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Athlete Lifestyle Support of Elite Youth Cricketers: An Ethnography of Player Concerns Within a National Talent Development Program

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Article

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Devaney, DJ, Nesti, MS, Ronkainen, NJ, Littlewood, MA and Richardson, DJ (2017) Athlete Lifestyle Support of Elite Youth Cricketers: An Ethnography of Player Concerns Within a National Talent Development Program. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology. ISSN 1041-3200

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Abstract

The 15-month ethnography reported here investigated the culturally and contextually relevant lifestyle concerns for which national level youth cricketers seek support, and the personal meanings ascribed to them. Players discussed lifestyle challenges and support, with five themes emerging: (1) players appreciating lifestyle support, (2) adapting to the new environment, (3) managing competing demands, (4) educational choices and professional contracts, (5) identity negotiation in critical moments. The challenges impacted players’ sense of self, wellbeing and ultimately performance. The findings suggest lifestyle practitioners should support players through counselling approaches, strong player relationships and environment immersion with a view to impacting performance.

Keywords: career transitions, ethnography, identity, sport psychology, lifestyle
Athlete lifestyle support of elite youth cricketers: An ethnography of player concerns within a national talent development programme

Research and literature within the area of career development and transitions has evolved considerably since early research investigating athlete retirement (see Mihovilovic, 1968; Ogilvie, 1987; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). This evolution has provided a view of career development and transitions that now adopts a lifespan perspective encouraging a focus on within career transitions as well as retirement, a more holistic approach to athlete career development and transitions (Wyllemann, Alferman, & Lavallee, 2004; Wyllemann, Reints, & De Knopp, 2013) and increased interest in dual career experiences of athletes’ combining an athletic career and academic study (e.g. Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2015).

With regard to youth athletes, there has been increased attention to dual career experiences, highlighting the challenges of finding an optimal balance between the demands of the athlete and student roles (e.g. McKenna & Dunstan-Lewis, 2004; Stambulova, Engstrom, Frank, & Linner, 2015) and identifying the costs and benefits of combining study and sport during adolescence (e.g. Jonker, Elferink-Gemser, & Visscher, 2009; Wyllemann, Reints, & Wanter, 2007; Aquilina, 2013). Research has also highlighted how the challenges of pursuing a dual career during development stages overlap with matters such as relationship challenges, life skill development, social life, identity (Tekavc, Wylleman, & Erpic, 2015), and how pursuing a dual career connects to an athlete’s sense of identity, purpose and wellbeing (O’Neill, Allen, & Calder, 2013). Further, Christensen and Sorensen (2009) highlighted the role of sport specific cultural factors, finding that although young footballers in their study worked hard to meet both their study and footballing demands, the underlying assumption within football culture emphasised the expectation that young footballers would show complete dedication to football, over and above other concerns, such as their education.
This often resulted in the early foreclosure of identity and a rejection of further educational development.

Aligned to these findings, there have been arguments for the delivery of holistic and ecological applied practice within talent development environments (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010). There have also been arguments for the mutual benefits of supporting performance and personal development simultaneously (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). This research has provided applied sport psychologists with a more complete understanding of the different areas of athletes’ whole lives and how transitions within these can overlap and interact at key stages along their career journey.

A wide variety of approaches a practitioner may take to transition intervention have been described, for example the Life Development Intervention (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1992; 1993; 1995), and Stambulova’s (2010) Five Step Career Planning Strategy. These approaches have generally emphasised the development of goal setting skills, as well as situating the present demands of an athlete between a past from which the athlete can learn lessons, and a future towards which the athlete is motivated to progress. Alongside these developments, athlete lifestyle programmes (sometimes referred to as career assistance or athlete life-skill programmes) such as the Career Assistance Programme for Athletes (CAPA) (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992), the United States Olympic Education Centre (USOEC) and the Australian Athlete Career and Education (ACE) programme, have been developed to help alleviate athletes’ anxieties regarding their future and prepare them for retirement from their sport and the pursuit of a new career. In the UK today, national sport institutes, for example, the England Institute of Sport (EIS) deliver the Performance Lifestyle programme to Olympic sports, and some professional sports. Other professional sporting bodies such as, the Welsh Rugby Union, have developed their own similarly aligned support services. In cricket, the Personal Development and Welfare programme (PDW) is currently
delivered by practitioners working for the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to the
England National teams, and a similarly aligned PDW programme delivered to professional
domestic county clubs by practitioners working for the Professional Cricketers Association (PCA).

There has been limited academic literature which has explicitly focused on the nature
of support provided by lifestyle programmes. However, Stambulova and Ryba (2014) acknowledged that there is great diversity in the “more than 60” programmes they have identified worldwide (p.7). Yet, they suggest that most often it is the sport psychology personnel who deliver these programmes with the primary focus on providing education, guidance and skills with a view to helping athletes prepare for life after sport and to help manage athletes’ demands outside of their sport.

There have been various accounts of what lifestyle support should look like, yet there has not been a description or analysis of what lifestyle practitioners actually do. The ECB’s Personal Development and Welfare Programme which is the context of the present inquiry, is described in official documents as providing: “integrated, impartial support to players and the team environment, to develop resilience in and out of cricket as a personalized service within the three areas of wellbeing, lifestyle and personal development” (ECB, 2017; see also EIS, 2017). This suggests that this organisation promotes a more immersed, relational, psychologically informed and performance oriented provision of support than is described in the academic literature. Moreover, in this particular institution, lifestyle support is not within the remit of sport psychologists, but a practitioner who might be an ex-athlete, or have a degree in a non-sport or non-psychology related field. Despite the diversity that is likely to exist also in other sport organisations, the most relevant guiding literature for lifestyle programmes has been conducted from a sport psychology perspective. This has created a lack of role clarity for both lifestyle practitioners and the sport psychology practitioners they work
alongside, and may have contributed to the portrayal of lifestyle support within the literature as focusing on practical skill development as rather than some of the more relational elements of the role.

