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“It looks like he cares, but he doesn’t.”: athletes’ experiences of “good” and “bad” care in women’s football

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ABSTRACT

Care research in coaching has repeatedly prioritised the voice of the carer rather than those of the cared-for. This article addresses this shortfall and examines notions of care through the eyes of female footballers. These voices are pertinent because football (soccer) in the United Kingdom (UK) has been labelled micro-political, cut-throat, competitive, and at times, uncaring. Further, women’s voices are often marginalised in sport and research. Noddings’ theory of care was selected to interpret semi-structured interviews of eight athletes’ experiences of care in women’s football. Findings suggest that athletes were exposed to superficial acts of care impede their learning and performance. There were also safeguarding concerns regarding the touching of athletes. Interview extracts did, however, describe the positive orchestration of supporting networks to reinforce a “climate of care”. Recommendations are provided for coaches on how to develop caring coaching.

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Care; Noddings; cared-for; coaching; football; female-athlete; touch

Introduction

Care within the field of sport coaching has received increased scholarly activity (Dohsten, Barker-Ruchti, & Lindgren, 2020). Specifically, research has begun to explore the complexities of “good” and “bad” care in sport settings (Daniels & Cronin, 2019; Gleaves & Lang, 2017). This growth of care research can perhaps be considered as a response to the uncaring practices (e.g., gender-based violence, bullying, overtraining) that are known to have encroached sport (Lang, 2020). Thus, this approach to care has informed research that repositions coaching as a caring activity (Cronin et al., 2019). In this reconceptualisation of coaching, coaches are encouraged to embrace a holistic caring ethic to inform their coaching practices (Cronin & Armour, 2018). Further, it is well established that coaches have a legal duty of care; to safeguard athletes and to ensure their welfare and well-being is maintained

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(Partington, 2017). However, while this duty of care and increased research (e.g., Cronin, Armour, & Gano-Overway, 2018) addressing care in sport is to be applauded, this work remains coach-centric, rather than athlete centred. Indeed, to date, accounts of caring coaching have predominantly been provided by coaches themselves. This is perhaps understandable, as it is the coaches who possess the position and responsibility of the carer (Partington, 2017). Nonetheless, athletes' views of care remain under studied.

Importantly, sports coaching exists within a social context. Thus, hierarchical structures, and coach-power, exist. At times within this context, athletes may have a reluctance to express an opinion truthfully, due to the potential impact their view might have on their position, team selection, or relationships (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020). Hence, the voice of the athlete may not always be heard. Significantly and paradoxically, care theorists (e.g., Noddings) have argued that care occurs by listening to the voice and acting on the concerns of the cared-for (in this case the athletes). Therefore, echoing the words of Daniels and Cronin (2019), "there is a distinct need to consider how athletes experience care" (p. 35). It is towards this aim, that this article progresses by exploring women footballers' experiences of care.

Underrepresentation of the female footballer in care research

Historically, women's preferences or experiences within traditionally male dominated environments (e.g., football) have largely been overlooked. This is remiss because exploration of women's lived experiences are warranted (Clarkson, Cox, & Thelwell, 2019; Culvin, 2019; Sawiuk, Lewis, & Taylor, 2021). Further, in high-performance football, Roberts, Baker, Reeves, Jones, and Cronin (2019) argued coaches "should listen to athletes' concerns and advocate for their needs, empathise and involve athletes in decision-making, and work with other staff such as medical professionals to develop a web of care around athletes" (p. 511). However, a dearth of research remains from the perspective of the female footballer on care within a performance setting. More worryingly, in women's football, there has been a series of sexual abuse accusations where senior officials have been accused of coercing female footballers into sex (Radbourne, 2020). Additionally, women's football has come under much scrutiny, given the recent number of high-profile cases appearing in the media of gender-based violence (sexual harassment, abuse and assault), alleged accusations of racial discrimination, social media trolling, mental health and overtraining (Culvin, 2019; Lewis, Roberts, Andrews, & Sawiuk, 2020). Some women have tried to speak up about this inappropriate and uncaring nature of women's football (e.g., Megan Rapinoe; Eniola Aluko; Drew Spence). It is, in support of these women and

their voices, that we consider this research article both timely and essential, to “shine a light” on the caring (or not) climate in women’s football in England.

