educator, and counsellor (Lyle, 2002). However, as Lyle suggested, this typical examination of the role of the coach does not begin to uncover the complex and interpersonal process that is coaching. Other professions with a high degree of personal interaction have received significant research attention with stressors

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identified in occupations such as nursing (Pryjmachuck & Richards, 2007), the police force (Thompson, Kirk, & Brown, 2006), and the teaching professions (Winefield & Jarrett, 2001). Within athletic environments, studies have identified the stressors experienced by referees and officials (e.g., Rainey, 1999), as well as the stressors of those in management roles such as collegiate athletic directors (Ryska, 2002). Nevertheless, as Hanton, Fletcher, and Coughlan (2005) suggested, “a more in-depth and broader understanding of the stressors that reside in elite sport will allow scientists, coaches and organizations to design more appropriate interventions to manage the demands placed on performers” (p.1131).

Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, and Hutchings (2008) argued that given the multiple roles coaches must assume, and the technical, physical, organizational, and psychological challenges involved, coaches should be regarded as performers in their own right. Coaches’ performances (and future employability), however, are often judged by the success of their athletes (Gould et al., 2002). It is, therefore, not surprising that coaches experience stress as a result of the growing demands they encounter. Indeed, Kroll and Gundersheim (1982) found that in a sample of 93 male high-school coaches, all participants perceived their jobs to be stressful, with interpersonal relationships (e.g., disrespect from players and not being able to reach athletes) identified as the most significant stressors. Although research conducted into coach stress has tended to focus on the relationships between stress and coach burnout (e.g., Kelley & Gill, 1993), several studies have identified the stressors associated with sports coaching. For example, Sullivan and Nashman (1993) found that selecting athletes, representing their country, lack of preparation time, and spending time away from family were the primary stressors encountered by Olympic head coaches during their experiences of coaching at the Olympic Games. Effective communication, creating a positive and motivational team atmosphere, keeping non-starters motivated, and lack of financial assistance have been identified as significant challenges for new coaches (Wang & Ramsey, 1998). Stress factors such as having less time available to spend with family and friends, lack of financial incentives, and increased intensity of recruiting were the most important reasons given by collegiate level coaches for leaving the profession (Pastore, 1991).

In a more recent study, Frey (2007) used semi-structured interviews to investigate the stress experiences of 10 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division One coaches, the perceived effects of stress on their coaching performances, and the coping strategies they employed. Findings indicated that communicating with athletes, lack of control over athletes, recruiting, and having multiple roles and responsibilities were cited as stressors. Furthermore, these coaches reported that factors including a desire for more free time, interference with family life, and losing passion for the job, were stress factors that might increase their likelihood of leaving the profession. Taken collectively, the available research in this area demonstrates the various challenges that coaches can encounter, and illustrates the potentially stressful nature of sports coaching.

Although Frey’s (2007) findings highlighted the dynamic relationship between stressors, responses, and coping efforts, the sample used was narrow and interviewing a broader sample of coaches was suggested as a useful adjunct to the existing literature. Indeed, the majority of research into coaching stress has sampled high-school and collegiate, dual-role teacher-coaches in North American educational institutions, whose experiences of stress might be tempered by the dual-role nature of their jobs (Capel, Sisley, & Desertrain, 1987). The stress experiences of coaches immersed in the unique culture of world class sport are likely to differ considerably. For example, the Olympic environment is considered unlike any other and thought to be an important factor influencing the performance of Olympic athletes and coaches (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999). Research into the psychology of performance excellence suggests that coaching issues also play an important role in the performance of athletes at this level (e.g., Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001). Despite coaching being
thought of as an inherently stressful occupation (Kelley & Gill, 1993), and despite coaches invariably being highlighted as stressors by elite athletes, coaches are often mistakenly seen as “problem solvers,” rather than those who can succumb to stress (Frey, 2007). This assumption might go some way to explain why coaches’ experiences of stress within the unique culture of world class sport have not been studied in depth.

