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Psychosocial Characteristics of the World's Best Male Rugby Union Players

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Abstract

In this study we investigated the psychosocial factors underpinning success and development in rugby union. Using a purposeful sampling strategy, we recruited five former “world’s best” international male rugby union players and conducted in-depth retrospective interviews with them and their nominated coaches. Abductive thematic analysis revealed commonalities, as well as differences, across the participants. Encountering adversity during childhood that was coupled with a positive sport experience and career turning point, obsessiveness, perfectionism and narcissism, a dual mastery and outcome focus, placing great emphasis on the importance of sport, a need for success, and an ability to perform under pressure, were perceived to be important to the development of excellence in rugby. Dichotomous thinking, self and team focus, and avoidant attachment strategies were also found to be commonalities among participants. Drawing the results together, two distinct personality profiles appeared to emerge, both seemingly complemented by avoidant attachment strategies. Findings suggest that encountering adversity, particularly disruptions to parental relationships, and the realization of self-protective attachment strategies, coupled with a positive sport-related event, may facilitate the drive and development of the necessary personality traits and behaviors to achieve excellence in rugby. Therefore, understanding the role of attachment in the development of excellence in sport, alongside a greater awareness of the nuanced differences in personality profiles which underpin similar high-performance behaviors, has considerable benefit not only for research, but also for enhancing the delivery of applied psychology practice in sport.

Keywords

talent, psychological factors, personality, attachment, excellence

Introduction

In efforts to understand the development of excellence, the respective influence of nature and nurture have long been debated. In support of the argument for nurture, Ericsson et al. (1993) offered a theoretical framework which played down the role of innate, inherited

characteristics and explained the acquisition of expert performance as the result of extended deliberate practice. Although this framework has been used as a foundation for a substantial amount of work exploring the development of expertise (e.g., see Baker et al., 2020) it offers

little insight into the psychological characteristics which underpin the extraordinary levels of effort and determination required to overcome the numerous challenges involved in achievement of the highest levels of sporting success. To fully understand the development of excellence there is also a need to recognize the importance of an individual's psychological capacity to learn and develop, as opposed to merely concentrating on how they currently perform (e.g., Crittenden, 2006; Hill et al., 2018).

There is now extensive research which demonstrates the role of psychological characteristics in the development of excellence in sport (e.g., Dimundo et al., 2022; Hardy et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2018; McAuliffe et al., 2022). Early research in this area (e.g., see Williams & Krane, 2001 for review) highlighted that several psychological characteristics appear to be associated with peak performance: specifically, high levels of motivation, commitment, coping skills, heightened concentration, self-confidence, and self-regulation along with the frequent use of mental skills such as goal setting and visualization. However, much of this early sport research shared a theoretical assumption, akin to Ericsson et al.'s (1993) work, that the characteristics required for expert performance can be developed, by almost anyone over time, given the right environment. The implication of such an assumption is that the right performance environment will provide an almost equal opportunity for all talented junior athletes to maximize their potential.

However, despite experiencing similar environments, coaches, and training practices that target many of the same physical and mental skills, not all athletes within high performance sport development pathways achieve their potential and some derail from the system regardless of early promise (cf. Baker et al., 2020). Therefore, considering this issue through a psychological lens, there is need to go beyond a simple focus on the psychological skills of the performer. As such, relatively recent research has begun to explore the influence of other psychosocial factors, such as personality and early life experiences, in the

development of expertise. For example, Hardy et al. (2017) explored the developmental biographies of Olympic athletes to better understand the psychosocial factors that differentiated serial gold-medal-winning Olympic athletes (described as “super-elite” athletes) and non-medaling Olympic athletes (described as “elite” athletes).

Although the relationship between personality and performance is complex (see Roberts & Woodman, 2017 for a review) an increasing amount of literature has begun to highlight how traits often perceived as maladaptive within certain domains or associated with negative mental health outcomes, most notably narcissism (e.g., Roberts et al., 2018), perfectionism (e.g., Hill et al., 2010), obsessiveness (Vallerand et al., 2008), and alexithymia (Woodman et al., 2008; Roberts & Woodman, 2017) are associated with high performance. Furthermore, recent work from Vaughan and Madigan (2021) indicates that athletes report higher levels of dark triad traits (sub-clinical narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) than non-athletes. In addition, although these traits are typically considered to be maladaptive, particularly in interpersonal contexts, in this study, Vaughan and Madigan (2021) discovered that dark triad traits offered a competitive advantage and led to better task performance in sport. To help guide the reader, Table 1 (next page) offers a definition of each of the personality traits mentioned above.

However, many of these aforementioned studies investigated the effects of only one or two dimensions of personality on sport performance and failed to consider the interaction between multiple traits, or indeed the combined influence of personality alongside other factors, such as early life experiences, training practices, and demographic factors (see Anderson et al., 2022 for a recent exception).

Multidisciplinary approaches to investigating the factors underpinning athletic success are now becoming increasingly common (e.g., Hardy et al., 2017; Güllich et al., 2019). Although these multidimensional examinations offer substantial insight into the factors that underpin excellence in sport, several

limitations require consideration. Many involve athletes from different, predominantly individual, sports. Thus, although literature is beginning to emerge (e.g., Dimundo et al., 2022; McAuliffe et al., 2022), the development of excellence in team sports is not yet fully

understood. Therefore, the primary aim of this study was to explore the developmental biographies of the worlds' best rugby union players to investigate the psychosocial underpinnings of success and development in this team sport.

Table 1. Definition of maladaptive personality traits.

Characteristic	Definition	Reference
Narcissism	Individuals high in narcissism are characterized by grandiose self-views and a relentless addiction-like striving to continually assert their self-worth and superiority	Morf et al. (2011)
Perfectionism	Perfectionism is a multidimensional construct comprising of both personal and social constructs including unrealistic standards and harsh personal criticism, perfectionistic motivation for self and others and the belief that significant others expect oneself to be perfect	Hewitt & Flett (1991)
Obsessiveness	A controlled internalization of an activity into one's identity in which certain contingencies are attached, such as social acceptance or self-esteem.	Vallerand et al. (2008)
Alexithymia	Alexithymia has been described as a personality trait characterized by a difficulty identifying and distinguishing between feelings and describing those feelings to others.	Taylor et al. (1991)
Machiavellianism	Machiavellianism is indicative of a cold and manipulative individual with low conscientiousness.	Paulus & Williams (2002)
Psychopathy	Psychopathy is indicative of high impulsivity and thrill seeking along with low empathy and anxiety.	Paulus & Williams (2002)

In addition, while some of the literature acknowledges that adversity-related trauma may act as an extreme motivational trigger, fueling ambition, effort, and application (Savage et al., 2017; Hardy et al., 2017) research to date has not directly addressed questions regarding the origins of the motivation and drive to pursue excellence in the first place. Such an omission seems surprising given that theories of development, such as attachment theory (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1973), provide a sound theoretical basis for explaining how early life events may influence an individual's sense of self-worth (Park et al., 2006) and the resulting motivation and desire for achievement that follows.

