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An exploration of coaches' and sport psychologists' experiences of managing performance blocks

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ABSTRACT

This study examined coaches' and sport psychologists' experiences of managing performance blocks and the mechanisms they adopted in supporting athletes who experience them. This qualitative study adopted a constructivist philosophical paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with elite coaches ($n = 8$) and HCPC-registered sport psychologists ($n = 7$). Following transcription, interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicated that managing performance blocks is a complex and dynamic process whereby participants iteratively moved through five stages (i.e., understanding the athlete, intervening in performance blocks, experiencing the emotional rollercoaster, coping with emotions, and learning). From an applied perspective, findings encourage coaches and sport psychologists to create trusting relationships with the athlete and demonstrate an emotional understanding of athletes' needs. Findings indicate that lowering the psychological demand and increasing the athletes' coping resources such as by offering emotional support is an important strategy in the management of performance blocks.

Lay summary: This article explores eight coaches' and seven sport psychologists' experiences of managing performance blocks. Coaches and sport psychologists continually shifted between five stages in understanding and supporting athletes' experiences of performance blocks. Findings highlight the importance of trusting and collaborative relationships, emotional intelligence, and coping strategies when managing performance blocks.

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APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

- Coaches and sport psychologists must create and maintain trusting relationships with the athlete and those surrounding the athlete before attempting to intervene in performance blocks to ensure athletes feel safe in discussing performance blocks and receive consistent and supportive messaging.
- Coaches and sport psychologists are encouraged to develop and utilize effective coping strategies throughout managing performance blocks. Examples including seeking support from colleagues and supervisors, participating in reflective practice, and seeking emotional support from friends and family.
- Sporting organizations can improve the management of performance blocks by providing coach education sessions to raise

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awareness of the causes and warning signs, and highlight instances of best and worst practice for management.

An exploration of coaches' and sport psychologists' experiences of managing performance blocks

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics brought athlete mental health and welfare to the forefront of conversation across global media, largely amplified by Simone Biles' experiences with the "twisties." Biles, the greatest gymnast of all time, withdrew from three individual events after failing to perform two and a half twists on vault, describing that she had no control over her body and felt lost in the air. Almost immediately, Biles' experiences created a surge of interest into an area known as performance blocks; defined by Bennett et al. (2013) as "a sudden and temporary loss of fine and/or gross motor and cognitive control manifesting as locked, stuck, or frozen movements" (p. 19).

It has been a decade since Bennett et al. (2013) coined the term performance blocks, and yet disparate terms continue to be used. For example, "lost move syndrome" is prevalent in artistic sports such as gymnastics, diving, and trampolining (Day et al., 2006), comparable to Simone Biles' descriptions of the "twisties." The "yips" is often used for sports centralizing fine motor skills such as cricket and golf and has been placed on a spectrum. Type I yips, a form of focal dystonia associated with physiological symptoms such as spasms and jerks, and type II yips, a form of choking (i.e., catastrophic performance breakdown under pressure; Mesagno et al., 2008) associated with psychological symptoms such as anxiety, represent the extremities (Smith et al., 2000), and type III yips represent those who experience the yips both psychologically and physiologically (Clarke et al., 2015). The yips is used interchangeably with "target panic" in archery (Clarke et al., 2015; Prior & Coates, 2020) and "dartitis" in darts (Bawden & Maynard, 2001). As type II yips are a form of choking that can be alleviated through traditional cognitive-behavioral methods (e.g., Mesagno et al., 2008), researchers of performance blocks have focused on addressing type I yips (Bennett et al., 2016). In particular, Bennett et al. (2013) compared type I yips with lost move syndrome to find that both were characterized by a loss of cognitive, emotional, and physical control, and only sport-specific differences could distinguish them. Therefore, it was recommended that the more general term "performance blocks" be adopted in future research (Bennett et al., 2013). This research focuses on type I yips amongst other sport-specific variations of this phenomenon (i.e., lost move syndrome, target panic, etc.) and adopts the term performance blocks in an effort to bring together the body of literature surrounding the phenomenon.

