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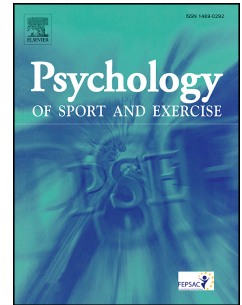
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# Accepted Manuscript

Sports performers' perspectives on facilitating thriving in professional rugby contexts

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Sports Performers' Perspectives on Facilitating Thriving in Professional Rugby Contexts

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Sports Performers' Perspectives on Facilitating Thriving in Professional Rugby Contexts

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## 1 Abstract

2 **Objectives:** The desire and apparent ‘need’ to succeed can drive a win-at-all-costs mentality  
3 in individuals who operate in sport. This approach has given rise to environments where the  
4 pursuit of high-level performance has been at the expense of athlete welfare. To redress this  
5 balance and to inform the creation and maintenance of sporting environments that promote  
6 both high performance and athlete well-being, we sought to (i) provide an exploration of the  
7 environmental factors that may promote player thriving in professional sport, and (ii) offer  
8 suggestions for how key stakeholders can support these mechanisms.

9 **Design:** A qualitative research methodology underpinned by ontological relativism and  
10 epistemological constructionism.

11 **Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 players from an English  
12 professional rugby union club.

13 **Results:** Thematic analysis generated thirteen factors that players perceived to promote  
14 thriving. These factors were underpinned by two general ideas: (i) Establishing Bonds  
15 between Teammates and (ii) Establishing a Connection to the Coaching Staff and the Club.

16 **Conclusions:** The findings provide the first insight into the type of environment professional  
17 rugby players believe can facilitate their development and sporting success. The factors  
18 generated in the analysis highlight the players’ desire to operate within an integrated,  
19 inclusive, and trusting environment, and a variety of suggestions are forwarded for how this  
20 can be achieved. To promote thriving in a professional sport that requires emotion and  
21 passion to succeed on the pitch, it appears that rugby union organizations must appeal to the  
22 sensitivities and welfare of players’ off it.

23 *Keywords:* athlete welfare, elite, performance, thrive, well-being

## 1 Sports Performers' Perspectives on Facilitating Thriving in Professional Rugby Contexts

2 The desire and apparent 'need' to succeed can drive a win-at-all-costs mentality in  
3 individuals who operate in sport (see, e.g., Dodge & Robertson, 2004; Duda, Olson, &  
4 Templin, 1991; Hardy et al., 2017). This mentality may be reflected, for example, in the  
5 ruthless and selfish attitudes held by some of the most decorated sports performers (see,  
6 Hardy et al., 2017), in the overly authoritative and uncompromising management styles  
7 adopted by some coaches (see, for a review, Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-  
8 Ntoumani, 2009), or in the critical behaviors displayed by some parents of talented young  
9 athletes (see, e.g., Tamminen, Poucher, & Povilaitis, 2017). Although there are some  
10 examples that demonstrate sporting success can be achieved in the potentially hostile and  
11 unpleasant environments created by enacting this mentality (see, e.g., Cruickshank & Collins,  
12 2015), it has become increasingly apparent that these may come at the cost of athlete welfare  
13 (see, e.g., BBC Sport, 2017; Roan, 2017; Wolff, 2015). Indeed, within the United Kingdom,  
14 repeated revelations regarding the poor duty of care shown towards elite athletes in world  
15 class programs has led to a comprehensive review into sustainable high performance winning  
16 cultures (see, Grey-Thompson, 2017; Nicholl & Price, 2017). Moving forward and in line  
17 with these observations, it appears essential that research helps to inform the creation and  
18 maintenance of sporting environments that promote both high performance and athlete well-  
19 being.

20 Within the academic literature, a substantial body of work exists informing the  
21 creation of optimal psychosocial environments in sport settings (see, for example reviews,  
22 Fransen, Boen, Stouten, Cotterill, & Vande Broek, 2017; Harwood, Keegan, Smith, & Raine,  
23 2015; Martin, Bruner, Eys, & Spink, 2014). This work has ranged from motivational  
24 climates in youth sport (see, e.g., O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2014), establishing a  
25 team culture in professional sport (see, e.g., Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2015), to

1 creating a team identity in Olympic national teams (see, e.g., Slater, Barker, Coffee, & Jones,  
2 2015). Moreover, understanding and facilitating performance and well-being outcomes in  
3 sporting environments has represented a core theme of interest for scholars studying sport for  
4 decades (see, e.g., Nideffer & Deckner, 1970; Snyder & Kivlin, 1975). Within this work,  
5 researchers have examined the influence of various predictor variables (e.g., basic  
6 psychological need satisfaction and frustration, personal resilient qualities, social support,  
7 stress appraisal) on athletes' performance and well-being, and much is now known about the  
8 effects of such variables (see, e.g., Bijleveld & Veling, 2014; Boat & Taylor, 2015; Cheval,  
9 Chalabaev, Quested, Courvoisier, & Sarrazin, 2017; Lu et al., 2016; Nicholls, Polman, &  
10 Levy, 2012; Verner-Filion, Vallerand, Amiot, & Mocanu, 2017). Despite these advances,  
11 research has tended to focus either on facilitating performance *or* facilitating well-being;  
12 thus, limited knowledge exists on creating environments that foster both components  
13 concurrently.

14 An emerging line of research that may be helpful in bridging this gap, is that on the  
15 topic of thriving. Broadly defined as “the joint experience of development and success” (D.  
16 J. Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, & Standage, 2017, p. 168), thriving describes the experience  
17 where humans are making progressive enhancements that may be either physical,  
18 psychological, or social in nature (e.g., learning adaptive coping styles), whilst also  
19 simultaneously displaying success through temporally and contextually relevant outcomes  
20 (e.g., attainment scores). Within an athletic context, thriving in elite sport performers was  
21 recently found to be characterized by dimensions of well-being (e.g., being focussed and in  
22 control, having a sense of belonging) and the perception of sustained high-level performance  
23 (D. J. Brown, Arnold, Reid, & Roberts, 2018). These findings are in-line with the suggestion  
24 that thriving is akin to being fully functioning, wherein individuals can fully access and  
25 exercise their human capacities, experience vitality, and display signs of happiness (Ryan &

1 Deci, 2017). The sport-based thriving characteristics are also similar to some of the indices  
2 used to measure thriving in other contexts where, for example, thriving at work is determined  
3 by levels of vitality and learning (see, Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012; Spreitzer,  
4 Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). However, differences also exist between  
5 these conceptualizations with performance considered to be a core component of thriving in  
6 sport (D. J. Brown et al., 2018; D. J. Brown, Arnold, Standage, & Fletcher, 2017), but an  
7 outcome of thriving at work (Paterson, Luthans, & Jeung, 2014; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). It  
8 therefore appears important that scholars draw on context-appropriate conceptualizations in  
9 their work.

10 In addition to characterizing thriving in elite sport, D. J. Brown et al. (2018) reported  
11 16 factors that were considered by participants to facilitate thriving including both personal  
12 characteristics (e.g., desire and motivation, self-belief) and contextual features (e.g.,  
13 competitive training partners, high quality relationships). Although these groupings were  
14 consistent with thriving research conducted in other populations (e.g., adolescents, Benson,  
15 Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; employees, Spreitzer et al., 2005), a number of the identified  
16 “enablers” of thriving (e.g., support staff) were new to the literature. Of the two types of  
17 enablers, Spreitzer et al. (2005) previously argued that greater contributions to theory and  
18 knowledge can be generated from “understanding the contexts that enable thriving” (p. 539)  
19 compared to studying individual traits, given Ryan and Deci’s (2000) suggestion that an  
20 individual’s success in fulfilling his or her predisposition for growth is contingent on the  
21 features of the environments in which he or she act. Perhaps, therefore, enhancing  
22 understanding of the sporting environment and the roles played by social agents within it  
23 should be a pressing priority for facilitating thriving in sport.