The Football Association (FA) governs football provision for both men and women in England. Women’s football appears to be enjoying a relatively positive era of evolution, with major contributions from the national side, the establishment of the Women’s Super League (WSL), and increases in funding, initiatives and participation (Bell, 2019). Considering the contemporary landscape of care in football, practices repositioning athletes as an active agent in caring settings are being initiated via athlete forums (e.g., local County FA Players Forums), representatives (e.g., The Players Football Association), rights organisations (e.g., Kick It Out), and adult and child safeguarding and welfare policy frameworks (e.g., The Football Association Three-part Strategy Safeguarding Framework). However, whilst we should celebrate this evolution, when considering the concept of care shown to athletes, little is known about the care shown to female athletes in women’s football. Instead, we must pay attention to alternative insights, conceding that Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne, and Nelson (2012) portrayed men’s high-performance football as “cut-throat, competitive, and at times uncaring” (p. 79). Roderick and Schumacker (2017) have also alleged that within many male football clubs, it is likely “there’ll be no professional care” (p. 171). This is indeed worrying, as many (e.g., Knust & Fisher, 2015) have already identified that caring relationships are imperative in sport. That said, we cannot assume the experiences of care for female athletes is the same or different than their male counterparts. Rather, Cronin and Armour (2018) and Fisher, Larsen, Bejar, and Shigeno (2019) have called for research to explore care in sport settings by consulting and listening to traditionally marginalised athletes. Hence, this exploration, focuses on care in high-performance women’s football, by listening to the voices of women themselves. It is anticipated that this research is not only valuable, but opportune, as the movement of scholarly work in the discussion of care, within the practice of sport, begins to gather momentum.

Theoretical framework: noddings’ care theory

Care theorists and emerging care theories originally arose with the works of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. In particular, Gilligan’s (1993) and Noddings’ (1988) work utilised feminist theory, and sought to recognise caring labour, which is often gendered, to document those traditionally silenced. Specifically, Noddings (1984) *ethics of care* positions care as an essential, yet undervalued, aspect of pedagogical relationships. Considering the critical positioning of this research, Noddings’ work will be used to explore the women’s voice and the culture of care in sport.

Central to Noddings' *ethics of care* is the relational nature of care. The relational nature of care constitutes "the cyclical nature of the caring relation in which the cared-for expresses a need, the carer attentively responds to those expressed needs with whatever resources are available, and the cared-for signals that the care has been received" (Robinson, Al-Freih, & Kilgore, 2020, p. 2). Noddings (1995) highlighted that when we (e.g., mother, father, teacher, coach) care, we want to do the very best for the objects of care (e.g., children, students, athletes). The consideration of care theory and care as an ethical process has thus far been applied in many facets of society (e.g., teaching); although lately it has been used to explore care in coaching (Cronin et al., 2019).

To date, authors who have explored the notion of care have drawn considerably upon several key concepts from Noddings' work, particularly *caring for* and *caring about* (Noddings, 1988). Firstly, *caring for* considers the nurturing component between the carer (e.g., the coach) and the cared-for individual (e.g., the athlete) (Noddings, 1988). Specifically, caring relationships are characterised by engrossment and motivational displacement (Noddings, 2014). Engrossment concerns the sustained attention (i.e., observation or dialogue) and interest from the carer, which eventually enables the carer to comprehend the needs of the cared-for individual(s) (Cronin et al., 2019). Additionally, motivational displacement occurs when a carer has both the desire and capacity to serve the needs of the other, regardless of whether the needs of the other conflict with the carer's own desires (Cronin et al., 2019). Indeed, reciprocity is also central to Noddings' relational notion of care. Therefore, it is necessary that the cared-for also contributes to the process in-action, by engaging with, accepting, and receiving the acts of care that are being presented. Secondly, Noddings also advocates *caring about* as a different form of care. Specifically, the concept of *caring about* may be slightly distanced and of a limited concern to the carer, hence a lack of sustained attention associated with engrossment or the committed actions associated with motivational displacement (Cronin et al., 2019). Consequently, reciprocity is no longer central to the caring about process.

