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 A Reflective Account of Delivering Multi-Level Sport Psychology Support in Professional League of Legends

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Article

1   **Abstract**

2   This case study follows the journey of a trainee sport and exercise psychologist who provided

3   sport psychology support to a top-tier, professional League of Legends team across a

4   competitive season. The purpose of this case study is to highlight some of the pertinent

5   professional and contextual demands associated with the process of embedding a three-level

6   (e.g., individual, team, coach) sport psychology service at the professional level of esports.

7   Specifically, a detailed account of the micro-processes involved in the design and delivery of

8   the sport psychology support are offered, along with critical reflections on the lead author's

9   professional judgements throughout the case in relation to their model of practice and the

10   contextual factors faced. It is hoped this case study can provide a granular and thoughtful

11   account of how to provide sport psychology support at the professional level in League of

12   Legends.

13   *Keywords:* esports, applied sport psychology, neophyte practitioner, multi-

14   disciplinary support

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26 **A Reflective Account of Delivering Multi-Level Sport Psychology Support in**

27 **Professional League of Legends**

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29 **Context**

30 **League of Legends**

31 League of Legends (LoL) comes under the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena genre of

32 gaming which focuses on five vs. five team-based, real-time strategy gameplay (Abbott et al.,

33 2022). Notably, LoL is the most popular video game in the world with an estimated 152

34 million active players (Samanta, 2023). The competitive infrastructure of LoL is similar to

35 traditional sport with franchised teams competing against each other in regional leagues to

36 reach inter-regional competitions. Matches are featured in weekly broadcasts often to

37 thousands of viewers with over 6 million people tuning in to watch the 2023 World

38 Championships which set a new esports viewership record (Gough, 2023). With such a

39 demanding professional infrastructure, there has been increased calls for, and efforts made to,

40 embed sport psychology support within professional LoL teams to help players and coaches

41 better manage the mental aspects of competition (Himmelstein et al., 2017; Swettenham &

42 Whitehead, 2022). The current case study aims to progress this initiative by drawing attention

43 to the micro-processes and contextual factors deemed worthy of thoughtful consideration

44 when doing sport psychology support at the professional level in LoL.

45 **The Team**

46 The client was a professional LoL team, known herein by the pseudonym Unknown

47 Gaming (UG). UG is a European esports team competing in the top-tier of their regional LoL

48 league. The UG team live together in a gaming house and consist of a team manager, two

49 coaches (head and assistant), and five players who collectively span five different

50 nationalities. Four players in the current roster have been on the same team for one year, with

51 the introduction of a new player during the current case. The team competed twice a week on

52 a live broadcast and practiced three times a week during 'scrims'. Scrims are the dominant

53 training method for LoL teams, and are an ecological, game-based training session design

54 where similarly skilled team, often those teams in the same regional league, compete against

55 each other in 'unofficial' matches (Abbott et al., 2022). The LoL annual competitive season

56 are divided into two splits (spring and summer), with each split lasting for nine weeks. The

57 split in the current case includes ten teams playing each other twice a week in a double-

58 round-robin format, with the top six teams entering a playoff to compete for entry into an

59 inter-regional competition.

60 **The Practitioner**

61 *Practitioner Background*

62   At the time of the current case, I (Author 1) was a trainee sport and exercise

63 psychologist in the latter stages of completing my Stage 2 qualification with the British

64 Psychological Society. This qualification is an independent training route which individuals

65 enrol on, after completing a relevant MSc, to become a Chartered Sport and Exercise

66 Psychologist in the UK. Alongside my training, I was working part-time at a category 1

67 premier league football academy. The Esports Performance Support Group (EPSG) contacted

68 me to join their team and support the current case. This made me the newest member of the

69 team which consisted of one HCPC qualified sport and exercise psychologist (Author 2),

70 another trainee sport and exercise psychologist, and a performance coach. This current case

71 was my first experience working in LoL and in providing embedded sport psychology

72 support at the professional level in esports. Up until this point, I had completed team

73 workshops with professional esports players in Valorant and Apex Legends, and had over

74 two years of applied experience working in various academy sports (athletics, cricket, and

75 football).

76   Prior to starting work with the UG, I was prudently aware of the sharp change in

77   contextual demands that come with going from working in academy sport to the professional

78   level in esports. Worryingly, I felt that my applied experience up to that point in academy

79   sport would ill equip me to make competent decisions in professional esports. I shared this

80   apprehension over my competency with my supervisor. His advice was that "you are an

81   expert on psychology, not LoL". This helped me to place a greater value on my prior applied

82   experience and current knowledge and skillset rather than worry about what I did not know

83   about the esports context. Nevertheless, and as is evident throughout the case study, I was

84   particularly keen to learn and reflect on the esports context to inform my practice.

