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**Exploring interpretations and implications of coaches' use of humour
in three national Paralympic teams**

September 17, 2024

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore interpretations and implications of head coaches' use of humour in three national Paralympic teams from the perspective of athletes and integrated support staff. We conducted six focus groups with 19 Paralympic athletes and individual interviews with 10 support staff members across the teams. Our reflexive thematic analysis resulted in two overarching themes that helped us understand how humour influenced feelings of psychological safety in the team environment, as well as considerations or challenges with using humour as a coaching strategy, including miscommunication or misunderstanding. Relational awareness, emotional intelligence, and effective communication were identified as important coaching competencies to consider when implementing humour as a leadership behaviour, particularly in an environment where power differentials of status and disability were present. The study was among the first to explore interpretations and implications of humour as a coaching strategy from athletes and staff in the high-performance parasport context. Coaches that implement humour within their environments are encouraged to reflect on the receivers of the interaction and how to maximize the facilitative rather than debilitating functions of humor as a "double-edged sword" to ultimately promote team satisfaction, well-being, and success.

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Paralympic teams

Coaches in high-performance sport environments have the potential to foster a positive team environment depending on their coaching behaviours, strategies, and core values (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Vallée & Bloom, 2016). Many coaches incorporate the intention of having fun as part of their coaching philosophy, including at the high-performance level, where there are increased levels of pressure, incentives, and stress (Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016). For example, four-time NBA champion Golden State Warriors head coach, Steve Kerr, described his four core coaching values as mindfulness, compassion, competition, and joy. When discussing joy, Kerr explained how “it’s meant to be fun” and emphasized the importance of finding the joy amongst the intensity that sport requires (The Daily Coach, 2023). In a similar way, Britain Paralympic head coach Paula Dunn, explained her intention of creating a fun, but purposeful, environment in track and field: “I want us to have a clear direction of where we’re going and how we want to work, but this is supposed to be fun... It’s sport – we’ve got to enjoy it. Yes, it’s serious. Yes, it’s hard, but, ultimately, we came into this because of a love of the sport.” (Portch, 2023). One strategy that coaches can use to create a positive and enjoyable environment for their team is implementing humour.

Humour has been defined as a form of verbal or nonverbal communication, such as jokes, puns, pranks, and irony, often expressed within pre-existing social relationships with the capacity to serve a variety of functions (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012; Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014). In sport, humour can be adopted by both coaches and athletes and offer facilitative outcomes within the environment, such as relieving stress in a highly pressurized environment (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014), helping athletes move forward after making mistakes in training (Banas et

al., 2019), creating a motivational learning climate (Morgan, 2017), developing a sense of belonging and team identity (Høigaard et al., 2017), creating strong coach-athlete relationships (Corkery & Fletcher, 2023), as well as diffusing conflict within the team (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). With the understanding that humour is a social phenomenon, however, it is not guaranteed to lead to positive outcomes, and is largely dependent on the way humour is interpreted (e.g., see the term *humour appreciation*; Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). For instance, if a coach tells a joke prior to his/her athletes' competition in pursuit of reducing tension and stress, one athlete may appreciate their coaches' understanding of their emotional needs, however another athlete may interpret this same joke as inappropriate. In this way, a poorly delivered or insensitive joke (e.g., poking fun at one athlete in hopes of getting the team to laugh) may lead an athlete to feel invalidated, isolated, distressed, or uncertain of how to respond. Due to the contrasting and varied implications associated with humour regarding interpretation and appreciation, humour has been labelled as a "double-edged sword" (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014; Rogerson-Revell, 2007), capable of eliciting either positive or negative outcomes depending on appropriateness, delivery, and reception.

Despite the potential for impacting both individual and team functioning, there has been little empirical attention placed on humour as a coaching strategy in sport. Among the few studies to adopt this focus, Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014) conducted individual interviews with six Scandinavian elite sport coaches from a variety of sports, including football, handball, swimming, and rowing, to better understand the use of humour in their coaching practices. All coaches identified humour as being highly relevant within their coaching. The positive outcomes of humour were considered a counterbalance to the seriousness and intensity of elite athlete lives, creating an enjoyable atmosphere by "lightening the hard work and making it more