Therefore, there is a need to better understand the actual practices of lifestyle practitioners and the contextually and culturally specific concerns for which elite athletes seek lifestyle practitioner support. Nurmi (2004) suggested that the adolescent years are the most critical for the formation of identity, development of cognitive motivational strategies and the social and organisational skills that may impact the educational choices and career aspirations of individuals. This suggests adolescence would provide a valuable context for such research. Due to a lack of previous research that uses methodology allowing for the presentation of athletes’ voices and capturing of their daily existence in specific contexts (Ronkainen, 2014), it is also felt that a focus on the personal meanings athletes bring to these lifestyle concerns is also necessary. Further, Stambulova and Ryba (2014) called for research aligned to career development, transitions and assistance which was more socio-culturally and contextually informed, as well as research which blend the applied and the theoretical.

Rather than focusing on a specific within-career transition, such as from youth to senior sport, the present study seeks to understand the daily existence and the holistic lifestyle concerns of youth cricketers embedded in a talent development environment. Using a practitioner-researcher ethnographic approach within a national talent development programme, our research was guided by two research objectives:

1. To understand the nature of contextually and culturally specific lifestyle concerns for which elite youth cricketers seek support, and the personal meaning they ascribe to them;
To gain an understanding of how athlete lifestyle support ought to be positioned within this context and at this stage of young cricketers lives.

Methodology

Theoretical positioning

The current study used an ethnographic approach to data collection, with the aim of understanding individuals’ experiences’ of lifestyle concerns within the broader context of a national cricket talent development programme. The philosophical underpinning of the study lies a in critical constructivist perspective (Richert, 2010). Critical constructivism maintains that the reality in which people live is constructed by the efforts of people to understand and make sense out of living. The distinction between social constructionism and critical constructivism is that the latter maintains that personal mental activity makes an important contribution to the reality that is constructed (Richert, 2010). In other words, both individual and social processes contribute to the construction of reality. The current study aligns with critical constructivism in trying to study how individuals make sense of their experiences and lifestyle challenges within a specific context and culture. By maintaining that the individual makes important contributions to the meaning-making process, this perspective allows for a more traditional concept of self as located within the individual. This approach subscribes to ontological realism (i.e. there is a world which is independent of our knowledge of it) combined with epistemological constructivism (i.e. our knowledge remains subjective and incomplete).

Participants

The talent development programme examined in this research consisted of two squads of players between the age of 15 and 19 who had been selected as players with the highest potential nationally within their respective skill areas. The participants in the study were
members of one of these squads. At the beginning of the research, there were 16 players in
the squad, 12 of whom were on their second year on the programme, and four were in their
first year. After 12 months, four players were deselected, and four new players joined the
programme. As such, members of the setting over the course of the research included 20
players selected from their First Class Counties (professional clubs playing national domestic
game who are awarded First Class status), and fourteen support staff including a head coach,
operations manager, six different skills coaches, two physiotherapists, two strength and
conditioning coaches, a performance analyst and a performance psychologist. Membership of
the programme involved attendance at residential domestic training camps, overseas
competitive and non-competitive tours and home competitive tours. The finer details of the
programme will be described later in the paper. Of the 20 players involved in this study, 16
were in full time secondary education throughout the period of data collection.

The Researcher and Reflexivity

It is often the mission of ethnographic research not to interfere with the environment
under study. The practitioner-researcher status simply did not allow for this. Indeed, I could
often be perceived as taking on the role of action-researcher, as data uncovered and
practitioner interventions became more and more interrelated over time. However, this was
deemed a symbiotic relationship as the insights derived from research improved player
support, and the improved relationships and trust aided the continued collection of data. Yet,
this increased the requirement for self-reflexivity throughout all stages of the research.

According to Day (2012), reflexivity concerns three interrelated issues. These are: 1) the
researcher underlying assumptions about knowledge production (epistemology), 2) issues of
power, researcher identity and positionality, and 3) reflexive techniques to produce good
quality, rigorous qualitative research. Schinke et al. (2012) further highlighted the importance
of self-reflexivity when fulfilling the role of both researcher and practitioner. Given the
practitioner-researcher approach in the present study, engagement with self-reflexivity is particularly important. It is considered appropriate to discuss how my own background, training and philosophical positioning may have contributed and shaped the research process.

I have completed a degree in Psychology, and a Master’s degree in Sport Psychology. Although I have a competitive background in both individual and team sports, I had no involvement within the game and culture of cricket, either as a player or a practitioner prior to entering the research setting. My experience as a sports performer provided me with an understanding of the experiences and challenges involved with youth talent development. However, I had no previous experience within cricket and entered the setting as a cultural outsider. Although this created challenges when entering the setting, it also provided me with a more critical perspective with regard to the cultural norms and daily practices for those operating within the sport. My approach as a practitioner is particularly grounded in humanistic and existential psychology where the individual’s existence and the experiential knowledge that they obtain in their pursuit of excellence are paramount with a particular focus on meaning, responsibility and freedom (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) I did not aim to begin the research process with a theoretical framework or set of research questions to answer. However, I did bring a sensitivity and curiosity for what I would understand as psycho-social and cultural challenges and lifestyle-based concerns. This will inevitably have been influenced by a number of factors, most significantly my educational background and philosophy of practice, and what Day (2012) referred to as the researchers theoretical traditions and perspectives as well as methodological practices.

My philosophy of practice will have shaped my interactions with staff and players as a practitioner and in doing so shape the nature of data which was co-created through these interactions. I will also have interpreted the players experience and identified their lifestyle-based challenges through this lens. This placed a high value on my practitioner reflection and
the role of the research team as critical friends (Smith & Sparkes, 2002) to challenge my interpretations and some of the biases which inform them. Further, my educational background in psychology and sport psychology means that I effectively performed the role of lifestyle practitioner from a holistic sport psychology perspective. However, this is not the only training route for lifestyle practitioners. Therefore my interpretation of what concerns players faced may contrast with the interpretation of practitioners who possess an alternative training background. Consistent with the paradigmatic positioning of the study, the findings ought to be viewed as one insight into the lifestyle experiences of elite youth cricketers, from the perspective of a practitioner-researcher with a specific philosophy of practice and educational background. Finally, use of “I”, “me” or “my” will refer to the first author throughout the remainder of the manuscript, whilst “we” will denote the research team (Tedlock, 2000; Foley, 2002).

