This is the published version of a paper published in *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Meckbach, S., Wagstaff, C R., Kenttä, G., Thelwell, R. (2023)
Building the "team behind the team": A 21-month instrumental case study of the Swedish 2018 FIFA World Cup team
*Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 35*(3): 521-546
https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2022.2046658

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

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To cite this article: Susanne Meckbach, Christopher R. D. Wagstaff, Göran Kenttä & Richard Thelwell (2022): Building the “team behind the team”: A 21-month instrumental case study of the Swedish 2018 FIFA World Cup team, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, DOI: 10.1080/10413200.2022.2046658

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2022.2046658

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Building the “team behind the team”: A 21-month instrumental case study of the Swedish 2018 FIFA World Cup team

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

In this study, we provide a novel account of the selection and development of a staff team for the Swedish national men’s football team for the 2018 FIFA World Cup. A total of 37 interviews took place at six time points over a 21-month period to track the values-based steps taken by the national Head Coach to build his support team. The sample was employed in a variety of roles including Head Coach, Assistant Head Coach, Goalkeeping Coach, Mentor to the Head Coach, Performance Analyst, Sports Psychologist, three Scouts, and a Team Manager. The data are presented in a temporal manner and organized according to three core values which were espoused by and later adopted as a value system by the support team: candor, humility, community. The data provide novel insight into the recruitment, formation, and development of the support team underpinned by a value system promoted by the Head Coach using candor, humility, and community. The presentation of longitudinal reflections from the Head Coach and members of the staff team during their build-up to, and excellent performance at the World Cup finals offer a significant contribution to knowledge regarding how a values-led approach was experienced in elite sport. The findings offer salient implications for research and practice.

\textit{Lay summary:} This is a case study of the selection, formation, and development of a support team for the Swedish national football team over 21 months before the men’s 2018 FIFA World Cup. We explored the values-led leadership approach of the Head Coach across this period, presenting data from interviews over time-related to the impact of this values-led approach on the “team behind the team” in the build-up to and during the World Cup.

\textbf{APPLIED IMPLICATIONS}

- Psychologists and coaches might benefit from adopting a values-led approach to recruitment and ways of working.
- The values of candor, humility, and community were effectively articulated and role modeled by the leader and subsequently adopted by members of the support team. Although the specific values may not be suitable, the processes and critical moments

\textbf{ARTICLE HISTORY}

Received 6 January 2021
Revised 21 February 2022
Accepted 22 February 2022

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Elite sports organizations are composed of a network of individuals and groups who transact with each other to perform functions essential to the development and performance of that organization. Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) argued that a “twilight zone” (p. 428) has existed between sports management and sports psychology, which encompasses the organizational culture and climate of sport, together with how personnel and the environment are led and managed, and how individuals and stakeholder groups interact within and with the broader organization. Researchers exploring this twilight zone do so under the banner of organizational sport psychology to gain the knowledge and understanding that facilitates the development of “optimally functioning sport organizations” (Wagstaff, 2019, p. 1). Its increasing prevalence within the elite sport is perhaps best explained by the realization that sports organizations are becoming ever more complex social environments where a diverse range of performance staff (e.g., managers, coaches, support staff) support the development, preparation, and performance of elite athletes. Moreover, sustained success in elite sport is not solely dependent on the talent of an individual athlete or group of athletes but rather how a system of stakeholders (e.g., performance staff and administrators) can work effectively together to ensure athletes are optimally prepared to perform at major competitions (Wagstaff, 2019).

Within organizational sport psychology, there has been a growing acknowledgment among researchers and practitioners of the importance of the “team behind the team” in elite sport (e.g., Arnold et al., 2019; Wagstaff et al., 2015). Indeed, as the recognition of the impact that sports science and medicine-related factors can have on elite performance has grown, the size and sophistication of support teams in elite sport (e.g., those in sport science and management roles) have also witnessed rapid expansion (cf. Gilmore & Gilson, 2007). It is now common for such teams to also comprise, sports medicine personnel (e.g., doctors, physiotherapists, soft tissue therapists), sports scientists (e.g., psychologists, physiologists, nutritionists, performance analysts, strength and conditioning coaches), and various other support staff and individuals working for the organization (e.g., performance lifestyle advisors, performance knowledge and innovation specialists, engineers).

The widespread emergence of and considerable contemporary investment in this “team behind the team” demonstrates the value of such personnel (Wagstaff et al., 2015). As an illustration, the English Institute of Sport (EIS; 2016) currently employs more than 350 people to provide direct delivery services that can help sports to improve performance and well-being across 40 Olympic and Paralympic sports. Given the diversification, complexity, and growth of sports medicine and science (SMS) support staff in elite sport, it seems surprising that there exists very little research literature on the professional formation, multidisciplinary working, and optimization of the team behind the team. It is worth noting that there have been studies conducted to examine SMS staff...
experiences of multidisciplinary work (Reid et al., 2004) and experiences of organizational change (Hings et al., 2018; Wagstaff et al., 2015, 2016), stress (e.g., Arnold et al., 2019; Larner et al., 2017), and precarious employment (e.g., Gilmore et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these advancements aside, we know little about how senior leaders develop their “team behind the team” and there is a dearth of research available to understand such processes or associated considerations for best practice. It follows that there exists a need to better understand the steps taken to optimize the development and functioning of “the team behind the team,” including aspects of the recruitment, working practices, integration, clearly defining professional roles, boundaries and responsibilities, reporting lines, and the general functioning of this group in high-performance sport systems. Hence, in response to the growing size and sophistication of personnel employed to help athletes seek a competitive advantage (see Gilmore et al., 2018; Wagstaff et al., 2016), we sought to better understand the recruitment and development of such a “backroom team” for the Swedish national football team ahead of the FIFA 2018 World Cup. In doing so, we hoped to address the dearth of knowledge within the extant literature regarding the development of “the team behind the team.”

Within many fields of psychological research, there exists an acknowledgment of the important role of personal values. Values are core beliefs or the underlying thoughts that stimulate human behavior. Rokeach (1973) defined values as prescriptive, enduring standards that have cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Moreover, values exist at multiple levels and play a central role in guiding what is considered right, worthy, and desirable for individuals, teams, organizations, and nations (Arieli et al., 2020). As a research team, we do not fully agree that values should or could successfully be prescribed (i.e., imposed or enforced) by leaders. Yet, we do support the notion that enduring standards can be adopted by members of teams and may play a salient role in shaping the social environment within a sports organization, not least when developing a support team. Indeed, the personal values of senior leaders in any context are likely to affect leader-follower relationships (Kouzes & Posner, 1995), leaders’ moral reasoning (e.g., Hughes et al., 1993), and personal behavior (England & Lee, 1974). Covey (1990), in a call for what he termed “principle-centered leadership,” argued that effective leadership is, “predicated upon certain inviolate principles—natural laws in the human dimension” (p. 18). The goal, in his opinion, is to align internalized values with transcendent principles. It follows that when developing their support team, leaders in sport may benefit by understanding and clearly articulating their belief system to raise awareness of the desired values to others.