The development of performance blocks has been likened to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bennett, 2015), as research has shown afflicted athletes commonly report early life experiences involving behavioral, psychological, and/or psychophysiological distress (e.g., death of a loved one, relationship breakdown, injury) preceding experiences of performance blocks (Bennett & Maynard, 2017; Stokes, 2009). The link between trauma and performance blocks is attributed to a conversion disorder (Baker & Humblestone, 2005), where a psychologically significant event causing emotional

distress inhibits the brain's ability to process this event (Sachdev, 2009), and so the event is stored subconsciously (Stokes, 2009). Following exposure to environmental cues that were present in the initial traumatic event (Shapiro, 2001), the brain will express this trauma through physical symptoms (i.e., performance blocks) to prevent the emotionally distressing reexperiencing of the event (Baker & Humblestone, 2005; Stokes, 2009). However, as consistently highlighted in PTSD research (e.g., Egan et al., 2014), not every athlete who has experienced trauma will experience performance blocks (Bennett, 2015), indicating a role for individual differences.

Researchers have identified certain characteristics involved the development and maintenance of performance blocks, for example, unhealthy perfectionism (Roberts et al., 2013), rumination (Bennett et al., 2016; Rotheram, 2007), reinvestment (Bennett et al., 2016), and anxiety (Bennett & Maynard, 2017). Specifically, an athlete's perfectionistic and ruminative tendencies may increase the likelihood that an event is appraised as traumatic, resulting in higher levels of anxiety (Bennett, 2015), and an athlete's propensity to ruminate and reinvest can exacerbate and prolong the experience of performance blocks (Bennett et al., 2016).

To date, a number of traditional intervention strategies have been implemented in the treatment of performance blocks including cognitive-behavioral strategies (Bell et al., 2009) and skill modification strategies (Rotheram et al., 2012), though typically, these interventions have reported to provide only short-term relief (e.g., Day et al., 2006), suggesting that intervening in performance blocks extends beyond normal coaching or sport psychology support. Bennett (2015) and Bennett et al. (2017) have reported success in two case studies of using eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy with graded exposure. EMDR is an eight-phase clinical approach that integrates several aspects of traditional psychological orientations with bilateral dual attentional stimulation (e.g., eye movements) (Shapiro, 2017), again suggesting that performance blocks has subconscious underpinnings and intervening extends beyond normal coaching or sport psychology support, given that clinical expertise is required.

Earlier research specific to lost move syndrome has shown that athletes often rely on the help provided by coaches (Day et al., 2006), though athletes have also reported that coaches do not understand performance blocks and often react negatively (e.g., becoming frustrated, pressuring the athlete to perform the affected skill), which exacerbates the problem (Maaranen et al., 2017). With this in mind, it is clear that coaches and sport psychologists can play a key role (e.g., as preventing, as intervening, or as providing social support) in determining how athletes experience performance blocks, yet research exploring these roles is limited. Indeed, some attempt has been made to offer insight (Bennett & Maynard, 2017; Feigley, 2009), though Feigley's (2009) recommendations for gymnastics coaches are not theoretically underpinned, and Bennett and Maynard's (2017) recommendations for sport psychologists are yet to be empirically tested.

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of coaches and sport psychologists who have worked with athletes experiencing performance blocks. It is anticipated that findings will offer a deeper understanding of the current support process for athletes experiencing performance blocks and highlight where further

education and support is needed to inform effective management strategies for performance blocks.

Methods

Research philosophy

This study followed a constructivist approach grounded in a relativist ontology, assuming the existence of multiple and equally valid realities (Schwandt, 1994), and a subjectivist epistemology, assuming that reality is co-constructed between the knower and the known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The study takes a qualitative approach and focuses on how coaches and sport psychologists interpret their lived experiences of working with athletes through performance blocks.