Procedure

I entered the setting as an ethnographic outsider (Ely, 1991), which can provide a challenge in gaining entry. However, my role as PDW practitioner allowed for a seamless and natural entry, establishment of trust and familiarisation with the participants. The dual-role of researcher and practitioner was deemed to be symbiotic, given the requirement for strong practitioner-player relationships, confidentiality and trust to succeed in both. However, it placed considerable importance on my commitment to maintaining a diary of personal reflections. Practitioner-researcher ethnography of this nature has occurred previously (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999; Peters, McAllister, & Rubinstein, 2001a). Similarly, Peters et al. (2001a) reflected that the approach was to the benefit of their research in cancer care as for them, simply hanging out and observing waiting rooms in a cancer clinic would be highly challenging and awkward otherwise.
My role as a PDW practitioner involved the development, delivery and case management of individual and group support for the squad. This included pro-active academic support and group education as well as one-to-one support that were more player-led and emergent in nature. Over a 15 month period, I attended eight residential training camps, ranging from 3 to 10 days, a home competitive series, an overseas competitive series, an overseas development camp and provided occasional support for players outside of the programme activity. I was based at the main development headquarters consisting of practice areas and residential accommodation, typically 5 days per week. This allowed for a uniquely practitioner based approach to the research, while still drawing on ethnographic research principles. For example, when not delivering support to players or coaches, the first author was fully immersed within the environment, allowing for a more typical ethnographic position of hanging out and observing events as they unfolded (Woodward, 2008).

Data Collection

Observations of the setting, daily practices within the programme and the sport more broadly, and of the day-to-day lives of players, provided the backbone to the ethnographic research process (Ely, 1991). These were supplemented by informal conversations with players and staff and formal conversations occurring through my activity as a practitioner within the setting. Notable moments and interactions were written down in a notepad in the form of keyword entries (Krane & Baird, 2005) as soon as possible after they occurred, but normally away from the scene. Observations and conversations were then captured fully in the form of a research log (Krane & Baird, 2005), typically at the end of each day of engagement and never more than 24 hours after the original observation (Emerson, Frets, & Shaw, 1995). These entries were then supported by practitioner-researcher reflective diary entries, during which I could attempt to make sense of key observations, conversations and their implications (Krane & Baird, 2005). My reflections occurred regularly after periods of
time with the squad, and on a more ad-hoc basis. All data extracts presented are taken from field notes, capturing the scenes and conversations that occurred. Although this meant capturing data from memory, it was felt that audio recording dialogue would have jeopardised the relationship development with participants and would have been at odds with the practitioner role delivery.

Assuming a critical constructivist perspective to achieve the purpose of the research, the focus of data collection was on how individuals experienced and made sense of their lifestyle concerns, but also how this was shaped by the broader cultural and contextual factors associated with membership of the programme, and the sport. Initially, my focus was quite broad capturing what daily life looked like for players. As relationships developed and the breadth of experiences became clearer, daily life began to provide the backdrop against which more individually relevant concerns played out. In that sense, the observational lens narrowed from the contextual and cultural, towards locating individual experience within these. The research team acted as “critical friends” (Sparkes & Smith, 2002) throughout data collection and analysis, challenging the first author to discuss the interpretations and methodological concerns as they arose. For example, this included helping to position the data within theoretical frameworks, appropriately challenging and/or focusing the first author’s observational lens, and negotiation of arising ethical dilemmas as a result of the practitioner-researcher role.

Data Analysis and Representation

Data analysis was based on a qualitative description approach (Sandelowski, 2000). In this sense, although data coding was systematically applied, the codes were generated from the data themselves, with collection and analysis mutually shaping each other (Sandelowski, 2000). Thematic analysis was completed, in alignment with guidance provided by Braun and
Clarke (2006). This involved: (1) familiarisation through repeated reading whilst searching for meaning and patterns amongst the data, (2) generating initial codes and organising data into meaningful groups, (3) sorting different codes into potential themes and collating extracts from the data into themed groups, (4) reviewing themes in line with Patton’s (1990) dual criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, (5) defining and naming themes before (6) using data extracts to produce the report. These steps allowed for the organisation of themes within the three groups. These were: player concerns; programme factors; and PDW support factors. Player concerns were the primary focus of the research and therefore provided the themes for presentation within the manuscript. However, the broader programme factors and PDW support factors played a secondary role in helping to position the discussion of the themes presented in this paper within the broader context and culture.

The data analysis allowed for description and interpretation of player lifestyle concerns within their specific context with an attempt to theorise patterns of description (Patton, 1990) with regard to previous literature (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) and the researcher’s contextual awareness.

**Ethical considerations**

This study was approved by the University ethics committee and the programme manager was identified as an appropriate gatekeeper to provide consent to overt research access to the programme. This was facilitated by the researcher’s entry to the setting as a new practitioner within the staff team. All members of the setting were provided with a verbal briefing of the practitioner-researcher’s role, aims of the research, data collection procedures and were offered assurances regarding anonymity and confidentiality. Players and staff were also informed that they maintained the option to withdraw from participation at any time. However, no participants opted out of research at any point throughout the study.
Ethics can be a complicated subject when it comes to conducting ethnographic research, due to the unpredictable nature of the work (Goodwin, Pope, Mort, & Smith, 2003; Ferdinand, Pearson, Rowe, & Worthington, 2007). There were a number of ethical dilemmas to negotiate during the study. One concern was that despite the overt research stance, it was felt that participants came to view me more as a practitioner than a researcher as trust and rapport was developed over time. This could have resulted in participants sharing a level of information not intended to be included in the research. However, I was open about my research work and players frequently saw me carrying out research work within the setting. They frequently asked me about the purpose and progress of the research I was doing with them. Further, it is important to appreciate that when players disclosed concerns to me, such as feeling homesick, struggling to meet expectations or not knowing what to do after finishing secondary school, it became my responsibility to support them as a practitioner, ensuring a mutual benefit and thereby reducing the power imbalance inherent in research settings. In general, when working within the applied setting, I felt that the ethical practice as a practitioner equated to good ethical practice as a researcher, for example, non-judgemental support, a primary focus on player welfare and confidentiality. However, it was also explained to participants that what was considered confidentiality in practice would be considered anonymity in research.