Foundational work in attachment theory (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby 1973) has highlighted that the bonds individuals make with primary caregivers during early life influence the development of internal working models of the self and others. More specifically, the propensity to make strong affectional bonds helps one develop a secure attachment by virtue of seeing oneself as being worthy of love and others as being reliable and responsive (e.g., see Bowlby, 1973). The dynamic-maturational model of attachment (DMM; Crittenden, 2006) proposes that disruption to the formation of secure attachment (such as via an attachment figure who is unresponsive or inconsistent in meeting the physical and emotional needs of the child) results in the development of self-

protective attachment strategies (e.g., avoidance or ambivalence) in an attempt by the child to meet their own needs for safety and comfort. Some of the personality characteristics associated with expert performance in sport, notably narcissism, perfectionism, and obsessiveness, have all been associated with disruptions and distress within early parental relationships, which, when experienced in early life, may feasibly lead to the development of self-protective attachment strategies. Such disruptions may include parental invalidation, parental criticism, high parental expectations, and authoritarian parenting styles (e.g., Flett et al., 2002; Huxley & Bizumic, 2016).

In addition, the development of a positive internal working model of oneself and others—that is, a secure attachment—facilitates the development of an innate sense of positive self-worth (Batholomew & Horowitz, 1991). However, when the development of secure attachment is disrupted, so too is the development of innate self-worth. When one is required to develop adaptive strategies to elicit care of closeness with a caregiver (rather than receiving this unconditionally), self-worth may become contingent upon demonstrating skill and competency within a particular domain and subsequently increases an individual's motivation to achieve success in that domain (Crocker & Knight, 2005). Taking these findings into account, it appears reasonable to consider that early life events and the development of self-protective attachment strategies may underpin not only the development of the necessary personality traits and behaviors to achieve excellence in sport, but also the motivation and drive to pursue athletic glory in the first place. Nevertheless, the role of attachment in the development of excellence in sport has received little research attention thus far. Therefore, the secondary aim of this study was to explore the influence of attachment in the development of the world's best rugby players.

Method

Methodology and Philosophical Underpinnings

This study drew upon a qualitative descriptive methodology (Sandelowski, 2010). Qualitative descriptive studies aim to produce a

comprehensive summary of events using the everyday terms of those events (Sandelowski, 2000). Using this methodology, the aim was to provide a detailed description of participants' experiences and factors that may have contributed to their development as rugby players. The intent was to present an account which would be perceived similarly by other researchers and aligns with the meaning the participants attributed to their accounts (Sandelowski, 2000; 2010), while recognizing differences in perceptions of reality where appropriate.

The paradigmatic approach underpinning this study is critical realism. Critical realism combines ontological realism and epistemological interpretivism (Bhaskar, 1989; Wiltshire, 2018). Within critical realism, it is perceived that there is an external reality that exists independent of individual's minds, but that individuals may perceive this reality differently. Such individual perspectives on reality are thought to arise because we are unable to directly comprehend reality due to how information is processed through our brains, language, culture, and methods (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). Consistent with this paradigm and methodology, it is recognized that all description is subjective and influenced by the individual interpretations of the participants and the research team, who selected not only what information to share and analyze but also how to make sense of such information. Nevertheless, throughout the data collection and analysis, the aim was to identify similarities in perceived realities and identify those explanations that appear to be more accurate.

Participants

We used purposeful sampling to select participants who had achieved on the highest international rugby stage (each participant had represented their country more than 50 times) and thus were perceived as information-rich and suitable to address the current research question. Further definition of the selection criteria may compromise participant anonymity and therefore is not provided. In total, five former international rugby players, all of whom were

widely considered to be the world's best in their position at the peak of their career, agreed to take part in the study. The classification of these players was based on them regularly being described as the world's best by rugby journalists, fellow players, coaches, and administrators from around the world throughout their career. All participants were male and ranged in age from 37 to 47 years, with a mean age of 43 years ($SD = 3.70$). Participants had a mean domestic playing career of 16.8 years ($SD = 1.10$), and a mean number of international caps of 76.4 ($SD = 10.95$). Each participant also nominated a coach, by whom they had been coached during their professional playing career, to also take part in the study by providing informant information about the participant.

Procedure

Institutional ethical approval was first obtained, followed by support from the associated rugby organization. Subsequently, participant recruitment began. We recruited the first participant through the rugby organization. He was a very well-known former international rugby player who agreed to act as an ambassador for the study and provided signed letters of endorsement which we sent to a select group of other former international players to share information about the research. We made clear that this player would not know if individuals decided to participate and that only the research team would be aware of who participated. In total, four players in addition to the first player chose to participate.

Data Collection

Aligned with qualitative description, data were collected through semi-structured, retrospective interviews. Since outstanding athletes can truly be distinguished only after they have reached the highest level, retrospective interviews remain one of the primary sources of information on athletic development (Côté et al., 2005). Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide (which can be obtained from the first author). The interview guide was informed by existing research and

aimed to examine previous findings within the context of elite sport while also allowing for the discovery of information that may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the research team (Gill et al., 2008).

Given the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed, we gave particular consideration to the structure of the interviews. Specifically, we were guided by the framework outlined by Dempsey et al. (2016) to ensure that participant's needs were safeguarded. The interviews were all conducted face-to-face in a location of the participants choice. Sensitive topics were signposted to the participant, as were the details of relevant support services. Additionally, prior to the study interviews, the first author, who conducted all the study interviews, carried out pilot interviews with three amateur athletes and three recently retired professional rugby players, with each interview lasting approximately 2 – 3 hours. This process allowed for some final minor adjustments to the interview questions and the opportunity for the interviewer to hone their expertise in conducting interviews (cf. Kallio et al., 2016).

Subsequently, each interview was conducted with two interviewers present to offer an increased capacity to collect relevant data (Monforte et al., 2021). In each of the interviews, one interviewer led the process and followed the interview guide while the other interviewer focused on taking notes and identifying additional topics for further inquiry. For three of the five interviews, a consultant clinical psychologist took the role of second interviewer while in the remaining two an experienced researcher-practitioner was present.

Previous knowledge of the subject created a predetermined framework for the interview (Kallio et al., 2016). Consequently, we prepared biographies of each participant prior to the interview, ensuring that both interviewers had a comprehensive understanding of the participant's career history. Interviews commenced with a discussion informed by this biography. The interviewer then proceeded with the interview guide. The order of the questions was determined by the direction each participant took. The total duration of the interviews was between 171 minutes and 212 minutes ($M = 189$ minutes, $SD = 17.6$).

Coach Interviews

We asked each participant to nominate a coach under whom they had played during their career and who would be happy to participate. Such integration of coaches within the study was valuable to provide “multiple angles of vision” (Thorne, 2017, p. 86), which can be beneficial when seeking to identify patterns among participant experiences. All the nominated coaches agreed to take part, and we scheduled interviews with them at the time, date, and location of their choice. The coach interview schedule was individually constructed for each coach. Once the participant interview was complete, the first author listened to the interview in full to determine the structure and focus of the coach interview. Although the coach interview made use of the information provided by the participant, we took great care to preserve the confidentiality of participants. We made no assumptions about what the coach did or did not know about the participant and the events in his life, and no references to specific life events were made. The duration of the coach interviews was between 85 mins and 152 mins ($M = 115$ mins, $SD = 25.3$).