Despite growing interest in coaching stress, and the resulting developments in knowledge, researchers have identified several areas worthy of further investigation. The interactional conceptualization of stress, adopted in much of the early occupational stress research, led to three important research areas receiving significant attention: the identification and organization of stressors, the relationships between various stressors and strains, and the organizational, individual, and situational variables that moderate those relationships (Cooper & Dewe, 2004). This conceptualization has guided research in sport psychology with early studies focusing on the identification of stressors experienced by elite athletes (and the coping strategies they use) within the competitive environment (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991). Nevertheless, Woodman and Hardy (2001) argued that although studies investigating athlete stress provided insight into the stress experiences of elite athletes, they have failed to examine the origins of stressors. Consequently, several studies have since investigated organizational stress in sport (e.g., Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Hanton et al., 2005) and have generally found that organizational stressors (i.e., the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with the organization within which an individual is operating) are mentioned by athletes more than competitive stressors as being significant for them. Woodman and Hardy suggested that to continue to develop our understanding of stress in sport organizations, the stress experiences of who they referred to as “non-performing” members of those organizations (e.g., coaches, managers, administrators, and other support staff) also need to be thoroughly investigated.

Stress research in sport has suffered from a lack of definitional clarity (Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 2003). Specifically, the term “stress” has been used interchangeably to describe a stimulus, a response, or an interaction between the two. In an attempt to provide a consistent approach within the field, Lazarus’ (1966) transactional theory of stress has been readily adopted within the sport psychology literature. This transactional conceptualization of stress places the emphasis on the dynamic relationship between environmental demands (i.e., stressors) and an individual’s psychological resources for dealing with them (i.e., coping ability; hardiness), with stress responses (i.e., strain) resulting from a perceived imbalance between these demands and resources. Adopting a transactional approach to stress has certainly developed the field, not least in providing researchers with consistent definitions of the key terms involved. As identified by Fletcher, Hanton, and Mellalieu (2006), in keeping with the transactional approach to the study of stress, research must focus not merely on the relationships between various stressors and strains, but on the overall stress process.

Although significant research has investigated elite and champion athletes’ experiences of stress (e.g., Giacobbi, Foore, & Weinberg, 2004; Gould et al., 1993; Scanlan et al., 1991), coaches of elite athletes have received comparatively little research attention in terms of their own experiences (Frey, 2007). Furthermore, from a transactional perspective, the various elements of the stress process require detailed attention and, therefore, when studying stress, it is important to consider stress responses and the processes of appraising and coping. Nevertheless, based on existing literature, before their overall experiences of stress can be fully understood, it is clear that within the arena of world class sport, a detailed understanding of the demands facing coaches is necessary. Therefore, the first in a series of studies exploring the stress experiences of world class sports coaches, the purpose of the present study was to identify the stressors these coaches encountered in their experiences coaching world class athletes.
METHOD

Participants

With institutional ethics approval, twelve world class sports coaches (6 males, 6 females) aged between 36 and 64 years (47.3 ± 7.6 years) participated voluntarily in the study. Coaches had between 6 and 22 years (14.5 ± 5.5 years) experience coaching at a world class level, were all based in the UK, and represented eight sports: (diving, sailing, swimming, bowls, equestrian, field hockey, lacrosse, and table tennis). Coaches were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) from a variety of sports to ensure that a wide range of sporting organizations was represented (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003). For coaches to meet the specific criteria of the study, they reported finding their jobs stressful prior to the interview commencing. As part of the selection criteria, coaches were considered world class if they had previously coached at an Olympic games, world championships, world cup, and/or Commonwealth games. In addition, nine of the 12 coaches had competed as elite senior athletes in their sports, and one had competed at a junior international level. At the time of the interview, one coach had just returned from a world cup, one was in preparation for world championships, two coaches were in the middle of a four year world cup cycle, and seven coaches were in preparation for the 2008 summer Olympics in Beijing. All interviews were conducted by the principal investigator who was trained in qualitative research methods and had experience in interview-based research. In addition, the interviewer had more than 10 years of coaching experience, including four years coaching at national league level. This experience helped the interviewer to build rapport with participants and to create a comfortable environment for the interview process.

Procedure

Coaches were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. Participants were assured that their comments would remain anonymous and that data would be treated confidentially. Convenient times and locations for the interviews were agreed and information packs providing details of the procedures, an informed consent form, and contact details for the principal investigator were distributed to the coaches. Pilot interviews were conducted with three coaches (2 male, 1 female) from three sports (swimming, field hockey, and basketball) and enabled the principal investigator to ensure the clarity of the interview structure and the questions asked. An experienced qualitative researcher reviewed the audio tapes and transcripts, and provided feedback on the pilot interviews. As a result, several minor changes were made to the interview guide.