24 Ryan and Deci’s (2000) position on the role of social agents on thriving is  
25 encapsulated in their self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT is



1 constructed from five mini-theories and, of particular relevance to thriving, is the mini-theory  
2 labelled basic psychological needs theory (BPNT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to BPNT,  
3 humans can achieve thriving (or full functioning) through the satisfaction of three basic and  
4 universal needs for autonomy (i.e., desire to feel volitional), competence (i.e., feelings of  
5 effectance), and relatedness (i.e., desire to feel connected to others). Moreover, the  
6 satisfaction of these needs can be nurtured and maintained via environments that are needs  
7 supportive and can be frustrated via environments that are controlling or need thwarting  
8 (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Within sporting contexts, an array of studies have been conducted that  
9 substantiate the suggested sequential relationships between need supportive/thwarting  
10 environments, need satisfaction/frustration, and well-being and performance outcomes (see,  
11 e.g., Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012; Balaguer et al., 2012; Carpentier & Mageau, 2013;  
12 Fransen, Boen, Vansteenkiste, Mertens, & Vande Broek, 2018; Gillet, Vallerand, Amoura, &  
13 Baldes, 2010; Kipp & Weiss, 2015)<sup>1</sup>. In addition, scholars have forwarded strategies for  
14 supporting need satisfaction (see, for a review, Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), and attempts  
15 have been made to design and empirically test BPNT-informed interventions in sport (see,  
16 e.g., Cheon, Reeve, Lee, & Lee, 2015; Mahoney, Ntoumanis, Gucciardi, Mallett, &  
17 Stebbings, 2016). Yet, despite the abundance of sport-based research informed by SDT, only  
18 two studies (viz. D. J. Brown, Arnold, Standage, et al., 2017; Gucciardi, Stamatis, &  
19 Ntoumanis, 2017) exist that have explicitly examined proponents of BPNT and thriving.  
20 Drawing on a conceptualization of thriving from the work literature (see, Spreitzer et al.,  
21 2005), Gucciardi et al. (2017) found that controlling coach behaviors (e.g., controlled use of  
22 rewards, negative conditional regard) were inversely related with experiences of vitality and  
23 learning. Using an alternative conceptualization where thriving was indexed by levels of  
24 subjective performance and well-being (see, D. J. Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, et al., 2017), D. J.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to highlight that some evidence also exists to suggest reciprocity in the relationships between need support, need satisfaction/frustration, motivation, and well-being (see, Martinent, Guillet-Descas, & Moiret, 2015; Stenling, Lindwall, & Hassmén, 2015).

1 Brown, Arnold, Standage, et al. (2017) found higher levels of basic psychological need  
2 satisfaction predicted athlete membership to a thriving class, but identified no predictive  
3 effects for social support, coach need support, or coach need thwart variables. Although  
4 these studies have begun to examine the motivational mechanism through which thriving may  
5 be facilitated or hindered by social agents, inconsistency in the studies' findings suggests that  
6 further exploration of environmental factors and thriving is warranted.

7         When considering the role that environmental factors play in promoting thriving in  
8 sport, it will be important to recognize that variations exist in the nature of settings (e.g.,  
9 clubs at different competition standards). For example, when relocating as part of earning a  
10 professional contract with a club, a young player will move from a familiar setting where he  
11 or she will have established support networks to one where he or she may need to create and  
12 access new social connections in order to thrive (Harris, Myhill, & Walker, 2012a, 2012b).  
13 The potential variation across environments motivates dedicated study into specific contexts  
14 to enable elucidation of the idiosyncrasies within each setting. For the current study, the  
15 decision was made to delimit the scope of inquiry to thriving in a professional sport setting.  
16 To date, researchers have examined the stressors encountered by professional sportsmen and  
17 women in their environments (see, e.g., Arnold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2016; Nicholls,  
18 Backhouse, Polman, & McKenna, 2009), the coping strategies used by performers to  
19 overcome these demands (see, e.g., Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts, 2012; Nicholls, Holt,  
20 Polman, & Bloomfield, 2006), and the possible negative outcomes experienced if coping is  
21 ineffective (see, e.g., Cresswell & Eklund, 2005, 2006). However, research is yet to explore  
22 how to promote thriving in these professional sporting contexts. Given their highly  
23 pressurized nature and the amount of time professional athletes spend operating within them,  
24 understanding how these environments can be shaped to facilitate both performance and well-  
25 being outcomes represents an important area of inquiry. The purpose of this study, therefore,

1 was to (i) provide an exploration of the environmental factors that may promote player  
2 thriving in professional sport, and (ii) offer suggestions for how key stakeholders (e.g.,  
3 organizations, coaches, and sport medicine practitioners) can support these mechanisms. In  
4 recognition of the potential psychosocial differences arising across professional sports  
5 organizations (see, e.g., Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2017), we focused this study on the  
6 experiences of professional athletes from one club.

## 7 **Methods**

### 8 **Research Design**

9 A qualitative research methodology was selected since it was deemed most  
10 appropriate for addressing the purpose of this study. Specifically, qualitative research enables  
11 scholars to study things in their natural settings and interpret phenomena by the meanings  
12 people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). It is important to  
13 acknowledge the underlying paradigmatic assumptions of a study, as ontology (i.e., the nature  
14 of reality) and epistemology (i.e., how reality is known to us) inform what is examined in  
15 research and how data are interpreted (Lincoln, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). It was  
16 assumed in this study that multiple and subjective realities existed and that participants'  
17 knowledge was subjective and constructive; thus, the study is underpinned by ontological  
18 relativism and epistemological constructionism (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

### 19 **Participants**

20 Eighteen male professional rugby union players formed the sample for this study. At  
21 the time of interview, all participants held full-time paid contracts at the same rugby union  
22 club whose first team squad participated in the Aviva Premiership and various Cup  
23 competitions. The participants represented either the first team squad ( $n = 16$ ) or the academy  
24 squad ( $n = 2$ ), with the participants including both newer members of the squad and seasoned  
25 international players. Participants had been representing the rugby club for between 0 and 12

1 seasons ( $M = 5.42$  seasons,  $SD = 3.80$ ). Eighteen was considered an appropriate sample size  
2 for this study, since the participants began to recall similar vignettes during the interviews;  
3 thus, data saturation was claimed as no new information was arising from the interviews and  
4 no new codes or themes could be constructed from the data (Bowen, 2008; O'Reilly &  
5 Parker, 2013).

## 6 **Data Collection**

7 The authors initially met with the Director of Performance (DoP) at the rugby club to  
8 discuss the proposed research. The DoP was enthusiastic for the study to occur at the club  
9 given its alignment with their vision and aims. Therefore, following institutional ethical  
10 approval, the study was introduced via a group presentation to players in the first team and  
11 academy squads at the club. Members of the squads were also given an information sheet  
12 which further outlined the study, what it involved, and ethical rights (e.g., confidentiality,  
13 anonymity, right to withdraw). If interested to participate, the players were asked to sign a  
14 consent form, and convenient dates and times for the interviews were arranged. Interviews  
15 took place in a private meeting room at the club and occurred on a 1:1 basis (i.e., one member  
16 of the research team and one player). The interviews lasted between 21 and 72 minutes ( $M =$   
17  $42$  min  $51$  s,  $SD = 13$  min  $31$  s), were digitally recorded in their entirety, and transcribed  
18 verbatim.