Research Team

The project team consisted of three researcher-practitioners within the field of sport and exercise psychology, with 30 years' collective experience, the national lead psychologist for an international rugby federation, and a consultant clinical psychologist. All contributed to the development of the methods and particularly to the interview guide and subsequent analysis. The inclusion of a clinical psychologist was deemed essential to provide a unique insight when developing the parts of the interview schedule focusing specifically on early life events as well as providing guidance regarding ways to navigate the more sensitive parts of the interviews.

Data Analysis

In line with the critical realist underpinnings of this study, data analysis followed the stages detailed by Miles and colleagues (2019). The

first stage was data condensation. Through this process the data were first transcribed verbatim by professional transcribers resulting in 885 transcript pages (239,759 words). Subsequently, the transcripts were read and re-read to ensure the lead author was familiar with the data and a code was assigned to all segments of the data that aligned with the research purpose. Initially descriptive codes were allocated to the data. These codes simply described what information was contained within the segment, with an emphasis on the social environment. Subsequently, process codes were created to identify any observable or conceptual actions in the data. From here, causation codes were developed. Causation codes seek to indicate why particular outcomes may occur and how this comes about. Given the focus of this study on identifying factors contributing to the achievement of an elite status in sport, such causation codes were particularly important.

While allocating causation codes, the focus shifted from inductive to a combination of inductive and deductive coding (abductive analysis; Ryba et al., 2012; Webster et al., 2017). The abductive approach was selected to enable dialectical movement between real-world observations (i.e., what we were seeing in the transcripts; inductive) and theoretical propositions (i.e., knowledge that came from literature that helped to make sense of the data; deductive) allowing us to investigate the lived experiences of each participant while also establishing whether experiences could be understood through pertinent theoretical constructs (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Such an abductive approach aligned with the critical realist tenets of the study because, through comparing the data to previous literature, it was possible to develop codes that appeared to be more closely related to reality. Based on previous literature, six broad areas of research were selected to facilitate deductive analysis: (1) Critical developmental experiences, (2) Relationship with rugby and motivational orientation, (3) Emotional regulation; (4) Personality, (5) Relationship with family and coaches, and (6) Career turning points. These areas were selected due to their previous

identification within literature as contributing factors towards elite performance (Hardy et al., 2017; Roberts & Woodman, 2017; Wagstaff, 2014; Weiss et al., 2002).

Methodological Rigor

To enhance the rigor of this study, we drew upon the guidance of Caddick and Smith (2012). Specifically, we sought to produce research that makes a substantive contribution to the field of talent development and expertise in sport. Moreover, the findings of the study have led to the generation of more research questions and areas for examination, demonstrating impact. The findings were generated based upon extensive and detailed interviews with a small cohort of participants, which we perceive provide comprehensive evidence pertinent to the research question. Further, through the analysis process and subsequent presentation of the results, coherence has been obtained as we have sought to present the findings in a manner that will resonate with the reader. Finally, through a detailed explanation of the study, as well as critical engagement with a team of experienced researchers with both methodological and topical knowledge, we believe we have demonstrated credibility as well as transparency regarding how the results were developed.

Results

The analysis process led to the development of three separate phases or components of the participants' experiences. Specifically, participants described their early life experiences, various personality traits, and the behaviors that subsequently developed. These phases are represented through the results within the following themes: foundational developmental experiences, development of personality traits, and who they became. Further, the process of analysis led to the generation of two distinct profiles or archetypes among the participants. Although the behaviors described were very similar across participants, it is our interpretation that the behaviors were likely underpinned by two distinct archetypes reflective of different experiences and traits.

These profiles are provided at the end of the results section.

Foundational Developmental Experiences Relationship with Parents.

Four of the five participants talked about how their father was unavailable to them, either physically or emotionally. KO provided an example of an athlete who grew up with a father who, due to work commitments, was absent from the family home a large portion of the time: "... [M]y Dad, obviously, I had less interaction with on a day-to-day basis because he was just out working and he worked incredibly hard, long hours; [this industry] is notoriously bad." Meanwhile, TI suggested that his father had certain expectations of him in terms of expressing emotions and being emotionally available: "[T]he rugby image of macho, get out there, was very ... Which was the one I had familiarized with my Dad; [our] relationship was that it was a very man-to-man thing."

The same four participants also described a very close relationship with their mother and the significant role she played in their life. Some described an empathy for the challenges their mothers faced in day-to-day family life. OB shared, "I have more sympathy for my Mum. That sounds quite harsh, but I just feel Mum has had a—she is a sole carer, so that, it is the whole situation now, you know." Meanwhile, other participants described the admiration they held for their mother. This admiration was evident for KO: "She was the most incredible woman, and just funny...I'd give you millions of examples of that drive, and determination, and ambition, which clearly had an impact on me."

The fifth participant did not provide much detail regarding his relationship with his parents. He described being equally close with both parents and said that there were very few occasions when either parent was absent from the family home.

Parentification. It is worth noting that the same four participants who described differing relationships with each of their parents also described a degree of reverse parenting, known as parentification. Parentification involves an

emotional role reversal in which a child sacrifices their own needs for attention, comfort, and guidance to accommodate and care for the emotional needs of their parent (Engelhardt, 2012). KO provides an example of a participant who felt responsible for protecting his parents emotionally:

[When I was away] there was one phone [X], and to get to it you had to wait your turn really. Every time I got to it, some bloke would come and beat me up and get on the phone. So, it took me about five weeks before I spoke to my Dad. We used to speak every day. He said, “Why have you not phoned me?” I didn’t say I was being beaten up. I didn’t think that helped. I just said, “Well it’s only one phone Dad; it’s a bit remote out here.”

KO also talked about feeling a sense of responsibility to help his parents following a tragic family event, “They love you and will look after you, but you can see what’s happened to them... I watched it. ... I stopped [messing] about and realized that actually, I need to do something quite dramatic really.”

Relationship with Siblings. All participants had one older sibling. Four participants had an older brother, and one had an older sister. Two of the participants also had a younger sibling; one had a younger sister and one a younger brother. Relationships with siblings seemed to vary between participants and there was no consistent pattern that characterized all of these relationships. Some of the participants talked about a strong rivalry within the relationship with their older sibling. For example, OB said, “Yes, yes, neither of us were kind of passive. We would, you know, if we did things, we would—I would—do it to win, yes.” WS said, “Yes, there was competition definitely.” However, other participants described a relationship that reflected a stronger allegiance to one another; for example, TI said, “We learnt early on that it wasn’t a good idea to compete ... because there was never a winner, as in,

whoever won ended up feeling like they’d lost because they didn’t like the fact the other person lost.” Nevertheless, all four participants with an older brother indicated a belief that, in relation to sport, they had a competitive edge over their older brother.