Interview Guide

Based on the existing stress literature, a semi-structured interview guide1 was used to ensure all participants were asked the same set of major questions (Gould et al., 1993). Nevertheless, as participants were encouraged to elaborate, the interviewer explored issues unique to each coach’s experiences in greater depth as they arose (Patton, 2002). The following definition of stress was provided for all participants:

When we discuss stress now, I am referring to the negative emotions, feelings, thoughts, and performance challenges that you might have had with respect to your experiences as a world class coach. These would include feelings of apprehension, anxiety, and nervousness, as well as thoughts centered on worry and self-doubt (adapted from Giacobbi et al., 2004).
The interview schedule was divided into three parts. Following introductory questions designed to facilitate recall and encourage descriptive talking (Patton, 2002), coaches were asked to identify what it was about their jobs that they found stressful and were reminded to consider their coaching experiences at world class level during discussions. Probes were used to elicit in depth information regarding stressors (e.g., Why is that a particular source of stress for you?; Tell me about stress that might be related to other aspects of your job), and, once coaches had finished describing the stressors they had experienced, one final general probe was used to ensure all stressors had been identified. In the final section, coaches were given the opportunity to reflect on the interview experience and to discuss any other relevant issues. None of the coaches felt there were any further issues to be discussed. After the interview, coaches were sent a summary of the interview transcript that identified the major themes they had mentioned. As a result, one coach wished to clarify the meaning of two of the themes discussed.

Data Analysis

Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and each interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim by the primary investigator. Transcripts of each interview were read and re-read to enhance familiarity and then content-analyzed by three researchers using procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and used extensively within sport psychology research (e.g., Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1989). To ensure credible data, two researchers individually coded raw data themes (i.e., quotes or paraphrased quotes representing a stressor) characterizing each coach’s responses to the interview questions (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russel, 1993). Once raw data responses had been coded, the analysis moved inductively from the specific (raw data themes) to general lower- and higher-order themes. Coach responses generated a total of 130 raw data themes. These raw themes were then organized into groups of like responses and common themes of greater generality were identified, resulting in the emergence of lower- and higher-order themes. The two researchers reached consensus through extensive discussion over a 4-week period. If there were disagreements between the researchers, transcripts were re-read and further discussion followed until consensus was reached (Sparkes, 1998). During these discussions, particular credence was given to the views of the principal researcher who conducted the interviews and listened to the audio tapes. Triangular consensus was reached at each stage of analysis with a third researcher providing a reliability check. Specifically, a third researcher was given a random selection of raw data responses (30%) and asked to categorize them into their lower- and higher-order themes. This researcher correctly categorized 92% of the quotes into their lower-order themes and 94% into their higher-order themes. The research team held further meetings until consensus had been reached on all themes.

RESULTS

In accordance with previous research (e.g., Frey, 2007; Giacobbi et al., 2004), raw data responses are presented in Figure 1, with the number of coaches reporting each raw data response in parentheses. The numbers of coaches cited in each lower- and higher-order theme are also included. Findings are presented using thick descriptive quotes (McKenna & Mutrie, 2003) to allow the reader to gain a feel for the context of the data. In discussing with coaches “what makes your job stressful?” the raw data themes were identified and organized into 16 lower-order themes. These lower-order themes were then organized into the following ten higher-order themes representing elite sports coaches’ stressors: conflict, pressure and
expectation, managing the competitive environment, athlete concerns, coaching responsibilities to the athlete, consequences of sport status, competition preparation, organizational management, sacrificing personal time, and isolation.