The concept of values as central to organizations and organized societies has a long history in the sociology of organizations as a guiding principle of institutions, organizations, and individuals (Schwartz, 1992). Values-Based Leadership (VBL) refers to leadership based on foundational moral principles or values, such as integrity, empowerment, and social responsibility (Reilly & Ehlinger, 2007, p. 246). According to Kanungo (2001), the aim of values-based leadership actions is to guide organizational members toward goals, which benefit the organization, its members, stakeholders, and society. Brown and Treviño (2006) reviewed the research and defined the VBL as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way
communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (pp. 595). Moreover, Brown et al. (2005) noted that values-based leadership includes making the leader a legitimate and credible role model with normatively appropriate virtues, such as honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, and care. Others have noted the importance of shared values in creating a strong organizational culture (Schein, 1985), motivating behavior by providing direction and emotional intensity to action (Schwartz, 1992), representing standards to judge and justify actions (Mills & Spencer, 2005), and socialization activities and individuals to organization and leadership (Grojean et al., 2004).

In the present study, we conducted a longitudinal, instrumental case study to examine the approach of Janne Andersson, from the outset of his tenure in his role as Head Coach of the Swedish football team, and for the following 21-months. This period included the build-up to, performance at, and reflections on, the 2018 FIFA World Cup. From the outset of this tenure, Andersson declared to the media that values would be at the forefront of his approach to preparing for the World Cup, stating, “All people gain from order and that is why it is important for us to have a concept of how to behave towards each other as well as other people off the pitch.” (Christensen, 2018, p. 1). The main aim of the study was to understand how Andersson recruited and developed his support team. We were also interested in the experiences of individual members of the support team as to how they developed as a “team behind the team” and were required to develop effective working relationships and practices in the build-up to the most prestigious competition in association football. We believed that by illuminating such experiences, a range of sports stakeholders (e.g., sports psychologists, coaches, performance directors) would gain a rare insight into how the recruitment and development process influenced the dynamics within the staff team with relevance to their own performance and that of the on-field team.

**Method**

*Research design and paradigm*

A case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular person, project, policy, program, or system in a real-life context (Thomas, 2011). This case study offers an insight into what Simonton (1999) termed a “significant sample.” To elaborate, significant samples include individuals “who have, to some measurable degree, ‘made a name for themselves.’ In the extreme case, the person may have actually ‘made history’ for some distinctive achievement” (p. 425). Significant samples are those who are different and possibly even extraordinary (Hodge et al., 2014) and can often be characterized as “critical cases” (Flyvbjerg, 2006) that offer valuable and exceptionally rare insight for others. The repeated interview design adopted here offered access to one of the world’s leading coaches and members of his support team throughout the first 21-months of his tenure as national coach in the build-up to the World Cup. A combined 3.572 billion viewers—more than half of the global population aged four and over—tuned in to the official broadcast coverage of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Teams competing in this event are among the world’s best teams and data collection during the preparations and performance at such events is extremely rare. Inaccessibility reasons aside, the Swedish team was deemed to be a
significant sample, given their exceptional qualification and performance at the 2018 World Cup finals.

An instrumental case study methodology (see Riessman, 2008), grounded in an interpretive paradigm (Sparkes & Smith, 2013) was employed in the present research. In contrast to the post-positivist paradigm, where the aims typically relate to explanation and control, the interpretive paradigm is interested in understanding and illuminating human experience (Carless & Douglas, 2012). Moreover, this approach allows the reader to engage with the biographical, historical, and cultural context experienced by the participants (Sparkes & Partington, 2003). In addition, the longitudinal approach included multiple data sources and enabled an examination of psychosocial processes in a unique and largely inaccessible cultural context (e.g., FIFA world cup, substantial public scrutiny, overachievement).

Participants

The participants for this study were ten men representing various professional roles typically included in a support team (Head Coach, Assistant Head Coach, Goalkeeping coach, Mentor to the Head Coach, Performance Analyst and Sport Science, Sports Psychologist, three Scouts, and a Team Manager who provided administrative support), aged between 30 and 70 years. At the outset of the study, all participants had been newly recruited to the support team of the Head Coach, Janne Andersson. One of the participants ended his assignment in the team after six months and another one started his employment in the spring of 2018. The remaining eight participants were in constant employment within the team between August 2016 and September 2018. Data collection occurred between December 2016 and September 2018. Participant selection was via purposive sampling and all received a request for participation by email. All participants volunteered their consent to participate before data collection commenced, were content for their names to be used in this work and institutional ethical approval was granted before data collection.

All participants had played professional football in one of the top three leagues in Sweden before their current employment role. Additionally, many of the participants had previously held senior positions within the Swedish Football Association, and several had previously worked with the Swedish men’s national football team in the past; one as Head Coach of the team. The participants had diverse educational backgrounds with eight having completed university education, one completing a doctorate, and one finishing their education at high school. For those with a university degree, there was a noteworthy commonality regarding the course subjects taken, which included education, leadership, and psychology. In addition to formal education, three held the benchmark UEFA Pro License Diploma or a UEFA Goalkeeping A License. Below, we offer a brief biographical introduction to each of the staff.

Janne Andersson National Head Coach. 55 years, 16 years of experience as a football coach at the highest level in Sweden. Was recruited as a head coach in spring 2016 and started his position in August same year. Peter Wettergren, Assistant Head Coach, 50 years, 12 years of experience as football coach at the highest level in Sweden, plus another year in Denmark. Joined the backroom team in August 2016. Previously
Maths Elfvendal, Goalkeeping Coach, 31 years, 7 years of experience as football coach at the highest level in Sweden. Joined backroom team in August 2016. Previously worked with Janne in the same role at the club level. Youngest Goalkeeping Coach both at the highest club level in Sweden and the Swedish national team. Daniel Ekvall, Sport Psychologist, 39 years, 10 years of experience as working with sport psychology at the highest level in Sweden in different sports. Joined the backroom team in August 2016. Previously worked with Janne in a club team. Lasse Lagerbäck, Advisor, 70 years, 18 years of experience as national head coach at the senior level in four different countries. Joined backroom team in August 2016, resigned in January 2017 on appointment as Head Coach for Norway national team. No previous professional working relationship with Janne. Lasse Richt, Team Manager (Administration) for the national team, 63 years. Twenty years of experience working in this role for the national team. Joined backroom team in August 2016 and retired after the World Cup 2018. No previous professional working relationship with Janne. Paul Balsom, Performance Analyst and Sport Science (the only Ph.D. in the team), 54 years. Twenty years of experience working in the role for the national team. Joined backroom team in August 2016. No previous professional working relationship with Janne. Tom Prahl, Scout, 69 years, 18 years of experience as football coach at the highest level in Sweden, plus another year in Norway. Joined backroom team in August 2016. Previously worked with Janne in a club team, when Janne was an assistant coach to Tom. Lasse Jacobsson, Scout, 57 years, 6 years of experience as football coach at the highest level in Sweden. Joined backroom team in August 2016. Previously worked as an Assistant Coach to Janne in a club team. Roger Sandberg, Scout, 46 years, 6 years of experience as football coach at the highest level in Sweden. Joined backroom team leading up to World Cup 2018. No previous working relationship with Janne.