19 At the start of the interviews, the researcher defined thriving (cf. D. J. Brown, Arnold,  
20 Fletcher, et al., 2017) and discussed this with the interviewee to ensure that both were  
21 reflecting on the same term for the remainder of the interview (cf. D. J. Brown et al., 2018).  
22 A semi-structured interview format was adopted so that an interview guide could be used to  
23 direct the discussions; however, its open-ended questions enabled the players to freely  
24 express their opinions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Interview questions were broad in their  
25 scope to enable the players to fully share their views and centered on the player's perceptions

1 of what environmental factors enabled thriving in the professional rugby context (e.g., *What*  
2 *are the contextual/environmental factors that you think help you cope with the demands you*  
3 *experience and can enable you to thrive? How have these changed during your time at [club*  
4 *name]?) and how they could be optimally promoted (e.g., *Based on your experiences, how do*  
5 *you think [club name] could increase thriving in their players? Do you think these changes*  
6 *would influence all players equally?*). The players were asked to respond in relation to  
7 thriving as an individual (i.e., a player), rather than as a collective (i.e., the team), as this  
8 study was targeted at facilitating performance and well-being in individual players operating  
9 within a team sport environment. However, we recognized that it was likely players would  
10 discuss themes pertinent to both individual- and group-level experiences, given the difficulty  
11 of disentangling the individual from the group with team sport settings (see, e.g., Wolf,  
12 Harenberg, Tamminen, & Schmitz, 2018). As both authors were involved in conducting  
13 interviews for the study, field notes and initial thoughts were recorded by each interviewer  
14 and discussed between the authors after each interview. This process not only enabled the  
15 authors to collectively reflect on their interview techniques, but also facilitated the discussion  
16 of initial concepts raised which could be explored in further detail with subsequent  
17 participants.*

## 18 **Data Analysis**

19 To identify patterns of meaning across the dataset, Braun, Clarke, and Weate's (2016)  
20 six-phase thematic analysis was used. Although the phases are presented here sequentially, in  
21 reality the process involved a recursive, reflexive process of moving back and forth between  
22 them. The first phase involved the first author immersing himself in the interview transcripts  
23 and repeatedly reading them whilst also identifying initial notes of interest. To capture these,  
24 the first author developed initial concept maps to identify informal trends and ideas across the  
25 data set. The second phase – coding – involved more systematically and thoroughly

1 identifying and labelling analytically relevant aspects of the dataset. This coding was  
2 conducted primarily at a semantic level, where participants' explicitly stated ideas and  
3 experiences were coded (Braun et al., 2016). In the third phase, the first author clustered  
4 these codes into themes which represented higher-level patterns across the data. Themes were  
5 separated into two levels in this study: *overarching themes* to organize and structure the  
6 analysis and *themes* to report the meaning of the central concepts (Braun et al., 2016). As  
7 well as various discussions occurring between the two authors about what was being done in  
8 the first three phases of analysis (see below), once the theme levels had been created by the  
9 first author, the second author independently scrutinized them and offered feedback. The  
10 identified themes were then reviewed in phase four to check that they fitted with the raw  
11 dataset and that they coherently addressed the purpose of the study. In phase five, the themes  
12 were defined and accompanied by a rich analytic narrative before being written up into the  
13 manuscript in the final phase.

#### 14 **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

15 To judge the “quality” of qualitative research, scholars are advised to draw from  
16 criteria relevant to their underpinning philosophical assumptions and from an ongoing list of  
17 characterizing traits, rather than applying criteria universally (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith,  
18 2009, 2014). Taking first the worthiness of the topic, the introduction to this paper illustrates  
19 how facilitating thriving in elite sport contexts, that is creating a culture whereby both  
20 performance *and* well-being are prioritized, is of great contemporary interest and value.  
21 Credibility and rich rigor were also pursued in this study by (i) interviewing rugby players  
22 who had first-hand experience of professional sport contexts, (ii) reporting the procedures  
23 comprehensively, which included using an interview guide consistently across interviews,  
24 and (iii) generating data that enabled important and meaningful interpretations (Potter &  
25 Hepburn, 2005). Furthermore, the first author kept a journal to detail reflections and decisions

1 made throughout the data analysis process, which the second author subsequently scrutinized  
2 as a “critical friend” to challenge the first author’s construction of knowledge and encourage  
3 reflexivity (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Finally, the study seeks meaningful coherence and  
4 methodological integrity, which relates to the linkages between the goals of the research, the  
5 researchers’ approach to enquiry, the design and procedures adopted, and the findings (Levitt,  
6 Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017; Smith & McGannon, 2017).

## 7 **Results**

8 The analysis process in this study identified two overarching themes relating to the  
9 environmental factors that may promote player thriving in professional rugby contexts. The  
10 first was labelled “Establishing bonds between teammates” and includes six themes which  
11 relate to helping players feel closer and more connected to their teammates to, ultimately,  
12 enable them to thrive. The second overarching theme is labelled “Establishing a connection to  
13 the coaching staff and club” and includes seven themes which relate to helping players feel  
14 more connected to the coaching staff and club to, ultimately, enable them to thrive. Whilst  
15 presented as separate overarching themes, it is important to note that some of the actions  
16 suggested for facilitating thriving may resonate with both; thus, reflecting the complex and  
17 intertwined nature of thriving in professional sport. Each theme is introduced in the following  
18 narrative and accompanied with an illustrative data extract; additional quotes are provided in  
19 Tables 1 and 2 to offer readers further insight into the participants’ voice in the generation of  
20 the results.

### 21 **Establishing Bonds Between Teammates**

22 This overarching theme consisted of six themes: forming collective goals, decreasing  
23 external player recruitment, maintaining equality in the playing squad, creating opportunities  
24 for interaction, ensuring effective teammate communication styles, and the senior players  
25 offering guidance. Firstly, the participants spoke about forming collective goals to establish

1 and strengthen their team bond since these enabled them to have shared expectations to work  
2 hard, show commitment to each other, fight for a common cause, and, ultimately, enable  
3 them to thrive. The following quote from one participant illustrates the contagious nature of  
4 pursuing a collective goal:

5       Once a small group of people are pulling in one direction, it's very difficult to pull  
6       them back. So, the initial commitment has to come from the playing squad because,  
7       once there are a few boys pulling in the positive direction, it's difficult not to get  
8       caught up in it. (Participant 10)

9       To further establish bonds between teammates, the players spoke about the  
10      importance of decreasing external player recruitment. Whilst participants acknowledged the  
11      need for some external recruitment, the players suggested that managing the levels of it could  
12      help to maintain academy players' motivation and maintain continuity in the playing squad,  
13      which were important for thriving. To exemplify, the following quote highlights the  
14      importance of this theme in achieving success and growth:

15      [Name of club] wanted success straight away. And how do you do that? You buy the  
16      best players. They bought the best players but, guess what? Rugby teams don't win  
17      individually. You need this culture . . . It takes time for a player to trust another  
18      player, and to want to play for another player. It took me a whole year before I wanted  
19      to run out there and put my body on the line for someone else . . . So continuity  
20      brings people together. And it takes time . . . you bring people in slowly. And then  
21      they've got to integrate into what has been formed. The culture that's been formed . . .  
22      to get success, you need to build it from the bottom up. You can't boom, boom, boom,  
23      players. Headliners. You need to have a squad. You need to have a strong base. And  
24      everything is great right now with that. So we've got the opportunity to grow really  
25      fast. (Participant 1)