bearable over time” (p. 38). The coaches did, however, identify humour as a “balancing act” in which coaches needed to be aware of when to be serious and when to have fun, and to be authentic in their interactions. In another study, Edwards and Jones (2018) investigated the use and manifestation of humour within power exchanges amongst coaches and athletes in a semi-professional football club in the United Kingdom. Adopting an ethnographic approach, the researchers utilized observations, field notes, and ethnographic films over a 10-month season. In many cases, it was found that humour was used as a method of inclusion where teasing, non-threatening comments, or banter (i.e., poking fun at one another) were used in a caring or friendly way that created a sense of belonging within the group. In addition, disciplinary uses of humour were identified by the coaches, such as “quirky comments related to poor performance or appearance” (p. 755), that allowed for a light-hearted means of keeping athletes adhering to coaching expectations. Taken together, humour appears to be an evident strategy in high-performance sport coaching, used for a variety of functions (e.g., relieving stress in training and competition, reducing power differentials, creating a sense of belonging, enforcing team norms), however it remains an understudied phenomenon in sport coaching literature.

One sport context where humour may be particularly beneficial is the high-performance parasport setting. Similar to the high-performance able-bodied context, athletes are juggling multiple demands of training load, travelling to competitions, and personal commitments (e.g., sport-life balance), however athletes with disabilities may encounter additional challenges or barriers associated with their disability (Martin & Whalen, 2014). For example, athletes with physical disabilities may face challenges travelling to and from competitions, including fatigue, increased recovery time, or enhanced pain, which can have a psychological impact on their mental health and well-being (Bentzen et al., 2022). Thus, parasport coaches have to be

particularly cognizant of the impact of training intensity and the implications for rest and recovery on a psychological and physical level (Alexander et al., 2022). The parasport coaching literature has uncovered a number of coaching strategies that have been deemed effective in the high-performance parasport context, including fostering autonomy (Cheon et al., 2015), promoting independence (Tawse et al., 2012), being aware of equipment-related concerns (Pomerleau-Fontaine et al., 2023), as well as enhancing team cohesion (Falcão et al., 2015). Although the parasport coaching literature has grown exponentially over the last 10 years, the field remains in its infancy with regard to what is known about effective coaching in this setting (Bentzen et al., 2021). Despite the potential for enhancing individual and group functioning in other sport contexts, there has yet to be an empirical exploration of humour as a coaching strategy in the parasport context.

Purpose of the Study

This study was part of a larger cross-cultural project with the overall aim of exploring effective head coaching strategies towards the management of three national Paralympic teams (Author et al., xxx). This paper reports on the interpretations and implications of coaches' use of humour in three national Paralympic team environments from the perspectives of Paralympic athletes and their integrated support staff. The main research questions guiding this study were: (1) How was the coaches' use of humour interpreted by athletes and integrated support staff members? and (2) In what ways (if any) did the coaches' use of humour influence individual experiences and/or group dynamics on the team?

Methods

Philosophical Assumptions

We approached our study using an interpretivist lens, guided by a relativist ontology and a subjective/transactional epistemology (Poucher et al., 2020). A relativist ontology states that multiple realities exist, and thus, we were interested in understanding the interpretations and implications of coaches' use of humour through the lens of lived experiences from varying individuals and roles within the team. We were not interested in identifying a "single truth" for how humour *should* be interpreted or how coaches *ought* to conduct their practices. However, we wanted to explore diverse views and interpretations of humour and how it had the potential to influence individual and team dynamics in the high-performance setting. A subjective/transactional epistemology outlines that the construction of knowledge is co-created between researchers and participants, and therefore, we also viewed our data to be generated through the intersecting identities, experiences, and beliefs of ourselves as the research team. The first author is a female postdoctoral fellow with experience researching intersectional identities in sport, such as gender and disability. The second author is a female Associate Professor in sport psychology with research interests in adapted physical activity, elite sport contexts, and psychological well-being. The third author has extensive experience within high-performance parasport, including building and leading the sport psychology staff at the Paralympics in London 2012 and working on-site at the Paralympics in Sochi 2014. The fourth author is a male professor who has developed a research program related to the knowledge, strategies, and behaviours employed by parasport coaches. All authors self-identify as able-bodied. Based on our philosophical assumptions, we encourage readers to note that these are simply one way of interpreting the findings and to have their own reflective eye when engaging with the findings of our paper.