Procedure

Recruitment of participants took place via direct approaches before team camps. There were no exclusion criteria and no one in the support team declined to take part. The participants had the agreed objective of qualifying for and performing at the 2018 FIFA World Cup finals. Once they achieved this aim, the revised goal was to reach the round of 16 teams (i.e., go passed the group). Hence, the team substantially overachieved relevant to their original goal. Participants only met as a team for international training or competition camps, and therefore, worked irregular hours, traveled extensively, and resided in different parts of Sweden. Interviews were selected as the most appropriate method to collect data in a time-sensitive manner. In terms of a theoretical rationale, interviews allow for the issues of time and change to be foregrounded, showcasing events and decisions that influence psychosocial trajectories as data are accumulated over time, in contrast with one-off qualitative studies that represent a “snapshot” of a particular moment in time. The study consisted of six interview time points over a period of 21-months, from December 2016 to September 2018 (see Figure 1) with 37 interviews completed in total. The first four interview sessions focused on leadership recruitment, formation, and development during the 2018 World Cup qualification.
process. These interviews took place when the participants had national team training or competition camps during the World Cup qualification process. The fifth and sixth interview sessions focused on the support team’s work before and during the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. Interview session 5 took place at a World Cup preparation camp, and interview session 6 took place at a time of individual convenience following the team’s return from the World Cup and was no more than 6 weeks after the end of the competition. All participants had the opportunity to provide an interview at each data collection point, however, some were unable due to leaving their role, workload, or missing the camp. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min with participants given the option to decide where the interview took place. All interviews were conducted by the first author with the majority taking place at the Swedish Football Association’s head office in Solna, or in a private area at the team hotel during national team camps. The researchers were not part of the Swedish team and retained an external research-focused relationship with participants throughout the duration of the study.

Before each interview, two interview guides were designed, one for Head Coach Janne Andersson and another for the members of the support team. The first four interview sessions dealt with issues, such as support team formation and development. At the first interview, the participants also had the chance to talk about themselves and their background in football. The aim was to gather information about demographics, previous experience, the recruitment process to the support team, the current role, and how that was perceived, with questions to Janne focusing on his hopes and intended approach to undertaking his role. Interviews 2, 3, and 4 were focused on how the support team developed and how the forming process “looked” and “felt” at each time point. The values of candor, humility, and community which were raised during interview phase one were also explored at each time point with a specific focus on the extent to which these were relevant or had any influence on the process of developing the support team and their roles. Interview sessions five and six focused on the participants’ well-being and performance and their work in the support team during and after the World Cup. Additionally, reflections were sought regarding how the backroom team worked leading up to the World Cup, an exploration of the recruitment of a new staff member, and general reflections on sustainable leadership and health during peak expectations. During interview phase six, questions were developed to focus on the sustainability of the support team and how the values system and associated behavior were influenced during and after the World Cup.

The interview guides prepared for each phase provided a consistent thread across interviews but enabled the first author to probe, seek elaboration, or explore themes as they arose. Each interview concluded with the question, “is there anything else that you consider relevant to the topic that you would like to add?”

Figure 1. Interview data collection timeline.
Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author resulting in 279 pages of single-line text. Data were then analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (see Braun & Clarke, 2019). According to Braun and Clarke, quality reflexive thematic analysis is not about following procedures “correctly,” “accurate and reliable coding,” or “consensus between coders,” but the researchers’ reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process. The data analysis process was led by the first, second, and third authors, and the entire research team met regularly to think reflexively and challenge each other’s interpretations in efforts to come up with a strategy on how to best illustrate the longitudinal qualitative approach (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Following familiarization with the data through reading and transcription, the first author coded the data, before collaborating with the second and third authors to develop the coding into unrefined codes and themes (e.g., early codes that were later collapsed into a single theme included “humility,” “no prestige,” “selflessness”) that were then furthermore refined through continued reading and analysis in an iterative process. The next stage of the analysis was to place the concepts directly communicated by participants into themes based on semantics. The ongoing revision of the themes took place via an iterative and constructive process, with the research team meeting after each interview session and throughout the final analysis process to openly share their thoughts and act as critical friends. Perhaps most importantly, each stage of the analytical process was influenced by a consistent, but simplistic, values-centric rhetoric espoused by the Head Coach, and which was adopted, internalized, and promoted by participants. Finally, the first author presented the themes to Janne and other participants and engaged in a process of member reflection, whereby individuals were given an opportunity to offer “reflexive elaboration” of the results (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 285). As part of this co-participatory process and dialogue, the participants did not note the existence of contradictions or differences in knowing, disagreement with the themes presented or interpretations.

Results

In this section, we present themes developed by the authors throughout the analysis process. The data are presented somewhat chronologically, with key themes developed from each interview phase and relating specifically to Values-based recruitment: A chance to make a new start in the biggest role of your life; The vision: An environment characterized by candor, community, and humility; We are on the right path; Subtle refinement; It should be like a jet stream; New challenges; The value system held.

Values-based recruitment: “a chance to make a new start in the biggest role of your life”

When Janne assembled his support team, he departed from the criteria he previously employed in former coaching roles at the club level. The new criteria included a desire for both continuity and renewal in the support team. That is, he wanted to have a balance of people who had not previously worked with the men’s national team, and some
who were members of his previous backroom staff, or in the previous national Head Coach’s support team. For those with whom he had no existing working relationships, Janne attempted to communicate that this was a new template for working:

He has got a chance to make a new start and he has done it in a brilliant way. He has really set out his stool in terms of how it should be from now on. He was very distinct that ‘all my “templates” from before have to go’, because he wanted everything to look new, refreshed and redone. It should really be a new start. (Paul Balsom)

As Janne was at the beginning of his first role as a national Head Coach, it was especially important to him to recruit an Assistant Head Coach who had previous experience of working with a national team. Apart from this desire for experience and some elements of continuity, the fundamental criteria for Janne were the recruitment of an individual who he could trust, and who shared his basic values and vision:

There were some people I have worked with before that I wanted in the team, because they can cooperate with me and I can trust them. They have great knowledge of football, are very energetic and I know that “they are going to die for me”. Everyone doesn’t need to be the same, [but] you also cannot start every day by debating fundamental values, there we must agree. These people share my basic values and how I want things to be. (Janne Andersson)

When asked to clarify what these values were, Janne reported that there were four values to which he sought to recruit to his support team; competence, hard work, humility, and integrity:

You need to have knowledge about football to be competent. You must be prepared to work hard. You must have no prestige and understand that we do this together to make it great. Last, you need integrity and the ability to sort things out between players and colleagues. (Janne Andersson)