Findings and discussion

What follows is the practitioner-researcher’s tale of the “self” and the “other”, whilst trying not to let the “self” dominate and allow the “other”, in this case the players collective story of cultural and contextually relevant lifestyle concerns and the personal meaning ascribed to them, to be presented. The first section offers a description of the environment that the players experienced on the development programme before presenting the players’ experience of support and the lifestyle concerns they required support for. Pseudonyms are
used for participants throughout the discussion. The data extracts represent one individual’s experiences at a given time, however, the narrative attempts to recreate a holistic view of experience which is representative of what any individual may experience in the programme at a point in time.

**Entering the national development programme**

I met the staff team the night before the first day of a camp, referred to as profiling and used as a means of gaining an understanding of the players’ strengths and areas to work on for the coming winter. At the pre-camp meeting, I was initially struck by the high number of staff involved (14 people sitting around the table), their attention to detail and their demanding standards. I attempted to control my emotions and wondered if players struggle to control theirs during their first taste of the environment. However, I sensed that staff seemed to buy in to the idea of supporting players on and off the pitch through their descriptions of the players’ home life, previous struggles and character. Over time, I often heard staff state that they aimed to uphold ‘unashamedly high standards’ through ‘high challenge and high support’ where players would learn to understand the demands of their aspirations as potential international cricketers. What this meant in practice became clearer at the following training camp. It was a 10-day, very intense training camp right at the end of the post-season break. The goal was to provide a level of ‘culture shock’ regarding what was expected and demanded, through exposure to levels of training and performance under pressure that players would not have experienced before.

The content of days on camp included strength and conditioning sessions, various skill development sessions, and classroom sessions normally with a performance psychology, personal development or tactical theme. Player schedules also included academic study sessions of up to 2 hours per day to compensate for the time missed at school. Players could use their spare time to benefit from any specialist staff support if they wished. Everyone
would eat together, train together, study together and enjoy their limited downtime together
in what is an incredibly immersive experience, often including 6.30am alarm calls, and ten to
twelve hour days with performance and behaviour demands right on the edge of the players’
capabilities.

Players were held accountable for a high level of performance. Training would follow
a cyclical pattern of developing skills, training under pressure and being tested under pressure
in specific scenarios. From a behavioural point of view, coaches told me that they expected
players to hold a high level of professionalism, including time keeping, having the right kit at
the right time and taking responsibility for tidying the environment. Failure to meet
behavioural or performance demands could result in “consequences” such as a 5-minute
physical challenge for performance shortcomings. For committing a “behavioural” faux pas
such as arriving late to a session, the culprit may be required to clean everyone’s dishes after
lunch or may not be allowed to take part in training. Staff sought to lead by example and
create enthusiasm for the challenging nature of the programme. For example, it soon became
obvious that consequences could also be delivered to any staff member, all in pursuit of
“unashamedly high standards”. Beyond these camps, there were overseas tours, lasting from
two to four weeks, aimed at exposing players to competition and playing conditions beyond
what they had experienced before and which would challenge them in all aspects of the
game; hence maximising their development and enhancing their ability to “tour” successfully.

For players, the programme represented a new environment to balance with their first
class county academy or professional programmes, their educational aspirations and in many
cases, their ambitious school cricket programmes or scholarships, all while striving to
maintain a social balance with families and friends. The dual role of student and cricketer
meant missing many days of school, sometimes sitting mock exams in foreign countries and
carrying out two-hour study sessions in hotels and press rooms on tour before returning to the
UK to prepare for exams during the early cricket season. Alongside these unique demands on players, the programme was committed to developing players on and off the field, respecting the player’s educational aspirations, assisting players in the delivery of a charity project overseas and seeking to support the welfare of players through the performance psychologist and the personal development and welfare practitioners.

**Players Appreciating Lifestyle Support**

On the first morning of profiling camp, I met each player formally for the first time. I was surprised by their readiness to engage and discuss concerns that they currently had. This seemed to reflect their respect and appreciation for the PDW role and their enthusiasm to develop a relationship from the off. Kieron, arrived into his first meeting with me, and without introduction announced his recent frustrations and need for support:

I really need to speak to you…I have just moved to a new school and the difference in schools is just crazy. I was at a state school before, and the expectations of people there are so different. I am not sure I really fit in, or am even cut out for boarding [school] to be honest. I changed because it is a great school, better logistically for everything really, and I guess it is a good training environment for my cricket. But I have been missing home a lot and I have not really settled.

The coaches had suggested that players often responded very differently to the array of challenges that lay ahead, and that the player’s response would play a key role in furthering, or stifling their development. However, this first insight highlighted how the array of challenges would include the private and personal, and not just cricket. Kieron was struggling to adapt to his new life at a new school and was expressing a sense of loneliness, isolation and homesickness. It also highlighted how the personal and the performance were strongly interrelated for players as personal decisions were taken for the sake of cricket
development. Craig later recognised the importance of the off-the-field factors and the value of having the PDW to talk to about “problems”, as a player may feel the need to separate the personal from cricket so that their lives are not seen as interfering with performance:

I think it’s really good having a PDW. It gives you someone to talk to about the stuff that you can’t really tell the coach. Stuff that you don’t want them [the coaches] to know, or what you think if they did know, they might think of not playing you. Like stuff about school, or problems that you have, or even if you are really tired and are just struggling to keep going!

In their work with young footballers, Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) suggested that although it is the performance agenda that will attract coaches to the idea of psychological support for young athletes, they state that successful practice is “held together” by the practitioners “capacity to care” which embraced the self-awareness and empathic qualities that engender compassion. They also suggested that a symbiotic relationship exists between the performance and caring agendas. Rob, a second year player, summarised this relationship very simply:

I think it is one of the most important roles to be honest. If you don’t have that (PDW support) some people could really struggle…I would even say it is linked to performance. The stuff you (PDW) help us with is not performance, but by helping us it directly helps…by me being on top of everything else and my mind being in the right place, I can then go out and play. But if not, it can be really hard.