1           The third theme identified for establishing bonds between teammates related to  
2 maintaining equality in the playing squad. Specifically, this involved providing equality in  
3 treatment from coaches, nurturing an environment that caters for all players, and ensuring  
4 that all players' views across the squad are represented. Furthermore, players discussed the  
5 removal of fear between junior and senior players so that there were no perceived "levels" of  
6 the squad, as the following quote highlights:

7           Rugby players are the kind of blokes who are normally quite sound people, who come  
8 and chat. They don't talk to you as if you're here and they're there. They talk to you  
9 on par, which, like I said, whether you're a 14-year-old kid training with [Name of  
10 club] for the first time, or one of their superstars. They've all been just the same.  
11 That's what's made me feel most welcome. How the internationals came and chatted  
12 to me. Made me feel at ease . . . I think the big thing here, as well, there's no big  
13 cliques. You can go and talk to anyone. If you're having breakfast and you're on your  
14 own, you know the next person to come in you're going to get along with. It's not  
15 going to be someone who you don't talk to. You can just wait for someone to come  
16 along. (Participant 12)

17           The participants suggested several ways in which opportunities could be created for  
18 interaction. These included having: an academy house, training trips away from the main  
19 base, coffees together after training, disclosure exercises, situations in which challenge was  
20 experienced together, integration in training, team bonding socials, and structures for away  
21 matches. The following quote from one player illustrates the importance of such  
22 opportunities for interaction to enable success and enjoyment in a professional rugby context:

23           It's a tough game, and, you don't go out there and make friends with your teammates.  
24 You make friends off [the pitch], and you make bonds. That's where you get to gel. In  
25 what you do, that's when you start caring about people. And, in turn, if you've got a

1 good ethos, that foundation, that's where you care about how you're playing. And  
2 then when you're pulling the shirt on, you care about each other. And to care about  
3 each other, I think, when you then get out there, you naturally are going to give me  
4 100%. I think it's fundamental to what you do. The cohesion - that is where  
5 everything comes from for me. When you come in from a weekend when we've all  
6 been out together, someone's played up, there's fun, there's laughter . . . you've done  
7 it together and have that enjoyment factor. That will make you thrive. (Participant 6)

8 The fifth theme for establishing bonds between teammates was ensuring effective  
9 teammate communication styles. The players discussed how communication within the team  
10 should be positive and constructive rather than negative, and also spoke of the importance of  
11 developing each squad members' empathy and willingness to openly share their emotions.  
12 The following quote provides an example from one player of what he would like teammate  
13 communication to comprise:

14 Have the balls to talk man to man conversations with people. Stand up for what you  
15 believe. Not be a sell-out. Not being a sell-out is not just agreeing with people. So, if I  
16 think something is wrong, I say it . . . . But speak your mind positively. We don't need  
17 negative energy . . . it's all about positivity. (Participant 1)

18 In addition to effective teammate communication, participants suggested that, to  
19 ultimately enable thriving, bonds could be established further in the team by the senior  
20 players offering guidance. For example, senior players could not only talk to and ask  
21 questions of younger players and act as the players' voice between the squad and the club,  
22 but they could also role model behaviors and implement a buddy or mentor scheme. The  
23 following quote comes from one of the more senior players interviewed and demonstrates  
24 some of this guidance in action:

25 I just concentrate on myself when I play. When I train throughout the week I try and

1 concentrate on everybody else. Make sure everybody else knows their roles.  
2 Everybody else is enjoying it so they're not worried, they're not stressed. If you speak  
3 to players about me, hopefully they'd say that I always put them first, before myself,  
4 because I thrive on learning every position on the pitch, every lineout. So I'll always  
5 be saying "You alright? You know your role?", so during the game, people ask me  
6 questions and if people ask me questions I know that they're not afraid to ask it.  
7 Which is good, because then they're not afraid of making mistakes. Ask questions,  
8 make them feel comfortable. Just ask them how their day is going. Small conversation  
9 with the young players goes a long way . . . Then you create a bond, which then  
10 creates respect. Then when you ask them to do something they listen. (Participant 5)

#### 11 **Establishing A Connection to The Coaching Staff and Club**

12 This overarching theme consisted of seven themes: actively nurturing and managing a  
13 'family' club culture, considerately treating non-playing squad members, creating an honest  
14 and fear-free environment, facilitating enjoyment, decreasing player turnover rate,  
15 establishing a joint team and club goal, and fostering player development. To establish a  
16 connection to the coaching staff and club, the players agreed that a 'family' club culture  
17 needed to be nurtured. Specifically, this could involve the club encouraging inclusivity of  
18 players' families, offering free child care, and ensuring that the coaches "fit" this desired  
19 culture. The following quote from one player illustrates what he would like to see in relation  
20 to this theme:

21 I've got two kids now, very young kids. And the pressures of dealing with children,  
22 looking after kids . . . my wife is stressed out because the kids are being a nightmare . .  
23 . it's just full-tilt. The person who, when I get home, relieves most pressure is my  
24 wife. So if she's stressed all the time, there's not a lot of pressure relief for me when I  
25 get home. I'm as stressed as she is . . . You hear stories about other Premiership clubs

1 and how they engage and look after the family . . . you find out “oh they’ve got a  
2 crèche”, “oh they’ve got a dog kennel”, or they organize a dinner out for the wives  
3 once a month. Showing that my family is a part of this club, makes this club a part of  
4 my family. It’s like a two-way street. For me, that would relieve the most stress from  
5 my life and allow me to thrive more as a player. (Player 17)

6 In addition to players’ families, the participants also spoke of the importance of  
7 considerate treatment for non-playing squad members. It was suggested that this could be  
8 done by keeping those on the periphery involved, having integrated training sessions,  
9 removing Saturday training, sending players on loan, and making Thursday’s training session  
10 their game day. The following quote from one participant illustrates how a professional rugby  
11 club might look to achieve this theme to, ultimately, make players feel valued and experience  
12 improvements:

13 So it’s about keeping the people on the periphery, about keeping them involved as  
14 well. To keep them enjoying it, to keep them having fun. They’re already annoyed  
15 and pissed off that they’re not playing, so then by coming in and getting flogged [on a  
16 Saturday], and doing the same session we’ve been doing anyway. Or to come in when  
17 no-one else is there. I think sometimes it needs to be, “Right, you lads have had a hard  
18 week, you’ve been involved, you don’t need to come in here, you don’t need to do  
19 this”. They then feel that they’re being looked after as well. They just aren’t out there  
20 being flogged every day. But, instead, when you come to a session, you’ll get better  
21 and try again to make sure you are progressing. (Participant 6)

22 The third theme for establishing a connection to the coaching staff and club was  
23 creating an honest and fear-free environment. To do this, the participants suggested that  
24 coaches needed to: be accessible, allow players to express themselves, show a broader  
25 interest in players’ lives, understand individual player’s reactions, encourage freedom of

1 speech, instill appropriate performance standards in training, and ensure a player focus at all  
2 times. In terms of understanding player reactions, the following quote from one participant  
3 demonstrates the importance of a coach knowing how best to provide performance feedback  
4 to players to create a fear-free environment which enables players to thrive:

5 [Previously] you were always playing with a fear of a meeting. If you made a mistake,  
6 you'd know that it would be punished in the next meeting. And that's what I didn't  
7 like. Because when you're on the pitch, you're playing at such a high intensity,  
8 mistakes are going to happen. So you can't be fearful of making a mistake, to then get  
9 ridiculed or crucified at the meeting. If somebody does something exceptional, praise  
10 that. If somebody does something which is not very good, don't call them out in a  
11 meeting. Have a one on one with them. Ask them why they did it. Else people are  
12 afraid to do stuff, because of that consequence, but have a positive open forum in  
13 meetings and you get a better response from players. Then people are like "Oh I did  
14 something good at the weekend, do you think they'll pull it up in the meeting?" And  
15 then they show it in the meeting and you're like "Okay, cool, they did notice that I did  
16 something well". And then I think you thrive when people are excitable to try and do  
17 extras again. (Participant 5)

18 A club that showed trust in players and demonstrated transparency in decisions and  
19 processes was also identified as important for promoting an honest and fear-free  
20 environment. Over and above coach and club behaviors, there were certain suggestions made  
21 relating to processes, policies, and initiatives that could be put in place to further create an  
22 honest and fear-free environment to strengthen the connection to the coaching staff and club.  
23 Specifically, these included the usage of exit interviews when players left the club, having a  
24 fair rule making process and selection policy, creating a leadership group to drive standards,  
25 introducing a trusted and reliable intermediary (acting between players and club), and

1 providing a clear, honest, and constructive feedback process.

2 In addition to an honest and fear-free environment, participants suggested that, to  
3 ultimately enable thriving, a connection to the coaching staff and club could be strengthened  
4 by facilitating enjoyment. Participants suggested that this could be achieved by encouraging  
5 and facilitating team socials and ensuring that training was game-oriented, varied, and fun.  
6 The below quote provided by one participant shows how enjoyment can be facilitated for  
7 thriving benefits:

8 The enjoyment factor. How do you make people enjoy it? Well it's through those little  
9 things, being able to make sure that the schedule isn't monotonous and the same.

10 Making sure we are doing different things. It's not saying you have to fly me to Dubai  
11 or Vegas and have a weekend there, it's not that sort of thing. It's not as big as that.

12 It's the little things. An occasion for people to go to, to enjoy it, to have a great time  
13 to experience something different, but together. It gives you that to talk about when  
14 you come back, and enjoy that. That will make you thrive, I think. (Participant 6)

15 An additional suggestion for establishing a connection to the coaching staff and club  
16 to, ultimately, facilitate thriving was to decrease player turnover rate. Indeed, long-serving  
17 squad members were suggested to not only represent a culture and identity of a club, but also  
18 trigger enjoyment and performance as the following quote depicts:

19 Lads have spent their whole careers here who love the club, and live and breathe the  
20 club, and that's what it's about. You need that. If there's nobody that has been here  
21 years, you come in and there's no culture there. Because you haven't got those people  
22 here who have been here all of those seasons. Been through it all with the club . . .

23 And that enjoyment of "Do you know what, we're working hard, and that's fun,  
24 because, now, we're going to be right for the weekend". For me, it all fits in. It's like  
25 a jigsaw. It all comes together as the big collective. To make you better out there. To

1 make you play and make you care. It goes hand in hand for me. If you care about  
2 where you are, then you're going to do everything in your power to make sure you  
3 come right, and work hard, and graft. That's what it's about. (Participant 6).

4 The sixth theme referred to establishing a joint team and club goal. The players  
5 recommended that such goals were beneficial as could integrate playing and non-playing staff  
6 at the club, provide a stable vision and identity, help to share responsibility, and trigger a  
7 fighting for a cause mentality. To elaborate on this mentality and the joint nature of the goals,  
8 one player stated:

9 I just want to know that what I'm seeing from this club, is the same thing that the guy  
10 next to me is seeing. But also, that the kitchen porter and the cleaners also understand  
11 what that is about. Because, the cleaner polishing the door knobs, doesn't [make me]  
12 better [at doing] my job. But if I see her doing everything that see can, and she sees  
13 me [doing everything I can], then we are all on the same page then. (Participant 4)

14 The final theme that could help to establish a connection to the coaching staff and  
15 club was by fostering player development. The participants offered various ways in which  
16 this could occur, including the alleviation of trivial decisions for them, employing a  
17 psychologist and someone to manage player development, offering flexibility and support,  
18 facilitating individualized and open player-coach discussions, utilizing existing relationships  
19 with sponsors, and supporting the end of career transition. The following quote exemplifies  
20 one players' ideas around how development could be fostered to create thriving:

21 I think, helping players to be professional. Helping to alleviate trivial decisions from  
22 players. So, things like diet education and more specific personal development. I feel  
23 like we should have a more formal process to identify key development areas for  
24 every single player in this organization. They could ask "What are you doing outside  
25 of the club? Are you doing a course? How can we as an organization help you do

1 that? Have we got sponsors who want to do some stuff with you? Or can we put you  
 2 in touch and help facilitate that?" I feel like as an organization, we've got so many  
 3 tools to develop players, in every area, not just trying to get a tiny bit more out of  
 4 them on a match day. And I think, if we were more proactive, with the whole  
 5 package, we'd get more on the rugby front. (Participant 17).

### 6 **Discussion**

7 In the present study, we sought to (i) provide an exploration of the environmental  
 8 factors that may promote player thriving in professional sport, and (ii) offer suggestions for  
 9 how key stakeholders can support these mechanisms. Analysis of interviews conducted with  
 10 players from an English professional rugby club generated thirteen factors (labelled as  
 11 themes) that players perceived to enhance thriving. These factors were underpinned by two  
 12 general ideas (labelled as overarching themes): (i) Establishing Bonds between Teammates  
 13 and (ii) Establishing a Connection to the Coaching Staff and the Club. The discussion that  
 14 follows is organized according to these ideas and, given the limited research that exists on  
 15 thriving in sport, draws reference to topics covered in the wider literature as well as those  
 16 previously used in relation to thriving.

17 Six of the themes (viz., forming collective goals, decreasing external player  
 18 recruitment, maintaining equality in the playing squad, creating opportunities for interaction,  
 19 ensuring effective communication styles, senior players offering guidance) were underpinned  
 20 by a common notion of developing and enhancing bonds between teammates. Finding that  
 21 interpersonal connections between teammates are central to the promotion of thriving in  
 22 professional sport in the present study, resonates with conclusions drawn previously in elite  
 23 sport (e.g., D. J. Brown et al., 2018), and with the roles of colleagues in teacher thriving (e.g.,  
 24 Sumsion, 2004) and across the Dutch workforce (e.g., Bakker, van Veldhoven, &  
 25 Xanthopoulou, 2010). Moreover, this aligns with Feeney and Collins' (2015) conceptual



1 suggestion that humans can thrive through close and caring relationships. In relation to the  
2 findings of the present study, a number of mechanisms may help explain why enhancing  
3 bonds between teammates would enable individual player thriving. First, participants  
4 described that relationships built on trust, respect, and shared expectations, would generate a  
5 willingness to ‘put their body on the line’ for another player. Given the physical and  
6 attritional nature of a sport such as rugby union (see, e.g., Williams et al., 2017) and the  
7 intertwined nature of players operating as individuals and as a collective in a team sport  
8 environment (see, e.g., Wolf et al., 2018), establishing unwavering commitment across the  
9 playing squad is likely to be important for concurrently achieving high-level individual and  
10 team performance, success and, ultimately, thriving. Second, players discussed how  
11 establishing bonds with their teammates can bring enjoyment, as well as a sense of belonging  
12 and feeling valued. These accounts appear to reflect the experience of relatedness  
13 satisfaction (cf. Deci & Ryan, 2000), which scholars have previously suggested to be one of  
14 the three basic psychological needs required for thriving (Ryan & Deci, 2017; see also,  
15 Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