Care has a long history in gender studies and it is important not just to see women as carers, but as the cared-for, and cared-about. Aside from the tentative work conducted by Daniels and Cronin (2019), caring and its relation to the lived experiences of athletes, particularly in a women's football setting, remains vastly underexplored. Furthermore, we contend that women's voices continue to be silenced in research in general (Lewis et al., 2020). Therefore, we, the authors, hope the following exploration, using the work of Noddings, will enable coaches to understand the complex issues confronting the culture of care for women in sport.

Methodology

In order for a study to be methodologically coherent, the philosophical assumptions underpinning a study should be presented (Poucher, Tamminen, Caron, & Sweet, 2020). To this end, the authors in this study adopted a constructivist ontology to generate our own accounts of reality. An interpretivist epistemological stance, in which subjective meanings and social phenomena were constituted as knowledge, was also adopted by the authors. The critical positioning of this research study inspired the authors to empower a qualitative research method, interconnecting the intention to listen to the voice and facilitate an explanatory approach of care in the field (Ashby, 2011).

Sample and participants

This study involved the recruitment of a small purposeful sample that facilitates in-depth accounts of experience (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This purposeful sampling method relied on the authors making an informed decision about the participant(s) that would be most likely to contribute to this study, both in terms of relevance and depth. Following ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee of the lead author, ten participants were approached via email, of which eight participants agreed to take part in the study and were recruited by the lead author. Pseudonyms have been allocated to the extracts of each of the participants. The number of participants was considered to be appropriate, based not only on the findings of similar scholarly activity (e.g., Daniels & Cronin, 2019), but also on the data needed in order to achieve the aims of this research study. Given the critical positioning of the research study, all eight participants were women. At the time of writing, all participants were engaged as an athlete in the WSL (Tier 1 and 2) or the Women's National League (Tier 3).

Data collection method and procedure

To capture the experiences of the athletes, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the lead and third author. The production and reconstruction of the interview schedule was drawn from a combination of raised queries and assumptions throughout the existing literature. In particular, queries raised by Cronin and Armour (2018) regarding the positioning of care as an essential aspect of sports coaching and pedagogy were considered. Interviews were audio recorded and typically took place at informal settings and lasted between 45 and 100 minutes. The disparity in interview length could be elucidated by the researchers choosing to adopt the role of a traveller, as suggested by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), who documented

interviews should be a collaborative process where the participants and the researcher(s) are guided through the experiences by the participants. Bauman (1996) discerned two types of travellers: the pilgrim and the tourist. The researchers adopted the role of the pilgrim and were metaphorically able to “wander together with” the participants, asking questions, encouraging conversation, and supporting them to tell their own stories of their lived world in the search for the truth. In this case, the researchers were able to see the interviews as a process of knowledge collection and knowledge construction (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Therefore, variations in interview length were dependant on the told-stories of the participant.

Data analysis and interpretation

A thematic analysis approach was selected to ensure the production of rich and insightful material. As Clarke and Braun (2018) commented, thematic analysis can be used to describe and summarise, and that the “rich analysis typically moves from simple summation-based description into interpretation; telling a story about the ‘so what’ of the data” (p. 109). Since its inception, thematic analysis has swiftly become one of the most commonly used procedures to perform intensive qualitative data analysis of participant’s personal accounts (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To do this, we adhered to Braun and Clarke’s (2020) most recent articulation of their six phase model, which consisted of 1) data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report.

Methodological rigour

In keeping with Smith and McGannon (2018), for high-quality research to be conducted, researchers need to engage with contemporary methodological thinking by connecting with matters like rigour. To ensure that a significant level of rigour was followed, there were a number of criteria adhered to. Specifically, trustworthiness of the data and data analysis was sought via member reflections, which rather than simply verifying results, finding correspondence with the truth, or getting at independent reality, aim to generate additional data and insight (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The lead author engaged with the participants individually to explore their interpretations of the findings. This provided the participants with the opportunity to comment and make any necessary additions and/or corrections. No changes were made. Finally, because a critical friendship can not only be supportive, but a challenging relationship, a critical friend of the lead author was integrated into the process, in order to ask provocative

questions about the purpose of the research, provide an alternate lens to examine data, and offer critique of the findings. Specifically, the critical friend provided astute insights into the findings, particularly those addressed within the second theme.