Janne also reported recruiting new forms of science and medicine where he believed they could have a positive effect on the support team and players:

I wanted to have a sports psychologist, because I have seen the positive effect it gives. He gets closer to the players and can give them a voice and support them in a different way, than if I do it myself. For me, the sports psychological advisor’s role is important both in the support team and with the players. That role has not existed before. (Janne Andersson)

In addition, Lars Lagerbäck, former national Head Coach for Sweden, Nigeria, and Iceland’s men’s national football team, was recruited as a mentor to Janne. His eagerness to seek out this “extra pair of eyes” during meetings and in the stands was an example of Janne’s modeling of the humility and openness to development he valued:

The reason why I asked Lars to be a part of the support team is his unique knowledge and his personality, he is completely humble. I got a lot of information from Lars before the first national meeting, for example how to organize a meeting and what it means to be the Head Coach of the team. I got a shortcut into the job… he saved me from walking on a mine. I found my way with a hand from Lars as a “sounding board”. (Janne Andersson)

The sense of collaboration was shared by Lars, who stated:

The idea was that I should be a “sounding board” and be available… it was very fun. It is very positive to be part of Janne’s team. They are positive people. The collaboration worked great. I felt very welcome in the group. (Lars Lagerbäck)
**Interview session 1 “the vision”: an environment characterized by candor, community, and humility**

In addition to the values-led approach to recruiting his support team, Janne consistently stated that he hoped three fundamental values would characterize the support team’s work: candor, community, and humility. For Janne, candor and humility set the conditions for a successful community, with these values viewed as the core of how he would “make his mark on structures, routines, and working methods.” In this way, the members of the team operated in an environment with a clear understanding of their respective roles and the opportunities for multidisciplinary work. Janne hoped his humility would support the development of a psychologically safe climate where the opinions of the support teams were welcome and desirable, contained appropriate challenges and feedback, and enabled all members to be active participants in decision-making processes.

**Candor**

One of the foundational values of Janne’s leadership was his explicit clarity regarding how he wanted people to work with each other:

> I am very distinct in my leadership – “this is what I want” – I want order and order… I want everyone to understand because everything becomes so much easier then. (Janne Andersson)

The support team confirmed the existence of such clarity within Janne’s vision and reinforced the strength of his communication with varying groups:

> He is extremely accurate and solid with what he wants. He has “the gift of the gab”. He knows what to say on most occasions, both to the media and to us. He thinks through what he is going to say. He is normal and does not act differently because he is the Head Coach. He hasn’t changed because of that. (Lasse Jacobsson)

Janne perceived the support team to have become a relatively homogeneous group early in the group formation process and that collaborative ways of working had developed quickly after they instigated new learning and development processes during the national team camps:

> We always evaluate and debrief when we meet… I think it is a very homogeneous leadership team already, after this short time together, because we have made these evaluations and changed the team. (Janne Andersson)

Janne also emphasized the importance of being distinct at an early stage in his tenure regarding which values should guide the support team’s work together:

> We must have a common framework, but we also form guiding principles together in the management team. It works well, but people are people, so things happen sometimes. We can have different opinions where I, as the person ultimately responsible, must say what I think and decide. (Janne Andersson)

**Community**

The second value consistently articulated by Janne was that he hoped the support team would become a community, working in an integrated, holistic, and multidisciplinary way. For example, he wanted the team to proactively work toward collective
problem-solving, where individuals were clear on their respective roles and responsibilities, but felt confident supporting and challenging others appropriately and sharing information across the team:

We complement each other. We share our work while having different roles. I understand my role and I do my best in my role. This means that other people can do their best and together we can do good things. Of course, it is me who is ultimately responsible, who makes the final decisions and must own them. (Janne Andersson)

After several months together, the team generally reported that working in the support team was enjoyable and meaningful. It also appeared that the support team held considerable autonomy, albeit with Janne having ultimate responsibility. One member of the team noted, “Janne lets everyone in and everyone participates in the discussions. Then he is the one who makes the decision in the end, but everyone is involved in some way” (Lasse Jacobsson). Another noted:

Janne delegates responsibility in a very correct way and then he only briefly sensechecks “is everything okay?”. Then he does not interfere… It is very stimulating to be in that environment. (Maths Elfvendal)

Within this community, Janne encouraged candor within more formalized team briefing and debriefing to foster an environment of learning, collaboration, and psychological safety, as the first author reflected during data collection:

The leadership team started to develop a well-functioning structure and routine for the working process by constantly evaluating the activity. This has contributed to create a distinct and safe environment where the colleagues are involved in the working process and know what to do and what is expected of them. The leadership team has systematic evaluation and feedback sessions. In practice, this means that every national team meeting ends with an evaluation in which the leadership team discuss and reflect on their functioning. During the national team meetings, the leadership team also has a meeting in the evening, where the colleagues evaluate the day and plan for tomorrow. During the meetings, all team members are called upon to speak once, which is important for the participation and that the coworkers feel that everyone matters in the leadership team. The leadership team has an emerging values system, and the coworkers have respect for each other and their different roles and help and learn from each other.

Humility

The third value Janne outlined at the outset of his work with the team was the importance of humility. This aligned with Janne’s desire for candor and community, characterized by his inclusion of others in the decision-making process, the invitation to voice opinions, give feedback, and challenge each other. In promoting these values, Janne was clear that no one should elevate themselves above others and stated that he regarded his coworkers as equals regardless of the role they have in the support team. In the participants’ native language, the term “prestigeless,” (translated as “without prestige”) was used to reflect humility:

I have no prestige and I really hope that everyone who works with me feels that because otherwise I would be sad. If someone is good at something, that’s great. Neither of us need to be the best, but if the team together can find an approach to the work and agree on the basic values, it’s a strength. (Janne Andersson)
Several group members who commented on how they valued their inclusion in the decision-making process confirmed the absence of prestige within the support team. Furthermore, they also confirmed the general perception of Janne being a humble person and authoritative leader, whose strengths did not exclusively lie in his technical knowledge:

There are some things that are amazing about him. It is no doubt that he is the one who decides, but in the most humble and delegating way. He’s a great boss. The leadership is his primary strength. There may be others who are better on the theoretical part of football than him, but he is absolutely the best football Head Coach I know. (Maths Elfvendal)

**Interview session 2: “we are on the right path”**

**Candor**

A member of the support team who worked in the national team under the former Head Coach’s described his overall experience during the second phase of interviews, “the guiding principles are distinct, and I think it’s good. He is the first Head Coach to be so clear on how everything should be” (Paul Balsom). Indeed, the team generally appreciated working within guiding values, and when not followed, they were noted as a “failure” to ensure mistakes are learning opportunities. One of the members of the support team noted that Janne has used humor in combination with a serious message to clarify his values and expectations:

Janne has done it well when he uses humor. We have a rule of no support staff on the training pitch and the other day he photographed a person standing with one foot on the pitch and then make a joke about it on our meeting putting the picture up and zooming-in on the foot. He says it in a funny way, but there is a serious undertone. (Daniel Ekvall)

**Community**

Janne noted at this stage of preparation for the World Cup that “we are on the right path,” highlighting the evaluations as an important influence on the support team’s positive development, which was characterized by the team sharing a greater understanding of their respective roles and collaborative ways of working.

