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Raibuliavimas (making ripples): student-athletes action safe sport in Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

Athlete voice is fundamental to good governance; however, sports organisations have been slow to involve young people in safe sport initiatives. In Lithuania, the location of this study, athlete welfare issues are rarely discussed, and the development of a safe sport environment is new to the policy agenda. This project aimed to empower a cohort of student-athletes to promote good practice and safe sport in Lithuania. A secondary aim was to understand the content areas that young athletes prioritised in promoting safe sport. 17 Lithuanian university student-athletes worked in small groups to identify a safe sport issue that was relevant in their country and created awareness-raising poster campaigns to start conversations about it. Focus group interviews were conducted with participants who highlighted the need to challenge 'taken-for-granted' ideas about athlete welfare and the importance of involving young athletes in advancing the welfare and safe sport agendas.

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Introduction

Sport organisations have begun to address athlete welfare issues through the implementation of strategies aimed at developing a safer sport environment. Such developments, which remain largely confined to Western Europe, Australia and North America, have been promoted by decades of empirical evidence of athletes' experiences of maltreatment and unhealthy sports environments and the high media profile of such cases (see Dryden, 2018). The impetus behind the implementation of many athlete welfare initiatives has been high-profile cases of sexual violence (primarily sexual assault/rape and sexual harassment of (child) athletes by adult coaches; see Lang & Hartill, 2015). As such, much of the focus of these initiatives, including awareness training, is often on educating attendees about child abuse (sexual, physical and emotional abuse and neglect), and/or about sexual violence (sexual harassment, sexual assault/rape of adult and/or child athletes) at the expense of other athlete welfare issues (McMahon et al., 2022). However, the issues that can compromise athlete welfare are myriad and extend far beyond these topics, for example, disordered eating and self-harm, overtraining and injury, social and financial problems, and withdrawal from sport (see Hughes & Coakley, 1991; International Olympic Committee (IOC) Athletes' Commission, 2022; Jacobs et al., 2017). The IOC also recognises that sport may be the context for the maltreatment of athletes and promotes 'safe sport', which it defines as 'an athletic environment that is respectful, equitable and free from all forms of non-accidental violence to athletes' (Mountjoy et al., 2016, p. 2).

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Consistent with other scholars (e.g. Gurgis et al., 2023; Mountjoy et al., 2020), we recognise there is 'conceptual confusion' with this term as it may be conflated exclusively with athletes' *physical* safety, however, it is a globally accepted term in the field.

Athletes' involvement in welfare and safe sport strategies, including formal and non-formal training, is a core component of good governance in sports organisations (IOC Athletes' Commission, 2022; Lang & Hartill, 2015). Such an approach enables athletes' voices to be heard and their experiences and insights used for the improvement of sport. It also ensures decisions are relevant to and consider the impact on athletes' peers, thereby enhancing the credibility and inclusiveness of the organisation.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' template to follow to give young people more agency in sport; rather involving athletes can take different forms and occur at various levels (see Lang, 2023). However, sports organisations have been slow to involve young people in welfare and safe sport strategies (Lang, 2022). This is unsurprising as positioning young people as active, informed and informing agents with respect to sport, which has traditionally been an adult-driven framework, involves challenging long-standing institutional norms and conventions (e.g. the sport ethic; a conceptual framework of 'acceptable' morality/immorality that shapes sporting experiences) (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). This is especially true in Lithuania, the location of this study, where athlete voices have yet to feature, athlete welfare issues are rarely discussed, and the development of a safe sport environment is new to the policy agenda.

In Lithuania, athlete welfare is currently receiving an unprecedented level of interest. Recently, Olympic swimmer Rūta Meilutytė informed the media that the incessant pressure when competing at the highest level led to the development of an eating disorder and poor mental health (Buožis & Darulis, 2018). Also, the first case of an athlete welfare violation was recently heard by a Lithuanian court, with the prosecution of two cycling coaches for distributing performance-enhancing drugs to athletes (BNS, 2018). These cases have drawn attention to the unethical coaching practices and infrastructure inadequacies that threaten the welfare of athletes in the country. Unlike the UK and other European nations, Lithuania does not yet have sport welfare enshrined within national sport policy or sport-sector specific safeguarding mechanisms. Therefore, Lithuania provides an interesting context to explore the ways established traditions and values within sport shape the practices that are accepted, negotiated, or abhorred. The purpose of this project was to empower young student-athletes to target an area of concern relating to athlete welfare in Lithuania and promote safe sport. In doing so, the secondary aim was to understand the content areas that young athletes prioritise in promoting safe sport in their nation.