Findings

After a number of data analyses, key headline findings were identified; 1) the act of superficial care and the impediment on learning and performance; 2) the act of touching athletes: the protection and safeguarding of our athletes; 3) reciprocity: relational notion of care and supporting networks. The significance of the voice of the athletes is central to this exploration, and so has been illuminated below within the extracts.

Theme 1: no, little, or superficial care, and associated links to learning and performance

Given the micro-political nature (e.g., the results driven entity) of sport, a coach might prioritise and protect their self-interests more willingly than spending time caring for their athletes (Gibson & Groom, 2018). Considering the point of Gibson and Groom, the following extracts provide accounts that indicate the micro-politics of sport have attributed to a failure of care for the athletes:

“We were fooled. All the right things would be said, but when I needed someone to be there, with things going on outside of football, that just got in the way. There was no time for that. It wasn’t football, it didn’t matter. There was a league to be won. He was nice, and at times, the right things were said, but without meaning or care behind them. It was fake”. [Ciara]

“I don’t think much else mattered really. We [the players] just had to win and that was it”. [Danielle]

Every so often, the athletes also experienced acts of superficial care. As Hailey goes on to explain, she felt neglected when her managers and coaches pretended to care:

“At times it felt like the manager and coaches would force themselves to act like they cared. But if there was any time where we would approach them, and they had to show sympathy, empathy, it was just empty. It was like they were pretending. We were treated like footballers, not people. They were in it for themselves. I felt neglected [laughs]. But what can we do? [Shrugs shoulders]”. [Hailey]

What the extracts suggest here is the coaches’ actions were perceived as superficial attempts at care and that in fact these acts were for the benefit of coaches (the carer). In Ciara’s case, reciprocity was withheld because it was perceived that the motivation of the coach was not directed towards her

needs. Subsequently, Noddings (1984) notion of relational care was unfeasible. Furthermore, it is important to note the shrug of the shoulders displayed by Hailey during her interview. Streeck (2009) comments this is a display of great communicative importance, in that Hailey is suggesting a “stance differential” and dissatisfaction at the point being articulated. For Noddings (2014), caring acts need to be received and acknowledged as caring to be effective. Of course, acts of care can be interpreted differently by people and perhaps even more so in different contexts. Nonetheless, for coaches and organisations to cultivate a caring culture, coaches need to not only care about the welfare and safeguarding of their athletes, but also consider how such care strategies are received.

It is of some concern that the extracts exposed micro-political behaviours of the coaches which Gibson and Groom (2018) deem to be specific strategies driven by an individual’s self-interests. In contrast, Noddings (2012) *ethics of care* expects the carer to respect and respond to the needs and choices of the cared-for, as well as support them, regardless of their own goals. Again, this would suggest that the concept of motivational displacement has not been met, given the overemphasis placed on winning. Critically, caring for athletes does not consist of simply being “nice” to them (Knust & Fisher, 2015). Rather, it should focus on helping athletes achieve what they want to achieve, which may include winning, but also caring for athletes with issues and/or concerns that are situated outside the confines of sport itself. The following extract from Beth suggests that having a caring coach who shows interest in the athlete’s personal life, actually enabled her to perform at her optimum:

“At the time I had a lot going on outside of football, at home ... and Mike [pseudonym] [head coach] seemed interested to know this. I felt, because we were looked after, we were able to perform at our best. We were comfortable, knowing we had people who cared for us and wanted us to do well”. [Beth]

In contrast, some athletes did not have a similar encounter, as in the words of Gemma, Faith and Ella:

“The best way I could describe it was, it looks like he cares, but he doesn’t. He really, really doesn’t. How can we be expected to perform? He doesn’t care, so why should we? You could just tell. He was sound, but he didn’t care, unless you were one of the top performers. If you had problems, he’d say go see the captain, not me, with humour, but we knew he actually meant it. He would say all the things that needed to be said, especially out loud in the team talks. But we all knew, even he knew, it was just rubbish. He was there for himself. He needed us, but he didn’t care that we needed him”. [Gemma]

“I remember one coach; he had his favourites. I wouldn’t say he particularly cared for anyone else outside of his ‘clique’. That made it hard, he wasn’t very well liked, so no one really listened to him. He actually took temporary charge at one point; I don’t think many of us tried that hard when he was in charge”. [Faith]