Study Design and Participants

Following ethical approval at the lead researcher's institution, we sought to recruit three teams from North America and Europe that met the following eligibility criteria: (1) summer Paralympic team (due to timing of data collection during the winter), (2) co-acting sport (i.e., an individual sport where athletes train and compete within a team environment), and (3) teams of approximately similar sizes of athletes and integrated support staff members. We began by reaching out to head coaches of eligible teams through professional contacts of the research team and met on Microsoft Teams to outline the purpose and procedures of the study. All three teams were interested and enthusiastic about participating, and therefore, we moved forward by setting dates for the lead researcher to physically enter the training environments for informal observations (3-5 days with each team) with the aim of building rapport with the team. Overall, we had 10 members of the support team and 19 athletes volunteer to participate in the study (over 80% of each of the teams participating).

Although we made a concerted effort to limit team demographics for confidentiality, we can say that our teams were successful on the international circuit earning a combined 24 medals at the Tokyo and Rio Paralympic Games as well as experience at World Championships, Commonwealth Games, and Parapan Am Games. Coaches had an average of 15 years as head coach of their national teams at the time of data collection. From the data collection that took place for the larger project, we identified that each of the coaches intentionally used humour within their practices (e.g., writing jokes on training plans, pulling pranks) and two of the teams incorporated "joy" or "fun" as their team's core values. Thus, in this study we focused specifically on how the support staff members and athletes interpreted humour as a coaching strategy. The integrated support staff that participated in our study consisted of varying members on each team dependent on who was present or influential in the daily training environment,

including assistant coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, mental performance consultants, sport physiotherapists, physiologists, and high-performance managers. Finally, the athletes were diverse in their demographics regarding gender, classifications, disability types, and ages, with some athletes being as young as 18 and others over 40, some athletes with physical disabilities, such as spinal cord injuries competing in wheelchairs, and others with neurological disabilities, such as cerebral palsy competing in standing classifications. Each of the teams and members were bilingual and were purposely chosen based on their ability to speak English, the primary language of the lead researcher.

Data Collection

Following the observational period in each team, data were collected using individual interviews for support staff members (Smith & Sparkes, 2016) and focus group interviews for athletes (Kruger, 2014). Specifically, 10 interviews with support staff and six focus groups with athletes (2 focus groups per team, 3-4 athletes in each focus group, 19 athletes in total) were conducted across teams. We followed the guidelines outlined by Smith and Sparkes (2016) on qualitative interviewing that included developing a semi-structured interview guide to acquire in-depth perceptions about their sport experiences. Separate interview guides were devised to provide the opportunity for participants to speak on unique aspects of their role on the team, and in the focus groups, the opportunity to build on common experiences among teammates. Due to the larger purpose of this project, the questions were general to coaching strategies and behaviours that influenced the dynamics of the team environment. Sample questions from the athlete focus groups included: “What strategies or behaviours does your coach employ that you consider to be valuable or effective towards fostering success?”, “Are there any strategies or behaviours that your coach uses that you do **not** find valuable or effective?” and “Are there any

strategies or behaviours that your coach does not use that you **wish** he/she did?”. Sample questions from the integrated support staff interviews included: “In what ways (if any) do you work with the head coach in pursuit of creating and/or maintaining a strong team environment?” and “What other members of the support staff do you consider valuable towards creating and/or maintaining a strong team environment?”. Importantly, questions on coaches’ use of humour were not directly asked in the interview guide. All experiences regarding humour arose naturally from the interviews and were subsequently probed by the researcher. Example of probes included: “You mentioned the jokes and how they can be good at times and bad during others. Do you have any examples of when they have gone well versus not?”, “Based on what you explained, do you think jokes *should* be used by the coach?”, “Following on that, could you further reflect on whether you think there is a balance between lightening the mood with a joke and invalidating someone’s feelings?” All focus groups took place in person in a private room within the training facility in each team. The majority of individual interviews took place in-person (over 80%); however, virtual interviews were utilized when needed.

Data Analysis

Data were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within the participant experiences (Braun et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2019). The transcriptions yielded 100 single-spaced pages of data from the athlete focus groups and 121 single-spaced pages of data from the support staff interviews. The lead researcher began by reading and re-reading transcriptions to acquire familiarity with the data and began taking notes on initial impressions, thoughts, and ideas surrounding the meaning behind each person’s stories. She then inductively analyzed the data using the qualitative software, NVivo, by sectioning the data into meaning units and labelling each unit with an initial