16       When considering how to create bonds between teammates, two approaches appear to  
17 underscore the factors described in the analysis: (i) providing opportunities for high-quality  
18 interactions between players and (ii) establishing a collective and shared ‘voice’. With  
19 regards to providing opportunities for interaction, players described how both large occasions  
20 (e.g., organized team socials, away training trips) and smaller contacts (e.g., discussions over  
21 breakfast, seating in team meetings) afforded opportunities for interaction between players.  
22 These exchanges encouraged players to engage with those outside of their ‘typical’ group,  
23 which created greater familiarity across the entire squad, prevented individuals feeling  
24 isolated, and was considered to attenuate the possible formation and divisive effect of cliques  
25 (cf. Wagstaff, Martin, & Thelwell, 2017). In addition, players considered the experience of

1 collective difficulty either on the sports field or as part of a team bonding exercise to support  
2 the development of bonds; this suggestion aligns with previous research that has  
3 demonstrated the shared experience of stressful events can enhance team cohesion (see, e.g.,  
4 Bartone, Johnsen, Eid, Brun, & Laberg, 2002). When encouraging interaction between team  
5 members, it appeared important that these exchanges were of a ‘high-quality’; that is, they  
6 were open and honest, parity existed between members, and communication styles were  
7 empathetic and constructive. Exchanges of this nature are likely to support expansive  
8 emotional spaces, generate trusting relationships, and facilitate thriving (see, D. J. Brown,  
9 Arnold, Fletcher, et al., 2017; Losada & Heaphy, 2004). Lastly, when considering these  
10 suggestions, it may be important to reflect on the influence exerted by external player  
11 recruitment. More specifically, the upheaval and unfamiliarity created by altering squad  
12 composition requires players to establish new, trusting bonds and to integrate new members  
13 of the team into the team culture, which may temporally preclude individual and team  
14 performing (cf. Tuckman, 1965) and, therefore, individual player thriving.

15 Turning to the development of a collective and shared voice, this suggestion considers  
16 how player thriving can be facilitated through the formation of collective goals within the  
17 playing squad, ensuring that views across the squad are equally represented, and the shared  
18 voice of the squad being presented to the club by the senior players. Encouraging team  
19 members to have an active role in generating and developing a clear collective goal/vision  
20 can create mutual understanding of, and investment in, what the team is trying to achieve  
21 (see, e.g., Webster, Hardy, & Hardy, 2017), increase team cohesion (see, e.g., Senécal,  
22 Loughhead, & Bloom, 2008), and encourage teamwork (see, for a review, McEwan &  
23 Beauchamp, 2014). In addition to sharing their views on the goals to be set for their team, all  
24 players should feel like their opinions and roles are well regarded by the group. This  
25 approach may not only enhance team performance (see, Sherf, Sinha, Tangirala, & Awasty,

1 2018), but also by perceiving other group members to be intrinsically interested to hear,  
2 acknowledge, and represent personal views, members will likely feel more related to each  
3 other and have greater motivation towards the collective cause which may lead to them  
4 thriving (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2017). In these circumstances, senior players can play a  
5 significant role in ensuring that the voices of those with a perceived lower standing in the  
6 playing squad are heard within the group, and that the opinions of the playing squad are being  
7 recognized in the broader organization. To enact these benevolent and prosocial behaviors, it  
8 is important that team members act empathetically (cf. Hoffman, 1991).

9         The second overarching theme that underpinned the remaining seven themes to  
10 promote thriving (viz., actively nurturing and managing a ‘family’ club culture, considerately  
11 treating non-playing squad members, creating an honest and fear-free environment,  
12 facilitating enjoyment, decreasing player turnover rate, establishing a joint team and club  
13 goal, and fostering player development), was establishing a connection between the players,  
14 the coaching staff and the club. Previous research from D. J. Brown et al. (2018) and  
15 Gucciardi et al. (2017) has highlighted the importance of coach support and coach behaviors  
16 with regards athlete thriving; however, the present study is the first to emphasize players’  
17 connections to the club/organization. One mechanism that may explain why these  
18 relationships promote thriving is the trust created by the bonds (see, Carmeli & Spreitzer,  
19 2009). To elaborate, players thought that establishing these bonds would mean that the club  
20 trusted the players in their ability to perform and in their capacity to make correct decisions  
21 (e.g., degree of professionalism). These perceptions would enhance players’ own belief in  
22 performing at the required level and offer discretion over the choices they made, thereby  
23 satisfying their basic psychological needs of competence and autonomy (see, Deci & Ryan,  
24 2000). Moreover, if individuals reciprocated the trusting relationship (i.e., they trusted that  
25 the organization would do right by them), then this would increase the closeness they felt to

1 the organization and their perceptions of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as well as their  
2 propensity to thrive (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009). A second mechanism that may result from  
3 players feeling connected to the coaching staff and the club is all squad members perceiving  
4 that they are valued members of the organization. Feeling trusted and valued by an  
5 organization has been suggested to foster a willingness to cooperate and attend to other team  
6 members, which can then promote thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005). In addition to being  
7 willing to cooperate with others, participants spoke of being more willing to commit and fight  
8 for the collective cause if they perceived that the club was investing in them (e.g., supported  
9 their professional development). Taken collectively, these suggestions appear to support the  
10 role that the organization can play in supporting basic psychological need satisfaction, and,  
11 ultimately, thriving.

12 A number of suggestions emerged for facilitating connections between the players,  
13 the coaching staff, and the club. These include: establishing a club collective identity,  
14 creating a climate of transparency and fairness, and investing in the players and their family.  
15 For individuals to feel close to, and commit to an organization, they need to understand what  
16 the organization stands for (i.e., its values) and if congruence exists between theirs' and the  
17 organizations' values and objectives (see, e.g., Amos & Weathington, 2008; Kristof-Brown,  
18 Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Within a rugby union context, the players suggested that the  
19 values underpinning the identity and culture of the club were upheld and epitomized in the  
20 attitudes and behaviors of long serving squad members and, therefore, ensuring continuity in  
21 the playing squad was considered to help other members understand and connect to a club.  
22 This finding represents a shift in focus to previous work that has typically centered on the  
23 role of the performance directors and coaches in establishing a club collective identity (see,  
24 e.g., Nissen, 2017), but perhaps reflects the increasingly volatile nature of professional sport  
25 whereby players may remain at clubs longer than the head coach and management (see,

1 Wagstaff, Gilmore, & Thelwell, 2016).

2           A second approach that could be used to support players' perceived connection to the  
3 coaching staff and the club is to create a climate of transparency and fairness. To elaborate,  
4 players thought that it was important for their coaches to be accessible, to communicate  
5 openly and honestly to players, and to treat players across the squad with parity. Moreover, it  
6 was considered important for players to feel like they could express their views without fear  
7 of retribution (e.g., subsequent non-selection). This latter characteristic describes an  
8 environment that has psychological safety; that is, an individual perceives they can express  
9 themselves "without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (Kahn,  
10 1990, p. 708). Although this environmental feature has been considered in elite youth sport  
11 settings (see, e.g., Strachan, Côté, & Deakin, 2011), it is yet to be examined in elite adult or  
12 professional sports settings. Within professional work settings, Frazier and Tupper (2016)  
13 suggested that psychologically safe work contexts are need satisfying and found that  
14 perceptions of psychological safety predicted employee thriving; thus, psychological safety  
15 may prove to be a fruitful future avenue for thriving research in sport. In addition,  
16 perceptions of psychological safety have been found to predict individual and team learning  
17 from failure (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Edmondson, 1999), so may be of value to sport teams  
18 when managing the fluctuations in performance across a season.