85   *Professional Values and Strengths*

86   A defining influence on my professional philosophy were my observations of how I

87   felt players were commonly treated in elite sport. Often, I found players were encouraged to

88   focus on their deficits, asked to conform to a narrow set of values (e.g., discipline), and rarely

89   given a voice in problem-solving. These cultural norms of elite sport often left me concerned

90   by my own, and the staff I worked with, distinct lack of effort to understand the players

91   perspective and maximise what was unique and brilliant about each player. Such

92   incongruence led me to re-evaluate my practice based on my personal values (Cropley et al.,

93   2016). What I realised was that I was not adopting a model of practice that aligned closely

94   with my most important values of *humility (i.e.,* To be client-centred*)* and *uniqueness* (i.e., to

95   identify individual brilliance). This is when I moved towards adopting a pluralistic model of

96   practice (Cooper & McLeod, 2011) because of its emphasis on being client-centred and

97   prizing clients' unique capabilities.

98   Adopting a pluralistic model of practice was also influenced by a desire to use my

99   signature character strengths more often in practice. Signature character strengths are the

100   most positive and self-defining part of my character and are displayed through the thinking

101 and behavioural tendencies that I take pride in, frequently use, and excel at (Peterson &

102 Seligman, 2004). In knowing that two of my signature character strengths were *social*

103 *intelligence* (i.e., an ability to adapt to client preferences*) and appreciation of beauty and*

104 *excellence* (i.e., an ability to appreciate a client's talents), I aligned with a pluralistic practice

105 (Cooper & McLeod, 2011) to best utilise my strengths through its emphases on

106 accommodating client preferences and drawing on client strengths (Cooper, 2009).

107 ***Pluralistic Practice***

108   Pluralism focuses on working skilfully with the individual differences that exist

109 between the practitioner and client in their relationship (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). In

110 understanding people are deeply unique beings, pluralism argues that two people in a

111 relationship are rarely, if ever, unified in their worldviews, knowledge, and values and thus

112 both give and take from the goodness of the relationship in unique ways (Rescher, 1995).

113 Such natural departures call on the pluralistic practitioner to collaborate with the client to

114 develop shared ways of working together that both are confident champions the client's

115 wants and needs and works best for them (Cooper, 2009). Inviting and privileging the client's

116 perspective commits to the idea that the client, being so unique and only truly known by

117 themselves, are the primary driver of change and should be empowered to tailor the support

118 as they see fit (Bohart & Tallman, 1999; Cooper. 2009). In practice this can be noticed by the

119 same player asking the practitioner to be taught mental skills to cope better with pre-

120 competition nerves at one time (cognitive-behaviour), and at another time, preferring the

121 practitioner to provide them with a non-directive, reflective space to let them discover their

122 own solutions to a personal issue (person-centred). The idea client's benefit from different

123 theoretical models at different times based on changes in their sensibilities over what would

124 work best for them is a core feature of pluralistic practice (Cooper & McLeod, 2011).

125   **The Case**

126   The support started just over one month before the start of the competitive split and

127   ended once the competitive split had finished (See Figure 1 for a detailed timeline of the

128   support). The EPSG provided support virtually via the digital platform, Discord. Due to UG's

129   logistical challenges of moving players from different countries into a gaming house over the

130   Christmas period, the start of the one-to-one support and training observations were delayed

131   by a few weeks. This meant the original needs analysis completion date agreed with UG was

132   also delayed and that as a result, a couple of the originally planned team workshops were

133   delivered before the needs analysis could be completed. Whilst the benefit of conducting

134   these workshops without a completed needs analysis were debated amongst the EPSG team,

135   we felt going ahead with them as planned provided valuable opportunities to facilitate the

136   players and coaches' receptiveness towards our services by normalising our presence,

137   building rapport, and encouraging constructive psychological conversations to take place

138   (Poczwardowski et al., 2020). Attending coach meetings to understand the coaches' needs

139   were part of the needs analysis process and thus started during the needs analysis period.

140   **[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]**

141   **Contracting and Intake**

142   In November 2021, the head coach of UG's LoL team contacted the EPSG about

143   embedding a psychological support program within his team for their upcoming split. In

144   UG's initial meeting with us, the head coach mentioned feeling the pressure from the senior

145   management to have them place higher in the league but felt this was being hindered by a

146   poor team culture. Due to this, the head coach felt that the inclusion of a psychological

147   support program that worked at the player, coach, and team level could help improve the

148   team culture team and drive performance. This multi-level support included one-to-one

149   player support, team workshops, and coach development sessions for the coaching staff.

150   My first task was to read through our contractual agreement with UG to develop its

151   content. Being the newest member of the EPSG meant I felt it was important not to be too

152   critical of the contract's content in case of being perceived as too intrusive by my colleagues.