Since the adoption of the UNCRC in November 1989, emphasis has been placed on listening to the voices of children (under age 18) and young people (under age 25). Article 12 specifies children and young people's rights to express their opinions in all matters affecting them and that these views should be given due weight. That is, 'simply listening to the child is insufficient; the views of the child have to be seriously considered when the child is capable of forming her or his own views' (UN Committee, 2009, p. 11). Thus, there is a need to take their opinions seriously, and those listening must be prepared for children and young people to have 'influence' and for changes to be made as a result of the views expressed (Lundy, 2007). In this way, children and young people are positioned as experts in their own lives, capable of making useful observations about themselves and the world in which they live (Stride et al., 2017). In application to this project, such an approach recognises student-athletes as competent social agents and offers them a voice in the shaping and (re)imagining of safe sport in their nation. Thus, the value of this work lies in extending research in safe sport to not only involve young people as participants but also to *empower* them to *lead* developments.

Methods

Historically and politically, Lithuania sits on the semi-periphery of Western and Eastern contexts (Blagojević-Hjuron, 2014) and has fundamentally distinct philosophical and ideological influences (e.g. a

former member of the Soviet Union, joined the European Union in 2004 and the Euro zone in 2015). The emphasis in Lithuanian (sport) education remains on didactic methods, a privileging of the biosciences, and practical-focused training. Given the deeply entrenched values, ideas and *a priori* assumptions that underpin how young people are educated and acculturated to think, feel and be in sport, athletes' views on safe sport are worthy of exploration.

This project was informed by the interpretivist paradigm which posits a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology to *understand* areas of safe sport that were of relevance and of concern to a group of young athletes in their nation at a particular point in time. Such a position required recognition of the participants' unique experiences as athletes across a range of sports and levels of participation and their knowledge and interpretations of the sport sector in Lithuania (to be discussed shortly). Merriam's (1998) qualitative case study approach aligned with the authors' positioning and desire to understand young athletes' views on safe sport. Consistent with the methodology, to generate data, focus-group interviews were undertaken with participants (to be discussed later in the paper). Stemming from her research in education, Merriam's (1998) case study methodology is characterised by a particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic analysis of a bounded phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Key to this methodology is the delimiting of the case or the defining of boundaries that determining what will (and will not) be studied (Merriam, 1998). Accordingly, the case was bound within the unique national sport sector of Lithuania as described through the experiences, beliefs, and understandings of a small group of participants who engaged in workshops on safe sport at a time in which youth voice and their representation were being discussed globally. Heuristically, this case was of value in its contribution to global conversations about athlete welfare and safe sport.

Following ethical approval from the authors' institution¹ and consent to host the project from the partner institution, a gatekeeper was recruited to advertise the programme to university student-athletes in sport-related programmes. Seventeen Lithuanian undergraduate students (average age: 22) who had completed their first or second year of studies in the areas of sports coaching and physical education voluntarily participated in the week of workshops on topics relating to safe sport. The group comprised 10 women and seven men who were (age-grade) international, semi-professional and national-level athletes from a variety of specialisations (i.e. football, basketball, handball, rowing, canoeing, judo and volleyball). Student-athletes were targeted as potential change-makers who, with support, would have the confidence to promote positive practice that would 'make ripples' in the sport sector.

The workshops took place at the end of the academic year to prevent disrupting the host university's taught sessions. They ran for five consecutive days, with sessions starting at 9:30 and finishing at 15:30. Participating student-athletes were given breakfast and lunch each day and, at the completion of the week, a hoodie they designed that promoted safe sport. The workshop content reflected current trends in academic literature, policy and activity from athlete advocacy groups (e.g. EU Athletes). Similar to the IOC's Athlete365 Safe Sport programme (IOC Athletes' Commission, 2022), included were the following areas of discussion: abuse/maltreatment, early specialisation, eating disorders, sexism, ableism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, use of performance-enhancing substances, match-fixing, and transitions within and out of sport. The workshops were designed and delivered by both authors who have taught and conducted research in this area for two decades.