Family Culture. All participants talked about growing up within a culture of striving. Whether that was through hard work or just “doing your best,” they all appear to have been encouraged to try and achieve. KO shared this: “I came from a culture where you’re expected to win.” Similarly, OB described his parents’ strong work ethic: “I look back on my parents, you know, they’ve got a strong work ethic ... I look at that as something that hopefully I’ve inherited, and I admire in them.” TI provided an example of the influence this culture of striving had on him regarding winning:

Everyone in the family had... I’m sure their different perspective of what “give it your best shot” meant and whether that was process or outcome related, more process, and more outcome related, but for me that translated hugely. Not because of the value system but because of my take on it.

Critical Foundational Events. All participants experienced at least one foundational adverse or challenging event in their childhood. In some cases, participants experienced multiple foundational adverse events. Experiences ranged from serious relationship issues (e.g., disruptions within parental relationships, reverse parenting), death (or serious illness) of a close family member, experiencing physical discipline (at home or at school), separation from parents (e.g., attending boarding school) through to issues around body shape and size. Details of specific events have not been given to protect participants’ anonymity.

In addition to these adverse events, all five participants described a critical, positive sport-related event which occurred in early childhood and in close temporal proximity to an adverse

event. For two participants the positive critical sport event occurred shortly after the adversity. For one participant the positive critical sport event occurred shortly before the adversity and for two participants the exact order of events was unclear.

The first positive sport related event discussed by all five participants involved the significance of finding a sport (i.e., rugby union) in which they could thrive, or which fulfilled some kind of need; for example, TI said, “I made a load of friends through rugby. I played nothing but sport the whole time. I literally hid away probably when I first got there [boarding school]...but expressed myself through sport and through the ability to play sport.” Similarly, all participants discussed the influence of a significant coach on their sporting aspirations and development. WS shared this: “He was my first coach. He made it fun; he made it enjoyable for everyone.... When people ask me, ‘Who was the best coach?’ I always say, ‘Him, bar none.’” Furthermore, all five participants described how they regularly played sport with older peers while they were growing up and this positively influenced their experience. WS recalled, “I think [X], my elder brother, because of the age gap and because a lot of the other kids were [my brother]’s age, it always meant I was playing with older kids.”

Finally, four of the participants described either enjoying and benefiting from a disciplined training environment early on in their development or being encouraged and rewarded for their own high standards in terms of training. KO said, “...[W]e were the fittest team that you’d ever seen.” He went on to say, “I understood what it took to be successful because we trained very hard....”

Development of Personality Traits

Narcissism. Narcissism has been described as a relentless striving to assert self-worth and superiority (see Miller et al., 2011), and there is evidence that narcissism predicts improved performance under pressure (for a review, see Roberts et al., 2018). Multiple studies provide evidence of two facets of narcissism which are referred to as *vulnerable* and *grandiose* (Miller

et al., 2011). Grandiose narcissism primarily reflects traits of aggression and dominance whereas vulnerable narcissism reflects a defensiveness which obscures feelings of inadequacy and incompetence (Miller et al., 2011). Four of the five participants described behaviors characteristic of narcissism. Some described thoughts and behaviors reflecting aspects of grandiose narcissism whereby they demonstrated a sense of superiority and indicated a belief that they were more proficient than others. KO shared, “But I knew I was definitely good enough to do it. I think some of my colleagues probably either sensibly admitted to themselves that, one, I don’t think I’m as good as you....” In addition to this, both players described a sense of gratification derived from being recognized or receiving admiration. WS explained, “Obviously when you arrive into [X airport] and there are 25,000 people there at 5.30 in the morning ... then that’s a different experience and that makes it all good.”

Other participants described thoughts and behaviors reflecting aspects of vulnerable narcissism. OB provided an example of this when talking about the media: “And if I played badly I wouldn’t read the paper. If I had a particularly good game, I thought ‘maybe I will read it’ but their opinion wasn’t the most important; it was more of ego.” Similarly, TI talked about feeling that he had trained harder and wanted success more than others:

My way of preparing during the week was to try to cover every base of making it ... literally going into a game and being able to say, “I have trained so much harder than everyone here. I have wanted it so much more. I need it so much more. I’m better than any of you.”

In contrast to the others, TS showed an explicit lack of narcissistic grandiosity and no evidence of narcissistic vulnerability. He described feeling very uncomfortable with the praise he received from members of the public: “I felt uncomfortable with the incessant praise you get sometimes. ... I still feel uncomfortable

at times, when people come up to me and start talking about me and saying how great I am.”

Self and Team Focused. All participants demonstrated behaviors consistent with both agentic and communal traits, supporting the notion that they were both self-focused and an effective team player. Specifically, participants articulated a focus and assertiveness in satisfying their own needs. OB provided an example: “You know, being effective and efficient was a driver for me. I wanted to, you know, be] the best I could be. So, influencing how the team thinks was important.” This dual self-team emphasis was reinforced with behaviors consistent with communal traits. Three of the participants displayed what were perceived to be communal behaviors, demonstrating genuine concern and consideration toward their teammates. TS, for instance, demonstrated helpfulness and encouragement toward his teammates so that they all avoided the repercussions for not training, “I do remember taking some of the fitness where the sports master may not turn up. ... but I literally would be, ‘Lads, we better get on with something, because if he turns up and thinks we haven’t done anything...”

For two participants, although they described themselves as good team players and articulated ways in which they believed they supported their team-mates, their communal behavior was perceived as being driven less by genuine care for others and more by the understanding that within a team sport others play a vital role in their own personal success or failure. WS provided an example, in which his drive and desire to win and be the best was the motivation to ensure that his teammates did not let the side down:

Although I spoke about myself as an individual, I was very much a team player. I knew I was ready. I was worried about everyone else. I suppose that’s the only anxiety I had, that everyone else was in the best possible place themselves. If I could help them get there, then I would.

Perfectionism. All three types of perfectionism—self-oriented, other oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism (cf. Hewitt & Flett, 1991)—were evident within our sample. Self-oriented perfectionism involves self-directed perfectionistic behaviors, other oriented perfectionism involves holding others to unrealistic standards and stringently evaluating others’ behavior, and socially prescribed perfectionism reflects a belief that one must live up to some form of societal ideal (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). All five participants demonstrated evidence of both self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism was apparent in KO’s interview, in which he shared this: “We all go through life, we do jobs, and occasionally you have to do well at your job. On a rugby field you have an appraisal every single week. In fact, [in] training, you have an appraisal every single day, and it’s about driving that culture on a daily basis, on a weekly basis.” Meanwhile, alluding to other-oriented perfectionism TS stated the following:

We would have an hour slot for weights, and after 20 minutes, they’d all be going out for coffee. And I’d be there, “How can you possibly be going?” I knew they were doing a different schedule, but I would look at it and go, ... “Well you can’t have lifted the heaviest and highest, can you, if you’ve managed to cut your rest that much.” But it wouldn’t stop me doing my full session. It would just make me a bit angry with them.

Characteristics of socially prescribed perfectionism were evident in the participants who had also displayed traits of vulnerable narcissism (for evidence of the relationship between vulnerable narcissism and socially prescribed perfectionism see also Stoeber et al., 2015). TI illustrated this point: “...[A]s things went better the expectation from outside grew, which meant that the ground level rose...I was always dropping downwards because as I did

better the expectation and requirements of what good meant was defined by the outside.”

