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1 **WORKING IN ESPORTS: DEVELOPING TEAM COHESION**

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21 **Abstract**

22 The team in the current case study is a professional League of Legends (LoL) team within the

23 UK. This case study aimed to develop team cohesion through increasing players' awareness

24 of self and others through mutual sharing of strength profiles. As the split progressed, the

25 case also aimed to support the players to manage uncomfortable thoughts and emotions under

26 pressure utilising an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy approach (Hayes et al., 2006).

27 This was done through five workshops over four weeks with one-to-one work blended into

28 the programme to ensure an individualised approach to enhance learning (Cross et al., 2006).

29 This case study will outline the context of LoL, the needs analysis, intervention delivery, and

30 feedback from interviews with players and coaches. Finally, this case study will provide

31 reflections from the trainee sport and exercise psychologist working within esports for the

32 first time.

33 *Keywords:* esports, team cohesion, league of legends

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43   **Context**

44   **League of Legends**

45   Electronic sports, otherwise known as esports, is a professional video gaming industry that

46   has been rapidly emerging across the world. Esports has been defined as: "A form of sports

47   where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of

48   players and teams as well as the output of the esports system are mediated by human-

49   computer interfaces." (Hamari & Sjoblom, 2017, p. 213). Esports may also have, but not in

50   all instances, ranking systems and competitions regulated by official leagues (Pedraza-

51   Ramirez et al., 2020).

52   One of the most popular esports worldwide is League of Legends (LoL), a multiplayer

53   online battle arena (MOBA) that saw a five-million-dollar prize pool in the 2016 World

54   Championships (Himmelstein et al., 2021). In LoL there are two teams of five competing

55   against one another. Matches last between 30 – 45 minutes on average and end when one

56   team destroys their oppositions' 'Nexus' by completing objectives across the map and

57   navigating lanes successfully. Each player in the team will select a unique character (called

58   champions) to compete as out of the 150-champion pool. Each player has a separate role

59   within the team: top lane, jungle (an area between the bases and lanes), mid lane (middle

60   lane), bot lane (bottom lane), and support. For each role, a different skill set is required. For

61   example, some roles deal with high damage, whereas others focus on healing ability and

62   farming (Himmelstein et al., 2021). Teams must communicate effectively to help them reach

63   their desired objectives. For example, to plan when to engage in a team fight, switch lanes,

64   and close the game.

65   In addition to effective communication, other performance challenges have been

66   identified within the esports literature, including concentration, communication, motivation,

67   emotional regulation, team cohesion, and anger management (Murphy, 2009). Perceived

68   stressors of professional LoL players have been found to include team issues, performance

69   expectations, audience, and social media (Leis et al., 2022). More specifically, Leis et al.

70   (2022) identified team issues to include lack of confidence in teammates, intra-team criticism,

71   and teammates' evaluation of one's performance. It is not surprising, therefore, that the

72   appointment of applied sport psychology support has been increasing within esports teams to

73   enhance team cohesion and support teams with these performance challenges (Smith et al.,

74   2019).

75   **The Team**

76   The team in the current case study was a professional esports team within the UK

77   League Championship (UKLC). The team was comprised of two managers, one coach, one

78   performance analyst, and five players. The age of the players ranged from 17 to 21. A LoL

79   season is divided into "splits". Typically, the season includes a "spring split and a "summer

80   split". The workshops were delivered over the four-week summer split, where eight teams

81   compete, meeting each team twice throughout the split.

82   Unlike the top teams within Europe and across the world who often train together in

83   gaming houses alongside coaches and support staff, teams within the UKLC tend to run

84   remotely. With each player and staff member training and competing from home and

85   connecting through Discord; software where communities can communicate over voice,

86   video, and text. This is an important consideration for the sport psychology practitioner with

87   the need to create an engaging and interactive intervention to promote learning via online

88   technologies. Furthermore, the lack of face-to-face contact may impact team cohesion, with

89   remote working environments needing careful consideration to draw on opportunities (e.g.,

90   ability to move with others into different channels) and negate the hindrances (e.g., lack of

91   richness in communication; Torro et al., 2022).

92   Several demands were present within the team. As this team was playing together for

93   the first time, there was potential for a lack of understanding of one another's playing style

94   and personality (Himmelstein et al., 2017). Moreover, as the team was comprised of players

95   from four countries, there may have been differences in communication styles leading to

96   misunderstanding (Himmelstein et al., 2017). Another potential challenge was that two

97   players had no experience playing within a professional league, meaning management of

98   stressors and coping under pressure may be important.