19           To enhance players' perceptions of feeling valued and cared for by the organization,  
20 the third suggestion captures the strategies the club could use to 'invest' in the players and  
21 their families. Investment here does not necessarily involve financial contributions, rather  
22 investment is intended to refer to the effort and support provided in the personal development  
23 of players in and out of sport, and in the integration of the players' families into the club. For  
24 example, the average playing career of a professional rugby union player has previously been  
25 reported to be only 7 years (Rugby Players Ireland, n.d.), and a number of the participants

1 voiced concerns regarding their transition out-of-sport. In addition, the players recognized  
2 that club sponsors could provide avenues for post-sport career development (e.g., learning  
3 new skills) and encouraged clubs to utilize these arrangements to initiate this process while  
4 the players were still playing. Pursing these actions would afford players an alternative  
5 skillset outside of sport that could support their post-sport well-being and quality of life (see,  
6 e.g., Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2017), and may enhance players' perceptions of  
7 feeling cared for, which has been found to be critical to the perceived effectiveness of social  
8 support following retirement from sport (see, e.g., C. J. Brown, Webb, Robinson, &  
9 Cotgreave, 2018). With regard investing in the players' families, this relates to encouraging  
10 inclusivity of players' spouses and children in club activities. As with previous thriving  
11 research (see, e.g., D. J. Brown et al., 2018), players perceived their families to be a key  
12 source of support; however, critically, they also suggested families impose strain. If clubs  
13 can help to alleviate strain arising from difficulties and loneliness when relocating or  
14 childcare for away trips for example, this would create a perception that the club was  
15 interested in and cared about the players' families which, in turn, may increase players' buy-  
16 in to the club.

17         With increased critical attention placed on the treatment and experience of athletes in  
18 highly pressurized elite and professional sporting environments, the present study offers a  
19 novel and timely investigation into players' perceptions of how these environments can be  
20 shaped to foster thriving in professional sport. Players' voices are represented in multiple  
21 raw data extracts and these quotations are used to provide readers with enough detail on the  
22 participants' lives to enable them to consider whether the findings 'ring true' to their own  
23 experiences as professional athletes, coaches, or practitioners working in these environments.  
24 Furthermore, these data extracts offer readers the opportunity to consider whether the  
25 findings are transferable to their experiences of other sporting environments such as those

1 with elite/funded, individual, or female athletes. We therefore hope that this study achieves  
2 naturalistic generalizability and transferability (see, for a discussion, Smith, 2018).

3         Whilst recognizing these strengths of the study, it is also important to recognize the  
4 limitations. First, sole interviews were conducted with each participant and all the interviews  
5 took place during a single phase of the season. Thus, the data capture participants'  
6 experiences at one-point in time and do not capture changes in the environment or the  
7 psychosocial process over the course of the season. To explore these dynamic events in the  
8 future, scholars may consider conducting repeat or iterative interviews as the season  
9 progresses (see, e.g., Wagstaff et al., 2017). Second, the current study sought to understand  
10 how to promote individual player thriving and, therefore, focused the analytical lens on the  
11 players' perceptions of factors relative to their own experiences. However, as anticipated,  
12 references were made by participants to the interdependency of thriving, which raises  
13 questions pertaining to the existence of dyadic or collective thriving in sport (e.g., If one  
14 person is thriving in a team, does that impact another player? How many team members need  
15 to be thriving for an organization to thrive?) These questions have begun to be answered in  
16 work settings (see, e.g., Thompson & Ravlin, 2017; Walumbwa, Muchiri, Misati, Wu, &  
17 Meiliani, 2018); however, they go beyond the scope of the data collected in the present study  
18 and offer avenues for thriving research in sport in the future. Third, researchers may wish to  
19 quantitatively examine the effectiveness and efficacy of the strategies forwarded to assess  
20 whether some approaches are more effective for facilitating individual player thriving than  
21 others, and whether any suggestions prove counter-productive to others. Fourth, researchers  
22 are encouraged to go beyond the environmental factors identified in the present study, and  
23 consider the personal enablers that promote thriving in professional sport, and the interactions  
24 between personal and contextual enablers. A fifth consideration is the inclusion of distinct,  
25 but similar themes (e.g., collective goals) under the two overarching themes. Separating and

1 presenting the data in this way was considered to be the most compelling and coherent way  
2 by the study authors (cf. Braun et al., 2016); however, this is not intended to imply a  
3 restricted set of mechanisms through which the environmental factors could impact thriving  
4 or simplify the complexity of these interactions.

5 To conclude, we conducted the present study to (i) provide an exploration of the  
6 environmental factors that may promote player thriving in professional sport, and (ii) offer  
7 suggestions for how key stakeholders can support these mechanisms. Analysis of interviews  
8 conducted with players from an English professional rugby club generated thirteen factors  
9 that players perceived to enhance thriving. These factors were underpinned by two broad  
10 ideas (i) developing and enhancing bonds between teammates, and (ii) establishing a  
11 connection between the players, the coaching staff, and the club, and were motivated by the  
12 players' desire to operate within an integrated, inclusive, and trusting environment. These  
13 findings provide the first insight into the type of environment professional athletes believe  
14 can facilitate their development and success, and offer a number of unique suggestions to  
15 thriving literature. Significantly, it is suggested that clubs, coaches, and practitioners  
16 promote thriving through both overt and substantial gestures (e.g., team socials), and small  
17 and subtle interactions with players (e.g., considerate treatment of non-playing members) and  
18 their support networks (i.e., families). In closing, it appears that to promote thriving in a  
19 professional sport that requires emotion and passion to succeed on the pitch, rugby union  
20 organizations must appeal to the sensitivities and welfare of players' off it.



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Table 1

*Additional Data Extracts for the Establishing Bonds Between Teammates Overarching Theme*