At the end of the week, the student-athletes worked in small groups to identify a topic relating to safe sport in Lithuania and created their own posters on the issue to disseminate to sports clubs as part of an awareness-raising campaign. It was left to the student-athletes to decide the agenda with regard to identifying relevant issues that were specific to their sporting cultural context and to decide an appropriate means of drawing attention to it. As such, the student-athletes' knowledge of the sport sector, their experiences as athletes and their design and communication skills were essential. To manage expectations, it was emphasised that the poster campaigns were not likely to result in immediate change; after all, it was a new topic for sport in the nation. Poster campaigns,

however, served to start conversations on an issue (i.e. safe sport) that aims to benefit young people, led by young people themselves.

Poster campaigns are often used to raise awareness of societal problems to change the attitudes of the public (Cismaru et al., 2014). Such campaigns are seldom intensive enough or sufficiently theory-driven to transform norms, however, they can provide a platform for advocacy initiatives (Heise, 1998). More importantly, posters enabled us to provide a gentle introduction to the topic, led by young people/athletes themselves, in a country that has little to no history of safe sport mechanisms. In this way, the poster campaigns were a starting point, an awareness-raising initiative, that could build ownership and confidence among young athletes to engage further in the area. By designing posters in their native language, the student-athletes could meaningfully connect concerns about athlete welfare to sport contexts in Lithuania. Furthermore, given the participants were actively engaged in the sporting system and understood the limitations and opportunities where ideas and structures within the system could or could not be challenged, this poster project provided an opportunity outside of the 'system' where they could express their individual agency in challenging the status quo without reprisal.

At the end of campaign preparation, the first author facilitated three in-person focus group interviews, one with each campaign group, each comprised of 4–7 participants. This explored their choice of campaign topics and rationales for these, concerns they had about sport in Lithuania and thoughts about how to effectively disseminate the posters. Three months later, after the student-athletes had disseminated the posters in their chosen sports settings, a virtual focus group interview, with nine participants, took place that centred on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the campaign and possibilities for future work. All focus groups interviews lasted approximately 45 min and were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. The workshops and group interviews were conducted in English, the student-athletes' second language.²

Data were analysed inductively. Initially, transcripts were coded in light of meaningful words, phrases, and common features relating to the poster campaigns (Tesch, 1990). For example, over-training, a payment-by-results system, organisational/club support and injury. These 'meaningful units' were organised into 'core' categories that related to the poster campaigns, including: over-training and over-conforming to the sports ethic, pain and injury, psychological abuse, and athlete voice. These will be discussed below.

Results and discussion

Poster campaigns

Three Lithuanian-language poster campaigns were created that concentrated on the following issues: overtraining and over-conforming to the sports ethic, pain and injury, psychological abuse and athlete voice. The posters were designed (i.e. the inclusion of images and slogans) for an audience of athletes, coaches, parents and other stakeholders nationwide. The following section includes the posters and the student-athletes' discussions about their chosen topic. Also featured are the student-athletes' concerns about the campaigns, and how their awareness of safe sport has changed since being a part of the project.

Campaign #1: Over-training/over-conforming to the sports ethic

Figure 1. This campaign (see [Figure 1](#)) was focused on critiquing prevailing ideologies that frame hegemonic practices within sport and glorify over-training. The student-athletes believed that slogans such as 'Impossible is Nothing', 'No Pain, No Gain' and 'Just Do It' encouraged dangerous forms of compliance, especially amongst young athletes. Such a view represents a progressive shift, or an acknowledgment of changing sport norms, amongst the young athletes in this project. As one participant explained, 'In [the] media in sports, pictures are about "more pain" or "to train without pain is a problem", especially for young people.' The student-athletes' slogan,