descriptive code. For example, the participants spoke about their coaches' use of humour towards creating an environment where athletes felt relaxed, positive, safe, and comfortable, which aided their ability to perform under pressure. This notion was descriptively coded as "Positive Psychological Environment". The initial codes were then discussed amongst the research team, who acted as critical friends to challenge and support the lead researcher's assumptions and interpretations of the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In the same example, the ideas discussed within the "Positive Psychological Environment" were deductively discussed, making connections to previous coaching literature on effective (or ineffective) coach-athlete relationships (e.g., Pomerleau-Fontaine et al., 2023) and psychological safety (or unsafety) in sport (e.g., Walton et al., 2024), and refined to understand humour as a coaching strategy towards fostering or inhibiting a sense of well-being on the team. Through an iterative process, the codes were grouped into larger themes and sub-themes until the research team felt comfortable with a final list of two overarching themes to present the interpretations and implications of coaches' use of humour from athletes and support staff members.

Quality Standards

In line with our qualitative approach and philosophical assumptions guiding this study, we identified a set of characterizing traits to outline our quality standards that were unique to this project (Burke, 2016). Understanding the importance of the research team in co-constructing data, we sought to provide *transparency* within our work by outlining our philosophical assumptions that shaped the interpretation and presentation of the data. For example, our team is largely oriented towards high-performance parasport, with authors being intimately involved in the Paralympic Games, consulting with Paralympians, and/or studying national team coaches, therefore, we were transparent in how our previous experiences may have influenced data

collection and interpretation. We utilized co-authors as *critical friends* to challenge, support, and question initial thoughts and perceptions of the analytical process to foster deeper reflection, interpretation, and meaning of the dataset. This was done after the initial coding and theme development stage to challenge the language being used to present the findings. For instance, when presenting recommendations on how to best utilize humour as a coaching strategy, the critical friends challenged the lead author to more deeply consider when humour can be debilitating to the team (e.g., when humour was miscommunicated or misunderstood) but also strategies for optimal use (i.e., open communication, emotional intelligence, relational awareness). Thus, this theme was co-created as *Intentions of Humour: (Mis)communication and (Mis)understanding* to highlight both cautions and recommendations. We strove to achieve *credibility* through establishing physical presence within the daily training environment and building rapport among participants, which influenced the quality of questions and probes used throughout the interview process. For example, informal conversations led to the identification of team values and behavioural expectations, and therefore, a question was added to the interview guides to explore these values, and their subsequent implications on the team environment. Finally, we considered *impact* in the creation of this project as humour can be a powerful coaching tool in training environments with the potential to uplift moods and feelings of belonging, but at the same time, isolate or patronize members of the environment depending on how humour is interpreted (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014). Thus, in studying humour within the parasport context, an underappreciated population empirically and practically, this study provides *substantive contribution* to coaches, athletes, and support team members by sharing how humour can be used in a facilitative and uplifting manner to enhance well-being in sport rather than detract from it.

Results

The main research questions guiding this project were to explore how coaches' use of humour was interpreted by athletes and integrated support staff members and how humour influenced individual experiences and/or group dynamics on the team. Our analysis resulted in two overarching themes: (1) *Humour as an Influencer of Psychological (Un)Safety*, and (2) *Intentions of Humour: (Mis)communication and (Mis)understanding*. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities.

Humour as an Influencer of Psychology (Un)Safety

When discussing humour as a coaching strategy, our participants often described appreciation towards their coaches' use of humour, which was connected to creating a fun, psychologically safe environment (i.e., a feeling or climate where the learner feels valued and comfortable without fear of retribution or consequences; Turner & Harder, 2018) for athletes and staff to be authentic and to thrive. With the understanding that many athletes were juggling heavy training and competition schedules as well as occupational and/or educational demands, the participants highlighted how their coaches intentionally strove to make the training atmosphere enjoyable, and that jokes were particularly welcomed within the environment. In one example, Physiotherapist Michelle explained:

I think [our head coach] really built an environment where it is hard work and fun at the same time. People aren't afraid to crack jokes and things like that. He really strives to have an environment that people will enjoy being in, it's positive, it's not too heavy, but it's still a high-performance program so the expectation is that you'll work hard in the [training centre]. I think he wants people to feel comfortable in the environment (Individual Interview).

Athletes also highlighted their coaches' use of humour towards creating a positive competitive environment. More specifically, athletes from one team described their coach telling "dad" jokes prior to their competition to help them obtain their optimal arousal levels to perform:

You're supposed to have fun. It's important to be able to joke around, not be so serious all the time, and have fun together so we can play better. I feel like he's good at creating a relaxed environment [at competitions] by making jokes... not always good jokes... bad jokes [all athletes laugh], but when you [compete], you're not as stressed (Athlete George, Focus Group).

