# Developing team resilience: A season-long study of psychosocial enablers and strategies in a high-level sports team

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*Objectives:* Previous research exploring team resilience has advanced our definitional, conceptual and theoretical understanding of this construct in elite sport. Although more is known about the psychosocial processes that underpin the resilient characteristics of sports teams, less is known about the contextual enablers that stimulate these mechanisms and the associated pathways to team resilience. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the psychosocial enablers and strategies that promote the development of team resilience within a high-level sport team.

*Design and method*: Through prolonged fieldwork, a season-long ethnography (11 months) was conducted. The sample consisted of a leading English national league-winning semi-professional rugby union team (*n* = 27 participants). Multiple data collection methods were employed (i.e., observation, interviewing, field notes, reflexive diary) as part of a holistic ethnographic approach. An iterative process of content data analysis was employed to identify key themes.

*Results:* Findings revealed five categories comprising multiple practical strategies, actions, and enablers for team resilience development: Inspiring, motivating, and challenging team members to achieve performance excellence; developing a team regulatory system based on ownership and responsibility; cultivating a team identity and togetherness based on a selfless culture; exposing the team to challenging training and unexpected/difficult situations; and promoting enjoyment and keeping a positive outlook during stressors. Cultural expressions and folk terms were identified to illuminate the context of the ethnography.

*Conclusions:* This study advanced team resilience research in sport by identifying key psychosocial strategies throughout a season as part of building team resilience. The findings provide practitioners with a platform for creating team resilience interventions in sport.

The scientific study of teams and group dynamics is an intriguing topic for sport psychology researchers and practitioners. In a review of dynamic group environments in sport and exercise, Eys, Bruner, and Martin (2019) presented two reasons why the study of group dynamics is important. First, the pervasiveness of groups (i.e., the extensiveness of team and group sport), and second, the central role of relationships within groups (i.e., the need to belong) and its potential positive (e.g., friendship) and negative influence (e.g., fear of rejection) on cognitions and emotions. The advancement of knowledge of team psychology in competitive sport is also essential in better understanding the processes that underpin collective functioning that precedes optimal team performance in a dynamic, competitive environment (Beauchamp & Eys, 2014). Kleinert et al. (2012) discussed a number of well documented scientific constructs associated with positive team outcomes including cohesion (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985), team roles (Eys, Beauchamp, & Bray, 2006), and team efficacy and potency (Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi, & Beubien, 2002). However, Kleinert et al. (2012) and others (see e.g., Martin, Bruner, Eys, & Spink, 2014) have also argued that several challenges remain in this area such as the general underrepresentation of team-level psychology, the need for a greater variety of team psychology perspectives (cf. Eccles & Tran, 2012), and more investigations which reflect 'real-world' practice needs. One particular need

concerns a team's ability to overcome adversity and avoid its potentially harmful effects (e.g., poor morale, low prosocial behaviour, chronic performance slumps).

Since the relational fabric of teams is fundamental to group functioning, understanding how to support teams to withstand shared experiences of adversity and maintain effective collective functioning offers practical appeal for researchers and practitioners. This topic has been recently addressed through the study of team resilience (see, for a review, Morgan, Fletcher, & Sarkar, 2017). Emanating from other psychology disciplines such as organizational behaviour (cf. Blatt, 2009; West, Patera, & Carsten, 2009) and occupational health psychology (cf. Bennett, Aden, Broome, Mitchell, & Rigdon, 2010), team resilience has emerged as an "intriguing new subject" (Eys et al., 2019, para. 3) and a new scientific construct in sport psychology research (Strauss & Ntoumanis, 2015). In other areas of psychology, researchers have proposed that team resilience can be developed through structured training programmes and interventions via various strategies and actions (Alliger, Cerasoli, Tannenbaum, & Vessey, 2015; Amarel, Fernandes, & Varajão, 2015). It is, therefore, somewhat surprising, that seeking a better understanding of team resilience and recognizing its importance in sport has been overlooked until relatively recently (Morgan, Fletcher, & Sarkar, 2015, 2017, 2013; Decroos et al., 2017; Galli, 2016; Yukelson & Weinberg, 2016).