**Conflict**

This higher-order theme contained responses from all 12 coaches indicating that conflicts within the sport organization were stressors. Specifically, 22 raw data themes were

![Diagram of stressors identified by world class, UK sports coaches.](Continued)
Figure 1. (Continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw data themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of adequate facilities (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not possible to get the support staff I’d like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with specialist volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to stay in contention with other countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sport is volunteer based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to keep performance athletes (lottery funding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not having the budget to do the best for your athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judged by performance but don’t always have the tools (budget)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching large numbers of players alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of talent available is quite low (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making tough decisions (cutting athletes from the program) (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting who goes to tournament (players and staff) (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inheriting an inexperienced squad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t want to make the wrong selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of event evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sure you’re properly respected in the role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistics (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sure the taper is right (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not having the time to prepare properly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of competitive play (practice matches)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern over preparation - have we done enough?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In charge of many different aspects of the club/overall responsibility (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing large numbers of staff (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convincing organizations that money is needed (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping the management team happy (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing other coaches in the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing multiple roles (selection, coaching, managing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with administration as a priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sure delegated tasks are done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with background administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of admin/IT support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to maintain relationships (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not getting enough sleep (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early mornings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being away from home so much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time consuming nature of the job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long days/weeks/training schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicting demands from family/managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of a support system - isolated role (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having to make calls/decisions alone (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being listened to on important matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel like I can’t ask for time &amp; input from management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little support from mentor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1. (Continued)**
organized into three lower-order themes labelled management cohesion, interference, and forced collaboration.

**Management Cohesion**

This lower-order theme contained responses from 10 coaches suggesting that a lack of cohesion within the team or organization was a stressor. Conflict between staff, a lack of trust within the team, tensions with the previous coach, and the perception that other staff actually wanted them to fail were all examples of conflicts within the organization that coaches identified as stressors. In addition, two coaches perceived an incongruence between their own coaching philosophies and the values of the organization, or the philosophy of the performance director. As one coach highlighted:

> Sometimes, as a coach you’re trying to be consistent and stick to your coaching philosophy and sometimes you get people trying to impose a different coaching philosophy. And that can be stressful because obviously if you really believe in it you’re gonna kick against it.

**Interference**

This lower-order theme contained responses from six of the 12 coaches and referred to them having to deal with outside influences that impinged upon their coaching roles and responsibilities. For example, representatives from the media imposing on athletes without the coaches’ permission and the need to be constantly mindful of certain rules and regulations to avoid legal action were stressors for coaches. Three coaches also commented on how parents’ interference and lack of understanding was a stressor for them. As one coach explained, “parents can be very stressful, especially to a young coach... sometimes they can interfere to such a degree that they’re actually hindering the kid or the athlete, so parents are difficult, no question about that.”

**Forced Collaborations**

Four coaches discussed the demands of being forced to collaborate with other organizations as a stressor. For example, working in partnership with a city council and the constant struggle over issues such as health and safety or adequate facility time were two stressors mentioned by coaches. One coach described how a lack of efficiency from partnership organizations was also a stressor:

> When people are inefficient and take a long time to do things, when they look at it and say “yes you can have that back in 3 days time” and I say “why can’t you just sign and stamp it now?” That’s not the way the system works... inefficiency and bureaucracy would get me going if you want to wind me up.

**Pressure and Expectation**

The second higher-order theme encompassed raw data responses from 11 of the 12 coaches and described the pressure and expectations placed upon them by themselves and others. Seventeen raw data themes were organized into two lower-order themes: self-imposed pressure and outcome pressure.

**Self-Imposed Pressure**

In this lower-order theme, 10 coaches discussed the pressures and demands they placed upon themselves. Specifically, coaches felt that “being under the microscope at all times,”
“not wanting to let the athletes down,” and “caring about the result,” were all demands that led to stress. Coaches also discussed the pressure they felt when they “couldn’t do it for [the athlete]” during competitions. As one coach described, “to stand on the sideline, watching them go round the competition, that’s stressful, because you can’t do anything about it and you just wish and hope that everything goes well.”

Outcome Pressures
This lower-order theme contained responses from 11 coaches who identified that pressure from outside sources to achieve results was another stressor. Coaches most often referred to the pressure placed upon them by their governing bodies to get results and the fact that funding was reliant on the outcomes of competitions.

Managing the Competition Environment
Seven of the 12 coaches interviewed discussed how managing their time and their athletes during competitions were particular stressors for them. This higher-order theme comprised 15 raw data themes categorized into two lower-order themes: unforeseen events and managing time at competition.