Athlete Liam from the same team interpreted his coaches' use of joking behaviour in competition by stating, "I feel like he does that to try and make the situation less scary." Thus, regardless of whether they interpreted the jokes as humorous or not, athletes and staff appreciated their coaches' attempt at de-escalating the pressurized environment and helping their team to relax. Contrastingly, athletes recalled experiences of being exposed to other countries' high-performance environments where there appeared to be a hierarchical or authoritarian relationship between coaches and athletes, and in turn, joking would not be allowed:

Athlete Katya: If you look at some other teams, it's like a hierarchy. I trained there and as soon as the coaches came in to the [training centre], everyone went quiet. I was almost scared because I wasn't used to that at all. That you can't joke or talk. It was really tense and it's nothing like that here. It is so much easier to be open. I think that's a huge reason why it's easier to come and talk to [the head coach] or some of the other coaches. If it were stricter in that way, like it is in some countries, I would be scared to talk to him.

Athlete Mia: [It was a] huge difference in culture. The players were quite relaxed before the coaches entered. When *we* practice or have our meetings, it's professional, but then in between we can joke and talk to each other (Focus Group).

In contrast to other teams/countries where coaches created an environment where joking was not allowed, athletes made the connection between their coaches' use of humour and the influence it had on their perceptions of psychological safety and enjoyment within training and competition.

Athletes also expressed appreciation for their coaches' humorous side when reflecting on adversity within their careers. This was discussed by one athlete, in particular, who recalled a season where she was injured and not training with the team. She described the isolation and distress she experienced being apart from the team, yet at the same time, an enjoyable memory when her coach pulled a prank on her on April Fool's Day. Her coach told her to call their physiotherapist concerning her injury and purposely gave her the wrong phone number – to the local [amusement park]! She called the [amusement park] and quickly realized that her coach set her up. She recounted this memory positively and expressed how it helped her navigate the struggles associated with being a high-performance athlete dealing with an injury: "It's hard to be injured, it was quite tough for me... [but] I think it says something about [the coach]. He can be really serious [in training] but he can still joke with you, and I think that says something about him." Notably, all athletes in the focus group reflected on this same memory, laughing about how their coach used humour in this way, which fostered the ability to manage difficult situations concerning mental and physical health, as well as created unity among the athletes through positive team memories. As a research team, we identified that the coaches' intentional use of humour - in this case, pulling a prank on his athlete - allowed the athlete to feel joy, relieve pressure and distress from her challenging situation, and importantly, enhanced a sense of

belonging to the team. Taken together, the coaches use of humour appeared to influence the psychological safety of not only athletes competing and training on a professional level, but also those who were dealing with adversity and distress apart from the team.

In sharp contrast, athletes on one team described how their coaches' use of humour acted in opposition to psychological safety (e.g., feeling uneasy or unsafe) when their feelings were dismissed or invalidated by a joke. For example, one athlete explained her hesitation to go to the coach with personal issues due to negative past experiences, and instead, reported speaking with one of the senior athletes on the team whom she felt more comfortable:

Athlete Diane: I prefer to go to [one of the teammates] instead of [the head coach].

Interviewer: Why do you think that might be?

Athlete Diane: I don't know. I sometimes think he isn't that understanding. It depends, of course, on what the issue is. But part of it is that he just makes a joke or something instead... I needed him to listen and try to understand what I was saying so I would feel like he wanted to help me and find a solution rather than dragging it away (Focus Group).

Athlete Lee from the same team reiterated that his coach would rather avoid conflict or difficult conversations and prefer to make a joke of the situation to move forward:

It's still a way to go before this group is as open as we want it to be. One where everybody can talk about anything. I think that's also a part of how [our head coach] can be in some ways, because he's not a guy that likes conflict or wants to be part of conflict. He's not able to go into something and fix it. He would rather make a joke out of it or try and talk it away. It's easier to laugh it away. So that makes it difficult for the group to come up and talk to him (Focus Group).

Thus, due to their past experiences, athletes on the team felt hesitant to approach their coach and speak up about a conflict or concerns in fear that he would use humour to lighten the mood and dismiss their needs. In turn, this influenced the athletes' feelings of psychological safety within the environment in being unable to show vulnerability and ask for help in a conflict.