In the first known study of team resilience in sport, Morgan, Fletcher, and Sarkar (2013) reported findings that defined and characterized team resilience in elite sport teams. Team resilience was defined as "a dynamic, psychosocial process which protects a group of individuals from the potential negative effect of the stressors they collectively encounter. It comprises of processes whereby team members use their individual and combined resources to positively adapt when experiencing adversity" (Morgan et al., 2013, p. 552). Four resilient characteristics of elite sport teams emerged from the study: group structure (i.e., conventions that shape group norms and values), mastery approaches (i.e., shared attitudes and behaviours that promote an emphasis on team improvement), social capital (i.e., the existence of high quality interactions and caring relationships within the team), and collective efficacy (i.e., the team's shared beliefs in its ability to perform a task).

To better understand the psychosocial processes underpinning team resilience, Morgan et al. (2015) subsequently conducted the second known study of team resilience in elite sport using narrative analyses of the autobiographies of eight members of the 2003 England rugby union World Cup winning team. Five psychosocial processes were revealed: transformational leadership (i.e., leaders of teams employing inspirational, personal, and emotional approaches with team members during stressors); shared team leadership (i.e., distributing team leadership to enhance wider accountability during stressors); team learning (i.e., acquiring and acting on new knowledge following setbacks); social identity (i.e., building a strong, distinctive team identity to bolster team members during stressors); and, positive emotions (i.e., promoting humour and banter during difficult situations). Overall, Morgan et al. (2015) described team resilience as a dynamic process that fluctuates over time in accordance with the stressors that the team is encountering and the stage of the team's development.

The growth in team resilience research in elite sport over the last five years or so has generated clearer definitional and conceptual clarity. However, understanding how team resilience can be practically developed remains a captivating topic for researchers and those working with teams. Indeed, at the individual level, researchers have discussed how psychological resilience can be developed in sport performers (see Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016a) with the aim of providing practitioners with sound information (e.g., evidence-based strategies) about developing resilience that is immediately applicable to their work (see, e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar's, 2016b, mental fortitude training program). While existing sport psychology research certainly points to potential ways of enhancing team resilience (e.g., profiling a team's resilient characteristics), the identification of evidence-based practical strategies to improve team resilience requires specific investigation. In their discussion of future research directions, Morgan et al. (2015) proposed that "creative qualitative approaches such as ethnography offer intriguing possibilities to study 'first-hand' the underlying team resilience mechanisms… and how they are developed (p. 76)". Such an approach could provide a valuable 'vantage point' from which to capture the strategies and actions used to improve team resilience in a team sport context. Furthermore, longitudinal research conducted over the cycle of a team's existence would advance our knowledge of its temporal, unfolding nature (Morgan et al., 2017).

In summary, research investigating team resilience in elite sport has begun to describe what resilient teams 'look like' (i.e., their characteristics) and how they function (i.e., their processes). However, less is known about the psychosocial enablers and cues that stimulate such mechanisms and the associated pathways to team resilience (Morgan et al., 2017; Wagstaff, Sarkar, Davidson, & Fletcher, 2017). Advancing knowledge of this area is a pivotal phase in developing an evidence-based understanding of impactful interventions in team sport contexts. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to explore the enablers and strategies that promote the development of team resilience within a high-level sport team. To effectively address this aim, we believe that an immersive, longitudinal, and prolonged approach to inquiry is needed. Such methods should enhance sensitivity to the contextual and subtle psychosocial dynamics that likely characterise team resilience development.