Unforeseen Events
In this lower-order theme six coaches explained that disputes with officials and unclear rules in competition were stressors for them. Facing unknown opposition and the stress of decision making during competition were also stressors discussed by coaches, as evidenced in the following quote:

I think sometimes when I went to [country], particularly when I didn’t know all the groups and we got there and I was thinking “I don’t know whether we were going to be beaten 20–0 or beat them 10–8, I have no idea where we are.” And that’s quite stressful.

Managing Time at Competition
Within this lower-order theme containing responses from six coaches, “having no down time” at competitions was reported as a stressor. Two coaches also discussed the schedule of competition as a major stressor for them. As one coach explained:

Unlike Rugby and football who have 2 weeks in between to prepare for the next match, we prepare every single evening, so if we have a 4:00 game one day, we might have a 10:00 game the next. . . . as a coach, you have to be preparing three or four matches ahead, so that when you get to it, you still have your ideas there and you can clarify them in your mind for the players.

Athlete Concerns
This higher-order theme encapsulated raw data themes referring to behaviors or attitudes of athletes that coaches found stressful. Specifically, responses from 10 of the 12 coaches were organized into three lower-order themes: professionalism, commitment, and performing to potential.

Professionalism
Responses from seven coaches reflected concerns that athletes’ professional attitudes were not as good as they should be and that this was a stressor for them. Two coaches felt that
athletes had more to distract them, taking them away from what coaches felt were important parts of the learning process. As one coach described,

I think they’ve got more things to distract them and I think that’s frustrating from a coaching perspective . . . instead of thinking about the games and watching the videos, quite often they’ll put their music on, they’ll have their Nintendo Wii’s on . . . and all these little things that just take away a little bit of the time that we feel should be spent thinking and reflecting about [the sport].

**Commitment**

In this lower-order theme, six coaches felt a lack of commitment from their athletes was stressful for them. Two coaches mentioned that their athletes “saw no reason why they should work any harder,” and one coach described how it was “frustrating from a coaching perspective that we have to feel that we do have to push [the athletes] quite so hard.”

**Performing to Potential**

Responses characterizing coaches’ frustrations at athletes not performing to potential constituted the final lower-order theme within athlete concerns. Specifically, five coaches described the stress they felt when their athletes failed to deliver in competition. As one coach explained, “you’ve talked through the race, you’ve told them what they need to do, they know what they need to do, and then they don’t perform like they should.”

**Coaching Responsibilities to Athletes**

Eleven of the 12 coaches felt that the responsibilities they had towards their athletes were stressful for them. Specifically, 14 raw data themes were organized into two lower-order themes: meeting athletes’ training needs and managing athletes psychologically.

**Meeting Athletes’ Training Needs**

Ten coaches described demands associated with having to meet athletes’ training needs. Several mentioned that not having the time to work with talent during training phases was stressful for them and four coaches discussed the demands of managing a large group of athletes. As one coach described,

You’re not just managing yourself, you’re managing a group of individual players, all with different wants and needs, egos . . . but you’ve got to be fair to each and every one of them, you know? And if you do one small thing more for one player than another player, it’s all hell let loose.

**Managing Athletes Psychologically**

The lower-order theme consisted of responses indicating that coaches found it stressful having to work with athletes psychologically at all times. Five coaches indicated that managing athletes who were themselves affected by stress as competition approached was a cause of stress as evidenced in the following quote:

As [competitions] get closer, [the athletes] are under tremendous stress as well. . . . they [don’t] act the same and they don’t behave the same as they would normally, you know? So stress affects them in a very negative way quite often and you’re trying to manage that situation as well. So it’s just more difficult all round.
Consequences of the Sport’s Status

Thirteen raw data responses reflected stressors that were considered to be consequences of the minority or amateur status of the sport. Specifically, within this higher-order theme, responses from six coaches’ suggested that budget concerns and lack of recognition were two factors contributing to their stress.

Budget Concerns/Amateur Status

Five coaches identified stressors associated with the lack of a sufficient budget, including not being able to get the right support staff and a lack of adequate facilities. One coach explained that because of a smaller budget and the amateur status of their sport, it was hard to stay in contention with other countries, even though the level of expectation to perform was still high. Another coach suggested that a limited budget only allowed specialist support staff to be employed on a voluntary basis and that was a stressor because the coach felt unable to place demands and deadlines on these volunteer staff members.