For me, their participation is important and that everyone now understands their roles. It feels like we are on the right path. The evaluations mean that we constantly polish how we want to work and strengthen what is good in the leadership team… We have talked and clarified very distinct areas of responsibility after each national team meeting, I really enjoy working like this. (Janne Andersson)

The structured evaluations in the support team improved the clarity and cooperation among staff as they provided an opportunity to reflect on the working process, the creation of familiarity, and a psychologically safe environment for collaborative working. Another aspect is that the evaluations have contributed to create a safe environment, where it is acceptable—and expected—for members of the team to express opinions and concerns.
Members of the support team shared their own reflections on the new values-led working process, with one reflecting on this new debriefing process, “This is the key to improving cooperation in the leadership team that we have evaluated in a systematic way.” (Daniel Ekvall). The development of a sense of community took a significant step when individuals with the best facilitation skills assumed responsibility for team meetings, “The sports psychologist creates an environment where it is easier for us to present opinions and make us more involved” (Paul Balsom). Another member of the team noted the value of this change for the community:

I believe that the evening meetings are important for our activities on a collective level. I think it is important that all individuals get the opportunity to say something. Regardless of the role you have, everyone will be called upon to speak. You feel involved. I think that is very important for our community. (Maths Elfvendal)

### Humility

One of the ways Janne attempted to instill humility was his use of Lars Lagerbäck as an advisor and critical friend during his first six months as Head Coach of the national team. However, between interview sessions 1 and 2, he accepted an offer to become the Head Coach of the Norwegian national team which led to his resignation from the Swedish support team. Janne reflected on his experience of having Lars as an advisor, “It was sad that he left because he holds important skills, but I also felt that we could survive because we have come so far” (Janne Andersson). Similarly, Lars felt that the collaboration worked well and that he felt welcomed by the coworkers. Lars also emphasized that Janne had no prestige in working with him as an advisor. Interestingly, another coworker noted that Lars also demonstrated “no prestige,” despite his prominent status in world football:

Being an advisor requires an incredible lack of prestige from Lars. He is an authority. He is a member of UEFA committee. He has been a national Head Coach in many different countries. Yet he does not want to be “seen” at all, but just wants to help advise Janne and Peter (Assistant Head Coach). (Lasse Richt)

### Interview session 3: “subtle refinement”

### Candor

After one year of working together, the support team reported that their collaborative work was now a group norm, that routines had been established, and that challenging each other to drive performance levels was an accepted norm. The participants noted the importance of the early values-led work for embedding ways of working and that “subtle behavioral refinements” became noticeable because of Janne’s values and leadership. This experience had a performance benefit for the team, with one person stating they had more energy during team meetings.

It has become easier. In the beginning, there is so much you must go through and you are also over-ambitious. Now we build from a place of clarity and openness. I was tired at the end of the first national team meetings. Now I have more energy because much of the work is already prepared and we challenge each other effectively. (Peter Wettergren)
Community

Nevertheless, at this time Janne reported that he needed to manage the balance of collective contribution with clear roles and responsibilities to maintain a sense of community. Janne noted that he proactively intervened to speak with coworkers because of perceived role conflict and overlap. Nevertheless, he was at pains to explain that these conversations were individual and that “some things do not have to be vented in the management meeting” and that he needed to plan such conversations and express himself in the “right way at the right time”:

Sometimes participation can be too big. I want to involve people, but at the same time you don’t have to be involved in everything, then it can get messy. I have noticed this. It must not be that you start talking about trivialities and the things discussed in the management team must be done so with dignity. It is a risk that you start to fixate on small things that are just a matter between you and me. It’s subtle balance because I don’t want to kill the engagement. I must express myself so that people really understand. (Janne Andersson)

During the spring of 2017, Janne adjusted some roles in the support team, as he noticed that some of the coworkers, and even himself, were very fatigued during and after national team camps and needed relief and time for recovery. Another reason was that Janne wanted to distribute the work and streamline the roles. For one of the coworkers this led to some relief:

For me, the biggest challenge is that I am responsible for both performance analysis and sport science. Most national teams have three, maybe four people who do the same job I do. I don’t say that to suggest I’m good, but that it’s a challenge to keep up with everything. I may also have ambitions that sometimes are not realistic. We have made a small change before this camp so that I am relieved of the pressure. It feels great. (Paul Balsom)

Humility

After a year as Head Coach of the Swedish national team, Janne reported that he finally felt safe in his role as Head Coach and in the support team. He had found a way of working that align with his values, but he was also encountering challenges to his position and system due to growing professional scrutiny and media attention because of the team’s positive performances. In line with previous interviews, Janne also emphasized that the open and collaborative work with his support team was the most important thing for achieving their goals.

At this time, after the first meeting I felt that I had found an approach to how I would work. I feel very confident in the role, but that does not mean that I know everything; I just feel safe in how to handle the role. I feel very happy with my coworkers and the team we have. It is absolutely the most important thing... I have no prestige. I have no problem with my coworkers questioning and having views; I see this as a constructive process. We have quite high expectations in the leadership team. We rarely have conflict because we challenge each other with care and openness. My basic setting is never to be afraid of taking in anything. My focus is on any guardedness among my team and I am careful to correct things on the road in case we do not come to a smart position. (Janne Andersson)

Interestingly, others within the team began noting the importance of humility, with several members of the support team adopting the value in their rhetoric with players and other
staff. The Assistant Head Coach stated that “no one is more important than anyone else” in the support team, later adding how the membership of the group was regulated according to this humility:

To have no prestige is important in this team. Those who take themselves too seriously will not last long. If you look at the best coaches they have a fantastic team behind them. There is only one figurehead but this is not a one-man show. Everyone is good at what they do, and no one is more important than anyone else. Everyone has equal share in our success or failure. I think it has become more open. You get closer to each other. It is a great atmosphere and a wonderful chemistry during each meeting. Humility, working hard every day and no prestige is the key, and that’s exactly what we do. (Peter Wettergren)

**Interview session 4: “it should be like a jet stream”**

**Candor**

For Janne, at this point in the preparations for the World Cup, he had developed several metaphors to articulate his values in new ways. He noted a personal closeness between him and his coworkers, saying “we have come to know each other well and developed clarity in how we work together,” but felt a way of communicating and reinforcing his core values would help. He began to refer to communication as a “jet stream”; that everything in the national team environment should be so distinct that everyone knows exactly what to do:

Those who have got to know me know I am distinct about how I want things done. I have come up with a new analogy. When you step into the hotel it should be like a jet stream that pulls in one direction; we are so distinct with how we want it. This means that I must be distinct in my role, but we also must be jointly responsible. (Janne Andersson)

**Community**

Janne reflected on the role clarification intervention several months earlier and felt this had led to greater efficiency and understanding of collective work, and community. Peter, the assistant Head Coach, also noted enhanced role clarity, “It has become easier. We have repeated the role and values messages a lot so that everyone knows exactly what is required. We know our area of responsibility. It works quite smoothly.”