Participants & sampling

Participants were initially recruited using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), where coaches and sport psychologists known to the researchers were invited to participate. Furthermore participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria stated that participants must have worked with elite-level (at least national-standard; Swann et al., 2015) competitive athletes and worked with at least one athlete through performance blocks (on average, coaches had worked with 38 athletes and sport psychologists with 8 athletes). Sport psychologists were also required to be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) which is the regulating Body governing applied practice for psychology in the UK. Fifteen participants took part in the study, including eight coaches (4 male, 4 female) and seven sport psychologists (6 male, 1 female). Overall, participants managed performance blocks across seven sports (archery, $n = 3$; acrobatic gymnastics, $n = 1$; artistic gymnastics, $n = 4$; cricket, $n = 4$; diving, $n = 1$; golf, $n = 1$ tennis, $n = 1$; trampolining, $n = 1$; note: one participant had managed performance blocks in two different sports). Four participants had worked with athletes at the national level (i.e., British championships), and eleven participants had worked with athletes at the international level (i.e., Commonwealth Games, Olympic Games, World championships).

Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, the researcher contacted participants via email and invited them to take part in the study. Participants were provided with standardized information regarding the purpose of the study and relevant ethical issues including confidentiality, anonymity, right to withdraw, and data protection.

Following written informed consent, interviews took place online via Zoom. At the start of each interview, the purpose of the study and relevant ethical constraints were reiterated to the participants. The interview was organized into four main areas: the participants' understanding of performance blocks; their attempts to manage performance blocks; their emotional experiences when working with performance blocks; and

any recommendations for future applied and/or academic work in the field. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the lead researcher.

Semi-structured interviews

In line with a constructivist philosophical position, a semi-structured interview using open questioning was deemed most appropriate. An extensive review of previous literature and the lead researcher's previous experiences of performance blocks guided the development of a semi-structured interview guide.

Following standardized comments surrounding the research aims and ethical considerations, participants were asked about their experience in their role ("*Can you tell me about your background as a coach/sport psychologist?*") to help build trust and rapport (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). The first area of the interview then focused on exploring the participants' understandings of performance blocks, including their definitions of performance blocks, and how and why performance blocks manifested. Here, participants were not provided with definitions of performance blocks so that the results could reflect coaches' and sport psychologists' general understandings of the topic. The participants were then asked about their role in managing performance blocks (e.g., "W*hat strategies have you tried in managing performance blocks?*" and "*How successful did you find this?*"). The interview then focused on the participants' emotional experiences of performance blocks (e.g., "*What emotions did you feel whilst working with the athlete?*" and "*Did you use any strategies to support yourself?*"). The fourth area of the interview explored the participants' recommendations for the future of applied and/or academic work in performance blocks. Throughout the interview, participants were asked probing questions to elicit further information from their answers, for example, "*Can you describe the situation?*" and "*Can you give an example of that?*" In closing, the participants were asked if there was anything they would like to add and thanked for their involvement in the research.

Data analysis and rigor

We analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) framework for reflexive thematic analysis. The lead author transcribed, read, and re-read the interviews to gain familiarization with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2016), and noted initial thoughts throughout this process to inform the creation of codes (e.g., going back to basics, mental skills training). Coding was predominantly inductive and was done at a semantic level to present the data as a reflection of the coaches' and sport psychologists' communication of their experiences. The lead author then grouped similar codes together to generate overarching themes (e.g., intervening in performance blocks), which were further organized into sub-themes (e.g., physical interventions; psychological interventions) (Braun & Clarke, 2016). In discussions across the three authors, the themes were reviewed to ensure their applicability to the research question, and then defined and refined to ensure that the lead researcher's analysis "fit" with the authors' overall representation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

In the present research, rigor was enhanced in several ways, mainly through member reflections and critical discussions. First, the completed analysis was shared with participants to encourage member reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2018) where, rather than verifying results, participants were invited to offer additional data to the analysis. Several participants did offer further insights and clarifications in this process, and this was added to the analysis. Furthermore, throughout data collection and analysis, the authors engaged in critical friend discussions surrounding self-reflexivity and interpretations of data analysis to ensure transparency about biases, motives, and goals for the research.