99   **The Practitioner**

100   At the time of the workshop programme, I was in the third year of my professional

101   doctorate. I had never worked within esports, LoL, or even provided sport psychology

102   support remotely using online platforms. Esports is a world I always wanted to explore due to

103   my passion for gaming and to see whether the skills I developed within traditional sport could

104   be transferred. During COVID-19, my consultancy work had drastically reduced, and I was

105   seeking something new to challenge myself and to continue my development.

106   The aim of my work as a practitioner is to bring individuals and teams closer to their

107   true selves in and out of their performance environments, allowing them to live and perform

108   in line with what is important to them. The values that guide my work are curiosity, self-

109   awareness, acceptance, and collaboration. This aligns with a humanistic cognitive behaviour

110   approach. A humanistic approach as I believe it is vital to explore all areas of an individual's

111   life experience and to support them towards their true, integrated self (Rogers, 1961; Ryan &

112   Deci, 2017). Therefore, I need to collaborate with staff and players to bring their knowledge

113   and expertise to the sport psychology programme and to be curious about their experiences.

114   This was paramount within the current context due to my lack of experience within LoL and

115   esports. Within cognitive behaviour approaches, I align with the third wave approach of

116   Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2006). This is due to my belief

117   that thoughts are mental events that should not be changed or be removed. Finally, when

118   individuals engage with meaningful, values driven action, it will bring them closer to living a

119   fulfilling life.

120   **The Case**

121   **Needs Analysis**

122   I observed scrims (team training) online using screen sharing and voice channels on

123   Discord. During my first observation of scrims, one of the team managers talked me through

124   various aspects of LoL (e.g., draft, objectives, roles, champions) and the processes the team

125   went through (e.g., pre-game talk, draft, post-game reflection). Additionally, both team

126   managers discussed with me how the team had not been performing optimally and had drawn

127   in their first three matches. I continued to attend more scrims within my first week and was

128   able to observe independently. I noticed that communication often broke down when the team

129   was under pressure. For example, when the opposition took the first drake and when a team

130   member was perceived to be purposefully feeding the opposing team. This led to behaviours

131   such as blaming others for "not responding to calls" and "inting" (intentionally feeding the

132   opponent with gold and experience), dying more frequently due to a lack of support, and

133   certain team members decreasing their contribution to communication. This resonated with

134   research from Himmelstein et al. (2011) who reported factors such as limited ability to

135   regulate emotions, lack of team reliance, and ineffective communication.

136   Further discussions with both team managers identified the importance of

137   communication and teamwork within the game. The head coach reported that whilst

138   performing under pressure, player communication can become toxic and players start

139   performing as individuals rather than as a team. This was in line with previous research

140   identifying psychological challenges faced within esports (Murphy, 2009; Smith et al., 2019).

141   More specifically, Smith et al. (2019) reported team issues such as negative comments and

142   criticism about gameplay, mistakes being pointed out, and teammates not listening or

143   following instructions. This was further supported by Leis et al. (2022) who found

144   professional LoL players to experience stressors including intra-team criticism, and

145   teammates' evaluation of one's performance. The head coach reported this may be due to

146   "rookies" within the team with no previous professional experience as an esports player. The

147   research stated resonates with the narrative from management, my initial observations of

148   scrims, and discussions with the coaching staff. Additionally, as this roster had not previously

149   competed together, with fluctuation of rosters being common within esports (LeNorgant,

150   2019), there was a potential need to support team cohesion.

151   To gather more data for the needs analysis, the first workshop would introduce the

152   players to sport psychology, learn more about the team's personal experiences within LoL,

153   and create space for the team to offer suggestions for the programme. The team echoed the

154   importance of team cohesion, understanding their individual strengths and weaknesses, and

155   what this looks like in game. Therefore, the initial aims were to develop team cohesion

156   through creating a greater understanding of self and others. The needs analysis continued

157   throughout the split, with case development being cyclical not linear. This allowed me to

158   respond to developments within the team and collect new information as my relationships

159   grew with the players and staff. As a result, new topics were identified such as managing

160   thoughts and emotions before and during competition. This was in line with my initial

161   observations, where toxic behaviours were observable when the team was under pressure. I

162   also believed this would support team cohesion, as players may experience greater

163 psychological flexibility under pressure, reducing unworkable behaviours or urges (Bem et

164 al., 2021) such as toxic communication.