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## Discussion

Via a season-long ethnography, we explored the enablers and strategies that promote the development of team resilience within a high-level rugby union team. The results indicate that multiple, and often contextual and subtle, psychosocial enablers stimulate pathways to team resilience. Specifically, team resilience development strategies included: inspiring, motivating, and challenging team members to achieve performance excellence; developing a team-regulatory system based on ownership and responsibility; cultivating a team identity and togetherness based

on a selfless culture; exposing the team to challenging training and unexpected/difficult situations; and, promoting enjoyment and keeping a positive outlook during stressors. To explain these findings, the discussion is structured into two broad areas, which are discussed forthwith.

The first key message generated from the results is that team resilience was developed through numerous actions and enablers that produced strong coordinative influences on collective functioning during stressors. A range of strategies helped the team's functioning during stressors including: establishing team protocols for pressurized situations; reinforcing high expectations; and encouraging accountability. This offers support for team resilience research that has identified transformational and shared leadership as psychosocial processes underpinning team resilience (Morgan et al., 2015). For example, inspiring the team to reinforce high expectations of success during stressors resonates with the concept of transformational leadership. However, the findings of the present study also pointed to specific actions and cues that mobilize these processes (e.g., creating "protocols" for pressure situations). Moreover, the findings suggested the importance of the whole coaching team's complementary expertise and roles rather than one individual leader.

One potential explanation for the findings of the present study is the concept of "coordinating mechanisms" (Salas, Sims, & Burke, 2005, p. 564) that are associated with successful team outcomes. Salas et al. (2005) proposed that three coordinating mechanisms influence broader aspects of teamwork: shared mental models (cf. Cannon-Bowers, Salas, & Converse, 1993), closed-loop communication (cf. Eccles, 2010), and mutual trust (cf. Webber, 2002). In the present study, team resilience enablers and strategies included regularly exposing the team to challenging training and unexpected/difficult situations, which enhanced the team's shared mental model during stressors (i.e., a common understanding of actions). Team members often stated that they "knew what to do" during stressors "where nothing was a surprise". Salas et al. (2005) stated that, "the importance of this coordinating mechanism [shared mental model] increases in teams that must perform in stressful conditions" (p. 567). Interestingly, exposing the team to regular unexpected, difficult, pressurized scenarios in training appeared to provide a practical aspect with regards to the development of team resilience compared with the abstract/conceptual findings of Morgan et al. (2015). For example, Morgan and colleagues explained that team learning was a key psychosocial process underlying team resilience. However, the results of the present study provide more specific enabling strategies (e.g., using pressurized scenarios) that enhance the application of collective knowledge during stressors.

Research in medical and organizational settings also shows that closed-loop communication and mutual trust improves team performance (e.g., through error reduction) during stressful situations (cf. El-Shafy et al., 2018). The present study's findings reported how the team held regular communications about minimizing errors and putting "systems in place" to clarify actions under pressure. Mutual trust was cultivated through enablers such as having a shared vision, encouraging honest feedback, and distributing responsibility during difficult periods. This resonates strongly with Hodge, Henry, and Smith's (2014) study that identified the role of ownership, accountability,

and "dual management models" (Hodge, Henry, & Smith, 2014, p. 64) for the 2011 Rugby World Cup champions, New Zealand. The findings also offer support for the role of shared leadership processes for team resilience (Morgan et al., 2015); however, employing ethnography in the present study also seemed to offer greater insight about how ownership and responsibility is enacted over time through specific strategies (e.g., create defined leadership roles, coaches allowing team members to take responsibility during setbacks, encouraging honest feedback, holding team briefings to discuss team functioning following setbacks).

The influence of numerous coordinative factors during stressors illuminated how team resilience developed differently in different situations. Specifically, during the pre-season, team protocols aligned team members' commitment to shared goals through enhanced team members' collective sensemaking (cf. DeChurch & Mesmer-Magnus, 2010). Later in the season, team resilience was developed by activating practical strategies to emphasize the importance of the team enjoying their sporting challenges. These findings suggest that harnessing a range of coordinative factors over time, and in different situations, is critical for team resilience development. This resonates with team resilience research in organizational behaviour; West et al. (2009), for example, found that team resilience only developed following prolonged multiple interactive experiences. The findings of the present study suggest that team resilience is developed through ongoing multiple team-environmental interactions (cf. Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993).