Recognition

Three coaches perceived that a lack of recognition was a consequence of their sport’s minority status. Specifically, one coach discussed the lack of financial rewards for what they considered to be a time-consuming and stressful job, while another coach felt that the lack of recognition for their successes as a coach was another stressor.

Competition Preparation

In this higher-order theme, coaches explained how preparing for any major competition contributed to their stress. Specifically, nine coaches discussed how the demands of maintaining elite standards and preparation for major events were stressors for them, as reflected in the following lower-order themes.

Demands of Maintaining Elite Standards

In this lower-order theme, coaches felt that there were several demands associated with maintaining a high standard of training and performance that were stressful. For example, being expected to compete at an international standard with an inexperienced squad was a stressor for one coach. Selection issues and having to cut athletes from athletic programs to maintain high standards were also cited as stressors, as one coach described:

That was a really tough time but it was something we had to do, we had to do it for the sake of the player and we had to do it for the sake of the group . . . and obviously a lot of things are said and a lot of people involved. . . . So that’s extremely stressful for that player and for us as well.

Preparation for Major Events

Coaches also felt that the preparation phase for major events placed significant demands on them. Two coaches mentioned being responsible for hotel, travel, and accommodation arrangements for support staff and athletes was a stressor, while other coaches referred to preparing the athletes. For example, “making sure the taper is right,” “lack of time for adequate preparation,” and “lack of competitive practice matches,” were all stressors mentioned by coaches.
Organizational Management

In this higher-order theme, raw data themes from nine of the 12 coaches interviewed reflected issues associated with the management of other people and outside organizations. Four coaches cited having overall responsibility for all aspects of the team as being a significant demand for them. Four coaches also described how the need to prioritize administrative duties was stressful in that it took them away from what they felt was more important (i.e., coaching and working with their athletes). Managing other coaches within the program and managing multiple roles within the coaching job (e.g., selector, manager, coach) were also cited as stressors.

Sacrificing Personal Time

Six coaches interviewed felt that the time-consuming nature of the job, early mornings, and long days and weeks were stressors for them. One coach described how the unrelenting training and competition schedule was a cause of stress and had an effect on personal relationships, which was itself cited as a stressor by other coaches:

I get up at 5 in the morning, I coach 6 ‘til 8 in the morning and then I coach 5 ‘til 8 in the evening every day. On top of that I coach three land sessions before the evening sessions . . . and then I’m probably away at competitions at least 25 weekends a year. The divorce rate in [names sport] coaches is massive.

Another coach felt that having to sacrifice time with their family was a stressor and described how the conflicting demands between work and family life caused stress:

I’ve got a young family and quite a demanding [spouse] . . . [they] want me to see the kids more and all the rest of it. And then you’ve got the managers here saying we want you to do more days with the athletes, so I’m just trying to keep the two balls in the air at the moment and that’s a stressor for me. I can’t keep everyone happy, it’s impossible.

Isolation

The final higher-order theme that emerged from the interview data consisted of five raw data themes in which five coaches described how the often isolated nature of their coaching role was a stressor. One coach described how not being listened to on important matters was stressful for them, while another felt that they couldn’t ask for time and input from management. Three coaches cited the lack of a support system as contributing to their stress. One coach stated: “I mean it is a solitary role, there is nobody to go to, nobody to talk to.”

DISCUSSION

This study extends previous research by exploring coaches’ experiences of stress within the organizational culture of world-class sport. The first in a series of studies exploring coaches’ experiences of stress, the present investigation facilitates a deeper understanding of coaches’ stress experiences within a transactional framework of stress by focusing on identifying the stressors in elite coaching in the UK. In support of existing literature describing the stressful nature of sports coaching, the findings of the present study indicate that world class sports coaches experience a diverse range of stressors, demonstrated though the ten higher-order themes that emerged (conflict, pressure and expectation, managing the competition...
environment, athlete concerns, coaching responsibilities to the athlete, consequences of sport status, competition preparation, organizational management, sacrificing personal time, and isolation).