Researcher reflexivity

I (the lead researcher) have experienced performance blocks as a gymnast. I felt misunderstood by my coaches, and I was unbeknown to sport psychology support, thus, my performance blocks were left untreated, and I made the decision to abruptly end my gymnastics career. As such, this experience has created personal biases and assumptions that influenced knowledge production throughout this study. For example, I went into the data collection and analysis processes with assumptions about what results I would find based on my experiences with my gymnastics coaches (i.e., they did not understand performance blocks or how to manage them) and based on my goals for the research (to progress the field in ultimately finding the panacea for performance blocks—somewhat unrealistic). Reflexive discussions with the second and third authors as critical friends helped me to couch my assumptions and remain focused on the participants' experiences rather than my own. Nonetheless, my experiences as an athlete were valuable in helping to co-construct the data with the participants, both in the data collection and data analysis, as reflected in the subjectivist epistemological position of this paper.

Results

A total of 130 codes were created and organized into five overarching themes and seventeen subthemes to represent the coaches' and sport psychologists' experiences of managing performance blocks. These five themes were understanding the athlete, intervening in performance blocks, experiencing the emotional "rollercoaster," coping with their emotions, and learning from and for performance blocks. A preliminary conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1 to showcase the coaches' and sport psychologists' overall process of supporting athletes through performance blocks, with each overarching theme representing a different stage in the process. The following section presents an exploration of each overarching theme, with the differences and similarities in the coaches' and sport psychologists' responses specified throughout.

At the start of each interview, participants were asked to define and describe performance blocks based solely on their experiences (i.e., no clarification or input was provided). Though some participants referred to sport-specific terms relative to their sport (e.g., yips, lost move syndrome), all coaches and sport psychologists provided definitions and descriptions of the causes and presentation of performance blocks that were aligned with those in the literature, for example, one sport psychologist said, "you get anything from the freezing in the skill or twitching to jerks and muscle spasms … it's