Intentions of Humour: (Mis)communication and (Mis)understanding

Our participants described the numerous benefits of using humour as a coaching strategy, yet also cautionary tales with the way it was communicated or interpreted within the high-performance sport environment. The two main issues revolving humour were when miscommunication and misunderstanding were present – in other words, when athletes found it difficult to interpret the meaning behind what the coach was communicating through humour. In one of our focus groups, athletes expressed difficulty in being able to understand and read their head coaches' emotions and intentions, particularly when he was making a joke:

Athlete Mia: The first thing that comes to mind now is that he has the best poker face and I don't know if it's a good thing. Sometimes it's hard to understand if he's serious or joking.

Athlete Olivia: I can see it, [but] I've known him for 15 years.

Mental Performance Consultant Clara, who was also new to the team, reinforced this message in her own interpretations of the head coach:

I said to [the head coach] yesterday that I don't know when you're joking or when you're serious. He was making a joke and he had a straight [face]. I didn't know! In [our country] we have a lot of ironic humour and there's a lot of humour in what he's saying. I think it's really funny but if I was a player by myself, I don't know... (Individual Interview).

At times, the support staff acted as a liaison between the head coaches and athletes to discuss the head coaches' intentions with humour and relieve concerns with miscommunication. In one team, for example, the head coach was expressing his intention for athletes to prioritize their training, mentioning (as a joke) that apart from your own funeral, you should find a way to be present. The staff described how the athletes were distraught about whether they should quit their schooling to be on the national team. The staff then explained to the athletes the intention behind the coaches' joke; that time management was the main takeaway from his message, and to plan ahead with schooling to manage the demands of national team training. Thus, support staff were important in disseminating, clarifying, or reinforcing the messages from the head coaches to athletes, in some situations, between relationships where athletes felt more comfortable openly sharing their voices (i.e., staff-athlete relationship versus coach-athlete relationship). As such, it is important that head coaches and support staff are consistent with the core values and vision of the program so they can "fill in the blanks" if messages are misunderstood or miscommunicated.

Open communication with all members of the team was recommended towards better understanding humour, particular with regard to athletes being unsure about whether their head coach was joking. Strength and Conditioning Coach Lin encouraged athletes to communicate their feelings with the head coach, and the staff in general, to help everyone better understand individual coaching preferences and what behaviours would help maintain a positive and enjoyable team environment:

It's important for the athletes to let him know if [humour] is not a thing they appreciate.

They should tell him. We talk about that a lot. They also have to tell me what they need because then it's easier for me to give it to them and the opposite. I need them to know what I expect from them so we can work well together (Individual Interview).

Finally, participants highlighted the relational awareness and understanding required by the head coaches to determine *when* and *with whom* humour was an appropriate coaching strategy:

I think when you are a coach, you have your personality, and as an athlete, you have your personality, and sometimes you click and sometimes you don't. In general, what I've observed is that he uses a lot of humour and irony in his coaching, which is great for some athletes. For other athletes, that's a no go because they don't always understand it (Mental Performance Consultant Marie, Individual Interview).

I think [humour] is really good for some athletes and hard for other athletes, but if I see the positive in it, he has a joke, he has a comment, he has things that take the seriousness out of it. I think that can come with good timing and with bad timing... You have to know the athletes. If [the coach] knows the athletes and knows that one athlete is in an emotional state one day, he's not going to joke. So it's always a timing issue. I think it depends who you work with, how much humour, how many jokes you can do, and what you can joke about... That's very important. That's probably my biggest thing to mention (Strength and Conditioning Coach Lin, Individual Interview).

Athletes spoke about humour as a balancing act where the main message being relayed was that it depends on the person and their stage of career. For example, in their focus group, veteran athletes spoke about the beginning of their careers with the national team coach and how emotions played a role in understanding or appreciating humour:

Athlete Lucas: It depends on the player, you know?

Interviewer: How each individual interprets what he does?

Athlete Lucas: Yeah exactly, if it's a young boy who is very insecure maybe it isn't good. When I didn't know [the head coach], I was afraid of him, I guess. He's impossible to read. He has the same face all the time.

Athlete Oscar: It's like "are you joking"?

Athlete Lucas: I was a 14- or 15-year-old boy who was nervous as hell to have a conversation with the national head coach and then a few years later, I started to read him. I can see some of the youngsters now where they are like, "are you joking or are you serious"?

Athlete Oscar: We've been there.

Athlete Hugo: It's hard to know.

