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Starting a Conversation about Vulnerability in Elite Sport

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ABSTRACT
Psychological strengths are idealized in elite sport and contribute to the presence of stigma surrounding mental health issues and a high threshold for help-seeking behavior. Recently, scholars have argued that the concept of vulnerability has the potential to challenge the dominance of the performance narrative in sport. In this article, we provide practitioners with innovative poem and word cloud resources based on insights from high-performance coaches to enable conversations about vulnerability in sport. We hope practitioners will use these resources to stimulate reflection and dialogue about vulnerability, which may lower thresholds for help-seeking and foster sustainability in sport organizations.

The context of elite sport is often described as highly demanding and occupied by individuals consistently striving for performance outcomes and willingness to pay a high price. This striving toward success is not limited to athletes, it includes a range of stakeholders, coaches, and the entourage of support staff and others. A contributing factor to this pursuit is the dominance of what has been labeled a ‘performance narrative’ (see Douglas & Carless, 2009), which is characterized by the pursuit of performance outcomes in lieu of attention to, and care for, non-sport related aspects of life, or one’s other identities and needs. The archetypical “story” of the successful performer is one characterized by a singular focus on performance, overcoming challenges by working harder than others, and the espousal of attitudes that perpetuate the idealizing of toughness and resilience. On the surface, and from a linguistic perspective, the opposite of psychological strength might be vulnerability; certainly, terms like vulnerability and weakness are given little space to breathe in sporting success stories, unless of course, they are part of a character arc of success, wherein vulnerability is overcome by strength. Interestingly, vulnerability and psychological strength as interdependent concepts have been associated...
with the process of building resilience in sport settings, which is implicitly
underpinned by narratives of vulnerability (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Yet,
limited attention has been given to narratives of vulnerability in high-per-
formance sport; what they entail, and how they are experienced.

Recently, Hägglund et al. (2019) argued that working in high-performance
sport is synonymous with exposing one-self to vulnerability given that the
word vulnerability is defined as “the quality or state of being exposed to
the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally”
(Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). That is, for those operating in elite sport
it is common to experience feelings associated with fear of failure, risk,
harm, shame, uncertainty, emotional, and physical exposure. Moreover,
Hägglund and colleagues distinguished being vulnerable from the experience
of vulnerability and focused on the latter. In doing so, they defined vulner-
ability in relation to experience of vulnerability in sport as:

The ability to accept and connect with all of one's own feelings with compassion.
This builds self-awareness and the courage to uncover and know one's shortcomings
and weaknesses as well as the possibility to develop strengths and resources. Second,
it is having the courage and capacity to share experiences, seek support, and knowing
when to share, with whom, and to what extent. (p. 224)

The absence of narratives of the experience of vulnerability has resulted
in a cultural landscape with existing stigma surrounding mental health issues,
a high threshold for help-seeking behavior, and a low sense of psychological
safety in elite sport systems (see Hägglund et al., 2019; Vella et al., 2022). To
illustrate, Michael Phelps, winner of 28 Olympic medals stated:

For the longest time, I thought asking for help was a sign of weakness because
that's kind of what society teaches us. That's especially true from an athlete's per-
pective. If we ask for help, then we're not this big macho athlete that people can
look up to. (USA Today Sports, 2017).

Hägglund et al.’s definition of vulnerability reinforces the importance for
individuals to show courage to accept their shortcomings, imperfections, and
human mortality. That is, the authors encouraged a perspective on vulner-
ability wherein individuals accept their ultimate vulnerability as a human
being while simultaneously recognizing the value of self-awareness, self-com-
passion, and help-seeking behaviors. Hence, addressing vulnerability more
comprehensively in sport might offer a potential antidote to the dominant
performance narratives by fostering more diverse cultures where self-com-
passion is valued. For example, self-compassion entails being aware of emo-
tions and developing kindness and a supportive attitude toward oneself and
is characterized by three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and
mindfulness (Neff, 2003). From a sport perspective, the components of
self-compassion which support well-being might include giving one-self
enough kindness and forgiveness (i.e., self-kindness), recognizing that all
individuals encounter challenges and feel vulnerable at times in their (sporting-) life (i.e., common humanity), and being able to move forward in a balanced way after facing adversity (i.e., mindfulness). In contrast, individuals in sport have reported a fear of becoming “soft”, “mediocre”, or not achieving their goals as obstacles to treating oneself in a self-compassionate way (see, for a review of self-compassion in sport, Cormier et al., 2023). Such perceptions are likely influenced by the dominance of a performance narrative in elite sport environments, where hyper-masculinity, a lack of help-seeking, and the idealizing of toughness are likely to prevail. It follows that practitioners attempting to start conversations about vulnerability may be met with resistance from clients who perceive the idea of experiencing vulnerability a challenge in their context. Consequently, the development of resources that support practitioners to start these conversations might be fundamental to overcoming these challenges. In the following sections we present how and why we’ve developed resources to support such conversations.