Rob’s comments suggest that there are no non-performance factors, just some areas of support that influence performance (perhaps) less directly than others. Although there is a growing awareness of the value of supporting both the person and the athlete (Ravizza, 2002; Nesti, 2004), this is not currently represented in all research or practice. There is
overwhelmingly more research investigating the psychological elements of successful skill delivery, than research investigating how supporting athletes on a more personal level can contribute to both wellbeing and performance. Further, there has been no previous literature that has discussed the relationship and overlap between support of a lifestyle nature and a performance psychology nature. The player discussions cited earlier would appear to suggest that the divide between the two is more blurred than support infrastructures and current literature seems to suggest.

When talking to players, I was struck by the value many players placed on developing a trusting relationship with me from the outset. Kieron, openly shared the depth of his struggles and his perceived importance of the PDW role when he had first joined the programme:

At times last year I was coming into PDW meetings in tears. I used to really struggle. It took time to be able to speak about it [personal issues] as well, like at first she [PDW] would have been asking me a lot of quite touchy feely questions, but I didn’t really want to talk about that stuff with someone I didn’t know or trust yet. But once I could, it was a lot easier and you begin to feel better and be yourself a bit more. I hope that with time together on the programme, I can show you that trust as well.

Kieron identified the difficulty, and value of discussing issues of a personal and emotive nature without a strong trusting relationship in a highly competitive, unforgiving and rather masculine high performance environments (see Parker, 2001). Nesti (2004) stated that such a strong relationships allowed for what he referred to as, ‘the encounter’ to occur, where both parties are at ease and can converse freely, yet the nature of the conversation is intense and focused. Nesti (2010) stressed how this should not be mistaken for simply a conversation as it has a clear aim, which is clarification of the issues at play. This important element of
counselling (Nesti, 2004) is missing from descriptions of lifestyle support roles within the literature, which has instead focused on the more practical elements of the role, like career guidance or educational support. Further, as discussions of practitioner philosophies of practice (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004) and of counselling approaches (Hill, 2000) for sport psychology practitioners have emerged, this has not been applied to athlete lifestyle practice.

Adapting to the new environment

The “high challenge and high support” programme approach appeared to be embraced by many players who had learned how to cope and access the “high support”. For those who hadn’t, or for new members of the group, the high-octane, action packed milieu could be overwhelming. Players’ sense of being overwhelmed could relate to physical demands, organisational demands or behavioural demands. It was further fuelled by the level of emotional investment which players attached to their place on the programme and the demand to meet expectations in order to maintain it. One evening, John, a coach, highlighted that George may be struggling to cope during his first week in the programme:

He has had a bit of a wobble today, after a tough session he just got a bit emotional and said he wasn’t sure if he was cut out for this. He has done ok, he has just been hit with a few consequences and his technique has been a bit exposed at times. He might need a chat [with you], just to break the ice a bit. He has had a really tough introduction this week and he won’t be used to this level of demand.

There was minimal judgement from this coach, just empathy with the challenge the player was facing and how important him overcoming this would be for his long-term development. George shared his shock at the intensity of the programme, and his investment in the programme:
I am not really used to this type of environment, the intensity, and judgement and consequences. So it has just been quite hard to take in the first week. It’s tough because I have had to make a commitment to cricket and drop rugby which has been a tough decision, but I still think it is the right decision, I guess this is just what I need to do, I just need to get used to it and get better.

George appeared to doubt his ability to compete at this higher level. He also shared that he also had to make a decision with regard to what sport to focus on as a result of his selection. His difficult experiences early in the programme appeared to create a sense of doubt about whether he had made the right decision, probably one of the first life decisions he had been required to take regarding his future.

George’s description of his challenges in adapting to the new levels of performance expectation are consistent with what Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourn and Richardson (2010) termed as the “developing mastery” stage of development for football players. Relvas et al. (2010) outlined this stage of development in a critique of previous developmental models of transition as lacking the contextual details and specificity critical to better understand the unique social and cultural features within many sports. Relvas et al. (2010) suggested that players in this stage had already progressed through the development stage of Wylleman et al. (2004) transition model, yet lacked the attributes and experiences to be considered the finished or polished article and still required focused and continued development work. The transition to the national development programme in the current study undoubtedly involved a similar step up in performance expectations for players, and in the level of performance which may be tolerated. There were still contextual differences from Relvas et al.’s (2010) football participants, in that these young cricketers had stepped up to a new level in International youth cricket, but not necessarily a step towards a professional role at their counties. However, the players in this study did still experience what Relvas et al.
(2010) labelled social insecurity and comparison on a psychological level, new coaches on a psycho-social level and uncertainty and isolation on an environmental and cultural level.

Players’ experiences of adapting to the programme appeared to align with what Bourke (2002) referred to as a form of culture shock, a psychological phenomenon which may lead to feelings of helplessness, irritability and disorientation which players would have to accept and learn to cope with in order to keep progressing. Finding a way to endure the malaise that could accompany the personal demands of balancing these multiple roles could begin to have an effect both when on camps, and when at home as Jack revealed:

Yeah, I have been really tired, more worn out I suppose...like I never have time to just sit and chill for a bit...and even here (at the development centre) actually, sometimes when you get back, you can feel like you need to just chill or else you will not get to sleep, you just need a break...when we finish late like we have done for the last couple of days, it can really knock you off...you almost get energised by having a little down time, or even a game of pool, just having a laugh.

Jack’s personal sacrifices resulted in fatigue, and a lifestyle which was significantly different from his adolescent peers, similarly to professional golfers in Carless and Douglas’s study (2009). However, for them, golf was already a professional career. Jack was describing how cricket was at risk of feeling like a job, even though it wasn’t a career yet, and there were still many areas of typical adolescent development unfinished, both educationally and socially.

For other players, including Kieron, the time spent away from home, on tours or long training camps and away from those people close to them provided a particular challenge:

Last year I found it really tough because the first half of the tour is all training and then its matches. And when I reached the halfway point last year, I just couldn’t see how I would reach the end...I had a few conversations actually with the PDW, and
Kieron explained how, on a personal level, the programme was really challenging him, yet, it was important for him to persevere as the career he wanted would require him becoming much more comfortable and able to spend large parts of his life living like this.