“We were pushed to our limits. We have to expect it, being professional footballers, but sometimes it was too much, particularly if we were risked when carrying knocks or injuries. Even when concerns were voiced by the physios or sports therapists, there was a sense of overruling, if results would be impacted as a consequence”. [Ella]

There is sufficient indication here that athletes have identified tension between focusing on results and taking care of the athletes’ well-being and emotional needs, particularly when actions and/or decisions are outcome-orientated (Fisher et al., 2019). For example, it seems that Ella was pushed to her limits, regardless of what the consequences of this may have been. In the case of Faith, it is contended that if reciprocal caring relationships are not attained, then this can disrupt and hinder athlete performance.

It is evident in Ella’s extract that she would have appreciated greater autonomy in the decision-making process on training load and performance contribution. Research (e.g., Dohsten et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2019; Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010; Noddings, 2012) argue that coaches should pay attention to and listen to the needs of the athletes. This seems particularly pertinent if there is a greater risk of harm, bearing in mind the coaches’ legal duty to care (Partington, 2017). In terms of appropriate coaching practice, training loads should be comprehensively planned, carefully executed and conscientiously monitored, in order to avoid overtraining and to minimise the likelihood of performance related injury (Bolling, Barboza, van Mechelen, & Pasma, 2019). Nevertheless, from the data provided here, we can neither substantiate, nor disprove, whether careful regulation did in fact take place. What we can note, is that it is ostensible that Ella is signifying it did not. Therefore, what comes to light perhaps portrays micro-political activity, where the coach was perceived to prioritise self-interests possibly to adhere to their own professional identity and performance, rather than including Ella in the decision-making process that related to her own welfare and safeguarding. Thus, care is an act that is not free from local micro-political activity and which is linked to learning and performance.

Theme 2: the act of touching athletes: the protection, safeguarding and care of our athletes

The importance to explore touch in sport, its use and misuse, intent, and effect, is difficult to overstate. Within this study, incidents of athlete touching were declared by Ciara, Ella and firstly, Faith:

“My right quad is like a cheesestring [laughs]. I think everyone at the club has had a grip of my leg. I don’t mind though, I know they are just trying to help, even if they don’t know what they’re doing [laughs]”. [Faith]

Regarding the multitude of ways in which care can be implemented, some responsibilities of a coach can involve injury prevention and/or rehabilitation (Bolling et al., 2019), which can, to an extent, comprise of the act of touching athletes. A medical diagnosis or treatment such as sport massage may provide one potential justification for the use of touch. Whilst sports massage therapy has the capability to lessen the severity of muscle soreness, amongst other benefits for athletes (Gasibat & Suwehli, 2017), the extracts of the athletes here suggest coaches may not have had the capacity to serve their needs in this area (i.e., injury prevention and/or rehabilitation). Given the seeming lack of knowledge or prerequisite certification for the tasks they were undertaking, if such procedures were to be performed, we must question why there was not a qualified person to implement such actions. This perhaps raises more questions of how coaches are qualified to care ethically for their athletes. Indeed, within the following extracts, the timing, execution, appropriateness and need for touching to occur, seem to be questioned by the participants. Particularly in the case of Ciara, it is evident that over time, she became cautious and wary of the appositeness of the coach touching athletes, including herself.

“He [coach] would touch us. Like massage us. I was never sure what qualification he had. Nor did he ever show us. But he would still touch us. To be honest, I would never say no, it felt nice and seemed to work, so I did trust him. If I was injured, I would have done anything to try and get fit . . . was he doing it to help us, or did he just want to touch us? Who knows? . . . I would say it [the act of touching athletes] made me a bit more wary of him as time went on”. [Ciara]