Obsessiveness. Obsessiveness is characterized by an uncontrollable and rigid engagement in an activity, which can lead to the neglect of other aspects of life (e.g., Vallerand et al., 2008). All five participants demonstrated levels of obsessiveness in relation to training and playing. Some participants openly described themselves as obsessive and appeared comfortable labeling themselves as such. TI shared, “... the reason it was in permanent marker was because of my obsessive side and that just hammered home the fear.” Other participants did not use the word obsessive, but it was clear from their descriptions that they were describing obsessive behavior. OB shared the following example: “I’d train every day. And I think I probably got to, later on, I probably got to the stage where I probably had a training addiction, to a degree. I wouldn’t feel comfortable if I didn’t train... I’d feel nervous if I hadn’t trained, or I’d feel anxious.”

Fear of failure and need for success. Three of the five participants talked explicitly about experiencing fear of failure. Two of them were very candid about being motivated by a fear of failure and used this term when describing their behavior. For example, OB said, “My career was based out of the fear of failure, and it is an unhealthy way, but it is what motivated me, and it is what pushed me on.” Similarly, TS stated, “I believe my individual motivation would’ve been fear of failure.” Although related, another participant did not like or use the term fear of failure, instead referring to a fear of losing and a dislike for the associated feelings. KO said, “I think that, for me, the most successful people detest losing, and they also have a fear of losing, or a fear of the feelings of losing afterwards.” The fifth participant described himself as being completely fearless in a physical sense and did not explicitly say whether he experienced or was motivated in any way by a fear of failure.

In addition, all five participants talked about a need for success and a need to win. Some participants were very open about their need to

win. WS stated, “...[I]t was all about winning. While I played any other sport or any other activity, I needed to win. I wanted to win.” KO took this a step further and described a higher purpose associated with needing to win: “We can’t possibly lose this game, because it’s a matter of something... It has a higher purpose, and I think sport, when you need to win, you need to find the right emotional triggers.”

Linking the fear of failure and need for success to early childhood experiences, losing a rugby match may represent a deep emotional loss from early life or may trigger feelings of low self-worth. If so, it is unsurprising that participants described the feelings associated with losing a match in such strong terms. KO stated, “[After a loss] there is a period of about three days when you’re in [...] mourning, like someone has died... Conversely, the feeling of winning is brilliant, not just for you, but for everyone around you.”

Fearless Dominance. Three of the five participants described feeling physically fearless and, in some cases, this feeling extended to a desire and ability to physically intimidate their opponents. WS shared, “Never in my life, of anything, would I have been fearful.” Meanwhile, KO explained, “When you’re playing against the very best people, you know, you’ve got to ask yourself the question, ‘If I was out front, and I’ve got my foot on someone’s throat, am I going to let it off? No way.’” Overall, all participants referred in some way to certain levels of fearlessness on the pitch; however, accounts of physically dominating their opponents varied between participants.

Dichotomous Thinking. Dichotomous thinking relates to the tendency to think in terms of binary options such as “black or white,” “good or bad” and “all or nothing” (Oshio, 2009). Analysis of interview transcripts suggested that all five participants had a tendency towards this kind of thinking. Some participants stated quite clearly that they saw life in “black or white” and admitted to being incredibly uncomfortable with grey areas. TI was one such player: “That was just how I saw life. It was immensely black and

white.” When talking about WS, his coach provided a similar example when talking about him: “He was as loyal to our cause and as loyal to me as any player I’ve ever coached. There seems to be an almost black and white view of people that they’re ‘either with me or against me.’”

Several participants also displayed a tendency to want to clarify whether things were beneficial to them or not. As OB shared, “... I was quite an inquisitive mind, so I wasn’t someone who [heard the instruction] ‘run around 10 times’ [said,] ‘Okay, I’ll run around.’ I’m like, ‘Why? How fast? To do [what], why? How does that fit into what we’re going to do?’”

Who They Became

Career Turning Points. All participants described a significant career turning point, which increased their overall focus, motivation, or determination. Two participants experienced a positive turning point, and three participants experienced a negative one. The negative career turning points described by participants related to being told that they were not good enough to reach the top of their sport or not being selected for a particular team. KO shared the following:

It was the first sort of disappointment I’d had, really, in terms of not being picked. I thought, “[...]. that really hurts, doesn’t it?” I was crying, I was really pissed off... Part of me thought, “This is a fucking joke. I’m the best player on the pitch but the reason I haven’t got in the team is because I’m not fit enough.” But surely, they could’ve done something to help me with that. I mean, they were quite brutal about it, and that was it. So, I thought, “Right, well, actually, if that’s the reason, it’s not down to ability. I’ve got to get myself sorted out.”

In contrast, the positive turning points included moving to new clubs with excellent sporting facilities and being selected for a tour and

training with a group of top players which inspired a strong work ethic and helped develop an understanding of what was required to be the best.

Importance of Sport. Two related themes emerged within the data regarding the importance of sport. The first theme is the extent to which the outcome of matches, in particular losing, affected participants, and the second refers to the sacrifices participants made, specifically within close personal relationships, to try to achieve success and avoid losing. All five described the lasting feeling that losing a match had on them and the extent to which this loss reflected something about their place in the world and perhaps even their sense of self-worth. KO perfectly illustrates this stating, “... you’ve lost the game, and it’s horrible, and it hurts. It affects your sleep; it affects everything you’re doing ... I just took it personally, took it really personally... I lost. It affected everything that happened in my life.”

For all participants the time they spent focused on rugby, either training and playing or simply ruminating about matches, either past or future, intruded greatly on their close personal relationships. OB stated, “And I didn’t have anything else. I didn’t have a lot of stuff going on. Even later on, I looked at people who [were] kind of like married and had kids, and was like, ‘No, that wouldn’t work.’”

Mastery and Outcome. All participants had a dual focus on mastery and outcome. KO’s coach highlighted this when he talked about him:

KO, undoubtedly, wanted to be the best player in the world. He absolutely thought he was. I thought he was. He, at his time, was the best [X position]. KO would have got in any world team, any team. He achieved that. Physically, he was an amazing athlete, amazing body. Equally, he just loved winning. He came into the changing room after we’d lost a game, and he was absolutely nuts. He’s an absolute winner.

Difficulty Expressing Emotion. For three participants, expressing emotions appeared to be difficult. They struggled to discuss or describe experiences which had been highly emotional for them, and often spoke about these emotive experiences (e.g., illness of a family member) in a very matter-of-fact and emotionless way. For these individuals there may be greater significance in what they do not say in relation to their feelings and emotions than what they do say (thus we have not presented an exemplar quotation). It was difficult to know whether omissions were deliberate (e.g., conscious avoidance) or due to difficulty identifying and describing feelings (e.g., alexithymia). Alexithymia has been described as a personality trait characterized by a difficulty identifying and distinguishing between feelings and describing those feelings to others (Taylor et al., 1991) and has been shown to be related to insecure attachment styles (Troisi et al., 2001). Alexithymia may offer an explanation as to why these three participants, though all described experiencing anxiety before a match, continued to participate in rugby despite this. More specifically, high-risk and highly emotive environments such as those associated with elite sport provide alexithymic athletes with opportunities to experience and master clear emotions (such as anxiety), which they would normally struggle to do, with such experience then providing transfer effects back into everyday life (cf. Woodman et al., 2010).