In their study on the development of mental toughness at one of the biggest soccer clubs in the world, Cook, and colleagues (Cook, Crust, Littlewood, Nesti, & Allen-Collinson, 2014) described how coaches sought to foster independence and resourcefulness within their players. Given the demands of the young cricketers in this study these are certainly two characteristics that players are required to possess (or acquire) in order to successfully navigate their way through the programme. However, one coach, Gerard recounted that it was the challenge for the coaching team to recognise where each individual was ‘developmentally’ with regard to coping with these demands and identify how the coaches and support team, could help these players to evolve:

Basically, we are asking these guys to behave like adults. With where they want to go, there is no shame in that, because I think that is what they need, but sometimes we have to remember that they are still teenagers, some only 16, and they will not always be ready for that developmentally. For me that is a constant tension in the programme, balancing their demands, our education of them and the challenges we put in place with where they are in terms of their individual development.

Without attention to the personal stories and challenges that sat behind observable behaviour, there was a risk of coaches misjudging the lived experience of the player who in the context of their development might be showing significant toughness in persevering through tough challenges even when they might not necessarily appear to be. Current literature describes
athlete lifestyle programmes as predominantly helping athletes with life skill development or career and education guidance (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). However, these findings suggest that practitioners may find themselves more often supporting challenges which are more personal, psychological and emotional in nature. This suggests that the positioning of support provision ought to prioritise the ability to support issues of this nature, as should the desired skills and knowledge of practitioners performing the role.

Managing competing demands

Players, who were selected to the programme, were required to take on this new commitment alongside what was already a considerable investment of time. They would now be required to balance school, county cricket training, their social lives, their family lives and this significant commitment involved with joining national development programme. Soon after being selected onto the programme, I as PDW organised a meeting for players who are in full time education at their school. For Simon, a first year player, this brought him together with his parents, representatives from his county cricket club, representatives from the school and me. We met to ensure that everyone understood the commitments necessary when joining the programme and discussed plans to cope with the weeks of missing school whilst away on tour. The conversation would often divert towards discussion of skill development and cricketing needs, the different coaches he would be working with and how his training needs could be met around his class times. This often required further input of even more members of the players’ support network. I considered how aligned these stakeholders could actually be in supporting the player.

Similar to what Richardson, Gilbourne and Littlewood (2004) observed in football academies, these young cricketers were exposed to a high number of significant development stakeholders. This created a risk of the players hearing mixed or conflicting messages, or
having to work to maintain contact with staff across a range of environments. This was viewed by players and staff as having the potential to be detrimental for player development. Brian, a physiotherapist commented on the programmes occasional need to simply clarify and bring together the variety of messages players received, rather than add to them:

You think of these players, the number of people with an invested interest in them is insane. You have the academy director, academy S&C, academy physio and academy bowling or batting coach. Then you have the second team staff, maybe the first team, maybe school cricket staff and then you add out programme staff, plus parents who are obviously at the centre. So you are looking at about 17 or maybe even 22 people if the player is at a cricket school…If we can get everyone pulling in the same direction it might work, but if they are pulling in different directions, it just becomes very hard for the player.

The potential incongruence between different stakeholders across different environments was perceived as potentially anxiety-provoking by several players. Rob, a player in his second year on the programme shared his worries about possessing the level of independence required in order to maintain positive relationships with the different staff. For example, players may have to report training loads and injuries to a number of physiotherapists in different environments which may include school, county or the national programme. Alternatively, they may need to clarify what they should do in response to receiving conflicting advice from coaches in their county and national programmes. Further, the requirement to meet the demands of all staff began to create pressure and stress for players, as they felt the need to keep all these stakeholders happy:

I have been feeling quite overwhelmed recently. I have a lot on my plate with school, the programme and then having changed clubs. That has led to a lot of things to be
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done. It feels like I have just been making one big mistake every day. Basically
making someone angry every day, and I have really been worrying, like worrying that
I have done something wrong or forgotten to do something I should.

Coaches are one of the most important actors within a youth sport context and play an
influential role in either facilitating or hindering the development of young athletes (Camire,
Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011). Therefore, it is no surprise that for players, maintaining a
positive relationship with their coach(es) is thought to be highly important. However, it was
striking that as the number of stakeholders’ rose, this relationship could also become a source
of stress, with players like Rob worrying that he was letting others down by not meeting his
commitments rather than seeing the network as a source of support. Reid, Stewart and Thorne
(2004) recognised the importance of developing a highly functioning multi-disciplinary team.
However, there remains no discussion of the challenges of multiple teams working with a
player, perhaps with different approaches or philosophies. Relvas et al. (2010) acknowledged
the challenge of maintaining consistency in approach, communication and culture between
first team and academy structures within football clubs. Players in the current study operated
across anything from two to four cricket environments, in addition to school and home
environments. This appeared to have the potential to impact the coach-athlete relationship
and their subsequent working dynamics, something not discussed in the literature.

The players’ attempts to manage relationships with such a high number of coaching
staff often appeared a stressful and dysfunctional dynamic where players could be left
wondering who they need to keep happy and confused by what could appear to be conflicting
messages. The potential for players to feel insecure and confused amidst this need to keep
others happy appeared to present a risk to players as they struggled to maintain a sense of
personal authenticity (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). As Guignon (1993, p. 227) suggested,
everyday existence may become “fragmented into a series of means-end strategies governed
by the latest public attitudes about what constitutes success”. In this case, the “public” refers to the coaches and stakeholders within the various environments that the players perform. This could impact the players developing sense of self (Nesti, 2004), place their identity in a state of flux (Richardson, Relvas, & Littlewood, 2013) and negatively influence their ability to take responsibility for their own development, both as people, and performers.

Somewhat paradoxically, coaches discussed their desire to encourage players to take responsibility for their development, as Gerard recognised:

The guys who are really on route to making it, are the ones who are driving their own development, they are strong enough to challenge the coaches…they are taking the lead. They are independent, whereas the opposite is someone who is just hearing it, doing bits here, doing bits there, no real direction from them…I think a large part of our role, is trying to encourage that [empowerment], create independence.