Seeking creative ways to start a conversation about vulnerability in sport

We have developed four resources based on our shared professional experience of elite sport contexts and academia. Specifically, as authors, we collectively have over 75 years of experience working in sport organizations in diverse roles, including as an elite athlete, national team coach, and researcher (Author 1), and as scientist-practitioners, coach-developers, and lead psychological consultants to individuals, teams, and organizations in professional and Olympic-based sports (Authors 2, 3, and 4). In these pursuits, we have incorporated creative practice into our own work and overseen programs of performance and mental health service delivery in high-performance communities using such methods. These resources have also been developed within our work on a program of research and practice dedicated to promoting sustainable career for high-performance coaches (HPCs; see Hägglund et al., 2019; 2022).

In our applied research we have noticed how several HPCs reflected about the complex meaning of “vulnerability” within our work with them. In response, and to better understand this term, we invited HPCs to share their personal definition of vulnerability and to explore their views on vulnerability in focus-groups. Importantly, participating in these focus-groups created a psychologically safe space for HPCs to share their narratives of their personal vulnerabilities, which also enhanced their help-seeking behavior (Hägglund et al., 2019; 2022).

Our intention was to develop resources based on the knowledge coming from these practice conversations, knowledge that was translated by practitioners, for practitioners to use. Voices from within high-performance coaching
are rarely presented within the academic literature and developing resources directly from HPC's personal definitions of vulnerability has novelty. To help the reader, we have described the process undertaken to provide both clarity in how we developed the resources, but also in the hope that others might lean to this process for similar endeavors. In total, 36 written definitions of vulnerability were gathered from HPCs between 2017 and 2021 (17 women, 19 men; all Caucasian of multiple nationalities, working in Swedish elite sport) after these individuals had completed a brief mindful self-reflection intervention. To elicit the definitions, the HPCs were simply asked to write down their personal definition of vulnerability. The responses varied in length from one word to a couple of sentences, and some individuals included personal narratives of vulnerability. We noticed that the definitions reflected two contrasting perspectives which became the foundation for the proposed resources: (1) Vulnerability as a sense of being fragile, and; (2) Vulnerability as a sense of being human. We decided to use two creative ways of presenting these perspectives of vulnerability. First, we selected all the definitions that represented each of the perspectives and entered all the keywords defining vulnerability into a word cloud generator to create two frequency-based visualization of words used by HPCs for each perspective of vulnerability (i.e., the more mentioned a word was the larger it became in the visualization). The first author constructed the word clouds using worditout.com, see Figures 1 and 2. Second, two poems were written in a creative composition exclusively using the words from the definitions provided by the HPCs. The poems were also constructed by the first author and were revised after discussing with second and third authors. Minor changes of words were made to ensure that meaning wasn’t lost in translation from the original Swedish to English.

Our aim here was to develop resources that might help and support practitioners in sport to start conversations about vulnerability as an attempt to initiate positive change. We believe such conversations may support self-compassion, psychological safety, help-seeking behavior, and sustainability in the profession. The resources developed here reflect a form of creative analytical practice (CAP; Richardson, 1999), which is a research term used for different forms of representation in qualitative research. CAP is used instead of more traditional ways of presenting information to evoke curiosity and resonance and thereafter stimulate dialogue and analysis.