165 **Developing the Programme**

166   Based on the needs analysis, I decided to work towards building team cohesion by

167 increasing the players' awareness of themselves and others. This was facilitated through

168 mutual sharing of their individual strengths and weaknesses. Mutual sharing within sport has

169 been found to benefit team closeness, understanding of teammates, and communication

170 (Windsor et al., 2011). It involves communication exercises whereby athletes disclose

171 information and personal stories that were not previously known to other team members

172 (Holt & Dunn, 2006). It was important the players believed they were sharing their personal

173 information in an environment they perceived as psychologically safe. This is an environment

174 where individuals believe interpersonal risks can be taken safely within a team. For example,

175 asking for help, admitting errors, or seeking feedback from other team members

176 (Edmondson, 1999). Additionally, previous research suggests psychological safety may

177 support task cohesion within team sports (McLaren & Spink, 2021) providing rationale for

178 the mediating role of psychological safety in developing team cohesion.

179   Team members were to complete a psychological safety questionnaire, which was

180 discussed within the team (with each player's permission) before agreeing to mutually share

181 their strengths and weaknesses. To create a shared understanding of self and others within the

182 team, a strengths-based technique (Ludlam et al., 2016) was to be drawn upon. Strength

183 profiles would be created during one-to-one sessions to enhance the learning from the

184 workshops and ensure the players' individual characteristics and experiences were taken into

185 account. Additionally, these profiles were to be shared with the whole team within a

186   workshop to further enhance team cohesion through the act of open discussion and mutual

187   sharing (Windsor et al., 2011).

188   It was hypothesised, through increased awareness of self and others and mutual sharing,

189   factors such as understanding of teammates and communication in and out of the game

190   scenario without it turning toxic would be improved. This could be due to players having a

191   greater understanding of why their teammates behave in certain ways (e.g., when we've lost

192   the first drake, I know my teammate may feel anxious and will need positive communication

193   rather than using blaming them).

194   As the team grew through the split, two workshops explored how individuals respond

195   to high-pressure scenarios. Specifically, it provided techniques to understand and manage

196   uncomfortable thoughts and emotions using ACT techniques. It is important to note here that

197   the workshop topics evolved throughout the split as the needs of players fluctuated and

198   changed with context (e.g., reaching the playoffs). It was hypothesised that players would be

199   able to better manage stressors within the environment (e.g., social media expectations,

200   falling behind in a best of five, having a poor draft) as they would receive coping

201   mechanisms to practice within scrims and on a 1-1 bases with the sport psychologist before

202   entering the playoffs. In turn, this could lead to greater emotional regulation and prevent toxic

203   behaviours. In line with a third wave approach, this would allow the players to have more

204   space to respond to uncomfortable thoughts and feelings as opposed to reacting.

205   It is important to note, the coach and performance analyst were to be present for all

206   workshops to provide feedback and LoL specific examples where relevant. Integrated

207   approaches to sport psychology have the potential to be more effective than those delivered

208   solely by psychologists (Brown & Fletcher, 2017; Daley et al., 2020). In this case, this

209   allowed the coach and analyst to promote techniques and language from the workshops (e.g.,

210 overcooked and undercooked strengths, recognition of thoughts and emotions) into their day-

211 to-day coaching, allowing psychology to live within the environment.

212 **Delivering the Programme**

213 *Procedure*

214   Over the four-week Summer Split, five 30-to-40-minute workshops were delivered to

215 the team with coaching staff present with one workshop per week, apart from one week

216 where there were two workshops. The workshop schedule was as follows: introduction to

217 performance psychology (week one), overcooked and undercooked strengths (week two),

218 safety and strengths (week three), the performance brain (week four), and playing under

219 pressure (week five). After the strength profiling session on week two, one-to-one sessions

220 were arranged with each player. Additionally, I had a reflective session with the coach every

221 week. Here, I gained feedback and we discussed how the coaching team could embed the

222 concepts into the performance setting. This included being able to prepare players before

223 matches due to a greater understanding of what enhanced their strengths and what drained

224 them, and being able to call individuals out when they moved away from their strengths.

225   Due to the online nature of the delivery, I wanted to make the sessions interactive

226 where possible. It took me a couple of workshops to build confidence working in this way,

227 which was supported by my reflective practice. For example, I reflected on how my initial

228 sessions were not interactive enough and the importance of this for increasing engagement

229 and buy-in to the workshops and overall sport psychology support. Sessions were made

230 interactive through several means, for example holding discussions about questionnaires and

231 strength profiles, and using menti.com to explore player perspectives.

