

WORKING IN ESPORTS: DEVELOPING TEAM COHESION

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Abstract

The team in the current case study is a professional League of Legends (LoL) team within the UK. This case study aimed to develop team cohesion through increasing players' awareness of self and others through mutual sharing of strength profiles. As the split progressed, the case also aimed to support the players to manage uncomfortable thoughts and emotions under pressure utilising an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy approach (Hayes et al., 2006). This was done through five workshops over four weeks with one-to-one work blended into the programme to ensure an individualised approach to enhance learning (Cross et al., 2006). This case study will outline the context of LoL, the needs analysis, intervention delivery, and feedback from interviews with players and coaches. Finally, this case study will provide reflections from the trainee sport and exercise psychologist working within esports for the first time.

Keywords: esports, team cohesion, league of legends

Context

League of Legends

Electronic sports, otherwise known as esports, is a professional video gaming industry that has been rapidly emerging across the world. Esports has been defined as: “A form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the esports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces.” (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017, p. 213). Esports may also have, but not in all instances, ranking systems and competitions regulated by official leagues (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020).

One of the most popular esports worldwide is League of Legends (LoL), a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) that saw a five-million-dollar prize pool in the 2016 World Championships (Himmelstein et al., 2021). In LoL there are two teams of five competing against one another. Matches last between 30 – 45 minutes on average and end when one team destroys their oppositions’ ‘Nexus’ by completing objectives across the map and navigating lanes successfully. Each player in the team will select a unique character (called champions) to compete as out of the 150-champion pool. Each player has a separate role within the team: top lane, jungle (an area between the bases and lanes), mid lane (middle lane), bot lane (bottom lane), and support. For each role, a different skill set is required. For example, some roles deal with high damage, whereas others focus on healing ability and farming (Himmelstein et al., 2021). Teams must communicate effectively to help them reach their desired objectives. For example, to plan when to engage in a team fight, switch lanes, and close the game.

In addition to effective communication, other performance challenges have been identified within the esports literature, including concentration, communication, motivation,

emotional regulation, team cohesion, and anger management (Murphy, 2009). Perceived stressors of professional LoL players have been found to include team issues, performance expectations, audience, and social media (Leis et al., 2022). More specifically, Leis et al. (2022) identified team issues to include lack of confidence in teammates, intra-team criticism, and teammates' evaluation of one's performance. It is not surprising, therefore, that the appointment of applied sport psychology support has been increasing within esports teams to enhance team cohesion and support teams with these performance challenges (Smith et al., 2019).

The Team

The team in the current case study was a professional esports team within the UK League Championship (UKLC). The team was comprised of two managers, one coach, one performance analyst, and five players. The age of the players ranged from 17 to 21. A LoL season is divided into "splits". Typically, the season includes a "spring split and a "summer split". The workshops were delivered over the four-week summer split, where eight teams compete, meeting each team twice throughout the split.

Unlike the top teams within Europe and across the world who often train together in gaming houses alongside coaches and support staff, teams within the UKLC tend to run remotely. With each player and staff member training and competing from home and connecting through Discord; software where communities can communicate over voice, video, and text. This is an important consideration for the sport psychology practitioner with the need to create an engaging and interactive intervention to promote learning via online technologies. Furthermore, the lack of face-to-face contact may impact team cohesion, with 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.

This was paramount within the current context due to my lack of experience within LoL and esports. Within cognitive behaviour approaches, I align with the third wave approach of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2006). This is due to my belief that thoughts are mental events that should not be changed or be removed. Finally, when individuals engage with meaningful, values driven action, it will bring them closer to living a fulfilling life.

The Case

Needs Analysis

I observed scrims (team training) online using screen sharing and voice channels on Discord. During my first observation of scrims, one of the team managers talked me through various aspects of LoL (e.g., draft, objectives, roles, champions) and the processes the team went through (e.g., pre-game talk, draft, post-game reflection). Additionally, both team managers discussed with me how the team had not been performing optimally and had drawn in their first three matches. I continued to attend more scrims within my first week and was able to observe independently. I noticed that communication often broke down when the team was under pressure. For example, when the opposition took the first drake and when a team member was perceived to be purposefully feeding the opposing team. This led to behaviours such as blaming others for “not responding to calls” and “inting” (intentionally feeding the opponent with gold and experience), dying more frequently due to a lack of support, and certain team members decreasing their contribution to communication. This resonated with research from Himmelstein et al. (2011) who reported factors such as limited ability to regulate emotions, lack of team reliance, and ineffective communication.