Performance Under Pressure. Participants successfully competed at the very highest level in rugby and undoubtedly maintained high levels of performance under pressure. All participants in this study described either, or both, a counterphobic attitude and total preparation (cf. Hardy et al., 2017). Regarding total preparation, all five participants described that in some form. TI provided an example of how feeling unprepared increased the pressure of competition for him: “Now, bearing in mind that kind of unprepared feeling was one that ... drained me of any power.” Meanwhile, OB described how he dealt with the pressure of competition by ensuring that his preparation was meticulous:

When I say anxious... I became so focused that I didn't let it distract

me ... and then because my preparation was quite meticulous, ... I was quite, ‘Okay, I do this. Right, now I do that. Right, then I do this. This is how I do this. I strap this, do that. Right, yes. Good. Good to go.

Three of the five participants demonstrated a counterphobic attitude to competition. They described high levels of pre-match anxiety but talked about how they were drawn to competition and still competed. OB summed this up when he said, “I did hate competing, but I did it.” TS described intense levels of anxiety and talked about how this was all forgotten as soon as the match started:

... [T]he next period is just like, “Why do I bother being a rugby player? I just don't like this,” until the moment, you can get off the bus, get in your kit, and get on the training pitch. Because getting out on the pitch, putting your kit on, that's what you've trained to do so that makes life that much easier, palatable, and once the game starts it's all over.

Attachment

One potential way to make sense of the personality characteristics and behaviors described and demonstrated by participants in this study is through the lens of theories of attachment. Four of the five participants described parental relationships in which they had experienced inconsistent emotional support from at least one parent and in which they had experienced prolonged physical separation. KO provides an example of this when describing his feelings about attending a new school:

I said to her “Why [X school]?” “Well, it's the best [X] school in the country and it's ...” I said, “But it's 250 miles away. Have I done something wrong?” She said, “Oh no, you'll be alright” [and] this that and the other ...

Meanwhile, some participants described early attachment experiences in which they were particularly distressed about being separated from a parent, which may suggest anxiety about the consistent availability of their caregivers. WS provided an example of this: “I had a real ‘Oh where is Mum, where is she?’ And my brother and the other kid didn’t really give me any security ... I was like ‘Oh my God, they’ve gone, they’ve gone, and I got a sudden panic on.’”

Alongside the negative view that their emotional and attachment needs would be consistently met by others, two participants nevertheless presented a positive self-view. KO illustrated this: “I mean, obviously, you’re nervous about certain things when you’re that age, but I think when you’ve got a parent who’s right behind you ... I think it just gives you a huge amount of confidence and belief, really.” In contrast, two other participants presented a negative self-view alongside their negative view of others. TI was one of these, sharing, “I think there was a fair feeling of proving worth and everything, for me... I needed to score highly on everything in order to prove that I was worthy.” This quotation also offers some insight into the presence of an external contingency of self-worth and a need to prove one’s own worth through success in sport.

Given the participants’ narratives about the experience of perceived emotional unavailability of at least one attachment figure and their stories overall, it is not unreasonable to theorize that participants may have developed adaptive strategies consistent with insecure attachment patterns. As a result, they may subsequently have internalized a view of others as unreliable, inconsistent, or rejecting along with an internalized sense of unworthiness (which may present as a negative self-view or as a pseudo-positive self-view). Self-protective attachment strategies, such as avoidance, are considered an adaptive response to protect oneself from danger (perceived or actual threat) and ensure survival (Crittenden, 2006). In addition, the presence of certain personality characteristics and behaviors (specifically narcissism, obsessiveness, perfectionism,

dichotomous thinking, difficulty expressing emotion, the importance of sport, and the need for success) may suggest a tendency toward avoidant attachment strategies within certain contexts (Boyson & Çam, 2016; Mikulincer et al., 2003; Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000). Within a sporting environment, which rewards individuals who are task and goal orientated and who can demonstrate an unemotional pursuit of success, avoidant attachment strategies may also be hugely adaptive and result in extremely positive high-performance behaviors and sporting outcomes.

Different Profiles Leading to Similar Outcomes

Despite most participants appearing to display some strategies consistent with avoidant attachment, there does appear to be some variance in the expression of certain personality characteristics. As previously stated, two of the five participants presented an overtly positive view of self, and these same two participants also displayed behaviors characteristic of grandiose narcissism. In addition, two different participants presented an overtly negative view of self, and the same two participants also displayed characteristics of vulnerable narcissism. Research supports the notion that there may be links between attachment and narcissism suggesting a direct association between grandiose narcissism and dismissive avoidant attachment (Rohmann et al., 2012). In addition, Zeigler-Hill and Vrabell (2023) linked aspects of narcissism with specific external contingencies of self-worth, suggesting the vulnerable narcissist derives self-worth from pleasing others and receiving external validation (which is a contingency of self-worth also linked to fearful avoidant attachment, where a negative view of others and self is held; Crocker et al., 2006), while the grandiose narcissist derives self-worth from demonstrating superiority over others (which is a contingency of self-worth also linked to dismissive avoidant attachment, where a negative view of others and positive view of self is held; Crocker et al., 2006).

Within our data we started to identify a pattern that reflected the link between avoidant attachment strategies with the constructs of narcissism, and contingencies of self-worth, in which we observed two distinct profiles or archetypes (Figure 1, next page). Although on the surface the behaviors of all five participants were perceived to be similar, they may in fact be driven by nuanced differences in the presentation of participant's self-view and their underpinning life story. At this stage, it is important to acknowledge our small sample size and the difficulties of generalizing findings to a wider athlete population. However, the in-depth data collection supported the plausibility of this position.

An example of these differing profiles was evident in the way participants described the importance of sport in their life. The two participants who presented a positive self-view, and displayed behaviors consistent with grandiose narcissism, made statements such as "Well, you know, you're not going to see your girlfriend as much as you want to, or you're not going to hang out with your mates...." Whereas participants who presented a negative self-view and displayed behaviors consistent with vulnerable narcissism, made statements such as this: "And I didn't have anything else, I didn't have a lot of stuff going on. Even later on, I looked at people who [were] kind of like married and had kids, and [I] was like, 'No, that wouldn't work'." The outcome of these statements is the same: Sacrifices were made to prioritize the pursuit of excellence in rugby. However, one set of individuals were able to make what might be described as selfish decisions to put their rugby career first, while the other set were inflexible in their pursuit of rugby and subsequently abstained from having anything other than rugby in their life.