The coaching staff made efforts to tackle the challenge of aligning player support across different environments. However, the number of differing support options offered to the players often resulted in a disconnection between how coaches wanted players to develop independence and a sense of responsibility, and the players feeling the need to please those overseeing their development.

**Education Choices and Professional Contracts**

At any time, players’ education commitments were viewed by coaches and players as welcome intellectual stimulation, a backup plan, or as something which simply got in the way of playing cricket. Typically, there was respect for the value of gaining an academic grounding on which players could fall if needed. This resulted in prioritisation of practical educational support and most players completing secondary qualifications successfully.
However, players often remained unsure regarding further education and its value beyond secondary qualifications, as was highlighted by Jack:

I mean I have never really thought about university before, but I have started to now, just because you don’t know if you are going to get a contract or not. So I will apply, but if I get a contract I will turn down the place, it is just in case I get released, everything really hinges on the contract.

Conversations with players on the subject of education often reflected their hesitations of discussing the prospect of not getting the career in professional cricket that they want. At times, there was confusion in terms of what they “are supposed to do?” regarding educational decisions. As such, Henry’s idea of “taking a gap year to focus on my cricket” appeared to become code for “I need to try and earn a contract and I am not sure how going to university might affect this”.

However, for Conor, it was a more complex decision given his academic ability, his upbringing and his concern regarding the impression it could give:

For me, I can’t see me not going to University, because of my up-bringing; it’s just really a question of what is the right time? I am quite keen on going to University, but there are some problems with that…Do you have to compromise cricket or your education, because I really don’t want to do that. Also how does it play into county consideration, being available to play or being noticed and considered by the coach?

The players in this study placed significant importance on their education as they looked to balance educational demands with the demands of the programme. This appears to contrast with findings from other professional team sports, such as football where Richardson (2003) suggested that the “seductive nature of the football environment may dilute the desire for educational development” (p-58) after signing a one or two-year professional contract. In
contrast, cricket has long been recognised for its middle-class culture and close affiliation with independent schools (Tozer, 2012). This was reflected in Conor’s reference to his family upbringing when considering his university options. Further, cricketers in this study were planning for the future and open to discussing their educational plans either as a dual-career or as a back-up plan in case they did not receive a professional contract. This also contrasted with findings from football (Christensen & Sorensen, 2009) in that for many players, their educational aspirations were afforded significance and the requirement in the future for a full commitment to cricket or education did provide a troubling dilemma which they would have to confront. This said, the cricketers were still worried about the perception that going to university might create among coaches. Moreover, education was still often viewed by players and coaches as an ethical responsibility and back-up plan as opposed to something which may offer the individual a life project, creating a more rounded sense of identity that would subsequently limit the risk of identity foreclosure and its negative impacts (Pummel, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008). This seems an important point given Nurmi’s (2004) portrayal of how important the adolescent years are.

The current findings suggest that elite youth cricketers develop within a socio-cultural landscape that is relatively supportive of players pursuing both secondary education and cricket. However, the players’ decisions regarding further education were heavily influenced by their contract status and the beliefs of coaches who acted as gatekeepers to a professional career. A further challenge for these young athletes is that in cricket, unlike many Olympic sports (Aquilina, 2013), going to the university is not typically seen as a mutually beneficial part of the developmental pathway, but as a separate pursuit. The current findings highlight the socio-cultural differences between sports and the impact this has on athletes career and dual-career decisions. This will inevitably influence athlete support needs within different socio-cultural landscapes.
Identity negotiation in critical moments

Given Nurmi’s (2004) portrayal of adolescence, it must be acknowledged that the challenges, career decisions and defining moments previously described occur during a phase of life which is itself transitional in nature. It could be argued that the magnitude of this developmental transition from adolescence to adulthood is somewhat understated within the transition literature, particularly with regard to identity negotiation and development. For Kieron, the need to negotiate identity in the face of challenge came in recognising that the perception his peers have of him is inconsistent with who he felt he wanted to be, and who he was previously:

You see, I have been a captain in everything else I have done prior to this, at my county, at my school, but now I realise that because of my character, because people do not see me as someone who can be serious, I will never be captain in this environment… I think it came from when I first joined the programme, I felt like an outsider, there was a big group from just a couple of counties and I think I realised that using my comedy was a way for me to be accepted and to get in with the group, so I just kept on doing that.

Many coaches commented on the struggle players have in finding their feet, and learning to simply be themselves within national squads. They reflected that this seemed to be a barrier to them playing freely and eventually proving themselves to be capable of playing at that level. However, given the players investment in cricket, this often created a personal cost too, both during time on the programme and in their broader lives. Kieron, having already shared his struggle to be himself in this environment, later went on to highlight the struggle of another player in his first year on the programme:
He just doesn’t seem comfortable here…because I captained him before, and he wasn’t like this, and I think that’s maybe why he isn’t performing as well as he can. It’s like one of those two things needs to happen first, you need to get a performance and then you feel comfortable, or you feel comfortable and then you can perform.

The players concerns were interrelated with significant career transitions, for example, entering the national level programme or finishing secondary education and entering professional cricket. However, the concerns players described fit better with what Nesti and Littlewood (2011) referred to as “critical moments” which need to be viewed in the context of transitions, rather than just the specific transitions themselves. Nesti & Littlewood (2011) suggested that a critical moment could range from something to nothing, could be large or small, intended or unintended and may have a negative or positive effect on a person’s sense of self (self-awareness and self-knowledge). In other words, they are the frequently experienced moments in our lives where we must confront the anxiety associated with an important change in our identity. Critical moments may include a player’s recognition of what is expected from them in order to be successful in the programme, or the experience of struggling to maintain a positive relationship with a number of coaches. From an existential perspective, the anxiety associated with critical moments is not simply the result of the impending need to perform, but the uncertainty of the player’s current situation, as well as the responsibility and freedom to act. From an existential view, to live authentically is to face this anxiety, be true to oneself and act according to one’s core beliefs and values (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). These cricketers were faced with demanding situations beset with uncertainty that require a responsibility to act, but within an environment which made authentic decisions challenging, leaving their sense of identity in a state of flux. As has been suggested, the existential element of career development has remained absent from the literature. Instead, discussion of support for athletes tends to revolve around barriers to transition, coping
techniques and mental skills. There is limited discussion of supporting athletes with a holistic approach focusing on their identity negotiation throughout adolescence despite the fact that this would appear to provide an important addition to ensure support for the whole athlete experience.