232 *Workshop Delivery*

233   **Introduction to Sport Psychology**

234   This workshop was included as part of the needs analysis and was integral as none of

235 the players had received sport psychology support before. Therefore, I introduced sport

236 psychology in general along with how I approach my role. It was important for me to get to

237 know the players more during this session, meaning a large part of this workshop was gaining

238 ideas from the players about topics they would like to be covered and to support my needs

239 analysis. This aligned with my professional values by collaborating with the team regarding

240 what they would like the sessions to focus on and to be curious about their past experiences

241 within LoL. Specifically, I posed the question to the players "what stops you from being your

242 best?" and "if I was to wave a magic wand and everything was perfect, what would I see you

243 doing differently?" to generate discussion and potential areas to target in the future

244 workshops and to explore where they wanted change to occur. In response to the first

245 question, answers included team members "not being on the same page" and "not having a

246 plan for draft". For the second question answers included giving "clear" and "concise"

247 communication without "cluttering comms" when in scrims and official matches, with

248 another player saying they would "be playing for the benefit of the whole team" rather than

249 gain as individuals. These discussions reinforced the importance of playing as a team,

250 communicating effectively, and being able to identify their strengths and weaknesses in

251 game.

252 **Overcooked and Undercooked Strengths**

253   During the second workshop, I discussed strengths and weaknesses with the players.

254 The language of these profiles was important, and it's important to note that "weaknesses"

255 were discussed as "overplayed" or "underplayed" strengths. For example, if a player felt their

256 strengths were not valued or acted on within the team (e.g., communicating when they need

257 support from their teammates but not receiving support), this may lead to an "underplayed"

258 strength (e.g., not communicating important information).

259   I outlined the anatomy of strengths to the players, adapted from research on character

260   strengths (Niemiec, 2019) and Spotlight profiling (Ong, 2018): undercooked (e.g., playing it

261   safe, afraid of making mistakes; the player is not using their strengths), sweet spot (e.g., plays

262   aggressively and smart; the player is optimally using their strengths), and overdone (e.g.,

263   playing high risk when the game needs safety; the player is using their strength within the

264   wrong context). I then handed it over to the players and asked them how this relates to them

265   as LoL players and whether they could think of examples of their opponents within these

266   three categories. The players discussed the phenomena of tilt here, which originates from

267   poker, and is a suboptimal state of mind where the individual loses control, impacting

268   decision making, and leading to negative emotions such as anger or frustration (Wei et al.,

269   2016). Some have likened tilt within esports to road rage (White & Romano, 2020). The

270   players discussed how they experienced tilt when they were overcooked. Finally, we spoke

271   about how everyone will have a different sweet spot. For example, some players would like

272   to play in a higher energy zone than others. This was presented as an "assassin" or a

273   "warrior" mindset. The players were provided a few tasks at the end of the session, such as

274   identifying when they are in their sweet spot or undercooked during training and whether

275   they perform best in an assassin or warrior mindset.
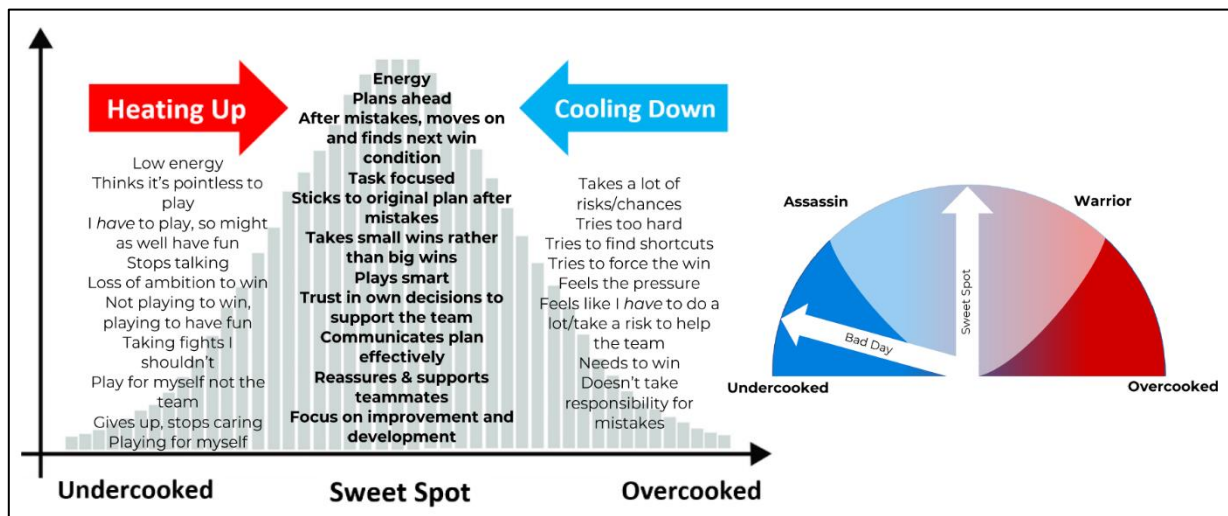
276   One-to-one sessions were arranged with each player to create a personal strength

277   profile (Figure 1). To do this, I shared my screen with the player on discord and we worked

278   through each of the components of strengths as stated above. These profiles would be shared

279   with the whole team (with the permission of each player) in the next workshop to support

280   psychological safety, cohesion, and self-awareness.