Touch is understood as an experience of physical contact, to come into or be in contact with someone (Kerr, Stirling, Heron, MacPherson, & Banwell, 2015). Kerr and colleagues go on to state that the perception of touch is highly contextualised and influenced by such factors as location, type, and nature of the touch, as well as sport-specific rituals. In an attempt to protect athletes, guidelines and policies (e.g., NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit) exist which are athlete-focused in that they recognise touch/physical contact can be, and has been, used by physical and sexual abusers in and beyond sport to desensitise victims to abuse (Gleaves & Lang, 2017). Specifically, these guidelines and policies provide clear information on how touch should be used safely for athletes' benefits and to allow coaches to do their job sensitively and safely, essentially forming the “rules-based practice” for touching athletes. That said, in reference to Ciara's extract, it would appear that she initially trusted her coach, but over time she began to question his practice. Indeed, this makes us consider Gleaves and Lang's (2017) conclusions considering coach-athlete physical contact, in which they “encourage coaches to reflect on why such contact is being used and in whose benefit, who is making the decision on this, how the behaviour

might affect the children [or adult athlete] involved, whether the child and parents [or adult athlete] understand why physical contact is being used, and whether they have consented to its use” (p. 207). Bearing this in mind in conjunction with the words of Ciara, coaches perhaps need to better understand that physical contact can be uncomfortable and intrusive for athletes. Indeed, further concerns about touch were raised by Ella:

“We used to joke about it all the time. Especially when Lucy [pseudonym] used to always be the one who would get the rubs. She was the one who everyone drooled over. These were always recommended and done by the manager. I don’t know what he was basing his medical expertise on, he was an accountant [job role changed for extract] outside of football. But he didn’t shy away from giving her legs a rub, to be honest, even when Lucy didn’t think she needed them. We all used to joke that he lusted over her [laughs]”. [Ella]

The use of touch has been associated with forms of sexual violence (Lewis et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2020). Lewis and colleagues also acknowledge that sporting environments provide a relatively unique sociocultural context that offers the potential for inappropriate acts of touching to take place. According to Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen, and Lang (2016), sexual violence constitutes rape, sexual assault, abuse and harassment. Vertommen, Schipper-van Veldhoven, Hartill, and Van Den Eede (2015) found that the vast majority of alleged perpetrators of sexual violence towards athletes in their study were male and occupied a position of trust and responsibility in relation to the athlete, most often in the role of a coach. Considering Ella’s comments, there are certainly references that may constitute sexual violence taking place at the hands of the coach. We can derive from the extracts that there appears to be an uncomfortable acceptance concerning the act of touching, and this area certainly warrants further exploration in research. As we are already aware, without the voice of the athlete, actions that purport to be caring might, in actual fact, be masking abusive control of individuals’ autonomy (Cronin et al., 2019). Contemplating the words of Ella, to us, consent and an underpinning reasoning for physical touching appear to be unaccounted for.

Considering Noddings’ perspectives, Cronin et al. (2019) argued that to care is to “feel, speak, listen, provide compassion, empathise, empower and nurture” (p. 15). To put it simply, it may be that for coaches to care in this context, it is best to listen to athletes and refer them to qualified practitioners. We wondered if the women in this study were aware of ways in which they are able to raise concerns and challenge such practices, and whether they had access to similar portals to the telephone helpline service on sexual harassment and abuse that the Netherlands Olympic Committee and Netherlands Sports Confederation have established (Vertommen et al., 2015). Thus, to aid participants who disclosed ethically concerning accounts

at interview (i.e., potential sexual violence), the research team followed the Universities ethics protocol by both supporting the participant and sign-posting them to the appropriate units (e.g., the wellbeing team).

Theme 3: relational notion of care as part of an orchestrated support network

Drawing on the work of Cronin et al. (2019), we can appreciate that a caring relationship should not be expected or dependent upon one individual. Considering this, the extracts below demonstrate the development of a “climate of care” that move beyond merely a sporting jurisdiction:

“Care isn’t just helping us with injuries. It’s much bigger than that. If you need to know the importance of care, then here it is. Or more to the point, here I am. She saved my life. That’s how important care is for athletes . . . she put me in contact with the right people to get the help I needed and allowed me to take time out of the game”.
[Danielle]

Here, Danielle is alluding to a coach who supported her with range of personal challenges, that she did not wish to be explicitly described here. Similarly, Abbie and Faith also received support from a coach and wider supporting network:

“I am so fortunate. I have been with my club since forever. We have a great supporting structure here. We have sports therapists, psychologists, along with the coaches, and for the last 7 or 8 years, I have had Kate [pseudonym] as our head coach. She is the nicest person and goes above and beyond to ensure she cares for us . . . she is more interested in us as people, and with what is going on in our lives outside of football. She has helped a lot of the girls”. [Abbie]