This difference was again evident in the language used to describe their total preparation prior to matches. Participants who presented a positive self-view and behaviors consistent with grandiose narcissism, described their pre-match emotions in terms of "adrenaline" and used that feeling to ensure they were completely "focused" on what they

wanted. Participants who held a negative self-view and behaviors consistent with vulnerable narcissism, used language like "anxiety" and "feelings of dread" about not having systematically completed their preparation prior to a match. Again, the outcome appears, on the surface, to be the same. Both sets of participants ensured that no stone was left unturned in relation to their preparation for matches; however, one set appears to be ruthlessly striving for success, whereas the other appears to be systematically avoiding failure.

These two profiles are further observed in participant's experiences of fear of failure. Participants who presented negative self-view and vulnerable narcissism openly described themselves as experiencing high levels of fear of failure and were subsequently driven to do their utmost to avoid failure. On the other hand, the participants who presented a positive self-view and grandiose narcissism described a dislike of the feeling of losing, or, in one instance, a complete fearlessness. Participants' need for success also seemed to mirror this pattern. Participants who presented a positive self-view and grandiose narcissism made statements such as "I need to win," whereas participants who presented a negative self-view and vulnerable narcissism made statements such as "It's not OK not to win." One profile clearly shows an aspiration to win, while the other shows a desire to avoid failure. This pattern of either demonstrating traits and behaviors evident of a ruthless pursuit of success or a systematic avoidance of failure appears consistently within the data.

Understanding that similar high-performance behaviors may be underpinned by differences in personality characteristics and traits and attachment strategies has important implications for applied practice: This understanding will enable practitioners to take a more individualized approach to effective sport psychology delivery (see also Roberts & Woodman, 2017).

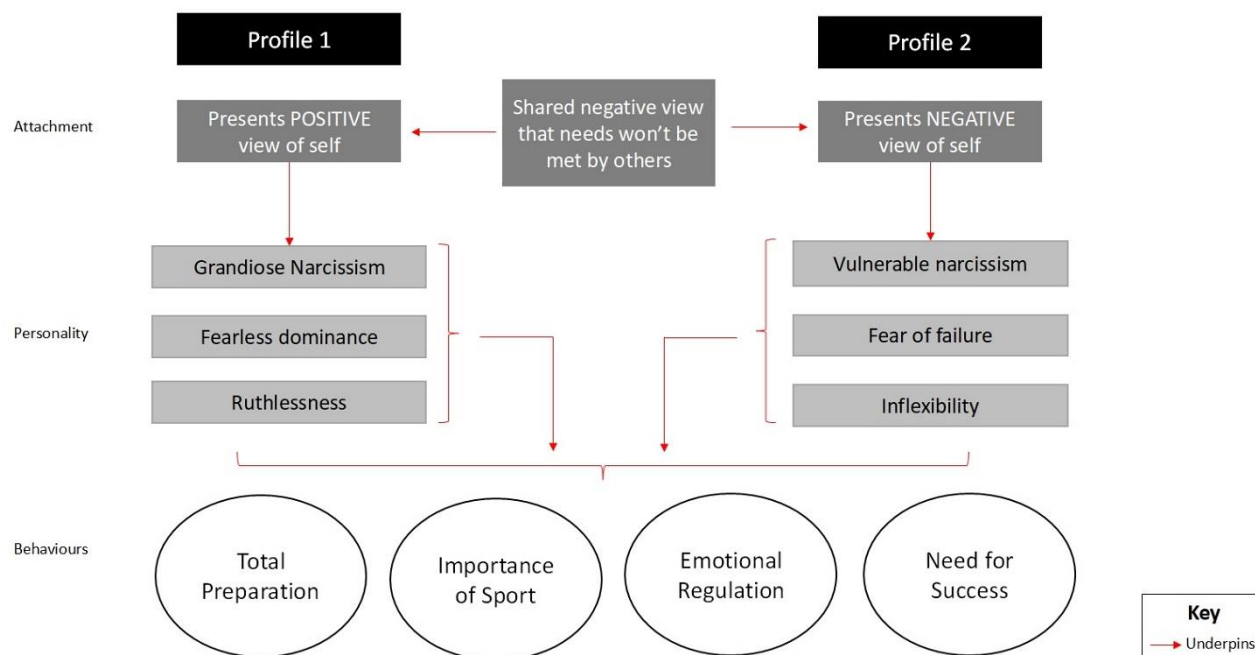


Figure 1. Model of differing profiles leading to the same behaviors associated with excellence in rugby.

Discussion

The overarching aim of this study was to understand the psychosocial factors that underpin the development of excellence in male rugby. Overall, results from the analysis identified that participants experienced a foundational adverse event, which typically occurred in close temporal proximity to a positive sport-related event and were raised within a family culture of striving. Within the current study, such information regarding adverse events came from only five participants; however, the types of adverse and positive sport-related events they recounted mirrored those described in previous work (e.g., Hardy et al., 2017) across various sports, namely, finding sport, having an influential coach, and experiencing an influential sporting pathway. In addition, participants also described experiencing disciplined training environments and participating in sport with older peers.

Personality traits also mirrored those found in previous research, with the participants in our study displaying traits of perfectionism,

obsessiveness, and narcissism (e.g., Hill et al., 2018; Vaughan & Madigan, 2021; Roberts & Woodman, 2017). Certain behaviors, which were revealed in the analysis, also mirror previous findings. All participants in the current study described a career turning point, in some cases a positive event, in others a negative one, which increased their motivation toward their sport. Additionally, they all demonstrated a dual focus on mastery and outcome, a need for success, an ability to perform under pressure, which was underpinned by total preparation or a counterphobic attitude, and they placed a high importance on sport in their life (see also Güllich et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2018).

The current study also identified new insights, which, to our knowledge, have not previously been documented in relation to developing excellence in sport. In relation to personality, participants demonstrated traits of dichotomous thinking. Dichotomous thinking consists of three components, preference for dichotomy, dichotomous beliefs and profit-and-loss thinking (Oshio, 2009). Preference for dichotomy is a thinking style which leads to a

preference for clarity and distinctness rather than confusion and ambiguity (Oshio, 2009). Dichotomous beliefs represent a thinking style in which everything in the world can be divided into two distinct groups. It is not difficult to see how these thinking styles could be advantageous in sport, particularly within team sports where clarity about the right and wrong way to do things and well-defined roles within the team would almost certainly be advantageous. Profit-and-loss thinking, which relates to a thinking style focused on how things might benefit or harm oneself (Oshio, 2009), was also mirrored in the way participants described their openness to new experiences, specifically within training set-ups. Most participants described having a conditional openness to new training techniques, which they would accept only if they understood the clear benefits to themselves and to the team.

In relation to early life experiences, analysis suggested a common experience of disruptions to parental relationships and signs of self-protective attachment strategies, specifically an avoidant attachment strategy. Early parental relationships and attachment have received little attention in athlete development literature; (however, see Davis et al. (2021) for a recent exception). A commonality among our participants was the experience of at least one parent being unavailable, either physically and/or emotionally, along with a degree of reverse parenting, known as parentification. Parentification, and the obligation this puts on the child to accommodate the emotional needs of their parent at the expense of the child's own self, can severely disrupt the development of secure attachment (Engelhardt, 2012).