281

282

283   Figure 1

284   An example of a player's strength profile

285

Strengths and Sharing

287   Prior to this workshop, I sent a psychological safety questionnaire (Edmondson, 2018)

288   to each player individually (Appendix 1). I clarified that their individual answers would not

289   be shared with the team, but, with their permission, a collective team score would be

290   calculated and shared in the next workshop. I was pleased to see that the psychological safety

291   of the team was high according to the questionnaire. This allowed me to reinforce to the team

292   that it was safe to speak their minds and take risks within the team, according to their scores.

293   Further, I hoped it would allow them to be more comfortable entering the mutual sharing of

294   strength profiles and their personal experiences within LoL. I presented the questionnaire

295   findings to the players, with my thoughts on how psychological safety can shift and change

296   during losses or high-pressure moments. With this, the team agreed and could see how this

297   played out within scrims and matches. I then presented the differences between a team with

298   high and low psychological safety. Following this, I sent the players the full team strength

299   profiles and gave them 10 minutes to explore them, asking them to do this with an open mind

300   and non-judgmental attitude.

301   After this, I opened the floor for discussions about what they had observed within the

302   profiles. For some, it was nice to see that everyone gets overcooked at times, and they are not

303   alone, others mentioned how it allowed them to have a better awareness of each player's

304   strengths and what this means for how they like to be communicated with. Interestingly,

305   during the one-to-ones developing the strength profile, one player struggled to identify his

306   overcooked behaviours as he believed this did not exist due to his positive, high-energy

307   nature. Due to his adamance, we left this in the session and decided to pick it up another time.

308   Within this workshop, a discussion emerged where players and coaches were helping him to

309   explore his overcooked preferences.

310   To end the workshop, I introduced a new component to strengths. This was wriggle

311   room (e.g., the player will sometimes get decisions wrong; here the player needs

312   understanding and support from their teammates to help them get back to their sweet spot). I

313   felt it was important to reinforce this within this workshop, as the players can work together

314   to support each other if they recognise their teammate is getting close to overcooked or

315   undercooked. By discussing psychological safety alongside these profiles, I hoped the team

316   could continue to develop a safe environment where they can call each other out when they

317   are moving away from their sweet spot to best support each other's performance.

318   To ensure the learnings from the profiles were brought to life within training and

319   matches, I had follow-up meetings with the coach and analyst to help them use the language

320   and feedback to players about where they are with their strengths. Additionally, the coach

321   encouraged the players to use this language with one another during communication in game

322   to help each other stay in their sweet spots where possible and not to tilt one another. Helping

323 a shared language between team members and coaching staff to be developed (Ludlam et al.,

324 2016). Further, within a match where a loss emerged due to issues in draft with one player,

325 myself and the coach were able to open a conversation about how he was undercooked, and I

326 was then able to supplement this with one-to-one support.

327   **The Performance Brain**

328   Following a run of wins in the split, the team was getting closer to playoffs and the

329 pressure was building. Feedback from the coach and players, backed up by my observations,

330 saw the need to explore performing under pressure. Here, we discussed the brain as a threat

331 detector and that, when in high-pressure situations such as being behind in a match or

332 experiencing high expectations, our threat detector (or limbic system; Bayle et al., 2009) can

333 be triggered meaning we enter fight or flight mode (Siegel & Bryson, 2012). To relate this to

334 LoL, I discussed how this can otherwise be known as tilt. This can lead to decreased

335 performance and see an increase in overcooked or undercooked behaviours. Discussions were

336 then opened within the team about how they felt about the upcoming opportunity to reach

337 playoffs. This included any pressures or expectations they had upon themselves or the team,

338 and what scenarios in game were likely to trigger their threat response. These discussions

339 may have supported team cohesion by creating space for the team to share when they struggle

340 with pressure and uncomfortable internal events during performance. This could potentially

341 create a greater understanding of when individual members struggle and how to best support

342 one another.

343   To ensure this session was not all about pressure and expectations, we finished by

344 reflecting on their progress so far. For example, what they have learned throughout the split

345 about how they manage high-pressure situations, and how they felt the team was working

346 together.