Although the literature on athlete stress suggests coaches are a stressor for athletes (e.g., Giacobbi et al., 2004; Gould et al., 1993), the findings of the present study appear to support Frey’s (2007) assertion that the coach-athlete relationship is, in fact, mutually stressful, with coaches highlighting the athletes in the squad as stressors for them. Specifically, two higher-order themes emerged demonstrating that coaches’ concerns about their athletes and their responsibilities to their athletes were stressors. Indeed, coaches reported several athlete behaviors that they considered as stressors (e.g., lack of commitment and motivation, running late, and underperforming in training). Coaches also reported that managing athletes’ psychological needs (e.g., dealing with athletes who are themselves under stress) was a significant demand. When the findings of the present study are examined alongside previous literature, it is apparent that both coaches and athletes find the partnership stressful. Little research, however, has examined athletes’ and coaches’ perceived needs in relation to one another in a high performance environment. Consequently, future research might explore further the dynamic relationship between athlete and coach at the world-class level, with particular emphasis on developing or enhancing the quality of communication.

Woodman and Hardy (2001) suggested that a limitation of early stress research was its failure to identify the origins of stressors. The findings of the present study provide support for Hanton et al.’s (2005) assertion that a combination of organizational and competitive stressors should be considered in stress research. In the present study, one theme that could be considered organizational in nature was conflict. Rather than conflict with athletes, however, this theme contained stressors such as a lack of trust in the management team, tensions with the previous coach, and key decisions being made by people “outside” the sport. The findings therefore provide further support for previous research extolling the consideration of organizational influences on stress in sport settings (Hanton et al., 2005; Woodman & Hardy, 2001) as well as for the suggestion that sport psychology practitioners should have a wider range of skills that will enable them to effectively deal with the range of concerns that spans beyond the athletic arena (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Indeed, a lack of cohesion within the sporting organization emerged as a specific stressor for coaches. The lack of trust, lack of cohesion, and atmosphere of tension in the organization reported by elite coaches certainly suggests that lines of communication within sport organizations might be improved. Along these lines, five of the 12 coaches interviewed indicated that they felt some stress as the result of being in an isolated role and it could be that this lack of cohesion within the team is a contributing factor to coaches’ feelings of isolation.

Although Bowes and Jones (2006) suggested that coach education programs should present coaching as a “complex, interactive process” (p. 237), the content of coach education programs is often directed towards promoting athletic achievement. Such programs usually contain modules aimed at developing coaches’ abilities to communicate effectively with athletes (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003), but have also been reported to leave coaches “ill-equipped to deal with the multidisciplinary, unique, uncertain social demands of their work” (Jones, 2000, p. 34). Thus, it is possible that helping coaches develop the communication skills that will enable them to work as part of a wider organizational team would also seem prudent. Dale and Wrisberg (1996) advocated the use of performance profiling in a team setting suggesting that the process “can be an effective method of creating a more open atmosphere for communication among members of a team as well as between the coach and his/her athletes” (p. 275). Although profiling in this instance was aimed at increasing the quality of communication between athletes, the process might also be undertaken with a team of
coaches and support/managerial staff. The findings of the present study not only suggest that coach-athlete communication might be improved at the world class standard, but that communication between coaches, managers, performance directors, and support staff might also be enhanced. Another theme to emerge in the present study related to organizational issues was organizational management. Specifically, this theme appeared to capture stressors related to issues of role conflict. Previous coaching stress research has generally reported that role conflict is a major source of strain for coaches (e.g., Capel et al., 1987). Indeed, several coaches in the present study felt that managing multiple roles (e.g., coach, chief selector, manager) and having ultimate control over several different aspects of the team or organization was a cause of strain. One possible explanation could, in part, be related to coaches’ feelings of isolation within the role. Nevertheless, it is still an important finding given that role conflict has been shown to be a significant predictor of burnout among coaching populations (Capel et al., 1987). Although “other coaches” are still cited as one of the most important aspects in the development of coaches (Cushion et al., 2003), one coach in the present study reported that they received little support from their mentor, while another specifically stated:

There’s nothing there to back up the coaches when the coaches need someone to talk to and say “this is how I’m feeling, how can I cope with that, how can I deal with my athlete?” We’re never given that option. I think sometimes, the coaches are forgotten.

For the coaches in the present study, although mentoring systems might be in place, periodic review of their effectiveness is one suggestion that might improve such systems and alleviate coaches’ feelings of isolation within the role.