One strategy Janne used to create a sense of community and optimize preparation was for the support team to undertake a three-day reconnaissance trip to the team’s World Cup base. For Janne, this was an opportunity to “polish” plans and information sharing processes:

We will go for three days with the leadership team to base camp so that everyone will get there, see how it looks and work there together. I am process oriented and think it is fun to brush on stuff. How should we work together in the leadership team? What role do I have? We work with it all the time. Then there will be planning with matches.

**Humility**

At this stage of preparation for the World Cup, the humility within the support team had contributed to the coworkers being more open with each other and giving
each other critical feedback in a compassionate manner. For one of the team members, this signified a poignant time of reflection for the support team journey:

In the beginning we didn’t help each other that much, but now it is so clear what roles each one has and the lack of prestige in our team environment enables us to give each other feedback and help each other even more. There has been a growing “synergy effect” of collaboration in the team over the course of the year. (Daniel Ekvall)

The first author reflected at this time:

It really is a community. Everyone speaks up and it is evident that the whole team’s humility is important for the leadership team so they can create a working environment where honest views can be expressed. For example, they may ask each other, “what do you think about my leadership in this situation?”. Janne models humility by inviting others’ opinions as part of a constructive process. He listens to the opinions of his leadership team and he wants to know if there is something that does not work and needs addressing. Thus, there are many opportunities to make mistakes and develop and the sense of community seems to be a key component of the developing value system.

Peter felt that his role at this stage of preparations was to help maintain the humility among the leadership team and the positive environment he saw, by supporting and enabling others:

In the beginning, everyone was new in their position. Then we all went into our own bubble and just tried to get our work done. Now we have found our own way of working and we can help each other and in other areas, such as subtly influencing relationships. I try to “see” all individuals, make them feel good, and try to have strong relationships with everyone in the team. (Peter Wettergren)

**Interview session 5: “new challenges”**

**Candor**

This phase of interviews coincided with the final weeks of preparation for the World Cup finals. The team reported experiencing growing expectations from the public and felt intense pressure emanating from the media. Janne faced an unexpected challenge dealing with incessant media questions about Zlatan Ibrahimović’s (a world-class player that officially retired from the national team in June 2016) possible selection in the squad. In his contact with the media, Janne attempted to exaggerate his displays of candor, and regardless of how often journalists asked about Ibrahimovic, he gave the same message. The heightened perception of pressure and media scrutiny and questioning about Ibrahimović came with a psychological load and energy loss for Janne. One consequence was a disruption to his candid value and self-care activities:

There has been a lot of work and talk to the media. I have put a lot of energy to deal with this Zlatan issue. I get tired of myself because I always have to answer. It has been a challenge to be as distinct as possible every time; to say the same thing and keep a cool head. As a result of these media distractions and a high workload I have lost my daily routine of exercising, which is too bad, and my values are challenged by the circumstances (Janne Andersson)
Despite these unexpected challenges, Janne was at pains to maintain the values-based foundation the support team had built. Importantly, Janne and the support team were keen to maintain their now embedded ways of working during the World Cup finals:

Now it is the World Cup, but it is the same thing. The process is the same. We will build things in the same way. If we have qualified for the World Cup because we have done things in a certain way, then of course we should try to develop things, but we should not make a mess. (Janne Andersson)

The consistency of the values-based working practices was a source of reassurance to several team members as the intensity of the World Cup approached, as illustrated by Tom:

As a result of the retention of our values and working practices within the leadership team, the team feel as though they know what to do … if we have some adversity, we should not do anything different, but we should continue on the course that we have embarked upon, regardless of what happens. It’s really important to stay true to our values. (Tom Prahl).

Community

A significant threat to the embedded working practices close to the World Cup finals was via the recruitment of another person to the team to support one of the team members who was showing signs of significant strain due to workload. The recruitment carried some risk regarding the disruption of team dynamics, but with the final decision based on the value of community (i.e., protecting the community’s ability to function) the appointment was a success. Not only did the new recruit facilitate a review of workload, but several of the team also reported experiencing more energy in light of mood changes and new skills in the team. In addition, the new team member worked well in collaboration with the existing team thereby enhancing efficiency:

Paul and Peter told me that it will take a lot of energy to be effective during the World Cup and that Paul has been tired. Then we decided that Paul should focus on physiology. Christoffer started during the spring and he had time and energy to put into performance analysis. His collaboration with the scouts was very good and he fitted into the team well. It added another dimension. (Janne Andersson)

Despite the personnel addition, the value system and ways of working of the group were relatively stable. On the eve of the World Cup finals, members of the support team described that “the energy level is at a very high level and the mood is good” (Roger Sandberg), and “It feels good. It feels like we have had a good approach. We have taken some breaks and been at home for a couple of days, instead of just grinding on all the time” (Daniel Ekvall). One of the team also highlighted the role of Jannes’s leadership in the sense of safety in the support team:

Janne has always had distinct values and leadership; we in the team have done our best as a collective team. We should be satisfied and proud and not bother too much what other people think. On this he [Janne] is quite strong and clear. He is good at finding the frames and what we can relate to. (Daniel Ekvall)

Despite this, it was apparent that some of the coworkers felt that they could continue to improve their work, which created some tension before the World Cup. For example, one of the coworkers reported that he felt anxious because “the work is never finished.”
Another coworker disclosed that he was experiencing anxiety and stress before matches and often worried whether he had done everything he could during match preparation.

**Humility**

At the World Cup preparation camp, Janne constantly pointed out to the members of the support team that their good working atmosphere was a competitive advantage. The coworkers reported that they were thriving in each other’s company, supported each other, and shared a collective sense of feeling energized by the positive team dynamic:

> I am fascinated by the collective power; we are all pulling in the same direction. It is so fun to work together. I am so happy and content that I will be with Janne and Peter for a lot of time in the weeks to come. (Maths Elfvendal)

They also spoke about the great openness and the proactive engagement in helping behaviors for each other’s work and development. For example, the sports psychologist led on an information-seeking session with the players regarding what the leaders could improve before the World Cup:

> The meeting with the players resulted in the development of ten points, outlining what the leaders could do better. I talked with the leaders about it. We have from the beginning of this journey talked about effective teams and the values we create in the leadership team. During the World Cup, we will remind each other of this. The leadership team will also have a checklist, have I done these things today? Should I do something else tomorrow? The opportunity exists to evaluate your own efforts. (Daniel Ekvall)

Another member of the support team noted their response to this feedback from the players:

> There has been no guarding of one’s special preserves in this group. Janne is the Head Coach but he has no prestige. He gets the coworkers to grow. Janne is amazing on those things. It is modern leadership. The day you think you know everything then it is over. It is fatal in this game. (Peter Wettergren)