Further discussions with both team managers identified the importance of communication and teamwork within the game. The head coach reported that whilst

performing under pressure, player communication can become toxic and players start performing as individuals rather than as a team. This was in line with previous research identifying psychological challenges faced within esports (Murphy, 2009; Smith et al., 2019). More specifically, Smith et al. (2019) reported team issues such as negative comments and criticism about gameplay, mistakes being pointed out, and teammates not listening or following instructions. This was further supported by Leis et al. (2022) who found professional LoL players to experience stressors including intra-team criticism, and teammates' evaluation of one's performance. The head coach reported this may be due to "rookies" within the team with no previous professional experience as an esports player. The research stated resonates with the narrative from management, my initial observations of scrims, and discussions with the coaching staff. Additionally, as this roster had not previously competed together, with fluctuation of rosters being common within esports (LeNorgant, 2019), there was a potential need to support team cohesion.

To gather more data for the needs analysis, the first workshop would introduce the players to sport psychology, learn more about the team's personal experiences within LoL, and create space for the team to offer suggestions for the programme. The team echoed the importance of team cohesion, understanding their individual strengths and weaknesses, and what this looks like in game. Therefore, the initial aims were to develop team cohesion through creating a greater understanding of self and others. The needs analysis continued throughout the split, with case development being cyclical not linear. This allowed me to respond to developments within the team and collect new information as my relationships grew with the players and staff. As a result, new topics were identified such as managing thoughts and emotions before and during competition. This was in line with my initial observations, where toxic behaviours were observable when the team was under pressure. I also believed this would support team cohesion, as players may experience greater

psychological flexibility under pressure, reducing unworkable behaviours or urges (Bem et al., 2021) such as toxic communication.

Developing the Programme

Based on the needs analysis, I decided to work towards building team cohesion by increasing the players' awareness of themselves and others. This was facilitated through mutual sharing of their individual strengths and weaknesses. Mutual sharing within sport has been found to benefit team closeness, understanding of teammates, and communication (Windsor et al., 2011). It involves communication exercises whereby athletes disclose information and personal stories that were not previously known to other team members (Holt & Dunn, 2006). It was important the players believed they were sharing their personal information in an environment they perceived as psychologically safe. This is an environment where individuals believe interpersonal risks can be taken safely within a team. For example, asking for help, admitting errors, or seeking feedback from other team members (Edmondson, 1999). Additionally, previous research suggests psychological safety may support task cohesion within team sports (McLaren & Spink, 2021) providing rationale for the mediating role of psychological safety in developing team cohesion.

Team members were to complete a psychological safety questionnaire, which was discussed within the team (with each player's permission) before agreeing to mutually share their strengths and weaknesses. To create a shared understanding of self and others within the team, a strengths-based technique (Ludlam et al., 2016) was to be drawn upon. Strength profiles would be created during one-to-one sessions to enhance the learning from the workshops and ensure the players' individual characteristics and experiences were taken into 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**

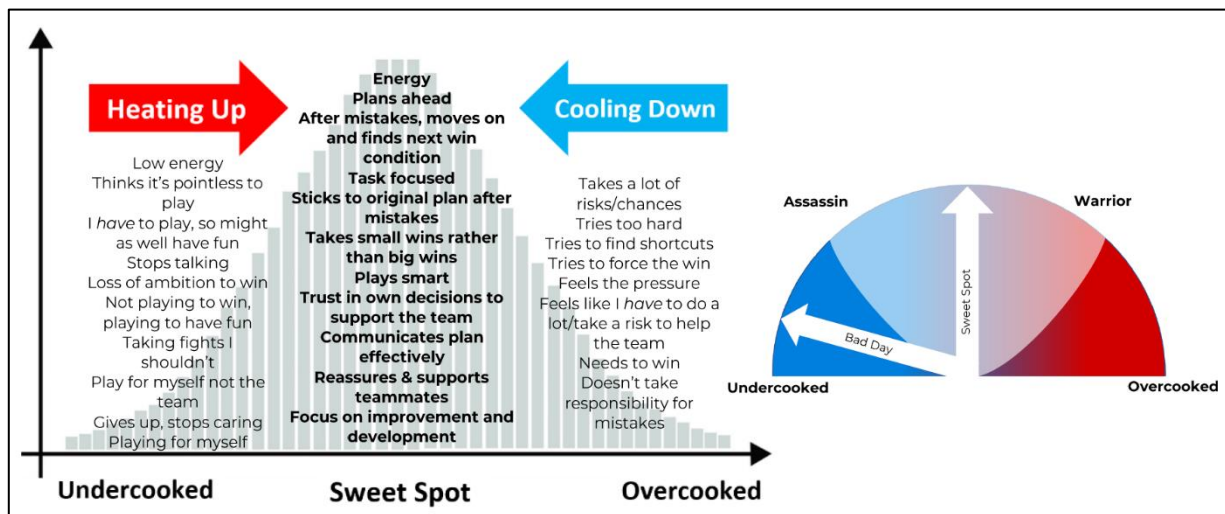
253 During the second workshop, I discussed strengths and weaknesses with the players.
254 The language of these profiles was important, and it’s important to note that “weaknesses”
255 were discussed as “overplayed” or “underplayed” strengths. For example, if a player felt their
256 strengths were not 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).