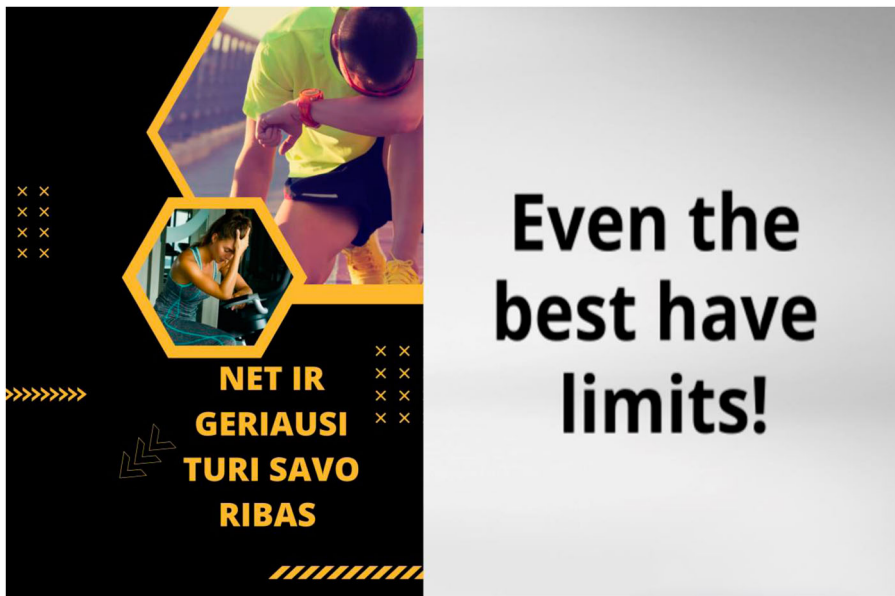


Figure 1. Poster on over-training/over-conforming to the sports ethic.

'Even the Best Have Limits', aligns with calls for awareness campaigns to educate young athletes, coaches and parents about overtraining (Oliver & Lloyd, 2015). In providing a rationale for their choice of campaign topic, one student-athlete stated:

There are situations like this where a young athlete is seen as a big prospect, he's let's say 16 years old, and he's taken into an adult club already. He plays with adults, he does everything the same, the same training, the same amounts of – he puts in the same amount of work, and then we come back to our topic of the poster, so the training becomes too hard for the, still, child, or teenager, since his body is still growing. He needs to have specific amounts of work.

As highlighted by this student-athlete and echoed in the literature, the period between ages 14 and 18, when a young athlete undergoes key maturational processes, is vital in an athlete's career development (Schubring & Thiel, 2014). The aforementioned example provides an illustration of when the characteristics of the growth process conflict with the rigid social and physical norms of elite sports. For the young athlete mentioned above, the training standards and competition norms are aligned with professional elite sports and do not respect maturation (Ford et al., 2012). Such a mismatch often results in inappropriate loading, which can lead to injury, poor health and drop-out from sport (Oliver & Lloyd, 2015).

The pressure to disregard the developmental needs of a young athlete could be explained by the sport ethic or set of norms that are often accepted as the dominant criteria for what it means to be defined and accepted as an athlete (Coakley & Pike, 2014; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The sport ethic encourages athletes to be fully dedicated to their sport at the expense of other interests. In addition, athletes must be distinguished from others, strive for perfection in training and competition, and need to accept pain and risk, and reject obstacles or their own limits (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). First discussed in 1991, the sport ethic has been utilised largely in literature from Western nations to draw attention to the consequences on athletes' health and well-being of overconforming to the sport norms, for example, by undertaking supplementary training, weight loss, overtraining, managing chronic pain, and using banned substances to enhance performance (e.g. Coker-Cranney et al., 2018; McMahon & Penney, 2013). Recently there has been a resurgence in scholarship

that discusses the sport ethic in relation to maltreatment in sport (see Boudreault et al., 2022; Fournier et al., 2022). As such, the sport ethic is a relevant and valuable concept to understand how these young people are engaging in, and experiencing, sport in Lithuania.

In raising awareness about overtraining, the student-athletes attempted to challenge practices that glorify the sports ethic and athletes' willingness to overconform to it (Coakley & Pike, 2014). As noted in previous literature, the sport ethic may be promoted by athletes, but it can also be endorsed by other stakeholders such as coaches and doctors (Fournier et al., 2022; Hughes & Coakley, 1991) and upheld within organisational and club philosophies. Beyond this, it is recognised that there are social and cultural conditions that inform athletes' perspectives about how they are meant to behave in sport. This has been framed in Lithuania by didactic coaching methods and as mentioned previously, the lingering effects of post-Communist training methods and a bio-scientific approach to coach education.

Towards this end, a student-athlete shared their recent experience with a teammate on the national squad who was overtraining and being encouraged to carry on:

My [teammate] ... was overtrained. And the doctor said that you need to rest, but our coaches go on, 'It's OK. It's OK to go on'. And when was ... participating in the [international event] he managed ... [his worst] time ever ... So it's kind of sad because our coach had said ... 'it's OK, [take some] vitamins ... take a rest, maybe two days of rest and then go on again.' But ... when [my other teammates and I] went to the ... sport doctor's office, he said, 'your colleague [is] overtrained ... and should take a rest – a month or two months.' But the coach said, 'fuck it' and raced him.