The second overarching message generated from the results of the present study was the salience of team culture. This refers to the values, beliefs, standards, and power distribution within a team environment (Dew, 1998). Numerous enabling actions and cues nurtured a culture that helped develop team resilience and mobilize constructive shared perceptions and responses during stressors. For example, team members' collective ambition created a "buzz about the place" and they frequently reminded each other to instil a "culture of confidence without arrogance and complacency". The results also showed that collective actions were employed to harness a "selfless culture" during setbacks. These findings provide support for Morgan et al.'s (2015) research that cultivating a team's social identity is a key underlying team resilience process. Further support was offered for the role of intense physical and affective commitment within a collision sport such as rugby union. However, in comparison to Morgan et al. (2015), the findings of this study point to the importance of team culture, possibly because ethnography provided a 'first-hand' deeper immersion into a team's functioning. The psychosocial enablers and strategies used to cultivate the team's identity and togetherness (e.g., phoning team members who were injured to provide support, putting the team first and "sacrificing" individual disappointment if not selected) illustrates the numerous 'acts' of their selfless team culture […]. A potential explanation for the role of culture for team resilience development is its influence on enabling constructive team member actions, promoting ownership, and monitoring power relations during challenging situations (cf. Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Driskell, Salas, & Johnston, 1999).

Although the findings of the present study reinforced the role of strategies that fostered a strong work ethic and "accountability" for team resilience development, the team's culture placed a high value on 'enjoyment'. Positive emotions have been associated with resilience at both the individual (Gonzalez, Newton, Hannon, Smith, & Detling, 2018; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004) and the team level (Meneghel, Salanova, & Martínez, 2016; Morgan et al., 2015). Interestingly, Meneghel et al. (2016) suggested that *collective* positive emotions develop team resilience through affective sharing mechanisms such as emotional contagion (see e.g., Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992). This offers support for the findings of Morgan et al. (2015) who suggested that the use of humour and banter throughout a team helped to absorb the potential harmful effects of stressors. In comparison to Morgan et al's (2015) findings, the broader theme of 'enjoyment' and 'a positive outlook' emphasized that maintaining team members' satisfaction, pleasure, and wellbeing during a season of intense competitive sport was essential to withstand stressors. Extending this explanation further, the findings may suggest that team resilience is developed through group-based appraisals and their influence on collective emotions (cf. Kuppens & Yzerbyt, 2012). Specifically, Kuppens and Yzerbyt (2012) argued that when there is a strong team identity, "people start seeing their social environment through some sort of group lens" (p. 21), and this can lead to group-based appraisals and group emotions.

## Strengths and limitations

A particular strength of this study was the use of ethnographic inquiry to explore team resilience development during a competitive sport season. Prolonged immersion illuminated how team resilience was developed in different situations through multiple team interactions. Indeed, a significant strength of the study was that the investigation involved full access to the team each week during the season where the first author was present as much as the participants themselves. This elicited a degree of "immersion and concrete detail… necessary to ascertain tacit knowledge…" (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). Another strength of the present study was the selection of ethnography to address real-world practices of teams to offer a deeper insight into the strategies, enablers, and actions for team resilience development. It is hoped that the triangulation and depth of research 'evidence' enabled naturalistic generalizability (cf. Smith, 2018) for readers engaged in team sport settings. A further strength of this study was that team resilience development strategies were captured across multiple time points. To date, and to the best of our knowledge, no other study in psychology has investigated team resilience over such a prolonged period. Salas et al. (2005) argued that team-level investigations should assess team processes during "a variety of conditions and situations" (p. 587). A season-long study allowed appropriate time to explore team members' interactive experiences on multiple occasions rather than a snapshot of team resilience (cf. Galli & Gonzalez, 2015; Morgan et al., 2017).