153   Therefore, I produced a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis to

154   present to my colleagues as I felt this reflected a more balanced assessment of the contract

155   and thus lead to a less defensive discussion about its content. Through reflection when

156   putting together the SWOT analysis, I became aware of how my professional experience and

157   pluralistic orientation influenced my thinking. For instance, I noted in *weaknesses* that the

158   EPSG had not integrated their different philosophies and ideas around the nature of the

159   support which may create an unclear message to UG on the EPSG's model of practice. My

160   previous applied experience of working with fellow sport psychologists in academy football

161   led me to believe the EPSG may work better together if practicing from a shared and

162   cohesive model of practice (Diment et al., 2020). Therefore, I recommended to my colleagues

163   in the EPSG that we consider integrating ideas to have a more consistent approach to

164   practice. However, the team did not feel like it was enough of a priority to commit time due

165   to the tight time constraints we were already under. I was happy for this to be a choice of

166   team, as from a pluralistic standpoint, I believed we may be more capable at problem-solving

167   client challenges through drawing on each other different theoretical ideas to look at

168   problems and solutions from different perspectives (Cooper & McLeod, 2011).

169   In *opportunities,* I noted the contract provided no measures of effectiveness to capture

170   the quality of the support. Hence, I put together a set of key performance indicators (KPIs)

171   that I felt could help the EPSG monitor and evaluate the quality of the support at each level.

172   There were 14 KPIs in total, which were split into three levels: players, coaches, and team.

173   One example of a player's KPI was for "each player to receive a one-to-one intake

174   assessment and have agreed goals of work for performance support". An example of a coach

175 KPI was "to complete formal observation and feedback cycles to coaches to inform their

176 coaching practice". Finally, an example of a team KPI was "to advise on team processes to

177 support a positive team environment".

178   Putting together the KPIs was primarily driven by my desire to demonstrate

179 accountability with UG, as from working in academy football, evidencing my value through

180 fulfilling department targets was an essential part of the job. I also felt the KPIs promoted

181 effective practice by setting performance and process goals to constructively self-evaluate

182 (McCann, 2000) and helped to promote alignment across the EPSG teams on our goals and

183 objectives. Looking back, whilst I collaborated on these KPIs with the EPSG, it would have

184 been important to co-create them with the head coach to develop greater confidence that we

185 were working towards mutually important goals (Bordin, 1979). As this was my first time

186 working within professional esports, I was hesitant to have collaborative conversations with

187 coaches about the KPI's out of a concern for not understanding their perspective and

188 therefore having little confidence in any agreement reached. However, collaboration sits at

189 the heart of pluralistic practice (Cooper, 2009) and thus I was left feeling very dissatisfied by

190 this independent decision. This highlighted to me how important it is to take risks and rely on

191 courage over confidence If I want to practice congruently with clients I am unfamiliar with.

192   In *threats*, I noted a pre-determined curriculum for the team workshops and a lack of

193 ethical clarity on player confidentiality. My desire for context-sensitive support meant I was

194 keen to ensure all workshops were based on a thorough needs analysis of UG's needs rather

195 than be prescriptive. Thankfully the rest of the EPSG agreed to have all UG workshops

196 informed by their unique needs. After further conversation with the EPSG on the need to

197 clarify our ethical position, we decided to implement an open confidentiality policy. This

198 meant after each one-to-one session, players were given the option to choose what

199   information they wanted to be shared with coaches. I felt such a policy helped maintain the

200   players trust whilst allowing us to coordinate support with coaches (Reid et al., 2004).

201   Before starting work with UG, the EPSG met to discuss the roles and responsibilities

202   of each practitioner. I would provide five hours of support a week with this being split across

203   several responsibilities: (a) structure the support provision (b) lead on the needs analysis (c)

204   provide weekly one-to-one support for three players (Aaron, Craig, and Jonathan;

205   pseudonyms; the two additional players were supported by other members of the EPSG) and

206   (d) contribute to other modes of support where hours permit.

207   **Consultancy**

208   *Gaining Entry*

209   I understood that beginning my work with UG could be difficult due to the need to

210   establish credibility with the players and coaches (Poczwardowski et al., 2020). I was aware

211   that the head coach had fractured relationships with the players, and it was unknown whether

212   the players supported the head coach's decision to bring the EPSG on board. Elite

213   environments are often highly political (Eubank et al., 2014), so I felt a sensible approach

214   early on was to not position myself as someone who showed a strong allegiance towards the

215   coaches or players in case this worked against me (Reid et al., 2004). Instead, it felt it was

216   important to buy myself some time to learn and understand the social-political dynamic to

217   develop a contextually intelligent practice (Hacker & Mann, 2017). Hence, my aim in the

218   initial weeks was to build relationships with all UG members and to take a more passive role

219   of observing how players and coaches interacted to build a picture of the culture.