I outlined the anatomy of strengths to the players, adapted from research on character strengths (Niemic, 2019) and Spotlight profiling (Ong, 2018): undercooked (e.g., playing it safe, afraid of making mistakes; the player is not using their strengths), sweet spot (e.g., plays aggressively and smart; the player is optimally using their strengths), and overdone (e.g., playing high risk when the game needs safety; the player is using their strength within the wrong context). I then handed it over to the players and asked them how this relates to them as LoL players and whether they could think of examples of their opponents within these three categories. The players discussed the phenomena of tilt here, which originates from poker, and is a suboptimal state of mind where the individual loses control, impacting decision making, and leading to negative emotions such as anger or frustration (Wei et al., 2016). Some have likened tilt within esports to road rage (White & Romano, 2020). The players discussed how they experienced tilt when they were overcooked. Finally, we spoke about how everyone will have a different sweet spot. For example, some players would like to play in a higher energy zone than others. This was presented as an “assassin” or a “warrior” mindset. The players were provided a few tasks at the end of the session, such as identifying when they are in their sweet spot or undercooked during training and whether they perform best in an assassin or warrior mindset.

One-to-one sessions were arranged with each player to create a personal strength profile (Figure 1). To do this, I shared my screen with the player on discord and we worked through each of the components of strengths as stated above. These profiles would be shared with the whole team (with the permission of each player) in the next workshop to support psychological safety, cohesion, and self-awareness.

Figure 1

An example of a player's strength profile



Strengths and Sharing

Prior to this workshop, I sent a psychological safety questionnaire (Edmondson, 2018) to each player individually (Appendix 1). I clarified that their individual answers would not be shared with the team, but, with their permission, a collective team score would be calculated and shared in the next workshop. I was pleased to see that the psychological safety of the team was high according to the questionnaire. This allowed me to reinforce to the team that it was safe to speak their minds and take risks within the team, according to their scores. Further, I hoped it would allow them to be more comfortable entering the mutual sharing of strength profiles and their personal experiences within LoL. I presented the questionnaire findings to the players, with my thoughts on how psychological safety can shift and change during losses or high-pressure moments. With this, the team agreed and could see how this played out within scrims and matches. I then presented the differences between a team with 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

a shared language between team members and coaching staff to be developed (Ludlam et al., 2016). Further, within a match where a loss emerged due to issues in draft with one player, myself and the coach were able to open a conversation about how he was undercooked, and I was then able to supplement this with one-to-one support.

The Performance Brain

Following a run of wins in the split, the team was getting closer to playoffs and the pressure was building. Feedback from the coach and players, backed up by my observations, saw the need to explore performing under pressure. Here, we discussed the brain as a threat detector and that, when in high-pressure situations such as being behind in a match or experiencing high expectations, our threat detector (or limbic system; Bayle et al., 2009) can be triggered meaning we enter fight or flight mode (Siegel & Bryson, 2012). To relate this to LoL, I discussed how this can otherwise be known as tilt. This can lead to decreased performance and see an increase in overcooked or undercooked behaviours. Discussions were then opened within the team about how they felt about the upcoming opportunity to reach playoffs. This included any pressures or expectations they had upon themselves or the team, and what scenarios in game were likely to trigger their threat response. These discussions may have supported team cohesion by creating space for the team to share when they struggle with pressure and uncomfortable internal events during performance. This could potentially create a greater understanding of when individual members struggle and how to best support one another.

To ensure this session was not all about pressure and expectations, we finished by reflecting on their progress so far. For example, what they have learned throughout the split about how they manage high-pressure situations, and how they felt the team was working together.

Playing Under Pressure

In the same week, another workshop was delivered to provide techniques to help the players manage pressure. The technique utilised was from an ACT approach. This was in line with my philosophy as I believe more struggle is created if thoughts and feelings are changed or attempted to be removed. By using techniques in line with ACT, the focus is on increasing awareness of these thoughts and emotions and accepting that it is part of human nature for them to occur. This acceptance can lead to the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings subsiding in their own time, giving individuals more space to commit to meaningful action in the next moment (Harris, 2019).

The technique that was focused on was 3R's (recognise, release, refocus) based on an ACT technique used in sport (Hansen & Haberl, 2019). I adapted this so it linked with the language of the strength profiles, providing an opportunity for team members to develop a deeper understanding of self and others, continuing the development of team cohesion. Finally, menti.com was used within this workshop to explore pre-and post-game performance behaviours. This was done to link with the 3R's, so that when refocusing pre or post game, the players knew what behaviours they could commit to. The downside to menti.com was that some of the answers lacked detail. To amend this, I asked the team questions, getting them to elaborate on what they put. For example, one player said pre-game to be in a "good mood", therefore, I asked "what does it look like when you're in a good mood?", "what would I see you doing?" to draw out specific behaviours they can commit to.