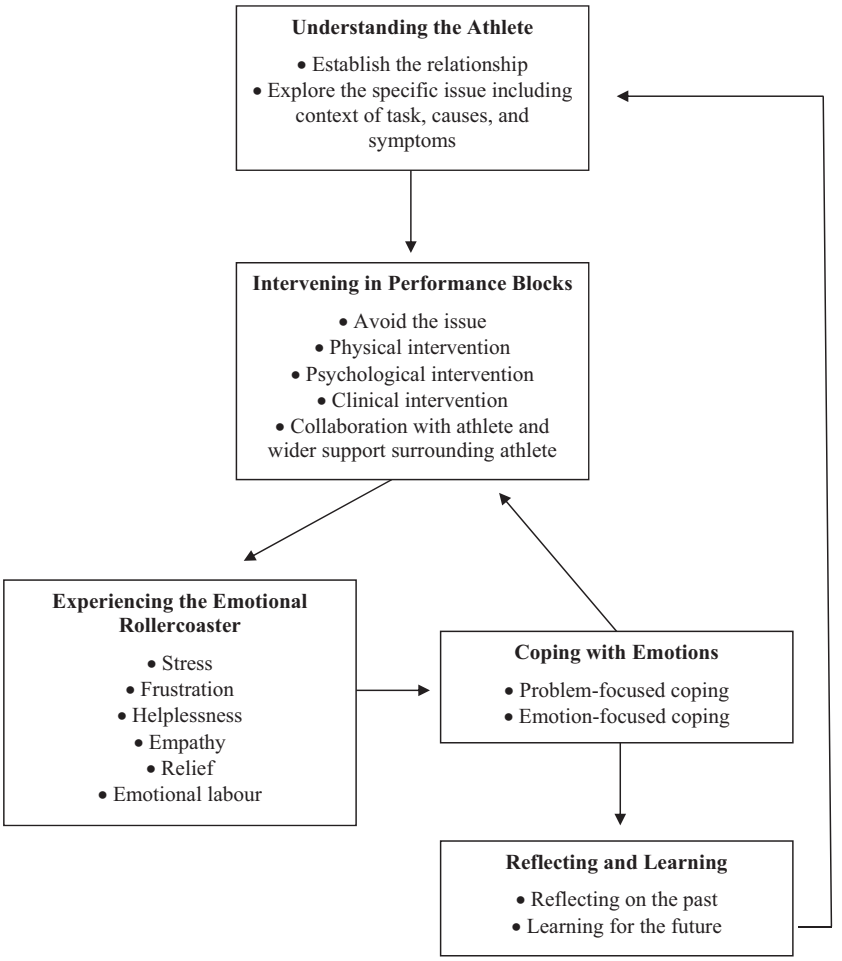

Figure 1. A preliminary framework of coaches' and sport psychologists' experiences of managing performance blocks.

almost like a complete loss of ability to complete the skill." Similarly, Bennett et al. (2013) defined performance blocks as a loss of control manifesting as frozen movements, disrupting the performance of a previously automatic skill. As such, we can be sure that the participants' reflections on their experiences of performance blocks are relevant to this research study.

Understanding the athlete

Both the coaches and sport psychologists described that understanding the athlete underpinned their experiences of working with performance blocks. This overarching theme included two subthemes: establishing the relationship and exploring the issue.

Establishing the relationship

Participants reported that the relationship with the athlete provided a foundation for their work, including, but not limited to, managing performance blocks. Specifically, the

coaches and sport psychologists focused on creating a relationship that was built on trust, because this enabled the athlete to speak openly about their experiences of performance blocks and promoted the development of empathic accuracy. For example, one coach said:

> One of the things I think helped to start with, we had a good relationship, she trusted me. So I was able to go in there and discuss it. Because it's a horrible subject to have to talk about, you're talking about a potential ending of career issue, but you have to address it because you've got to try help the player.

As performance blocks are a difficult topic for athletes to discuss, a trusting relationship contributes to a psychologically safe environment, allowing athletes to feel safe to share their experiences thus enabling coaches and sport psychologists to explore the issue.

Explore the issue

The participants explained that performance blocks were an individual experience, because "it manifests itself differently in each child," (gymnastics coach) and performance blocks manifest differently in different sports and skills, for example, in fine-motor versus gross-motor skills. Therefore, after establishing a trusting relationship, the coaches and sport psychologists explored the specific issue by discussing the athlete's thoughts and feelings and observing their performance. For the sport psychologists, this process also included formulating a needs analysis, wherein they attempt to assess and understand a client's psychological needs. One sport psychologist explained:

> I do a really thorough needs analysis in relation to trying to understand what's happening. And I try and do it very holistically in relation to their whole life, and just try and get a feel for what's going on. But also try and get different viewpoints and perspectives. So speaking to coaches, teammates, just about what they're seeing and what they're hearing.

Exploring the athlete's life outside of sport was a common practice amongst all participants, as they explained that performance blocks were often caused by external stressors such as school, work, or family issues. The participants' understanding of the athlete then informed the chosen strategies for intervention.

Intervening in performance blocks

The participants used various intervention strategies in their attempts to manage performance blocks, organized into five subthemes: postponing or avoiding the issue; physical intervention; psychological intervention; clinical intervention; and collaboration.

Postponing or avoiding the issue

This subtheme included the participants' attempts to avoid performance blocks, for example, by taking some time away from the affected skill or, by avoiding the affected skill completely. Both coaches and sport psychologists used this strategy, for example, one sport psychologist said:

> I suggested she stopped bowling, because at the time she had a lot of exams going on … with a view towards the end of the season, when exams were finishing, we start nice

> and slowly bringing her back … she actually went on an England trial and bowled really, really well, and has really got through it.