347   **Playing Under Pressure**

348   In the same week, another workshop was delivered to provide techniques to help the

349   players manage pressure. The technique utilised was from an ACT approach. This was in line

350   with my philosophy as I believe more struggle is created if thoughts and feelings are changed

351   or attempted to be removed. By using techniques in line with ACT, the focus is on increasing

352   awareness of these thoughts and emotions and accepting that it is part of human nature for

353   them to occur. This acceptance can lead to the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings subsiding

354   in their own time, giving individuals more space to commit to meaningful action in the next

355   moment (Harris, 2019).

356   The technique that was focused on was 3R's (recognise, release, refocus) based on an

357   ACT technique used in sport (Hansen & Haberl, 2019). I adapted this so it linked with the

358   language of the strength profiles, providing an opportunity for team members to develop a

359   deeper understanding of self and others, continuing the development of team cohesion.

360   Finally, menti.com was used within this workshop to explore pre-and post-game performance

361   behaviours. This was done to link with the 3R's, so that when refocusing pre or post game,

362   the players knew what behaviours they could commit to. The downside to menti.com was that

363   some of the answers lacked detail. To amend this, I asked the team questions, getting them to

364   elaborate on what they put. For example, one player said pre-game to be in a "good mood",

365   therefore, I asked "what does it look like when you're in a good mood?", "what would I see

366   you doing?" to draw out specific behaviours they can commit to.

367   After the workshop, I discussed the content with the coach and performance analyst.

368   This was to support them to use the 3R's during training and help the players to manage

369   negative thoughts or emotions that may arise.

370   **Feedback and Programme Evaluation**

371   Seven post-split interviews (five players and two coaches) were conducted to evaluate

372   the programme's effectiveness in developing team cohesion and ability to perform under

373   pressure from the perspective of the players and the coaching staff using a semi-structured

374   interview guide (Appendix 2). These interviews were conducted four to five weeks before the

375   final workshop delivery. This delay was due to the team winning the summer split and

376   gaining a position at a European tournament.

377   Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis of the data was

378   conducted by the first author in relation to the research question. The second author

379   supported the analysis process to ensure reliability and rigour (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

380   *Player Interviews*

381   For the player interviews, two primary themes were identified as "developing team

382   cohesion" and "playing under pressure". Subthemes were identified within each primary

383   theme. For "developing team cohesion" subthemes included: "greater understanding of being

384   a team", "enhanced empathy for teammates", and "safety to share ideas". For "playing under

385   pressure" subthemes included: "managing nerves, and "enhanced awareness of internal

386   events".

387   **Developing Team Cohesion**

388   *Greater Understanding of Being a Team*

389   Player 3 praised the workshops for helping the team to play together and felt the

390   outcome of the split would have been different without the psychology programme:

391   I will praise the fact that it did really really help us like play together. I think this split

392   would have been a lot different if we didn't have all those chats. Because we know how

393   to play the game, we can learn all of that but it's like getting in the correct mindset and

394   putting priorities into focus is the hardest part and you did help with that. (Player 3)

395 Player 1 reflected on how the sessions brought the group together away from the game and

396 how understanding one another helped the team to overcome problems:

397   I think for me what it achieved the most it was like, it forced us all together to do

398   something that wasn't just playing and like we got, I think we got closer because of it

399   er. Yeah, because usually the only thing we'd ever talk about was just the game right so

400   it sort of allowed us to yeah explore topics outside of that as well and I think we were a

401   bit closer and understood each other a bit better because of it like it helped overcoming

402   problems (Player 1)

403 ***Enhanced Empathy for Teammates***

404   Another player discussed that the workshops allowed them to understand that everyone

405 is seeing the game from a different perspective, suggesting improved empathy. This in turn

406 helped them to work as a team rather than five individuals:

407   I think if you know how someone is thinking about the game it becomes a lot easier to

408   work with them. Just because like if you know what someone's thinking you can like

409   change how you view the game or meet in the middle somewhere and actually form a

410   team rather than five people just doing their own thing. But I think it definitely changed

411   how we played. (Player 1)

412 Player 4 felt the work on strengths helped them to understand each other's perspective be

413 more empathic towards their teammates when they were overcooked or undercooked rather

414 than getting frustrated with one another:

415   We would find it easier to recognise when people weren't performing at their best and

416   it was like more, like, sympathetic and willing to just sort of help rather than getting

417   annoyed at someone for underperforming. (Player 4)

418   *Safety to Share Ideas*

419   The players discussed feeling safe to speak up within the team environment and to

420 bring up issues if they arose in the game:

421   If someone had an issue with something happening, I think they were more like, more

422   willing to bring it up if there was something they didn't agree with in game or

423   something like that, they'd be more happy to bring it up. (Player 4)