<p><i>Forming Collective Goals:</i> I think we need to come together, actually enjoy what we do. And I think if we enjoy what we do, we play better. ... I think that's the culture we have to buy into. Let's buy into it, not for the Lions tour, not do it to come 1st, let's just do it for each other. And let's play so that you know the guy next to you can stand with you. (Participant 8)</p>
<p><i>Decreasing External Player Recruitment:</i> If you want to be something [as a team], you've got to earn it. ... You want it to be staggered over time, so that you can maintain forever. [Almost as if] "The squad that have been with us for 5 years, and we're winning every year because the lads love it, they understand it. We've looked after them, they've looked after us. They keep performing." ... When you put a load of money to a place, you want results, we all understand that. But, you have to understand that there's 11 other teams in Premiership that want the same thing. Rugby is a type of game where you can have a better team on paper, but you still lose because it doesn't click. (Participant 4)</p>
<p><i>Maintaining Equality in the Playing Squad:</i> We talk about this player-led environment which I personally, really don't like, because it's not...there's 50 players in the squad, but you listen to the same 8 voices every day for a whole year. And those 8 players, four of them will be internationals, four of them will be senior players, they will all be 25 and above. And in the squad at the moment, you've probably got 25-30 blokes under 25. So how much of what I'm thinking and what I want is being put through? <b>So some younger representation?</b> Well change representation. So you get more than just the same input week-in, week-out. So you don't get the same voice, or the same person, being able to dominate a situation, which then goes onto the field. Because that person is so involved in making the game plan, you then can't drop them. ... I also think you can have more than one group. So you can have a team for the weekend senior group, and then a squad senior group. So, if we are planning a social, ask the 18 year old what he wants to do. (Participant 8)</p>
<p><i>Creating Opportunities for Interaction:</i> The social side was pretty much dead last year ...we only had probably one night out. So I think that's important. ... Generally, most people do get on with each other alright from a professional point of view. But I still think we could know each other better. I think we could mix better with each other. Not more, but better. If you let people in, if you care about people, you do better for them. If you know more about people, you know how to talk to them better, you know what makes them tick, it's different. ... We're not deep enough with each other. We don't know each other well enough to know what makes them tick, or to bring the best out of them. (Participant 13)</p>
<p><i>Ensuring Effective Teammate Communication Styles:</i> <b>You mentioned before about a part of your role going forwards being supporting that whole person, not just the rugby player. What is the intention and why is that important?</b> I think it's important because we want that connection between the players. So supporting them as people, means that they can develop personally. Allow them to become more confident, trustworthy, trusting each other with their emotions...then things like having a conversation or an argument about a lineout move are going to be easy, because you trust each other on a much more primal level. I find there is a big problem if you don't trust each other, and you don't challenge each other, then you end up with corridor chat [gossip]. (Participant 7)</p>

*Senior Players Offering Guidance:* When I came here, [player name] and [player name] were ahead of me, and I was the young lad who'd come in, and they helped me a lot. They were great guys, to help me along and always...help me rather than scorn me. It was brilliant learning from them. I'm one of the older ones now, so with the younger lads, [I] help them come through and help them understand. .... And letting your hair down, letting them see me... as the older lads, if you get stuck in, start having a laugh and enjoy it, then everyone else comes along with it. I suppose that's part of being in that leadership role. Making sure that people aren't afraid to come and talk to me. Being respected for the right reasons. Being approachable and the young lads feeling that they can come and talk to me. (Participant 6)

*Note.* Text in **bold** represents the interviewer's voice.

Table 2

*Additional Data Extracts for the Establishing A Connection to The Coaching Staff and Club Overarching Theme*

<p><i>Actively Nurturing and Managing a 'Family' Club Culture:</i> You've got to look at outside the bubble. What keeps people happy? Their family, their wives, the children. And if they're all supported, then you're supported. I think that's one thing, here we might be a bit better on, is helping the family outside of us players. Boyfriends, girlfriends, partners, kids...as soon as they're happy, it makes us happy. (Participant 5)</p>
<p><i>Considerately Treating Non-Playing Squad Members:</i> Obviously only 15 guys can pull the shirt on at the weekend, another 8 on the bench. But if you're not in that 23, you've got to feel that you've got a purpose at this club, in this organization. So obviously that's where you've got to be a bit more creative, with what that purpose is. On a Thursday we go 15 on 15, so when I used to never play, I used to really enjoy being in the 15 that was against the team, and actually trying to beat the team. So maybe, for the younger boys, you make their purpose like 'right, that is your game day. Thursday is your game day. I want you to go out and show up the team, show what you're about.' Because people need something to hang their hat on and to work towards. To strive for. (Participant 16)</p>
<p><i>Creating an Honest and Fear-Free Environment:</i> I think you've got to look after the individual first. So that they can apply themselves to a group wholeheartedly, and not just pay lip service to it. Or be forced into doing things. So that's definitely where it begins for me, with the individual. <b>Is that the club looking after the individual?</b> Yea. So try and alleviate those fears of selection, and new contracts, and things like that. And be honest about where the player sits. Say, worst case, you have to leave a club. It's a lot less scary when that is, at least, put on the cards 12 months before it happens. You can mentally prepare for it, it's either 'shit I need to pull my finger out and change these peoples' minds in the next 3 months', or 'I need to send my agent out for a look. Sort myself out physically, if I've got a particularly niggly injury'. ... The whole while contributing positively to the general feeling at the club. (Participant 10)</p>
<p><i>Facilitating Enjoyment:</i> I think, sometimes, we got caught in the bubble of rugby, rugby, rugby, when, sometimes, taking the team away for a day out, take the team for a social, can be more important than a day's training. I think we've been poor at that. We've been poor at facilitating the time for boys to have time together to have relationships, to build as a team. Because there's not 50 guys who are your mates, they are, but it's not you've picked them to be your mates. You're forced into an environment with 50 other guys, so you're not always going to get on with everyone. So it's important that you give boys time to form those relationships, so that when you demand more of each other as a player, you have that relationship to fall back on. An element of trust. A brotherhood of camaraderie. And I think that's something the club need to be better in terms of facilitating. ... Sometimes training is important, but you have to trust that they [the players] know the basics, they know their stuff. But to enjoy each other's' company, to have that relationship, to have that trust, is something that's overlooked far too much. <b>And you think that if the club did that, it would be more likely that you as an individual would thrive?</b> Yea, because you feel that the club trusts you enough to be professional about it. The whole, play-hard work-hard mentality. You feel rewarded by the club...they appreciate you. So I think, if that happened, we'd feel as players, appreciated by the club. And it would bring us all together, and then, maybe, that would start to build a culture that we want to have. (Participant 2)</p>



*Decreasing Player Turnover Rate:* Trust is a huge thing between players and the organization. Because if you want to be a [club name] player, you've got to feel that [club name's] got your back, they're behind you 100%. They're looking after your interests, so, guess what, I'm going to put my body on the line for this place. You actually care for the organization. You care for the reputation of the club. You care for the fans. A lot of people do feel like it because they've been here all their life. But when you've got guys coming in and out of the club like we've done in the last couple of years, the turnover rate has been very high, people are here for one year. Where is the love and passion? You can't form love and passion over a year. So a lot of people are individualistic, and if you're individuals, you'll never be a team or a culture. (Participant 1)

*Establishing a Joint Team and Club Goal:* I think, like I said, you've got to be fighting for a cause. So you've got to have everyone on the page of "We are playing for, not ourselves, we're playing for this club" . . . You've got to get people trusting and believing in this place. You can't have fear. They've got to believe that this club has got their best interests, and they'll go out there and put their body on the line. (Participant 1)

*Fostering Player Development:* **Who do you think could help you thrive, and what could they do to help?** Obviously [coach name] has now taken charge of player development. I could say [coach name], but I'd probably say the players for me. Like [player name], [who plays in] my position. So I'd say, if you had a first team player that was paired with you and you met with them once a week or something, just had a chat. Or you see them out of the club. Obviously I sit down with [coach name] once a week now, and discuss how I'm feeling. How I think the games have gone that I'm playing. (Participant 15)

*Note.* Text in **bold** represents the interviewer's voice.

## 1 Highlights

- 2 • Players desire integrated, inclusive, and trusting performance environments
- 3 • Bonds with teammates, coaches, and the club are critical to player thriving
- 4 • Teammate bonds are facilitated by opportunities for interactions and a shared voice
- 5 • Bonds to the coach and club can be supported by both substantial and subtle gestures