Our results suggest that disruption to parental relationships and avoidant attachment strategies may be common among the world's best rugby players, and it would be interesting to explore whether these characteristics are shared by other world-class athletes. As mentioned, the role of attachment has yet to be investigated specifically within elite athlete populations; however, Thomson and Jaques (2019) lend some support to this premise. In their research into attachment and childhood adversity among groups of high achievers (e.g.,

athletes), they found a higher prevalence of dismissive attachment among athletes, compared to actors, dancers, and the general population. Further investigation in this area would be useful, not only to explore the prevalence of self-protective attachment strategies among world-class athletes but to understand better the possible benefits, at least in performance terms, that such attachment strategies might hold for the athlete.

The importance of certain personality characteristics in high-performance environments is now the subject of much research, with literature exploring the role of alexithymia (Woodman et al., 2008), narcissism (Roberts et al., 2018), perfectionism (Hill et al., 2018), and obsessiveness (Hardy et al., 2017) in performance outcomes within certain elite sporting environments. While these characteristics have often been associated with unhelpful outcomes in certain domains of life, the literature suggests that they may play an important role in the achievement of sporting success. Avoidant attachment strategies include the suppression and repression of emotional responses (Mikulincer, 2003), denial of personal imperfections (Mikulincer, 2003), striving for perfection to mask feelings of unworthiness (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000), an over-reliance on cognition (Boyson & Çam, 2016), and additionally, intolerance to ambiguity (Boyson & Çam, 2016) akin to dichotomous thinking. Drawing these findings together, it seems reasonable to theorize that there may be a high prevalence of individuals with adaptive but avoidant attachment strategies thriving—at least in performance terms—within high-performance sport environments.

The relationship between attachment and the perceptual processing of “threatening” stimuli may offer useful insight into additional benefits that avoidant attachment strategies may have within a high-performance environment such as sport. The prerequisite for avoidance of negative stimuli is vigilant attention (Maier et al., 2005). Avoidant individuals lack confidence in the availability of a protective caregiver when faced with a threat and subsequently do not hold an internal representation of a safe haven. The

individual must therefore vigilantly screen the environment for threat and react quickly to danger (Maier et al., 2005). This chronically heightened activation of the subconscious fear system creates hypervigilance and may contribute to the proficiency of avoidant individuals in evading emotional threats (Maier et al., 2005); e.g., the negative feelings associated with losing and conceivably even physical threats, such as an incoming tackle from an opposing player. This hypervigilance, which can be triggered by the development of insecure attachment and further honed during the early life challenges experienced by participants, goes some way to explain why, along with other specific traits and behaviors outlined in the literature, avoidant individuals may thrive within an international rugby environment.

Finally, another plausible explanation for the significance of attachment in the development of excellence is the notion of external contingencies of self-worth. Where insecure attachment strategies have been developed and individuals hold the belief that they are either unworthy of love and/or a parental figure is unreliable or unavailable to meet their emotional needs, they will start to draw conclusions about who they must be and what they must do to be a person of worth (Park et al., 2006). Without an intrinsic sense of worth individuals are motivated to prove their worth, both to themselves and others, and consequently develop a contingency of self-worth around activities within which they can demonstrate competency and accomplishment (cf. Crocker & Knight, 2005; Crocker et al., 2006). The potential for failure within the domain upon which self-worth is contingent poses a threat to self-esteem; consequently, effort is increased, and some individuals go to extraordinary lengths to avoid failure and achieve success (Crocker & Knight, 2005). Potential elite athletes, who have not developed an intrinsic sense of self-worth through their formative relationships, but who have positive early experiences within sport, may start to believe that their worth as a person is contingent upon their continued success as an athlete and go to

great lengths to continue their athletic success. This position may explain why elite athletes have typically been accepting of the performance narrative inherent in elite sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006).

In our analysis we also uncovered two distinct profiles, both perceived to be underpinned by avoidant attachment strategies and subtle differences in the presentation of self-view. All participants achieved the same outcome of becoming the best players in the world and demonstrated total preparation and a need for success. For all of them, sport had a place of high importance in their life, though they were ostensibly driven by slightly different traits and core beliefs. Participants who presented an overtly positive self-view also demonstrated signs of narcissistic grandiosity, a selfish or even ruthless pursuit of rugby, fearlessness, and a need to win. In contrast, participants who presented an overtly negative self-view also demonstrated signs of narcissistic vulnerability, an inflexible pursuit of rugby, a fear of failure, and a systematic avoidance of failure. The key point here is that although behaviors in different individuals may look the same, the behaviors may be underpinned by different factors and personal narratives. Thus, at an applied level, these findings underscore the benefits and importance of detailed psychological assessment and formulation (cf. Bickley et al., 2016), which will enable applied sport psychologists to enhance their practice and ultimately better support athletes.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The retrospective nature of this study precludes an assessment of causality. In addition, the small sample size reduces the ability to generalize findings to a wider athlete population (although we would anticipate they transfer to similar populations). Additionally, given that only one interview was conducted with each participant it was not possible to follow up on any answers or review the ongoing analysis with the participants (although coaches' perspectives were included in our analysis). Moreover, all participants had retired from their rugby careers at the time of the interviews and played within

an earlier era than those currently at the top of their game or on the pathway to elite rugby. As we cannot make inferences on relationships between variables from descriptive data, a prospective study with a larger sample size would be necessary to attribute fully causality between the experiences, characteristics, and behaviors observed and the development of excellence in rugby.

Based on the current findings, we propose a number of avenues for future research. First, we believe we have provided plausible explanations for the role of attachment in the development of excellence and the motivation and drive to pursue sporting excellence in the first place. However, we acknowledge that these explanations are relatively speculative. Further research in this area is necessary and has the potential to be of significant benefit to practitioners working with athletes in an applied setting. Second, our analysis revealed avoidant attachment strategies as a commonality among the participants in this study. It should be noted, however, that insecure attachment strategies also include preoccupied attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Within a wider athlete population, it is feasible that this may also be a common style of attachment, and researchers and practitioners would almost certainly benefit from its inclusion in future investigations of this nature.

Finally, further examination of underlying psychological profiles in alternative populations of elite athletes and/or those at different stages of development should also be considered. Such work is likely to be beneficial if it can help remove the assumption that all elite players fit a particular profile, thus helping practitioners take a more individualized approach to understanding and supporting players.

Conclusion

Our findings offer support to existing research which highlights the importance of personality traits such as narcissism, perfectionism, and obsessiveness, along with behaviors such as a dual mastery and outcome focus, importance of sport, a need for success, and performance under pressure, in the development of

excellence in sport. In addition, it also offers a new insight into the potential role of attachment in developing excellence with findings indicating that early adversity and the realization of avoidant attachment, coupled with a positive sport-related event, may underpin the drive and development of the necessary personality traits and behaviors to achieve excellence in rugby. Further research with a larger population of players to identify how such drive may be developed without encountering adversity would be beneficial.

Authors' Declarations

The authors declare that there are no personal or financial conflicts of interest regarding the research in this article.

The authors declare that they conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the Ethical Principles of the *Journal of Expertise*.

The authors declare that they are not able to make the dataset publicly available but are able to provide it upon request.

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