220   My observations and conversations with players and coaches suggested the players

221   had the most social power. For example, senior management would listen to and

222   accommodate the players' wants and needs more than the coaches due to the players'

223   celebrity status. The players often expressed scepticism towards the coaches' expertise and

224   disagreed with their tactical decisions. Such a player-heavy power dynamic led me to reflect

225   on how I should best position myself in the culture to develop trust with both coaches and

226   players. I felt it might be more contextually appropriate to prioritise the players' needs given

227   the power they possessed. Yet that point was caveated by the need to develop a good working

228   relationship with the coaches to support their practice and influence the team culture as per

229   the KPI's outlined. I, therefore, felt my pluralistic approach could help create greater

230   integration between my player and coach support as I could prioritise the players' agenda in

231   the one-to-one sessions and prioritise the coach's agenda in the coaching meetings (Cooper,

232   2009). However, I anticipated these agendas were likely to clash at times. As a result, I

233   decided it would be best to engage in more intense periods of reflective practice when

234   conflicting interests arose to develop a more nuanced approach to practice that would best

235   meet the needs of the situation (Gibbs, 1988).

236   **Needs Assessment and Case Formulation**

237   The needs analysis focused on the team and coaching dynamic and took six weeks to

238   complete. The needs analysis involved collecting information from all four members of the

239   EPSG, with data drawn from eleven training observations, all player one-to-ones up to that

240   point, and three coaching meetings. To organise this information into a coherent framework

241   that all members of the EPSG could contribute to and understand, the four Ps shared case

242   formulation approach was used (Bickley et al., 2016). The four Ps was a system-level

243   approach to making sense of UG's concerns and involved drawing connections between an

244   interacting and reinforcing set of factors believed to lead to the creation and resolution of

245   client problems. These factors include UG's history of behaviour that had contributed to the

246   problem being created (predisposing), the current contextual factors exuberating the problem,

247   (precipitating), the problematic behaviours that could be targeted for intervention

248 (perpetuating), and the resources the team had at their disposal to support intervention

249 strategies (protective; Bickley et al., 2016).

250   Table 1 presents a comprehensive overview of UG's needs at both a team and coach

251 level. The most salient needs as I and EPSG saw it were the high amount of interpersonal

252 conflict amongst teammates, a disempowering performance environment, and a lack of team

253 consensus on training methods. More descriptively, there existed long-standing feuds

254 between two groups of players, which meant unconstructive communication and a lack of

255 responsibility taking would be common amongst players in scrims and team meetings.

256 Moreover, in scrims, players would regularly complain about, and rebel against, the coaches'

257 training methods. Within the coaching team, there existed wide differences of opinion

258 between the coaches and between them and the team manager on areas of team strategy,

259 player management, and roles and responsibilities. This created fractured relationships

260 between the coaches, which was further heightened in coach meetings through unconstructive

261 lines of communication, which further served to undermine role-clarity, their working

262 relationship and the coach's confidence in their ability to fulfil their individual roles.

263   **[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]**

264   The EPSG met to discuss the shared case formulation before presenting it back to the

265 coaches. We wanted to be ethically sound in communicating the needs analysis to maintain

266 the trust of the players (Reid et al., 2004). Based on this discussion, the EPSG concluded that

267 (a) neutral language like "mixed agreement" rather than "conflict" be used to communicate

268 sensitive issues (b) for me to turn the case formulation into a SWOT analysis to reflect a

269 more balanced assessment of the team's needs and (c) due to the high social-political tension

270 in UG, players can only be identified when it relates to points raised in the *strengths* section.

271   The SWOT analysis was presented to the coaching staff at the fourth coaching

272 meeting and included *strengths* such as a UG's team-wide desire to debate and share ideas

273 around team strategy, *weaknesses* such as low team resilience in scrims and official matches,

274   *opportunities* such as team-building activities to achieve team goals, and *threats* such as the

275   possibility that a high challenge, low support team culture may be particularly harmful to

276   performance at an upcoming in-person LAN event if not worked on beforehand. Whilst

277   presenting, however, I felt a great sense of unease because the needs analysis was not

278   collaboratively designed with the coaches and seemed to discount their perspectives. Such a

279   practitioner-centric perspective on what should be changed in the culture seemed far removed

280   from my desired pluralistic approach of being client-directed (Cooper, 2009). To become

281   more congruent with my client-directed beliefs, I asked the coaches to highlight the needs

282   that resonated most with them (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). The coaching staff noted poor

283   performance evaluations and low team resilience as the areas they wanted to improve. Hence,

284   it was agreed that we would start to address these needs in the upcoming team workshops.