Here the coach's disregard for the sports doctor's diagnosis is a clear illustration of the performance-over-welfare mentality that prevails in elite sport within and beyond Lithuania and the contradiction between what organisations say they do and what they endorse (explicitly or implicitly). While the context of an international competition and the lack of a reserve athlete might have put pressure on the coach to include the overtrained athlete in the squad, coaches have also been known to include players specifically against a doctor's advice as a demonstration of sovereignty (Malcolm, 2006a). It would take a strong athlete to challenge such a coach and reject an opportunity to compete at a world championship out of fear that they will be sanctioned for it and overlooked for selection in future national squads (Purdy et al., 2009; Manley et al., 2016). Further, the decision not to compete could result in a loss of significant funding for the athlete or the team. While such financial pressures, as well as a desire to fulfil the expectations of teammates and significant others, might make a compliant athlete, ignoring health issues can have consequences. For example, in the short term, health issues can negatively affect athletic performance and, in the long term, have repercussions on an individual's sporting career (Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010). Thus, conformity to the sport ethic is the bedrock of an established career-protection strategy; one that is problematic but normalised to facilitate survivability and thriving.

Campaign #2: Injury and training through pain

Figure 2. There was the belief amongst the student-athletes who developed this campaign (see Figure 2) that pain and injury, both the prevalence of and how they were managed by coaches and other athletes, was of great concern in Lithuanian sport. Many of the participants were high-level athletes in their sports (several had represented Lithuania in international age-group competitions), so they had experienced serious injuries themselves or had teammates who had. As one participant reflected, 'Because [we have] a lot of good talent in Lithuania, we get a lot of injuries.' The student-athletes believed that coaches were partly responsible for many athlete injuries by socialising athletes to ignore pain:

There [are] injuries, too, like injuries constantly because – here's the thing, pain is a symptom. If you [ignore the] symptoms then you are going to [get] injured. ... Coaches see ... the players and their teammates are in pain, and they do not think about that, because coaches *endure* pain.



Figure 2. Poster on injury and training through pain.

As with over-training discussed above, a willingness to accept and play through pain and injury is one of the core demands of the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Pain and injury are frequently normalised in sport and, through pressure from coaches and the internalisation of this, athletes learn even at recreational levels that ignoring pain and injury is one way they can demonstrate their commitment to becoming a 'real' athlete (Young, 2012). The student-athletes perceived this situation to be the result of coaches prioritising sporting success over the welfare of athletes. Such a practice aligns with discourses of mental and physical toughness that promote the ability to withstand high levels of physical pain and 'play on regardless' as central to athletic success (Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010). Towards this end, coaches can reject athletes' attempts to disclose accounts of pain and/or dismiss sensations of pain as indicators of weakness, reinforcing the sport ethic message that pain is the price to pay for being an athlete (Pike & Scott, 2015). Furthermore, the student-athletes were aware that athletes who vocalise pain risk negative sanctions including being ignored or ridiculed by the coach and being dropped from the team (Malcolm, 2006b).

The student-athletes suggested that in Lithuania encouraging athletes to play through pain and injury also occurred because of a funding system that rewards coaches for success – a legacy of the historical State-sponsored sport system that promoted favourable treatment of successful coaches and athletes by offering financial rewards. In some sports in Lithuania, financial bonuses are awarded annually to those whose teams win the age-grade league competitions. This can tempt coaches to prioritise immediate results and success to bolster their salary rather than considering athletes' welfare over the long term. For example:

A lot of the times it's sort of, when you overtrain your young athletes, at first the results seem to be pretty good and everyone's like, 'OK, we're doing great, let's continue this sort of approach' ... And then a year goes by and you see that they're starting to just fall off, have injuries after injuries after injuries.

The consequences on the long-term development of athletes as a result of this system directly challenge the commitment made by the Lithuanian Olympic Committee (LOC) (and by extension, Lithuanian National Governing Bodies of Sport who fall under the LOC) to promote the ideas and values of Olympism and the Olympic movement, which include prioritising athlete welfare. The tension here is that in many sports, the current system rewards the coach for performance success, which in turn privileges the maintenance of the status quo, despite contemporary sport policy globally increasingly shifting towards prioritising athlete welfare and well-being over

results (Kavanagh et al., 2021). It is worth considering whether the payment-by-results system could be amended to reward those who prioritise athlete welfare. For example, clubs could earn points for introducing welfare strategies and safe sport practices, with these calculated into the results for the league, from which bonuses could be awarded to clubs (and distributed to coaches). This might help change perceptions that '[coaches] don't care about our health' (student-athlete).