A limitation of the present study, perhaps, lies in the positive emphasis of team resilience development. While team resilience is a desirable construct, dysfunctional aspects of team resilience can exist (Galli, 2016). For example, the findings illuminated the discourse associated with the

physical commitment required in a collision sport (e.g., "put your body on the line"). A potentially 'darker' portrayal of team resilience development was not reflected in this ethnography; for example, while a selfless culture is important for team resilience, it should not be at the expense of one's health and wellbeing and seen as a 'badge of honour' (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016b). Furthermore, while we consider that a strength of the present study is the richness of longitudinal 'evidence' and naturalistic generalizability (cf. Smith, 2018), we acknowledge that the findings of the study might be peculiar to a collision sport's culture. The engagement of critical friends was a valuable part of encouraging reflexivity. However, for a longitudinal study of this nature, a wider range of critical friends (e.g., coaches of other team sports, researchers in other group settings) might have broadened one's interpretations of the data (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2018).

## Future research

There are a number of avenues for future research arising from the present study. First, the ethnographic approach utilized in this study could provide a foundation for pre-intervention evaluations of team resilience development (cf. Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 2013). Indeed, the findings have offered support for the psychosocial team resilience processes identified by Morgan et al. (2015) together with some additional considerations (e.g., exposure to challenging training situations). The present study's concentration on identifying contextual enablers that stimulate these mechanisms and associated pathways to team resilience might act as a bridge for interventions that assess pre/post quantitative improvements. Indeed, future research should design team resilience interventions using pre-post intervention quantitative analyses. Interventions should involve enacting multiple team resilience development enablers, cues, and strategies [...] to enhance the protective characteristics and processes found in previous studies in this area (see Morgan et al., 2015). To date, no team resilience interventions have been conducted in sport psychology and this represents an exciting opportunity for researchers (Morgan et al., 2017). To measure pre/post changes in team resilience, a valid and reliable scale is required. The CREST inventory developed by Decroos et al. (2017) might offer researchers a basis to assess changes in team resilience.

Second, since team resilience is defined as a dynamic, temporal process, further longitudinal research conducted over the cycle of a team's existence would enhance our understanding of how team resilience is developed and whether it is more effective at one time point in a team's history than another (Morgan et al., 2017). This points to the value of conducting team resilience research over numerous time points. Galli and Gonzalez (2015) argued that, "if the goal is to truly understand resilience as a process that unfolds across time, "one-shot"… studies of sport resilience will necessarily lack depth compared to studies… at multiple time points" (p. 252). Moreover, Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, and Gilson (2008) recommended that researchers embrace the complexity of team investigations and proposed research methods which are sensitive to time (e.g., the use of diaries, time-sampling). Team resilience researchers might also apply the notion of resilience trajectories

(Bonanno & Diminich, 2013) to capture the varying effects of different forms of stressors when developing team resilience.

Third, future research should explore the relationship between team culture and team resilience. The role of strategies to inspire, motivate, and challenge team members to achieve performance excellence could be examined using quantitative and qualitative approaches. These strategies resonate with previous team resilience research, which identifies transformational leadership as an important team resilience process (cf. Morgan et al., 2015; Rodríguez-Sánchez & Perea, 2015). Indeed, research suggests that transformational leadership instils a proactive and resilient culture in organisations (Rodríguez-Sánchez & Perea, 2015). This also resonates with the role of coaches' use of character-building efficacy in elite rugby union teams (cf. Hodge et al., 2014). Observation studies should be conducted to assess effective coaching strategies to influence team members' behaviour during stressors. Finally, case studies might be employed to explore the relationship between team resilience, culture, and the factors that influence its development (cf. Vargo and Seville, 2011).