285   **Support Strategies**

286   ***Individual Players***

287   I conducted five sessions with both Aaron and Craig, and three sessions with

288   Jonathan. My choice of interventions with each player was influenced by my pluralistic

289   orientation, their independent case formulation, and contextual factors. For example, the

290   different cultural identities players had from me due to their different nationalities meant I

291   felt it was even more important I chose interventions that were heavily informed by the

292   client's worldview to demonstrate cultural sensitivity (Hacker & Mannn, 2017). Therefore,

293   the interventions (see Table 2 for an overview) were driven by the players perspective and

294   capitalised on their resourcefulness; namely their view of the problem, strengths, and

295   successful past solutions (Bohart & Tallman, 1999).

296   Due to the political manoeuvring in UG, I felt my approach needed to consider

297   changes in players' social circumstances alongside their resourcefulness to be effective. A

298   case in point was when a player whose nationality was different to UG nationality, began to

299   have less input into key tactical decisions as the split went on. To the player this decision

300   appeared to be politically motivated, with the organisation wanting to choose tactical setups

301   that would benefit the individual performances of UG's native players to appease UG's

302   national fanbase. Because of this, the player expressed a growing frustration of being

303   devalued by his team. Such an experiencing of disempowerment meant I felt it important to

304   engage in counter-conditioning tactics where I created a more empowering space for the

305   player in our meetings to help him regain a sense of being heard and valued (Bugas &

306   Silberschatz, 2000). I felt the players responded better to a more non-directive approach

307   (Miller & Rollnick, 2012) as he become more emotionally engaged in the conversation the

308   more I cared for and empathised with his experience. By the time we met a week later he

309   spoke much more acceptingly and assertively about his predicament, having a more detached

310   attitude towards the issue and an intention to seek out a new team if it did not improve soon.

311   ***Team Workshops***

312   After we presented the SWOT analysis to the coaches, the performance coach and I

313   presented a team workshop aimed at building more constructive performance evaluations.

314   This workshop drew on Elliot and Conroy (2005) 2x2 achievement-goal theory and Bandura

315   (1997) collective efficacy theory. Specifically, we encouraged all UG members to reflect

316   together on their recent performances from a positive and process-focused perspective, with

317   all team member taking it in turns to talk about each of their teammates' most team valued

318   strengths and to assign them a role within the team based on these strengths. After the

319   workshop each team member received a one-page profile which documented all their quoted

320   strengths and their strength-based role. For instance, one player strength-based role was to

321   keep the team emotionally stable under pressure and was nicknamed the "the steadfast"

322   because he "rarely gets tilted" and always "stays positive even when losing". It was hoped

323   players would increase their effort to play up to their strengths upon realising the value

324   placed on them by their teammates and coaches (Swettenham & Whitehead, 2022).

325   In the next coaches' meeting, the coaches asked to change the upcoming workshop

326   topic from 'building team resilience' to 'coping with pressure' as the coaches felt the players

327   were poorly handling the pressure of needing to win one of their last four matches. I agreed

328   to change the workshop topic to 'coping with pressure', as I felt the coaches' desire to engage

329   in the workshop would enhance its effectiveness (Poczwardowski et al., 2020). However, the

330   players did not engage well in this workshop. My hunch was the players disinterest was

331   driven by the players not agreeing with the coaches' verdict that they were struggling with

332   pressure. Hence, perhaps a limitation of my pluralistic approach is that I uncritically changed

333   the workshop topic to accommodate the coaches' preferences even though I knew team

334   resilience was a salient need from my perspective. After this workshop, the team went on to

335   lose their next two matches. This set off panic in the coaches who then cancelled the last

336   workshop to spend more time working on the tactical side of the game (Larsen, 2017).

337   Frustratingly, this doubling down on team tactics in the final two weeks meant I had a much-

338   reduced capacity to provide team support during the most pressurised period of the split.

339   **[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]**

340   *Coach Development*

341   The primary method to support the coaches was in the weekly coach meeting where

342   me and the performance coach from EPSG, and the head coach, assistant coach, and team

343   manager from UG would plan and review the week. The intense interpersonal conflict that

344   existed amongst the coaching staff in these early meetings suggested there were poor lines of

345   communication, little role clarity, and wide disagreement over UG's tactical strategy. More

346   specifically. the team manager would confront the head coach about the quality of his draft

347   picks, claiming the head coach needed to take a more democratic approach to draft picks by

348   involving the players more in these decisions. Quality draft picks are an integral part of team

349   performance in LoL and involve each team at the beginning of a match taking it in turns to

350   select from a pool of player-controlled characters with different abilities and attributes to gain

351   a tactical advantage over the opponent. As a result of this unwanted criticism from the team

352   manager, the head coach became more autocratic in his coaching methods, leaving the

353   assistant coach feeling more disempowered and devalued in his role.