The concept of critical moments better recognises the dynamic environments that the young cricketers operate in and the potential for seemingly mundane day-to-day events to hold significant influence over their development. It also helps emphasise that challenging moments within the career are not inherently negative experiences and may actually provide an exciting opportunity for personal growth, self-awareness development and the development of existential courage (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). However, the potential to see personal challenge as an opportunity for growth, self-awareness and development is something inherent to an existential philosophy of practice as opposed to a suggestion that tough experiences could instead be somehow reframed for athletes as nice, or pleasant. For example, Mike, who particularly struggled with the level of structure and discipline required on the programme, reflected that although going through the challenge had been really difficult, he had learned a lot about himself with regard to the negative impact of a lack of discipline:

I obviously have had a few events…where I have lost it. But I think it is good, the coaches all really held the line with me, and I think I need that. I have never had that. I need to learn to just get on with these things if I am going to be part of squads in the future… I think I have learnt a lot about myself and some of the things that I struggle with, but it was hard

Other players reflected that with the right support, certain skills, such as organisation and time management were learned through necessity created by the challenge of managing
demands. Players also acknowledged the value of gaining clarity over what they want to become, when faced with tension created as a result of uncertainty and identity negotiation.

**Conclusions**

The first research objective was to understand the nature of contextually and culturally specific lifestyle concerns for which elite youth cricketers seek support, and the personal meaning they ascribe to them. Participants discussed the value of being supported with experiences which were personal, psychological and emotional in nature which were related to their on-going negotiation of challenges within and outside of cricket. This is in contrast to the sometimes ambiguous and practical support highlighted previously in athlete lifestyle programme research (Wylleman et al. 2004; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). This support was viewed as being instrumental in maintaining wellbeing and improving performance. There also appeared to be a disconnect between coaches desire for players to develop independence, freedom and choice, and the players experiences of feeling constrained by cultural practices in their attempts to do so. The concerns appear to fit the concept of critical moments more so than transitional challenges, due to their everyday nature, their requirement for identity negotiation and their potential to lead to growth and development in players. The second research objective was to gain an understanding of how athlete lifestyle support ought to be positioned within this context, and at this stage of young cricketer’s lives. Supporting these concerns requires the development of deep and meaningful practitioner-player relationships, trust and confidentiality as well as a perspective of the practitioner as being somewhat removed from the performance agenda. This appears to create a paradox between the perception that lifestyle concerns are removed from the performance agenda, and the realisation that lifestyle issues, and lifestyle support are often explicitly linked to performance. Through these findings, this study fills a gap in the literature regarding the nature of concerns for which elite youth cricketers (and perhaps other athletes) may seek
support from lifestyle practitioners. This provides greater direction regarding what practitioners will be required to do in practice. These findings have important implications for research, sporting organisations and individual practitioners.

In order to ensure that athlete lifestyle support meets player’s needs, we suggest that lifestyle practitioners be immersed within the performance environment as opposed to on the periphery of the support infrastructure. This position has been proposed before by Anderson and Morris (2000). However, it is still recognised that such an immersive approach is not readily embraced or prioritised by such environments (and their budgetary constraints). We also argue that the value of psychological knowledge and counselling approaches may be worth embracing more explicitly than they currently are in lifestyle support, and have indicated that counselling which draws on existential psychology can be applicable with young athletes when they strive to form authentic life goals and identities. The findings also suggest a need to shift the athlete lifestyle agenda beyond the educational and practical support described in the literature.

The nature of lifestyle concerns expressed by elite youth cricketers alongside the perceived impact of lifestyle support on performance and the value counselling psychology can offer lifestyle support provision, suggests that the lines of role division between lifestyle support and performance psychology may be more blurred than support structures imply. It would appear that dividing roles and responsibilities without appreciation for their interrelatedness could in essence, break up the whole experience of the athlete, at the cost of truly holistic support. The emphasis on more direct performance support within the sport psychology literature and the wide ranging training backgrounds of lifestyle practitioners may leave both practitioners under-prepared for the nature of holistic support needed. For athletes, this could result in neither practitioner recognising the support need, or not having the required skills and knowledge to provide effective support when it is sought out. It may
also leave practitioners unprepared for the demands of the role, negatively impacting their own wellbeing and their chances of retaining their position in a competitive environment which requires visible impact from the role.

For future research, it is suggested that investigating individuals experience of the critical moments (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) identified here and the lifestyle practitioner support provided during these would be valuable. Continuing to use methodology which captures the day-to-day lives of athletes in other sports and stages of development is necessary to further our knowledge of athlete support needs across different sports, different sporting cultures and different stages of the career. It will also be important to further investigate the relationship between the performance psychologist and the athlete lifestyle practitioner, given their somewhat ambiguous overlap and the apparent psychological elements of lifestyle support.

In this study, the practitioner and researcher roles were symbiotic in their dual-focus on athlete care and wellbeing, but did create a sense of role conflict between active practitioner and (a more) neutral researcher. The combination of practice and research created ambiguity regarding confidentiality as a practitioner and researcher, requiring careful management of data and a limited presentation of the broader lives and backgrounds of participants. Representing participant stories from memory was a necessary limitation, in order to not compromise the trust involved in performing the practitioner-researcher role.

However, the practitioner-researcher approach was considered a major strength of this research as it provided a uniquely applied insight into the player’s experiences. Having the role of the practitioner who was there to support the players rather than just gather observations facilitated the gathering of rich, emotional and honest insight into player’s lives.

The longitudinal nature of immersion also acted as a strength in terms of the depth of data
accrued and researcher credibility, helping to advance understandings a relatively under-
studied topic.
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