Campaign #3: Psychological abuse and promoting athlete voice

Figure 3. This campaign (see [Figure 3](#)) had two important messages. Firstly, the student-athletes were concerned about emotional/psychological abuse³ and how this is often normalised in sport in Lithuania. One participant stated: 'a lot of players that I know have a lot of problems because of the coach, because of the things they said.' Emotional/psychological abuse is the most prevalent form of abuse in sport by some margin (Hartill et al., [in press](#)). Its consequences include reduced enjoyment, changes in motivation, mood and self-esteem, anger, poor body image, anxiety, impaired focus, and difficulties with gaining new skills, and diminished performance (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). In addition, for some athletes, emotional/psychological abuse from the coach results in lasting emotional and psychological problems (McMahon & McGannon, 2021).

Although this campaign was targeted at raising athletes' awareness of emotional/psychological abuse, the student-athletes believed coaches and parents would also benefit from learning more about this form of abuse. Emotional/psychological abuse by coaches is highly normalised in the sporting context by both parents and coaches (Jacobs et al., 2017; Kavanagh et al., 2017), who may not perceive abusive methods to be such (Fournier et al., 2022). For example, coaches' repeated yelling, shouting, belittling, name-calling and making degrading comments, including inappropriate comments about weight and physical appearance, as well as ignoring athletes or excluding them from training sessions are abusive practices prevalent in sport (Stirling & Kerr, 2013) but are often viewed by athletes, coaches and other stakeholders as 'normal' coaching practice (Jacobs et al., 2017). Such behaviours are often rationalised as a coach's intention to push an athlete to a higher level of functioning and/or anger and loss of emotional control (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Concerningly,



Figure 3. Poster campaigning against psychological abuse and promoting athlete voice.

emotional/psychological abuse is often normalised such that it is believed to be necessary for improved performance (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). As a student-athlete noted:

I think the really important thing is that not a lot of coaches understand emotional abuse ... And also, not coaches, but a lot of parents also don't understand ... So I think it's really an important thing to talk about.

Alongside raising awareness of emotional/psychological abuse, the student-athletes explained that sometimes they were afraid to speak out about their experiences or simply to express any opinion on their training out of fear of retaliation from the coach: '[in some sport contexts] you can't say anything about the coaches or anything because if you say, you are out.' However, as one student-athletes stated:

I think it's really important that athletes do understand they have a voice. And when we were doing our campaign, our main thing was that – and in big letters we wrote 'Your voice should be heard.' So, I think that's the main message we are trying to tell everybody.

While the student-athletes were keen to promote athletes' ownership over their sport experiences, for this to be effective their voices must be listened to by people who can enact change (Lundy, 2007). As one participant stated, 'So we have our words, but our voice is not every time heard.' If, in response to athletes' concerns, change is not possible, the right to participation requires that those in authority provide an explanation as to why. Rehearsing the UNCRC provisions, for meaningful and effective representation, children's and young people's views must be given due weight and listened to (not just heard). Knowing their involvement is not tokenistic complies with Article 12, but, more importantly, it also can increase children and young people's confidence to speak out about issues that affect their everyday lives as well as empower them to become active agents making changes themselves (Johnson, 2017).

Perceptions of stakeholder reactions to the campaigns

To our knowledge, this was the first project to gather young athletes' views on safe sport in Lithuania and the first to collaborate with young Lithuanian athletes to empower them to raise awareness of athlete welfare issues among the sports community in the country. Given the novelty of this topic in the country, the student-athletes considered how their messages would be received and interpreted by their target audiences a concern. One participant reflected on the possible reaction of the public:

I think they would not understand directly. They would read, they would understand the message, but not like types of situations. You never think about the simplest ones, and the simplest ones are mostly the key to everything, so I think it won't be – like, maybe they will think about it, some of them, and some of them just read and would be 'like, oh, OK'.

In addition to concerns that sport stakeholders would be unable to relate to the content of the poster or be able to put it into context, the student-athletes also expressed concern that their campaign messages would not be taken seriously simply because the issue was being raised by young people. This is unsurprising given that young people are often positioned in society as 'adults in training' and, consequently assumed to be immature, incompetent and irrational (Kehily, 2009; Lang, 2022), resulting in a privileging of adults' knowledge over children and young peoples'. As one participant articulated:

A lot of people will think, 'Oh, they're students, this doesn't matter, we don't have to listen to them, they have no message to send, we will do what we are doing'. So that no one would want to listen to us, that will hurt a lot.