After the workshop, I discussed the content with the coach and performance analyst. This was to support them to use the 3R's during training and help the players to manage negative thoughts or emotions that may arise.

Feedback and Programme Evaluation

Seven post-split interviews (five players and two coaches) were conducted to evaluate the programme's effectiveness in developing team cohesion and ability to perform under pressure from the perspective of the players and the coaching staff using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 2). These interviews were conducted four to five weeks before the final workshop delivery. This delay was due to the team winning the summer split and gaining a position at a European tournament.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis of the data was conducted by the first author in relation to the research question. The second author supported the analysis process to ensure reliability and rigour (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Player Interviews

For the player interviews, two primary themes were identified as “developing team cohesion” and “playing under pressure”. Subthemes were identified within each primary theme. For “developing team cohesion” subthemes included: “greater understanding of being a team”, “enhanced empathy for teammates”, and “safety to share ideas”. For “playing under pressure” subthemes included: “managing nerves, and “enhanced awareness of internal events”.

Developing Team Cohesion

Greater Understanding of Being a Team

Player 3 praised the workshops for helping the team to play together and felt the outcome of the split would have been different without the psychology programme:

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

Player 5 reflected on improving recognition of when he became tilted in a challenging performance situation and what internal events might arise (e.g., thoughts, emotions). He mentioned how the ACT techniques helped him to combat this:

When we went through things I would focus on when playing league it made it a lot easier to recognise when I was tilting or was not performing well. And you try to justify it... but as soon as you point out the common pitfalls then I recognised them and it was a lot easier for me to sort out myself. And using the [ACT] techniques so you know how to combat it [focusing on unhelpful things] (Player 5)

Coaching Staff Interviews

Within the coaching staff interviews, one theme of “developing team cohesion” was identified in line with the case study aims with subthemes including: “greater understanding of being a team”, “shared language”, and “understanding player needs”.

Developing Team Cohesion

Greater Understanding of Being a Team

Team cohesion was discussed as a perceived improvement due to the workshops. The performance analyst reflected that before the workshops there were a lot of egos trying to complete. The workshops allowed the players to gain a better understanding of themselves and their teammates, helping them to come together as a team:

It really got them thinking about themselves and others in a team aspect and being able to break it down to make them realise that not everything is about them and I really liked that because I think at the very start we sort of struggled before you came in 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 the way of explaining
470 it or the references so being able to have that as a coach, who doesn't necessarily have
471 that 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 player's 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:

If there's a way to link back the psychological aspects into an example that's league related...maybe work with [the coach] like 10 minutes before the session to find an example to make the link to league more obvious in a way. (Player 1)

Personal Reflections

This section will outline my personal reflections on the approach taken during the split and the feedback provided by the team. Additionally, I will reflect on my experiences working for the first time in esports. This case study aimed to develop team cohesion through increasing players' awareness of self and others through mutual sharing of strength profiles. Additionally, as the split progressed the case also aimed to support the players to manage uncomfortable thoughts and emotions under pressure. Based on feedback from the players it was perceived that team cohesion had improved with greater empathy for teammates, understanding of what it means to be a team, and safety to share thoughts within the team. Some players perceived performance under pressure to benefit the team in relation to managing nerves and improving self-awareness and focus in game. From the feedback, coaches perceived the development of team cohesion by creating a greater understanding of what it meant to be a team, utilising a shared language, and increasing understanding of player needs.

There were some negatives presented by one of the players. They felt the sessions were a "chore" and did not impact the way they played. This player also told me that if the other players said anything otherwise then they were not being honest. This was difficult to hear. However, I felt the feedback from the other players was authentic and so I will not disregard what they have said. I will continue to focus on trying my best to have a positive impact on the majority of team members. This same player did praise the one-to-one sessions we had 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 scrimms 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

the players and coaches was largely positive. This feedback indicated the development of team cohesion through several means. For example, greater understanding of what it means to be a team, safety to share ideas, greater empathy for team members, and creation of a shared understanding and language within the team. Finally, this case shows one example of how sport psychology can be of benefit within professional esports in the hope to share insights into the experience of working within this evolving context.

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Psychological Safety Questionnaire

Appendix 2

1. How useful was the content of the group sessions and why?
2. Were there any learnings that were key for you or you took away and used?
3. What benefits, if any, did you gain from the psychological support?
4. What things, if any, did you not like about the psych support/workshops?
5. How could the psychological support be improved?
6. Are there any other topics you would have liked to be covered over the split/Anything that you would have liked to be better prepared for?
7. Any further comments

676 Coaching Staff Interview Guide

- 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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