“The girls are great. At times I’ve had some amazing support from the girls. It’s easy to tell when I’m having a tough time [laughs], I’m usually the loud one. But my girls always pick me up. I know they’ve got my back. That’s how close we all are”. [Faith]

From these extracts, it appears that care itself and caring environments are a significant complexity of modern-day coaching, which requires a collaborative endeavour to address and inform a situated activity between various agents (e.g., coach, athlete, sport physiologist, sport psychologist, mental health counsellor). In reference to the experiences of Danielle and Abbie, it is evident that the coaches had intentionally developed a caring sporting environment (Gano-Overway & Guivernau, 2018) to support them both in and beyond sport. Indeed, as Dohsten et al. (2020) stated, by “caring about ethical principles such as strategies of listening to the athletes’ voices, taking time to interact and showing sympathy for the individual, coaches create an environment that meets the athletes’ needs both as human beings and as athletes (e.g., holistic needs)” (p. 49). As Dohsten et al. (2020) proceeded to state, this “enables coaches to support athletic development

and performance over time” (p. 49). Similarly, the athletes’ extracts demonstrate that in some environments, there is a web of care that seems to prioritise the well-being of the athletes over performance, which is different to the typical commodity orientation of high-performance sport. Again, this would require engrossment on the coaches’ part. As an instrumental component of a multi-disciplinary group of individuals, some coaches were able to orchestrate a supporting network to provide a greater amount of care. This led to some examples of a “climate of care”, in which several individuals, who care for the athletes, seem to be accessible at the athletes’ discretion.

In summary, it is evident that care had been applied in coaching and so, women’s football can be a safe place. However, the voice of the women who are giving us a perspective from the ground have also raised concerns regarding inappropriate behaviours. On the one hand, there is an awareness of care. On the other hand, touch is a problematic area. Considering this, regulators and/or researchers need to further explore touch. Coaches may also want to consider the superficialness of care. We know care is important, but the women in this study questioned the authenticity of coaches’ actions and motives. This shows us that women are shrewd enough to notice when care is not authentic and therefore coaches may want to consider whether they have the skill, ability and/or capacity to implement a genuine ethic of care.

Concluding thoughts and future direction

Sports coaches should have an informed awareness of the emerging relationship between the undertaking of coaching and the concept of care. Here, this work, in part, answers the call of Cronin and Armour (2018) and Fisher et al. (2019) to illuminate the voice of a marginalised group in an attempt to critically inform and reinforce the care responsibilities of coaches. Theoretically, care is associated with engrossment, motivational displacement, reciprocity, and authentic dialogue (Noddings, 2014). To that end, this article has foregrounded empirical evidence from female athletes to demonstrate how athletes have benefitted from caring actions grounded in these concepts. For the most part, this involved athletes accessing a network of experts that coaches had orchestrated, consisting of a multi-disciplinary group of individuals engaged to provide a substantial amount of care to their athletes. This is a significant finding that could prompt coaches in women’s’ football and beyond to consider the “web of care” within their teams.

Regrettably, this article has also problematised coaching, in that there were instances that highlighted the impact of the micro-political nature of sport and unethical practice towards athletes. Specifically, this study is the first to

explore touch from a care perspective. In doing so, the act of touching was at times deemed uncomfortable and intrusive. Furthermore, the relationship between care and performance was connected and explored, and notable tensions and uncertainty were experienced by female footballers.

To close, the extracts provided by the athletes build upon the starting point of Daniels and Cronin (2019) in exploring care in football coaching by listening to the voices of women. In addition, the findings prompt further research into the complexities of care in sport settings. Scholars should continue to afford space for the cared-for, to anticipate a greater understanding of how care is “understood, enacted, constrained, and enabled in elite football contexts” (Cronin et al., 2019, p. 20). As a final point, we suggest additional consideration around the “politics of touch”, using care theory, to bring focus on this underexplored topic. Fuller engagement with this issue, and the analogous accounts discussed in this article, will, we hope, go a long way to educating coaches on the significance and value of advocating and enriching a “climate of care”.

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