Taken together, athletes and staff highlighted that the head coaches needed to have the relational awareness to delineate when humour was an appropriate coaching strategy, particularly paying attention to power dynamics within national team relationships. Support staff were critical players involved with de-escalating distress about misunderstanding their coaches' use of humour and clarifying or relaying main messages from the coach.

Discussion

This study sought to explore interpretations and implications of coaches' use of humour in three national Paralympic team environments from the perspectives of athletes and integrated support staff. Through a reflexive thematic analysis, we described how the coaches' use of humour had the potential to influence feelings of psychological safety within the sport setting; positively, in terms of creating a fun training and competitive environment to perform optimally, and negatively, in terms of athletes feeling unable or unwilling to discuss personal issues with the coach due to concerns about their use of humour. Our findings also highlighted considerations or

challenges with using humour in the high-performance environment, including when humour is miscommunicated or misinterpreted, leading to feelings of unease or confusion, but also recommendations on how coaches can effectively implement humour in their teams (e.g., open communication, relational awareness). Our discussion will focus on three unique elements of this study: (1) facilitative uses of humour towards fostering athlete well-being in parasport, (2) the importance of emotional intelligence when implementing humour, and (3) the danger of using humour as an avoidance strategy within the coach-athlete relationship.

Using Humour to Foster Athlete Well-Being

Our participants described facilitative benefits of their coaches' use of humour, including creating an environment centered around athletes feeling safe and included, which aided their ability to persevere through difficult situations within the season. This finding is comparable to previous research by Morgan et al. (2019) who identified humour to be an effective coaching strategy in promoting enjoyment and a positive outlook during stressful situations and following setbacks (e.g., losing a difficult game). In the current study, the coaches' intentional desire to pull a prank on his athlete who was battling an injury (and experiencing isolation from the team) contributed to feelings of psychological safety within the environment. Consistent with previous research on coaching and humour (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014), humour was capitalized with the intention of rebuilding energy for his athlete throughout the season. In the parasport context, rebuilding energy, including well-being and motivation, may be particularly important during times of injury rehabilitation. The prevalence and incidence rates of musculoskeletal injuries are often greater for parasport athletes than able-bodied athletes (Pinheiro et al., 2021) and the severity of injuries for an athlete with a disability can cause significant psychological distress (e.g., "I'm often thinking, what will happen if I get an injury to my non-disabled side, I wouldn't

be able to manage my daily life. That's what I am afraid of", Fagher et al., 2016, p. 1244-1245). When dealing with athlete mental health, however, we encourage coaches to educate themselves on how they can support their athletes beyond humour alone to provide them with the resources to access mental health support (i.e., counsellors, psychologists, social workers, doctors, workshops for coaches on mental health) to best serve their athletes' psychological well-being through times of adversity (Bentzen et al., 2022).

Emotional Intelligence and Coaches' Use of Humour

Our participants described the use of coaches' humour with caution in the sense that coaches needed to delineate when and with whom it was appropriate. This finding is consistent with previous research on humour as a "double-edged sword", where humour can be a facilitative strategy towards enhancing relationships and cohesion among the team (Corkery & Fletcher, 2023; Høigaard et al., 2017), yet also be at risk of causing ostracization or social exclusion if used ineffectively (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014). Thus, a balancing act is required. Robert and Wilbanks (2012) expressed that "perhaps as important as the raw ability to create humour is the wisdom to know when and how to use it" (p. 1083). As such, emotional intelligence (i.e., the awareness and understanding of one's own emotions as well as the emotions of those around you) may be a critical skill in judging the timing and situational appropriateness of using humour (Magrum et al., 2019; 2023). The participants from the current study highlighted how coaches needed to be aware of who their athletes were as individuals, including their personalities and emotional states, the content and frequency of the jokes, as well as power dynamics present on the team for humour to be successful. In a previous study, Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014) highlighted the experiences of an assistant coach who was promoted to head coach and felt that this role shift influenced the way athletes perceived their

relationship. In turn, this coach used humour to reduce the distance of power by sharing personal (and humorous) stories with his athletes, which the authors noted led to humanistic perceptions of the coach and improved coach-athlete relationships. In the current study from the athletes' perspective, one participant expressed feeling insecure as a young, 14-year-old athlete interacting with the head coach of the national team. This may be particularly important in the parasport context when you consider that the majority of coaches in the Paralympic setting are able-bodied (Bentzen et al., 2021). Although jokes may be well-intentioned, coaches need to be aware and sensitive to power dynamics present on the team (Adams, 2020; Edwards & Jones, 2018; Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014) and how intersecting identities play a role in influencing whether humour may be well-received. Perhaps emotional intelligence can play an important role in fostering both intrapersonal (e.g., recognizing power differentials of status and ability) and interpersonal coaching knowledge (e.g., developing high-quality relationships; Côté & Gilbert, 2009) to better understand how humour can be used in a facilitative rather than debilitating way in the sport environment. More research identifying the association between emotional intelligence and coaches' use of humour in the high-performance parasport context is warranted.