424   It [the workshops] helped me feel more safe, helped everyone to bond together and just

425   like helped glue people in the team. Like we're understood how everyone wants to play

426   and how they feel in game. (Player 3)

427   **Playing Under Pressure**

428   *Managing Nerves*

429   Regarding the sessions on playing under pressure, player 2 reflected on how it helped

430 other team members to manage their nerves to enhance their performance:

431   …how to reset and what to do when getting nervous I think it helped some of the team

432   members like, I'm not sure if for example [player name] struggled a lot with being

433   nervous in the start and then when he figured that out, we just won all the games, so it

434   was really important, I think. (Player 2)

435   *Enhanced Awareness of Internal Events*

436   Player 5 reflected on improving recognition of when he became tilted in a challenging

437   performance situation and what internal events might arise (e.g., thoughts, emotions). He

438   mentioned how the ACT techniques helped him to combat this:

439   When we went through things I would focus on when playing league it made it a lot

440   easier to recognise when I was tilting or was not performing well. And you try to justify

441   it… but as soon as you point out the common pitfalls then I recognised them and it was

442   a lot easier for me to sort out myself. And using the [ACT] techniques so you know

443   how to combat it [focusing on unhelpful things] (Player 5)

444   *Coaching Staff Interviews*

445   Within the coaching staff interviews, one theme of "developing team cohesion" was

446   identified in line with the case study aims with subthemes including: "greater understanding

447   of being a team", "shared language", and "understanding player needs".

448   **Developing Team Cohesion**

449   *Greater Understanding of Being a Team*

450   Team cohesion was discussed as a perceived improvement due to the workshops. The

451   performance analyst reflected that before the workshops there were a lot of egos trying to

452   complete. The workshops allowed the players to gain a better understanding of themselves

453   and their teammates, helping them to come together as a team:

454   It really got them thinking about themselves and others in a team aspect and being able

455   to break it down to make them realise that not everything is about them and I really

456   liked that because I think at the very start we sort of struggled before you came in

457   because there were too many egos trying to talk like no one really gave anybody time to

458   listen and then one you came in I could see like the communication shift and that's

459   what I really liked because that's when they actually came together as a team. (Analyst)

460 The analyst also reflected on the impact on the strengths profile in creating greater

461 understanding of teammates and how this helped everyone to come together as a team:

462   Presenting the data [strength profiles] to everyone so everyone could see what sort of

463   person everyone else was. I think that was really big because I think everyone came in

464   like "we're just here to play, this is what I think, we're doing it" instead of having like a

465   team mentality. (Analyst)

466   *Shared Language*

467   The coach felt the workshops allowed him to have the language to discuss aspects of

468 the game with the players, helping him to relate to the players more:

469   You [the coach] don't know the phrases or you don't know they erm way of explaining

470   it or the references so being able to have that as a coach, who doesn't necessarily have

471   that erm background it was easy for me to, if they players were hyping up or

472   undercooked or something like that I could reflect on those words, and they would

473   know exactly what that meant. (Coach)

474   *Understanding Player Needs*

475   Through being aware of the strength profiles of each player, the coach was able to

476 identify and resolve issues more efficiently. One example provided by the coach was how he

477 could keep one player in his sweet spot by controlling the players champion pool during

478 draft:

479   I was able to keep him away from that overcooked, undercooked situation by

480   controlling his champion pool and doing the job for him, so all he had to do was focus

481   on his teammates really and that turned him into a monster. (Coach)

482 ***Critical Feedback and Suggestions for Improvements***

483   Critical feedback and suggestions for improvement are presented from both player and

484 coach perspectives in the hope to support sport psychology practitioners working within

485 esports. Players and coaches mentioned how the programme would have been better if it was

486 there from the beginning of the split. As I contacted the organisation as pre-season was

487 ending, the psychology support was not there from the beginning. This would be important to

488 resolve in the future:

489   It makes a much bigger difference if it was there from the start. At least from the way I

490   perceived people from when we started having the sessions and to after made almost no

491   difference (Player 5)

492   For an esports team, it's so important for you to be there from roughly week one, or one

493   week for the head coach and players to bond and then go into the second week and

494   bring on the support staff. (Coach)

495 One player did not feel the workshops were of benefit to the team and that they were a

496 "chore" to engage with:

497   It felt more like a bit of a chore, and it didn't seem like it was something that we were

498   using… and if the others were honest, I don't think they cared too much about it.