The use of poems as a powerful way to communicate personal experiences to non-academic audiences and to stimulate reflection among readers has been argued for many years (see Sparkes, 2020; Sparkes et al., 2003). To elaborate, Sparkes et al. noted, poetic representations have “the power to touch us where we live, in our bodies, allowing us to step into the shoes of other and make connections” (p. 169). Indeed, some notable examples of the use of poetic representation in sport offer support for the applied impact of such resources. For example, poems have been used to raise peer and system awareness of golfer motivation (Sparkes & Douglas, 2007) and
illuminated factors relevant for successfully coaching para-athletes (Culver & Werthner, 2018). Hence, the use of poetic representation has merit in sport and appear to have utility for stimulating reflection, discourse, and action relating to sensitive and challenging topics which may otherwise be difficult to discuss with others in sport. Given the promising use of poetic representations within sport we believe that the use of poems and similar creative media in applied settings might enable practitioners to support meaningful conversations in sport organizations. Indeed, resources developed through CAP may allow people to start conversations on vulnerability in a psychologically safe way, allowing people to “open up” to such conversations, and increasing the richness of reflection and dialogue. That the resources originate from work with high-performance coaches may spark curiosity among readers to engage with this topic further. Nevertheless, we anticipate that various responses and interpretations might result from reading the word clouds and poems and these might be best teased out through discussion of the meaning one takes from those resources as well as one’s private experiences of vulnerability. Importantly, it is not our intention to impose meaning or how they should be interpreted. Yet, we do outline how these word clouds and poems might be used in a two-stage process for starting conversations about vulnerability, they could also be used as stand-alone resources in coaching, therapeutic, or pedagogic scenarios.

**Resources for starting a conversation about vulnerability**

**Vulnerability as a sense of being fragile**

![Figure 1. Word cloud: vulnerability as a sense of being fragile (See supplementary files to download the word clouds and poems as separate resources).](image-url)
**Weakness**
Vulnerability you say …? That would be lowering my guard, to ask for help, show a weak spot.
You see, I want to be able to do it all. Never ask for help. The whole thing about receiving help makes me feel weak. Fragile. Awakes fear,

- of not being respected,
- of doing it wrong,
- of not being good enough.

Vulnerability you ask …? I fake it, say that all is good even if I don’t feel that way. Don’t want to show, when I’m fragile …
uncertain,

- when I can’t do it,
- when someone close to me is hurting,
- when I cannot help,
- when I feel pain and hurt, inside.

You know, it’s dark even though the sun shines. [I guess I could] ask for help when I am not enough, admit my weaknesses.
Vulnerability you say …? More difficult to explain than I thought.

**Vulnerability as a sense of being human**

![Word cloud: vulnerability as a sense of being human](image)

Figure 2. Word cloud: vulnerability as a sense of being human.

**To be human**
Vital, that’s what vulnerability is to me.
Allowing myself to feel,
being honest to myself about who I am, how I'm feeling.
Inviting my close ones into my core. Being authentic.
To put it simply, to be human, that's vulnerability.
We all have flaws, but also strengths, nobody is perfect, I'm at peace with that.
When I show my vulnerability, speak of my concerns, I sometimes feel uncomfortable,
yeah, it's difficult at times to follow through.
But, I've noticed,
it is often received positively, with compassion,
connection with others becomes deeper. Authentic.
I grow inside.
When I show my vulnerability,
        I feel brave and strong,
become stronger and wiser,
        I can handle failure, pain and suffering,
        I learn from it.
The way I see it, being vulnerable is simply the core of being human.
Daring to be authentic.

**Using the vulnerability resources to start a conversation**

The resources presented above could be used as part of a two-step exercise or independently by practitioners working with HPCs, but also other stakeholder groups in sport (e.g., athletes). The two-step process might provide an opportunity to gradually build reflection and dialogue richness, but it is for the reader to explore and determine their most suitable use in their own context. The following narrative gives an indicative process for the use of the resources and reflects the authors’ experience of drawing on creative resources (e.g., poems, metaphors, literature, music, film and television, theater, art, and role-play) when working with clients on challenging or sensitive topics in the context of elite sport.

**Step one**

*First, pay attention to the first word cloud labeled “Vulnerability as a sense of being fragile”. Try to be curious to the meaning of the words and open up to experiencing what you are reading. Read slowly, try to notice each word with full attention. When you feel ready, read the second word cloud, labeled “Vulnerability as a sense of being human”.*

*Now you have read both word clouds, pause for a moment. Try to make sense of the words you’ve read; Which words stand out to you? What do you notice about these words? What immediate interpretations do you take from what you notice? Try to construct a sense of an image or story for each of the word clouds based on the words that resonate for you; make this personal and integrate your life beyond sport.*
Step two

Please take a moment to direct your attention to the first poem labeled “weakness”. Before you start reading, we would like you to do two things. At first, think of a situation in which you are facing some moderately challenging circumstances (ideally a current or recent challenge). Now, picture that you are reading this poem as a response to this current challenge. Read the first poem. Pay attention to the thoughts, emotions, sensations you experience and behaviors that you feel prompted to do. Try to explore these with an open and curious mind.