This concern was challenged by another participant who suggested that this was precisely why the campaign would be effective. In his words:

I think when they read the posters, I think it will be really, really important, and really effective if federations or some important organisations share our message. Because we're young people, young people are sending

message, and because we are young, we are athletes ourselves, maybe other athletes look at us and, 'Oh, but they are not afraid. I won't be afraid'. So, I think that's really important, that we send the message.

Although the student-athletes had mixed views on whether the campaigns created by young people for young people would be well received by stakeholders, the process of providing a space to empower young people to take an active role in the development and implementation of safe sport initiatives cannot be understated.

The campaign follow-up

The student-athletes displayed their posters in national training centres and sports clubs around the country. Three months after they distributed their posters, they reconnected via a virtual focus group with the first author to discuss the campaigns. Some of the student-athletes perceived some sports to be more receptive to their message than others, consequently they placed their campaign posters in particular locations. For example, 'I didn't post at my football club because I know that parents don't really care about it, so I posted it at [a] gymnastics club where all the kids go ...'.

The suggestion that a football club would not be receptive to messages promoting athlete welfare is consistent with longstanding scholarship that recognises the distinct sociocultural norms and behaviours that characterise particular sporting environments that have led to the production and promotion of abusive practices (McMahon & McGannon, 2021). Football, particularly at the professional level, has been identified as tolerating practices that constitute abuse and maltreatment (Dawson et al., 2022). Such an institution has remained a closed-loop system, enabling the continued reproduction of such behaviours by stakeholders (coaches, athletes, fans, etc.) who are encouraged to be uncritical of outdated practices viewed as part of the cultural norms of the sport (Anderson, 2005). It is interesting that the student-athletes believed a poster awareness campaign would not be effective in challenging this culture, so they opted to focus on a sport that they perceived would be more receptive to their message. While some might criticise the participant's decision to ignore a sporting context that has received global attention regarding the maltreatment and abuse of athletes, the student-athlete believed they had stronger connections in the gymnastics club that would provide a supportive foundation to grow the movement.

Some of the student-athletes viewed the posters as a starting point, a medium through which they could kick start conversations about the subject. Consequently, several participants ensured that they talked to people about their campaigns. For example, one student-athlete stated, 'I put the poster at our national training centre. So, everybody just looked at it, asked us about it. We chatted with them ... The Olympians said that we need more posters like this!' In another example:

I went to the sports school ... and I had my big poster about psychological violence. I asked the girls if they knew what it was and their response was quite surprising for me, they didn't ... Well, this specific term for them was hard ... but when I [gave them examples of] situations that are about psychological violence, they understood what I meant. So, we had a great chat about how they should come to the coach and be open about how they feel and how other people make them feel.

The above student-athlete's experience aligns with work on athlete and coach-led education that found that participants and facilitators believed they benefited from discussions with a person with first-hand experience in their sport context (McMahon et al., 2022). Because both shared similar cultural standing, the discussions were perceived to be reciprocal, informed and reduced the power imbalance between facilitators and participants (McMahon et al., 2022). Furthermore, the interaction with younger athletes led the student-athletes to (re)imagine possibilities for involvement in sport beyond the role of coach or mentor. In one participants' words: 'I would like to be the face of some kind of good message, spread the awareness, to do some campaign work and bring the athletes together for good cause.'

While the focus of this project was to develop young athletes' understandings of safe sport and empower them to become actively involved in creating safe sport environments by designing

awareness-raising campaigns, it was worth querying if the content of the workshops and campaigns were perceived by the student-athletes to impact on how they approached sport as participants, coaches and/or spectators. To date, no published research has explored athletes' involvement in courses on safe sport or indeed their involvement in any aspect of sports organisations' athlete welfare strategies, so little is known about the impact of this on them, socially, educationally, and personally. Thus, the follow-up focus groups afforded an opportunity to enquire if the project had featured in the participants' lives since they disseminated their campaigns. The student-athletes provided examples of changes to their own practice as well as a greater sensitivity to welfare when observing sport. In relation to the former, a student explained how he had modified his training out of concern about overtraining:

There was a two-week break between our championships, so I used to go to training ... in the morning with my father and in the evening with my team. And the first week I trained, my father [would] say 'You shouldn't train because I can see that you're overtraining'. And I said, 'No, I can go on' because I felt good. And then the first week, like Saturday, Sunday, I felt like it was too much for me. And the next ... week he scheduled, like how we will train, and he trained me so I wouldn't overtrain myself.