**Interview session 6: “the value system held”**

**Candor**

As the Swedish team progressed to the quarter-final stage of the World Cup, and in doing so exceeding many pundits and fan expectations, Janne noted that “the value system held, even at the sharp end. The way of working and being in the team, everything held. Even when we made changes, the basics held, even at the World Cup” (Janne Andersson). Some of the support team also emphasized that the values-led leadership approach was valuable in competition noting that the team working process remained clear, collaborative, and without prestige during the World Cup, enhancing feelings of psychological safety:

> The leadership team had prepared a lot and thought-out things, so there were no quick decisions; we trusted our values and ways of working. It really paid off. Careful planning and preparation are very important and a key in this success – is there better confirmation that our method works? (Tom Prahl)
Community
During the World Cup, it became clear to Janne that his coworkers were self-sufficient and that they took a great deal of responsibility. He expressed it as a “fantastic football workshop,” where all members of the support team gave their utmost, and the values were fully integrated into working practice:

This was an amazing environment, such a fantastic football workshop. Everyone was so self-reliant and took a great deal of responsibility. When it was decided that we were going to meet Switzerland in the QF, we immediately started thinking about how we should play against them. This strategy started with clarity and preciseness in our roles and then it came together with an awesome, incomparable energy. (Janne Andersson)

The support team was heavily involved in decision-making during the World Cup and some perceived that their performance was strengthened by the sense of community this created:

I think our participation in decision making as a group increased. It was strong leadership to invite everyone into the decision-making. There was no doubt and Janne should have a great praise because he is very good at letting people talk and to make them feel involved. He has done brilliant work. (Tom Prahl)

Humility
Janne felt the support team had a safe and harmonious working environment, where individuals expressed their views with a low sense of threat:

There was never prestige or fear. We had a safe environment where people could think and talk, then develop. It happens automatically now. I have no problem praising someone who has done something good. It’s great and fun. We felt no threat from it. (Janne Andersson)

Reflecting on the team dynamic during the World Cup, Janne recalled positively his attempts to reinforce the value system among the support team:

The first day I said, “We should have a good time together”. It was an expression I used throughout. If we are good together, we can solve any problems. That start was very good and everything is easier when you win matches, but still forty-eight days and basically no catastrophes. The energy went in the right direction all the time. It was great to be together.

Some members of the support team expressed that there were “few conflicts during the World Cup because we had a good platform” to resolve these problems:

It was a strength that we could discuss things openly even though we had different opinions. We complemented each other and there was not a one-man show. If something happened, we always found a way forward. (Maths Elfvendal)

Similar sentiments were offered by another member of the team:

It was special because it was forty-eight days. Now we have the privilege of having single rooms. It is possible to train and to be alone, even though we had surprisingly few conflicts. I can’t remember any big thing. It is a sign that we had a good platform. (Daniel Ekvall)
The good accommodation with single rooms, opportunities for individual self-care (e.g., exercise, time alone from the team, and meeting other people) were positive for the teams’ well-being during the World Cup. This contributed to the coworkers being able to live a relatively normal life and did not feel isolated. Most of the support team experienced good physical and mental health during the World Cup, although some also mentioned that they gained weight and occasionally felt tired and experienced disrupted sleep. For those coworkers who had children, they missed them. For one of the coworkers who went away from the pre-camp on several occasions he felt the energy in the support team got worse each time he came back to the base in Gelendzhik:

I did not have the same working pressure at all and could work out, but it is obvious that it feels after a few weeks. You get a little tired and just keep on working. For me I noticed that there was a lack of energy every time I came back to the leadership team. You notice that leaders and players get tired and that they are affected by the fact that it is a long tournament. It is a challenge to constantly find new energy, but I cannot say that we had a wrong approach. (Roger Sandberg)

Janne reflected at this time, “the World Cup took all my power, because it was a high workload for a long time where I constantly needed to be on top and make many different decisions” (Janne Andersson). Another team member reported how he suddenly became fully aware of his exhaustion after the last match when called home to his partner:

I “flip” in my head and so I am in my performance mode. Nothing else matters. I was convinced that we had every chance to win the World Cup. It was my only focus. It was tough after the England match. Then I called my partner and just cried. Then I was “out of the bubble”. I was so focused on performing, but when we lost I broke down. (Maths Elfvendal)

Some of the support team also described that they slept a lot in the first few days they were at home and that “powernaps” were frequently taken in the middle of the day. Another aspect was that many of the coworkers struggled with getting back to everyday self-care activities and daily routines, such as work out and eating healthy food, and felt a sense of emptiness on their return from the World Cup. One of the team expressed feelings of restlessness and confusion:

There was an emptiness that I almost panicked when I arrived in Stockholm. I felt that something had to happen. It had been so much for a long time and suddenly it was just quiet. I knew exactly what to do during the World Cup, and when I got home I felt restless. After a week it was back to normal again. (Peter Wettergren)

Discussion

This study presents a novel case study conducted over 21-months before and after the 2018 FIFA World Cup at which the Swedish national men’s football team significantly surpassed their performance expectations. The main aim of the study was to understand how the Head Coach, Janne Andersson recruited and developed his support team, how they developed as a “team behind the team,” and how this influenced the dynamics within the staff team with relevance to their own performance and that of the on-field team. The results presented provide evidence that the values held by the Head Coach
were central to his recruitment and attempts to influence the values and behavior of the support team. Moreover, there was some evidence that these efforts were successful, and with members of the team reporting that they adopted and embedded these values team before, and during, the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Importantly, the participants consistently reported that their experience of the processes and behaviors aligned to these values remained embedded and effective for performance throughout the tournament. Moreover, support team members perceived these values to be central to the working practices and success of the team at the World Cup. In this way, the value system articulated and modeled by the Head Coach offered a means of influencing behaviors without the need for the implementation of overly formal structures, systems, strategies, or control mechanisms by the Head Coach. Indeed, the values also provided a means of leading and influencing the social environment and working practices of the team behind the team in the desired way. As such, this values-based approach was identified by the participants as playing an important role in the lives of the support team. Regularly, the participants reported being able to recognize, understand and articulate the collective values system the Head Coach hoped to embed and that this became critical in decision-making and working practices. Importantly, these principles and practices were also reported to have been adopted by some members of the team and these continued during a period of intense public and media scrutiny before and during the World Cup finals competition.

This study offers important contributions to knowledge, particularly to the literature on values and the development of the support teams in elite sport, although offering insight into the preparations of an elite sports team preparing for and performing at a major competition. To elaborate, this work provides a rich insight over nearly two years into the work undertaken by a national football Head Coach when building his support team to qualify for and perform at a major competition. The approach adopted by the Head Coach characterized an explicit and consistently articulated value system that he hoped his support team would adopt within their work. The data can be interpreted to indicate that these efforts were successful in terms of embedding ways of working based on the values of candor, humility, and a sense of community. The benefit of “a culture of candor” has been proposed to have performance benefits in non-sport contexts (e.g., O'Toole & Bennis, 2009), although openness within the coach-athlete relationship has been found to be an important strategy for maintaining relationships in sport contexts (Rhind & Jowett, 2012). We note that the value of “candor” held by Andersson was also often characterized alongside a desire for “order.” Clearly, the behavioral and contextual experience of this desire may have influenced the climate within the team. Our sense was that Andersson promoted relatively formal social structures, but also enabled the team to shape the interplay between each other as equal stakeholders within the team and that this allowed them to flourish within this formal structure.