354   In a conversation with the performance coach from EPSG about the coaching

355   dynamic, he felt the head coach should be educated on how to adopt a more autonomy-

356   supportive coaching style (Ahlberg et al, 2007) with the players and assistant coach. Whilst I

357   agreed with this assessment, I was concerned that asking the head coach to adopt a different

358   coaching style could harm our working relationship with him as he could perceive us as

359   doubting his competency like the rest of the coaching staff were doing. Again, like I had done

360   with the players, I tried to adapt my approach in a way that I felt was interpersonally sensitive

361   to the coach's wider social-political experience. Hence, I and the performance coach decided

362   to encourage the head coach to adopt a more autonomy-supportive coaching style through a

363   discrete intervention of creating a more psychologically safe climate within the coach

364   meetings (Edmondson, 1999). It was hoped increased psychological safety in these meetings

365   would support more constructive and collaborative conversations between the coaching staff

366   on challenging matters and lead them to have a greater willingness to work together.

367   Edmondson (1999) termed psychological safety as a person's ability to speak up

368   without interpersonal risk. Psychological safety was facilitated in the coaching meetings by

369   (a) intentionally raising avoided topics to support open conversation, (b) enhancing coaches'

370   empathic understanding of each other by playing 'mediator' in difficult conversations, and (c)

371   using conversational turn-taking to empower each coach's perspective (Edmondson, 1999;

372   Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). The role of mediator felt like a balancing act of knowing

373   when to keep going with a conversation or change course. It was evidence that both coaches,

374   feeling disempowered, thrived off being given the time to speak up in a psychologically safe

375   and empathic climate. At the same time, it was important for me to gently interrupt each

376   coach in good time to encourage them to have collaborative conversations with other coaches

377   in the room (e.g., "assistant coach, what do you make of that?"). Another strategy was to help

378   coaches turn their unrefined and abstract ideas about how to make team improvements into

379   specific and concrete actions that could provide better guidance on how the coaches can work

380   well together over the following week (Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). Therefore, at the end

381   of each coach meeting, 'agreed actions points' based on the conversation were created to

382   support cohesive coaching practices and were reviewed at the next coaching meeting.

383   **Monitoring and Evaluation**

384   *Mid-Split Review*

385   An internal and external mid-split review took place to evaluate the support.

386   Internally, the EPSG reviewed the KPIs to reflect on their progress. This reflection led us to

387   conclude that player engagement in the one-to-one support suffered from attrition during the

388   last two weeks of the split, dropping to 50% - 75% whereas it had sat at over 80% prior to

389   this. Amongst the EPSG team it was suggested that commitment 'fatigue' over time might

390   have contributed to this attrition. While it was perhaps a missed opportunity to not ask the

391   players why their attendance dropped, we felt adherence rates could be improved by giving

392   players greater flexibility in how they received support by offering to meet less frequently

393   and giving more choice over when to meet. In the one-to-one sessions, two players expressed

394   to the EPSG team that they would not like their interpersonal conflict with teammates

395   discussed in team workshops, therefore the EPSG team felt it would be wise to adopt a

396   strength-based approach in workshops to work on team issues in a disguised manner. Lastly,

397   we noticed the need to gain greater clarity on how the needs analysis was informing coaching

398   practice. That is, we were not confident that the needs identified in the needs analysis were

399   informing the focus of the weekly coaching meetings. We discussed these amendments with

400   the coaches at the next coaching meeting to improve the support going forward.

401   The external mid-split evaluation was completed through sending an EPSG made

402   consultancy evaluation form on to all players and coaches. The evaluation asked players to

403   rate the helpfulness of the support out of ten, outline what was helpful and what could be

404   improved. Four players and the head coach completed the feedback. Overall, the helpfulness

405   of the support was rated 8.8 out of 10 on average (SD = 1.31). Aaron stated the reason for his

406   scoring was that the support helped him offload his emotional worries: "all the talks I had

407   with Matt were very insightful and helped release built-up stress". Craig was slightly vaguer

408   about the reason for his score, although suggesting the support had a positive impact "the

409   chats we are having are helping me a lot even though [confidence] is sometimes a hard

410   topic". Players also praised the helpfulness of the workshops as one player stated, "the

411   workshops were pretty helpful as well, easy to understand, entertaining, and interactive".

412   In terms of developmental feedback, the assistant coach mentioned "Try to help

413   remind staff on how to deal with the players in an emotionally speaking way?". This

414   feedback intrigued the EPSG team and so in the next coach meeting I asked the assistant

415   coach to elaborate on the feedback provided. Following this discussion, it was agreed that in

416   training observations going forward, we would prompt the assistant coach on when we saw

417   an opportunity for him to help a player with their emotional state (e.g., "Aaron has gone quiet

418   now after he lost that fight, one to keep an eye on"). At the next coach meeting the assistant

419   coach expressed his appreciation for receiving this added support in training.