While this student-athlete showed how he applied his knowledge to a real-world situation, others provided examples of situations they had observed that made them think about athlete welfare:

A few days ago, we were watching the championship in Lithuania of [sport] ... we were watching everything, and I think that we were analysing, because it is really interesting – that it is really interesting to see how coach are treating [the athletes]. So, I think that ... we really saw ... all the things that we were learning in our project.

Thus, involvement in this project not only contributed to the student-athletes' understanding of safe sport but, by enabling them to set the agenda and develop their own campaigns, they were able to help others learn from their insight. Such a process empowered the student-athletes to critically evaluate their own behaviours as sustaining or promoting problematic practices and prompted them to critique the conduct of those around them (coaches, athletes), and develop more ownership over their training regimes and over the topic and its implementation more generally. As such, the project also had value in generating critical-self-reflection amongst participants and encouraging change from within. It remains to be seen whether these continue or develop over a longer period of time. However, at the very least, this project has started conversations about safe sport in Lithuania. As this was a small-scale project involving a cohort of young people from one university in Lithuania and engaging them for a relatively short amount of time (3 months), further investigations are warranted to understand the range of experiences, knowledge and concerns young athletes nation-wide have about safe sport. In addition, long-term work is warranted to see if (and how) any of the student-athletes make ripples in the sport sector by actioning innovations in safe sport in their local or national clubs. Also, there is a need to explore the receptiveness of clubs in Lithuania's sport system to these ideas and to monitor and evaluate any policy implementation and change.

Conclusion

Sport is beginning to make concerted efforts to incorporate the participation agenda (Lang, 2022). There has been a growth in the activity of players' unions, athletes' commissions, and entities such as the Court of Arbitration for Sport regarding the improved representation and advocacy of athletes and a handful of projects in Western European countries to raise awareness of athlete welfare issues and to develop and evaluate prevention programmes (e.g. the Erasmus + project: Safe Sport Allies). However, many awareness-raising initiatives to date have been run by transnational, national, and local sports organisations and are underpinned by assumptions that such approaches can work similarly across diverse transnational spaces despite different historical and socio-cultural landscapes and with little involvement from athletes or young people.

Athletes' involvement in welfare and safe sport initiatives is a core component of good governance in sports organisations, yet sports organisations have been slow to involve athletes in welfare and safe sports strategies (Lang, 2022). Athlete involvement is vital to the development of successful future athlete welfare and safe sport campaigns, especially those that target young people. It is also crucial to help athletes feel listened to and respected, to informing sports organisations on the best way to involve athletes in developing and delivering training, and to understand the enabling and constraining factors related to athlete's involvement in training.

This project aimed to develop young athletes' understandings of safe sport and empower them to become actively involved in creating safe sport environments by designing awareness-raising campaigns on a safe sport issue that they consider important in Lithuania. As such, it was underpinned by the understanding that not only are young athletes capable of important contributions to the development of safe sporting spaces but that *their involvement* would result in campaigns that were more meaningful and more engaging to other young athletes in Lithuania and to the specific cultural context of the country. It was also premised on the belief that the greater the level of participation from the young people, the greater the likelihood that they will engage with the ideas and serve as ambassadors of safe sport. As one student-athlete in this project stated: 'We *have* to have a voice'. Therefore, future work is needed to tell if their work in promoting safe sport has made ripples in sport in Lithuania. Furthermore, it is of interest to understand whether the student-athletes' awareness of safe sport has shaped their subsequent experiences. As one student-athlete stated:

I'm thinking here, I'm like, what can I do to make things better in my club maybe? And in Lithuanian [sport]? What can I do to make it better? And I'm sitting [thinking] 'I can do that' [or] 'Maybe I can speak with someone?' So, I'm like, 'Are you ready to change?' Because I'm definitely ready to make some change.

While involvement in the project has created enthusiasm amongst student-athletes to promote safe sport, whether this is maintained long-term is yet to be seen.

Notes

1. The project received ethical approval (ETH2011-0191) from the Social Sciences Ethics Committee, Edge Hill University, UK.
2. As part of their degree, students were required to study English.
3. We use the term 'emotional/psychological abuse' here in recognition that both terms are often used interchangeably and that such abuse can have impacts beyond the emotions (i.e., cognitive function, memory etc.).

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