Coaches’ reported feelings of isolation and lack of support are particularly important findings given that coaches also described a number of stressors related to the pressure and expectations they experienced in their roles. Specifically, coaches reported placing a great deal of pressure upon themselves, and that this pressure was a stressor for them. Further, coaches also discussed the pressure placed upon them by their governing bodies to produce successful athletes. Indeed, coaches reported feeling the pressure to produce results, often with their own employment and the funding for their sport programs under threat. At the same time however, coaches discussed limited resources or support as a hindrance to their achievement of those results. Sport organizations should consider taking steps to ensure that continued support is available for their coaches, particularly given the relationship between stress and burnout (Smith, 1986). Although it has been proposed within coaching literature that low commitment and feelings of entrapment are related to higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Raedeke, Granzyk, & Warren, 2000), findings from occupational stress literature still hold that burnout is a result of exposure to chronic stress, excessive job demands, or an imbalance between job demands and expectations (e.g., Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). Because burnout is more likely in highly motivated individuals with high goals and expectations (Pines, 1993), coaches operating in world class sporting environments might be particularly vulnerable. From an applied perspective, sport psychology practitioners should be aware of the effect of stressors associated with, for example, family life and being out of the country for long periods.

Stressors associated with the competitive environment, such as disputes during competition, making tough decisions during competition, and managing time at competitions were all identified in the present study. In a recent study, coaches used psychological skills across a variety of competition and training situations, and for a variety of purposes. Nevertheless, few coaches were found to use relaxation techniques, and for fewer purposes (Thelwell et al., 2008). In addition, coaches realize their behavior changes due to stress might negatively influence their athletes (Gould et al., 2002), and athletes also report these changes in coach behavior...
as stressors for them (e.g., Gould et al., 1999). Taken together, along with the findings of the present study, it would appear important to equip coaches, rather than just athletes, with the necessary psychological skills to manage the competitive environment. Because coaches are performers too, formal psychological skills training and the development of mental toughness might help them cope more effectively with the demands of coaching at world class level.

**Strengths and Limitations**

The present study extended previous literature by uncovering a wide range of stressors experienced by UK coaches working in a world class coaching environment. Further, the use of in-depth interviews as a method of data collection allowed a detailed exploration of the stressors experienced by this group of internationally experienced coaches and provides a base from which to explore the coaches’ overall experiences of stress.

Although it was considered a strength of the study that coaches from a wide range of sport types were included, it was also a possible limiting factor in the transferability of the findings to other sport settings because the results suggest that stressors might be influenced by organizational factors. Although all coaches had experience coaching at the international level, there was some disparity between the relative statuses of the sports. For example, while some coaches worked within sports that enjoyed an almost professional status, other coaches, who were expected to produce similar results in terms of medal success, were working in organizations where support and funding from governing bodies appeared to be limited. Stressors associated with the organizational structure and climate might therefore have been associated with a particular organizational structure and climate. Future research should carefully consider the sport background to provide some context to the findings. In addition, it is possible that the timing of the data collection (i.e., the cycle of competition the coach was in at the time of interview) might have influenced the stressors that were reported. Therefore, future research ought to consider coaching stress in reference to different phases of the competitive cycle (e.g., preparing for a world cup, returning from Olympic competition).

**CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of the present study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the stressors experienced by world class sports coaches. Findings indicated that coaches experienced a broad range of stressors, with organizational and competitive origins, during their careers. These findings are particularly important given that coaches are performers in their own right and their performances directly influences the athletes they coach (Gould et al., 1999). Sport organizations should continue to be aware of the demands that world class coaches face as the first step in working towards providing appropriate levels of support for their coaches.

It should be remembered that the stressors described in this study are often experienced in combination rather than as distinct demands placed on a coach. For example, athletes not producing in competition, the coach not being in control, and pressure and expectation from supporters might all be experienced simultaneously under a backdrop of poor team management and conflict between staff. From a transactional stress perspective these demands are part of a dynamic stress process and the responses to such a combination of stressors and the coping efforts of coaches are likely to be complex. For example, research has demonstrated that experiencing a particular stressor can have a motivational effect (e.g., Frey, 2007). Future research is therefore needed to explore coaches’ responses to stressors and the consequences of stress for them and those around them. The ways in which world class coaches manage their stress also warrant further investigation.
FOOTNOTE

1. A copy of the interview guide is available from the first author.

REFERENCES