Avoidance and Communication within the Coach-Athlete Relationship

A dysfunctional use of humour was identified by athletes who felt their head coach would rather avoid conflict by laughing it away rather than to address a problem directly, which led athletes to feel dismissed when experiencing difficulties. In this example, the head coach displayed avoidant behaviours (i.e., dismissing, avoiding, or denying a motivation/problem; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) that ultimately damaged the quality and strength of the coach-athlete relationship. In a case study on developing coach-athlete relationships in collegiate sport, Corkery and Fletcher (2023) described the experiences of one coach in particular who was

cautious of using humour as a coaching practice with respect to concerns about humour appreciation. To alleviate this concern, the coach decided to place himself as the subject of humorous interactions as opposed to the athletes to increase the likelihood that humour will be positively interpreted and appreciated. From our study, open communication was identified as a coaching strategy from support staff members as essential in better understanding how humour can be used effectively, particularly with respect to understanding the intentions of humour from the head coach. As noted by Jowett and Cockerill (2003), “open channels of communication allow coaches and athletes to share each other’s experiences, beliefs, values, thoughts, and worries” (p. 315), and contrastingly, interpersonal conflict can result when this communication is absent (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). In pursuit of repairing damaged or ineffective coach-athlete relationships, we can turn to Rhind and Jowett’s (2010) COMPASS model that identified seven key communication strategies towards relationship maintenance in sport, one of which being openness (i.e., efforts to increase the likelihood of communication). On a practical level, educating coaches on the intersection of motivational psychology (e.g., approach versus avoidant behaviours), communication strategies via the COMPASS model, and how humour can be used to foster positive interactions with athletes would offer unique insight into the interacting element of developing effective coach-athlete relationships (Rhind & Jowett, 2010; Pomerleau-Fontaine et al., 2023). On a theoretical level, the COMPASS model has yet to be explored within the context of parasport coaching leaving a notable gap in understanding how coaches and athletes diffuse conflict within the high-performance parasport setting and the role of humour in mitigating (e.g., approach) or deepening (e.g., avoidance) the tensions.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Despite the novelty of this study in an underrepresented area of research, there are limitations to address. Notably, we chose to present this study from the perspectives of Paralympic athletes and integrated support team members without the perspectives of head coaches, which limits our understanding of the coaches' intentions towards using humour as a coaching strategy. Future researchers are encouraged to consider all perspectives to acquire a more holistic and interactive understanding of how humour was intended, and in turn, perceived. Additionally, we collected data from three teams in three different countries yet were limited in our ability to make cross-cultural or cross-team comparisons to maintain confidentiality of our participants. Future studies can recruit multiple teams from the same country or use quantitative methods of data collection that would allow for a more detailed comparison within and across cases. Finally, we recruited athletes from high-performance, co-acting teams with mixed genders. It would be interesting to extend this sample to alternative samples, such as grassroots level parasports, team or individual sports, coaches with disabilities themselves, as well as all-male or all-female teams to deepen our understanding of coaches' use of humour in parasport settings.

Overall, humour is a powerful coaching strategy that has the potential to positively or negatively influence athletes on an individual and team level. From our findings, we identified two overarching themes that helped us understand how humour influenced feelings of psychological safety as well as issues with humour, including miscommunication or misunderstanding intentions. Relational awareness, emotional intelligence, and effective communication were identified as critical coaching competencies to consider when implementing humour within the high-performance parasport environment, particularly in an environment where power differentials of status and disability were present. To our knowledge, this is the first paper to directly explore and identify the interpretations and implications of

humour as a coaching strategy in the high-performance parasport setting. Coaches that implement humour within their environments are encouraged to reflect on the receivers of the interaction and how to maximize the facilitative rather than debilitating functions of the “double-edged sword” to ultimately promote team satisfaction, well-being, and success.

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