420   ***End-of-Split Review***

421   I carried out an end-of-split review with the players and coaches separately. Aaron

422   felt he improved his communication in the areas he wanted, and it renewed his motivation to

423   receive sport psychology support in the future after a previous bad experience with a "mental

424   coach". Craig felt the support helped him to appreciate the improvements he had made over

425   the split but still struggled for confidence. I could not get Jonathan into a final meeting but in

426   a message, he said "I really enjoyed our talks and I think that was very helpful for me during

427   the split". The coach review meeting suggested the coaches felt the support helped to "clarify

428   expectations and get everyone [coaches] on the same page going into each training week"

429   which led coaches to be "happier with team strategies" as time went on. However, the

430   coaches felt more time and collective action between us and them were needed to better

431   influence the team culture, there should have been more transparency on individual player

432   work, and the coaching meetings should include agenda-setting to better structure them.

433   **Reflections**

434   Reflective practice is an essential component of ethical and effective sport psychology

435   practice (Cropley et al., 2016). Therefore, guided by Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle, specific

436   attention will be paid to the strengths, challenges, and lessons learned when operating in an

437   esports context. As I was working across multiple levels of UG, I found myself in many

438   potential zero-sum scenarios, were a 'positive' course of action with one client (e.g., support

439   head coach decisions) could 'negatively' affect my relationship with another client (e.g.,

440   disempower assistant coach). Indeed, as team issues were the most prominent area of concern

441   for players and coaches, I had to continuously adapt to the UG's dynamic social-political

442   climate to facilitate a more integrative service delivery across player, team, and coach

443   support. For instance, upon knowing two players did not want the interpersonal conflict in the

444   team explicitly mentioned in team workshops, I took a strength-based approach to

445   euphemistically work on these issues. Indeed, a euphemistic approach permeated coach and

446   player support, where support strategies were designed to be interpersonally sensitive of their

447   social circumstances to sidestep threatening ways of working and heighten engagement in the

448   material (Steele, 1988).

449   A contextually informed practice required being client-centred, observant, and

450   critically reflective. To develop this, practitioners are encouraged to speak with multiple

451   clients (e.g., coaches and players) about their experience of the team to broaden their

452   contextual knowledge and use contextual mapping (e.g., SPAM model; Brown et al., 2005) to

453   further develop this through purposeful observation. Indeed, in this case study, roundtable

454   reflections with fellow EPSG practitioners were crucial to developing a more complete

455   understanding of UG's team climate and therefore practitioners are encouraged to work in

456   teams or seek out peer support where possible. Being critically reflective of my pre-existing

457   knowledge base and having a willingness to drop, refine and add to this in light of new

458   contextual information was also crucial (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). Therefore, practitioners

459   are encouraged to contextualise their knowledgebase through self-reflection rather than

460   assume prior knowledge has sufficient relevancy to the context (Hacker & Mann, 2017).

461   Being my first time embedded in an esports team, and coming from an academy

462   football environment which was authoritative, structured and process driven, I brought with

463   me a planned and logical approach to practice that seemed at odds with the informal esports'

464   environment. Whilst the integration of structure and processes may have helped

465   counterbalance the informal UG culture, it was noticeable that players and coaches were not

466   used to, and therefore struggled to adhere to settled practices and processes (e.g., scheduled

467   meetings, workshops, reviewing KPIs). Once the competitive split became highly

468   pressurised, either due to performance losses or the high point of the competitive split, the

469   coaches and players gripped tighter to their spontaneous and autonomous working practices

470   making planned service delivery much harder to achieve. Therefore, it is recommended that

471   practitioners collaborate with the relevant stakeholders in an esport organisations to align

472   expectations over shared practices and discuss potential challenges to these. To enhance

473   players and coaches' commitment to settled processes (e.g., meetings), it may help to

474   introduce processes gradually, collaborate with them on their delivery format and keep a

475   flexible attitude towards how they can be best actualised, especially during high period of

476   performance pressure. Moreover, it felt ill-timed to work on changing a team culture during a

477   competitive split where coaches and players were under high pressure to perform (Eubank et

478   al., 2014). Preferably, team building interventions should be delivered outside of competition

479   time (e.g., pre-season) when players and coaches have more time and motivation to commit

480   to change (Swettenham & Whitehead, 2022). Therefore, practitioners are encouraged to

481   collaborate with the relevant stakeholders in the esport organisation to conclude on a service

482   delivery approach that is best aligned with the team's competitive schedule.