## Practical implications

The findings of this study provide sport psychologists, coaches, and those working in teams with multiple psychosocial enablers and strategies to stimulate pathways to team resilience. First, sport psychologists should spend sufficient time with 'gatekeepers' (e.g., Head Coach) to understand a team's strengths and acquire the contextual intelligence necessary for effective interventions (cf. Brown, Gould, & Foster, 2005). Observing a team's behaviour during different stressors and noting strengths and weaknesses will provide a stronger platform for interventions.

Second, when developing team resilience, practitioners should implement the psychosocial strategies described in this study. Inspiring team members to achieve performance excellence during a team's pre-season could be enabled by collectively agreeing team protocols. This could involve discussion about how team members should positively adapt to challenging situations (e.g., adjusting to the loss of key players, how to communicate when losing (and winning) during a match, and how to individually and collectively respond to poor officiating). During stressors, these protocols should be reinforced and further developed so that team members are encouraged to see "the bigger picture" as part of their overall psychological and performance development. Coaches should reflect on how they lead by example during setbacks, and express confidence in the team to promote some perspective in difficult moments.

Third, as a team develops, individuals should be given opportunities to take responsibility during challenging situations. Coaches should foster a resilient team culture based on accountability and support to each other during stressors. Leadership roles and groups will promote accountability (cf. Hodge et al., 2014) and a wider sharing of knowledge to respond effectively during adversity. To ensure that team members are "on the same page" during stressors, teams should be regularly exposed to "challenging training" and rehearse pressurized situations (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016b). The use of "what-ifs", match analysis (i.e., individual and group responses to setbacks) and debriefs

to discuss the benefits of new knowledge of setbacks can enhance the development of team resilience through increased learning and coordination (Alliger et al., 2015).

Fourth, the findings of this study showed that cultivating a strong team identity and selfless culture was vital for team resilience development. This could be nurtured through displays of the team's physical and emotional commitment during stressors (e.g., using noticeboards, social media). Celebrating 'moments of team resilience' can boost connectivity during setbacks. Those working with teams should recognize the importance of time for a resilient culture. It is possible to achieve 'quick wins' through the establishment of team protocols (e.g., how will we collectively act when we lose a key team member to injury or disciplinary penalty?); however, creating a sense of belonging, cultivating constructive relationships, and developing psychological safety during stressors (cf. Edmondson, 1999) will require ongoing application. Coaches should also ensure that they promote enjoyment. Coaches could plan to provide players with adequate opportunities for rest at suitable points in the season, consider timings of social occasions, and monitor body language during stressors.

Finally, this study involved a top-level semi-professional team. While team resilience enablers and strategies might be similar at both elite and semi-professional levels, their emphasis might be different. Moreover, the intensity of stressors is likely to vary. Therefore, team resilience interventions might be similar across competitive levels but the development and sophistication of implementing these strategies may differ. To illustrate, Hodge and Smith (2014) suggested that the limited resources of amateur teams might restrict coaches' abilities to implement a range of anti-choking strategies. A team resilience intervention at lower levels of team sport could utilize a staged approach by focusing on one or two strategies at a time. Interestingly, the present study reported how team resilience was developed by creating a 'professional environment' within a semi-professional setting.

## Concluding remarks

This study has explored the enablers and strategies that promote the development of team resilience within a high-level sport team. A season-long ethnography identified multiple, and often contextual psychosocial enablers that stimulate pathways to team resilience. The results were categorized into five main themes: inspire, motivate, and challenge team members to achieve performance excellence; develop a team-regulatory system based on ownership and responsibility; cultivate a team identity and togetherness based on a "selfless" culture; expose the team to challenging training and unexpected/difficult situations; and promote enjoyment and a positive outlook during stressors. It is hoped that this study advances knowledge of the psychosocial enablers that promote the development of team resilience and contributes towards an evidence-based understanding of impactful interventions in team sport contexts.

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