Now try to put aside or ‘letting-go’ of the first poem and your experiences of reading it. Now shift focus to the second poem labeled “to be human”. Before reading, you might picture yourself or a person that is close to you—someone who means a lot to you. First, picture that you or they are struggling with a challenge that triggers uncomfortable thoughts or feelings similar to the previous exercise. Like before, when reading this poem, picture it as a response to this current challenge, but also pause and pay attention to your thoughts, emotions, sensations, and behaviors that you feel prompted to do. Try to explore these with an open and curious mind.

What are your reflections on the two poems? What version of you do they inspire? If you can, discuss the extent to which the poems trigger a meaningful perspective on vulnerability. What new perspectives do these resources offer? To what extent do these resources trigger thoughts of empathy or self-compassion? Do they allow you to learn something from them? Do they resonate with your experience, affect you emotionally and/or intellectually? Do they invite dialogue and reflection by raising awareness of vulnerability? Do you get in touch with the most important relationship, the one with yourself?

What you might notice when starting a conversation about vulnerability

While we are reluctant to direct the reader on how to interpret the vulnerability resources presented in the previous section, we wish to share with the reader what we noticed, as authors when developing them. When we were developing the “vulnerability as a sense of being fragile” word cloud and “weakness” poem we noticed that, for some HPCs, vulnerability is associated with mental weakness. We noticed themes of darkness, fragility, isolation, and avoidance in their words. These themes reflect a side of sport culture characterized by many researchers. For instance, Hughes and Coakley (1991), highlighted that individuals over-conforming to the sport ethic and associated norms often did so by avoiding showing vulnerability, simply “persevere until goals are achieved” and “pay the price” (p. 308), while and at the same time displaying “coolness” (p. 309). Moreover, these themes are
also illustrative of the dominance of the performance narrative in sport (see Douglas & Carless, 2009), and are likely associated with reduced psychological safety, the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, and high thresholds for help-seeking in elite sport (Olusoga et al., 2019). Those using these resources might consider the interplay between these themes within “vulnerability as a sense of being fragile” world cloud and “weakness” poem and the context the individuals operate in.

In contrast, when developing the “vulnerability as a sense of being human” world cloud and “being human” poem, we noticed the themes of authenticity, courage, freedom, empowerment, and openness. We also noticed that the “being human” poem offers individuals a template to conceive vulnerability as a universal aspect of the human condition. This perspective on vulnerability reflects the central tenets of theories of self-compassion, particularly those aspects relating to common humanity, (i.e., the recognition that it is human to experience vulnerability and a pathway to authenticity, motivation, and connectedness; see Neff, 2003). Although such a pathway is potentially insightful, we encourage readers to be open to many perspectives on vulnerability and how individuals may or may not connect with it in reference to sport.

What you might consider when starting a conversation about vulnerability

The personal definitions of vulnerability collected and creatively presented here can be used to make sense of the complexity of life for individuals in contexts dominated by the performance narrative (cf. Frank, 2010). Given others have argued that CAP narratives can be a powerful stimulus for change (Cavallerio, 2021), particularly with coaches on issues of mental health (Potrac et al., 2013), one forum in which our resources could be used is in psychoeducation or mental health literacy programs for sport organizations (Gorczynski et al., 2021). Nevertheless, we offer two considerations for the current use and potential future of these resources. First, these resources were developed from definitions from a group of coaches working within a single European country and will have been influenced by intersectional cultural factors (e.g., role in sport, nationality, ethnicity, and gender). As such, seeking different voices allow for the development of further resources that add layers to the experience of vulnerability. Second, we believe these resources are not limited to use with coaches and hope that they may be used with other stakeholder groups in sport (e.g., athletes and their family, agents, entourage). Yet, we do encourage practitioners to consider the readiness of their clients and use culturally humility and contextually awareness in their approach to conversations about vulnerability.
Conclusion

In this article we aimed to promote the use of creative ways to start conversations about vulnerability among, but not limited to, high-performance coaches. We do not claim that our examples are the only way to do this and do not intend to over-prescribe how they might be used. The word clouds and poems presented here used the original words of high-performance coaches working in elite sport and have been translated by us, the authors, who have experience of both practice and applied research within elite sport. The HPCs’ words offer a rare insight to coaches’ perceptions and experiences of vulnerability, and we have interpreted these insights as reflecting two sides of vulnerability, both of which have value for raising awareness of the challenges individuals face in elite sport. We hope the resources developed here can be used to stimulate reflection and dialogue to challenge the dominance of performance narratives, which could promote a compassionate and humane experience of vulnerability, lower thresholds for help-seeking, and foster sustainability in sport organizations.

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