499   (Player 5)

500 Another player suggested linking the concepts from the workshop back to LoL in a more

501 obvious way with the support of the coach:

502   If there's a way to link back the psychological aspects into an example that's league

503   related…maybe work with [the coach] like 10 minutes before the session to find an

504   example to make the link to league more obvious in a way. (Player 1)

505   **Personal Reflections**

506   This section will outline my personal reflections on the approach taken during the split

507 and the feedback provided by the team. Additionally, I will reflect on my experiences

508 working for the first time in esports. This case study aimed to develop team cohesion through

509 increasing players' awareness of self and others through mutual sharing of strength profiles.

510 Additionally, as the split progressed the case also aimed to support the players to manage

511 uncomfortable thoughts and emotions under pressure. Based on feedback from the players it

512 was perceived that team cohesion had improved with greater empathy for teammates,

513 understanding of what it means to be a team, and safety to share thoughts within the team.

514 Some players perceived performance under pressure to benefit the team in relation to

515 managing nerves and improving self-awareness and focus in game. From the feedback,

516 coaches perceived the development of team cohesion by creating a greater understanding of

517 what it meant to be a team, utilising a shared language, and increasing understanding of

518 player needs.

519   There were some negatives presented by one of the players. They felt the sessions were

520 a "chore" and did not impact the way they played. This player also told me that if the other

521 players said anything otherwise then they were not being honest. This was difficult to hear.

522 However, I felt the feedback from the other players was authentic and so I will not disregard

523 what they have said. I will continue to focus on trying my best to have a positive impact on

524 the majority of team members. This same player did praise the one-to-one sessions we had

525 alongside the workshops. This may show the importance of not solely delivering workshops.

526 Using a blended approach of one-to-one work and workshops can be beneficial to support

527 individual preferences and needs of team members (Cross et al., 2006).

528 Another limitation of this case study was limited time spent on mutual sharing, with

529 previous research implementing multiple sessions of mutual sharing to create impact (Pain &

530 Harwood, 2009). Though improvements in team cohesion were perceived by the team within

531 the current case, this could be taken further. Other improvements that were suggested

532 included working with the team in pre-season. Since I contacted the team when the summer

533 split had already begun, I missed pre-season. In the future, I will ensure that my support is

534 there from the beginning. In the future, I plan to adjust the design of the strength profiles. I

535 think they are quite cluttered in the form I presented them in and believe clarity would be

536 provided to the players if this was refined and focused on one or two key strengths.

537 Positives from the case include gaining experience from a new consultancy

538 environment. I believe my values of curiosity and collaboration were paramount within this

539 case and allowed me to become part of the team and encourage players and staff to engage

540 with the psychology content. For example, though I had a lack of knowledge about the

541 performance environment and was apprehensive to provide input during training sessions, it

542 enabled me to work more closely with the coaches (Kelly et al., 2018). Here I was able to

543 reflect with the team on how the content from the workshops could be embedded within

544 scrims and official matches. In some ways, this was the best approach in the given situation

545 and echoes a more systems-based approach (Daley et al., 2020). However, I do feel I could

546 have been more active within the training sessions to further embed psychology.

547 As my first step into esports and working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic,

548 this was certainly a learning curve for me and my role as a trainee sport psychologist. Though

549 I experienced challenges and there are improvements to be made in the future, feedback from

550   the players and coaches was largely positive. This feedback indicated the development of

551   team cohesion through several means. For example, greater understanding of what it means

552   to be a team, safety to share ideas, greater empathy for team members, and creation of a

553   shared understanding and language within the team. Finally, this case shows one example of

554   how sport psychology can be of benefit within professional esports in the hope to share

555   insights into the experience of working within this evolving context.

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661   **Appendices**

662   **Appendix 1**

663   Psychological Safety Questionnaire

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666   **Appendix 2**

667   Player Interview Guide

668   1.   How useful was the content of the group sessions and why?

669   2.   Were there any learnings that were key for you or you took away and used?

670   3.   What benefits, if any, did you gain from the psychological support?

671   4.   What things, if any, did you not like about the psych support/workshops?

672   5.   How could the psychological support be improved?

673   6.   Are there any other topics you would have liked to be covered over the split/Anything

674   that you would have liked to be better prepared for?

675   7.   Any further comments

676   <u>Coaching Staff Interview Guide</u>

677   1. How useful was the content of the group sessions, for yourself and the players, and why?

678   2. Were there any learnings that were key for you and the players?

679   3. What benefits, if any, did you gain from the psychological support?

680   4. What benefits, if any, do you think the players gained from the psychological support?

681   5. What things, if any, did you not like about the psych support/workshops?

682   6. How could the psychological support be improved?

683   7. Are there any other topics you would have liked to be covered over the split?

684   8. Any further comments

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