This work may also provide valuable insights for other types of senior leaders within sports organizations as they seek to recruit and develop their support teams, although also offering some indirect contributions to leadership literature. Although the values espoused by Janne in the present case may not align with other leaders, the case might offer resonance in terms of the factors that appeared to benefit Janne regarding the prominence of his values in driving recruitment, working practices, role modeling...
behaviors, and decision-making. In terms of locating this work within the existing literature, this study offers the first insight into the development of a support team and therefore substantially advances the hitherto insightful work conducted examining organizational stressors (Arnold et al., 2019; Larner et al., 2017) how members of such teams respond or how they experience organizational change (Wagstaff et al., 2015, 2016) and precarity (Gilmore et al., 2018). Specifically, the value of candor might benefit in elite sports contexts that are typically characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, and which so often leave members of the “team behind the team” experiencing precarity (see Bentzen et al., 2020; Gilmore et al., 2018). In addition to candor, the adoption of working practices and behavioral norms characterized by humility appeared to strengthen interpersonal relationships within the team although promoting psychological safety and information sharing. Such observations are consistent with research on humble leadership (e.g., Wang et al., 2018). For example, using a time-lagged questionnaire approach, Wang et al. found psychological safety to mediate the relationship between humble leadership and follower creativity; knowledge sharing moderated the relationship between psychological safety and follower creativity; and that the indirect influence of humble leadership on follower creativity through psychological safety is stronger when knowledge sharing was high (Fransen et al., 2020). In terms of the contribution to the literature in terms of the important role of community observed in the present study, this offers support for both shared leadership and social identity approaches to leadership in performance domains (see Reicher et al., 2005). To elaborate, the present findings support social identity approaches by highlighting the way in which a shared sense of identity made the Head Coach’s leadership possible and the way in which the Head Coach also acted as a role model for the values system that facilitated this identity, which in turn, made his leadership approach viable. In this manner, the Head Coach and the support team were interdependent, actively relying on each other to create the conditions under which mutual influence was possible (cf. Reicher et al.).

Several critical moments over the course of the data collection period are included in this case study that exemplifies how the support team’s emerging value system was embedded and challenged especially in the late preparations for and performed at the World Cup. Specifically, the values-led approach adopted by the Head Coach was central to the decision-making relating to both initial and subsequent recruitment to the support team, in the arrangements and structure for team sessions during camps, and the role clarification intervention that refined the ways of working and responsibilities of team members. Moreover, during the weeks before and during the World Cup, when both the Head Coach and team experienced an increase in stressors, the team faced threats to the value system, yet maintained their ways of working. Indeed, the low levels of conflict and positive sense of community were notable across the team during this challenging time. This collective sense of unity and identity, characterized by a valued-based, shared leadership approach enabled members to lead when their experience and expertise were required and step back for others to lead as the demands of the situation dictated. We believe this approach, combined with suitable challenge and information sharing in combination with clarity and consistency of vision from the Head Coach helped to establish mutually-agreeable ways of working for the support team that was stress-tested by the time they traveled to the World Cup finals.
It is important to note that despite the overwhelmingly positive experience and performance of the support team, for many of the participants there was a personal cost associated with the team’s work at the World Cup. The stressors (e.g., media attention and national expectation) are commonly reported within the literature (see Arnold et al., 2019), although the disruption of self-care activities during the tournament and emotional disturbance on return home may be comparable to the post-Olympic blues experienced by athletes (cf. Howells & Lucassen, 2018). That the values system and ways of working developed by the team continued during the tournament is positive, the development of plans and strategies for maintenance of self-care activities during major competitions offers an interesting area for future research.

There are several perceived strengths associated with the present study. First, the extensive data collection with senior leaders and support staff within a national football team over nearly two years and including the FIFA World Cup is exceptionally rare, because such populations and contexts are typically closed to researchers. Moreover, the novel insights from the participants regarding the changing nature of their team’s functioning over time also offer key insights that might resonate and offer valuable opportunities for knowledge translation to other high-performance contexts. Despite these perceived strengths, like any study, this work has limitations. Indeed, given the nascence of the support team literature in sports science, locating this work has been a challenge. We have alluded to aspects of organizational sport psychology (Wagstaff, 2019), leadership (Arthur et al., 2016), whereas numerous foundations might have been drawn on. Indeed, it is possible that team dynamics (e.g., Martin et al., 2016) or organizational culture (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) could have been alternative conceptual lenses for this work. A second limitation we would like to offer relates to our use of the terms support team and the “team behind the team” which we have used interchangeably here. We are fond of neither term given their obfuscation, informality, and unhelpful separation from what is commonly referred to as the “performance team” (i.e., athletes, or in some instances, coaches and athletes). Nevertheless, we felt that the use of “science and medicine support team,” “leadership team,” and “management team” (the labels participants used in their native language) were not representative given the present sample incorporated members from all three of these stakeholder groups. It is perhaps for others to settle on a consistent label, but also to explicitly detail the roles and responsibilities that their sample undertakes to ensure transparency. Indeed, further clarification of the composition, status, and structure of the team(s) within the team will help to better understand the performance, well-being, and interconnectedness of the variety of “performers” within elite sports environments.

**Applied implications**

One of the main challenges with applying these data to other contexts relates to the challenges—and viability—of implementing an apparently homogenous values system within a sports organization. That is, although the present data are interpreted to indicate the value of candor, humility, and community when adopted and embedded within the working practices of the Swedish support team this may not reflect a comprehensive adoption of these values at the individual level. It would be uncommon if there were no
competing, conflicting, and shifting values among the support team within any sports organization. As such, it may be that the apparent appreciation of values observed in this study appears to be a consequence of a complex interaction of the various steps taken by the Head Coach across recruitment, norm development, and reflection, subtle refinement, and the ongoing development of ways to communicate and emphasize a limited number of explicit values. Furthermore, the significant length of time the team had together enabled them to “stress test” these values and ways of working.

Given the case study approach adopted here and the unique and complex nature of the context, we advise against replication of the values articulated in this study. Instead, we offer this case as an example for reflection, discussion, and planning for psychologists and coaches. In this case, members of the team united around a shared set of values, developing a flexible, non-hierarchical, and non-bureaucratic approach, devoid of prestige and characterized by prosocial behaviors and psychological safety, with an enhanced capacity for collective action. It is plausible that whilst these ends may be witnessed in other contexts, the processes by which this might be achieved will ultimately be influenced by complex and changeable interactions of culture, personnel, and context.

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