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590   **Figure 1**

591   *A Gantt Chart to show the timeline of key events during consultancy with UG.*

	29/11/2021	19/12/2021	08/01/2022	28/01/2022	17/02/2022	09/03/2022	29/03/2022
Contracting	6 days						
Pre-split		34 days					
Team workshops x 6						78 days	
Needs analysis			36 days				
One-to-one support							77 days
Competitive split					57 days		
Coach support meetings					52 days		
Mid-split review					7 days		
Needs analysis presented				1 day			
End-of-split review							7 days
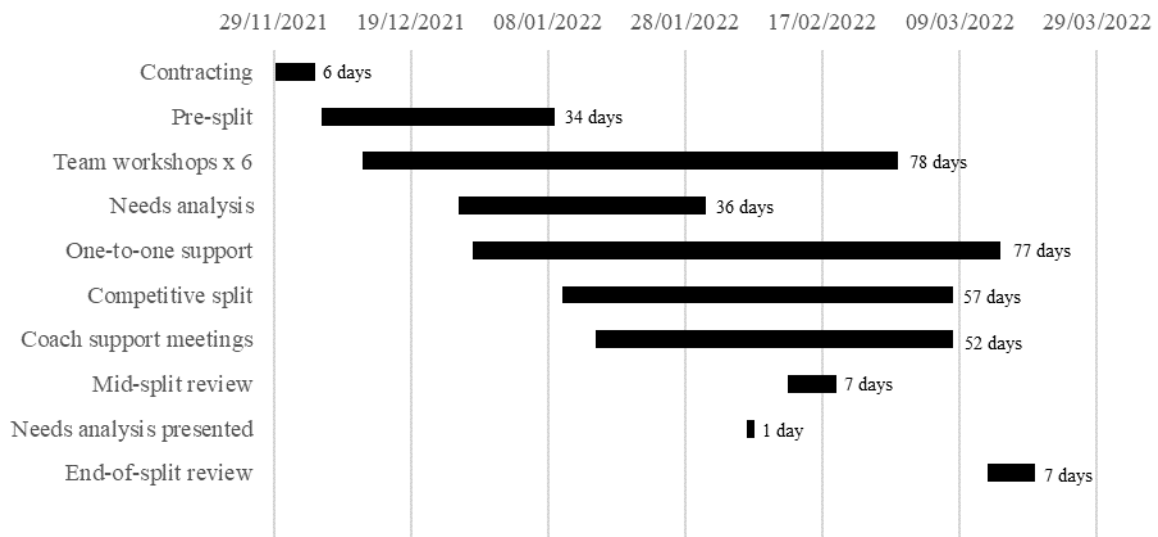
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595 **Table 1**

596 *A Four Ps Shared Case Formulation of UG's Needs.*

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Need	What? (*presenting*)	Why? (*predisposing*)	Why now? (*precipitating*)	Why continue? (*perpetuating*)	What to work with? (*protective*)
Team communication	Players' negative emotional contagion	Cliques in team creates low team resilience	Tactical disagreements between cliques heightens team tension	Interpersonal conflict is not addressed	Establish team norms and roles and responsibilities for in-game communication
Performance evaluation	Strong negativity bias in performance reviews	Little focus on performance process and a high challenge culture	Team underperforming and a strong negativity bias negatively reinforce each other	Coaches and player performance feedback is outcome and deficit focused	Support coaches to focus on team learning, player strengths and creating psychological safety
Player adjustment	Players struggle to adjust to moving into their new gaming house	Players believe the location and design of the gaming house does not meet their living requirements	Players worried about trialling a new playing setup with the pressure to perform in competition	UG staff not working with the players to tailor the gaming house to meet their living requirements	Individualise gaming house setup based on player needs
Teammate relationships	A low personal connection between players and staff	Players complain of clashes in "non-changeable" personality traits with teammates	Players refusing to make sacrifices for each other is stifling tactical flexibility	Players not being willing to work on their differences with each other	Create a greater emphasis on, and opportunities for, team bonding
Strategy consensus	Lack of player and coaching agreement on training methods	Different coaching philosophies and unclear communication between coaches	Team underperformances leading to more disagreements	Lack of communication system in place for coaches to plan and review their work	Facilitate collaborative discussion and agreement on roles and strategy amongst coaches

598 **Table 2**

599 *Intervention strategies guided by player resourcefulness*

Player	Problem	Strengths	Solutions	Underpinning theoretical position	Evidence-based strategies
1	Difficulty communicating personal needs to teammates and coaches	High emotional intelligence and Likes to act authentically	Has spoken up with teammates when sees it as personally important enough to do so	Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rolnick, 2012)	Elicit and amplify change talk on why improving communication is personally important (Mack et al., 2017)
2	Recent transition to the professional level has brought on increased self-doubt	Loves learning and rectifying weaknesses. Also has a supportive coach	Has an accurate self-assessment of his strengths and weaknesses to direct his learning focus	Achievement Goals Theory (Elliot & Conroy, 2005)	Facilitate a focus on mastery goals in training and work with coaches to highlight the player's strengths and areas to develop (Wikman et al., 2014)
3	Struggles to feel relaxed on match days	Likes to be self-disciplined and take a 'bigger picture' perspective on life	Takes care of personal needs on competition day (e.g., exercises to keep up appearance) so the outcome of the game feels less self-defining	Dualistic Model of Passion (Vallerand, 2012)	Encourage the player to commit to a range of personal values on match day (Henriksen, 2019)

600