A number of coaches and sport psychologists also avoided labeling performance blocks, both as a prevention and intervention strategy. The following coach said, "It's like Voldemort, it's like the thing that should not be named," and further explained that "it kind of spreads, it's almost cancerous at times." However, views on using this strategy were polarized, as one coach and two sport psychologists shared that labeling performance blocks can be helpful because it can give the blocks an existence to overcome and it can help to normalize the experience of performance blocks. One sport psychologist said, "I find labels helpful if they're strong enough, vulnerability wise, to be able to accept it," and that it depends on the athlete's "performance mindset and how they see psychology or how they see weakness or how they see strength." Nonetheless, other participants maintained that they would not label performance blocks throughout their various intervention attempts.

Physical intervention

This subtheme describes adjusting the physical demands of the skill, again, used by both coaches and sport psychologists. One coach said, "The only way to deal with it really is to bring it down to a basic level and start to rebuild." However, another coach shared that this strategy was ineffective because it did not treat the psychological nature of performance blocks, commenting, "Because she's so competent, it's neither use nor ornament, you know, it's a waste of her time," describing that physical interventions neither appear, nor actually are, practical. Nonetheless, other participants agreed that lowering the difficulty of the skill was an effective intervention strategy because it lowered the psychological demand placed on the athlete. The following sport psychologist said, "If you take down the demand, you lower the anxiety, lower the fear … so their coping skills are enough to be able to accommodate that amount of psychological load." When used in this way, the coaches and sport psychologists would often combine physical interventions with psychological interventions to increase the athlete's ability to cope—both with the experience of performance blocks, and with any stressors involved in causing and exacerbating the experience of performance blocks.

Psychological intervention

This subtheme includes the coaches' and sport psychologists' attempts to change the athlete's thoughts, feelings, and/or behavior surrounding performance blocks. As described above, the participants often used psychological interventions to increase the athlete's ability to cope, first by lowering the psychological demand, and second by increasing the coping resources available to the athlete. Lowering the psychological demand included the physical interventions above and psychological interventions such as taking the pressure off the athlete. One coach said,

> First thing I said to her was look, how about I tell everybody, everybody there is in our game, the head of the program, all the bosses and stuff, I'm responsible for your game. I'm responsible for how you perform. If you perform badly, it's my fault. If you perform well, I'll take responsibility for it, but anything that happens, it's my responsibility, not yours. And it was like the weight lifted off the shoulders.

After lowering the psychological demand, the participants then increased the coping resources available to the athlete, for example, providing emotional support, offering changes in perspective (e.g., "it's not the end of the world"), normalizing performance blocks, and helping the athlete to make meaning out of their experiences. With respect to the latter, one participant did so to "help them understand as best of their ability why they're experiencing what's happening."

Only the sport psychologist participants discussed using psychological interventions such as mindfulness, solution-focused therapy (SFT), cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT; including rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), and mental skills training (MST)). Specifically, MST included strategies such as self-talk, imagery, and pre-performance routines, however, the sport psychologists shared that MST was ineffective in treating performance blocks. One participant said,

> They worked for two or three months but they always came back … because ultimately you're giving a conscious solution to an unconscious problem … they're not even aware of what's going on and you're trying to give them something conscious to deal with the unconscious.

Here, the sport psychologist explains that performance blocks are rooted in the athlete's unconscious mind, and therefore, the intervention must target the athlete's unconscious processes. As some psychological interventions (i.e., MST) do not target the athlete's unconscious, the participants shared that intervening in performance blocks may require a clinical psychologist.

Clinical intervention

The use of clinical interventions includes any intervention requiring a clinical professional. five sport psychologists described clinical interventions including EMDR and emotional freedom technique (EFT). One sport psychologist said, "It's [the intervention] got to be evidence-based and I don't think there's too much in EFT that was evidence-based, so that's why I would totally at this moment always advocate EMDR." Nonetheless, the following participant said that both EFT and EMDR are "definitely impactful, but it's all about the practitioner, and you need a good practitioner to understand sport, understand context." The participants agreed that understanding the context was important when delivering clinical intervention, though also shared that clinical psychologists may not understand the demands of elite sport. One sport psychologist said, "A big problem has been that you hand over a sportsperson [to a clinical psychologist], they treat them for the clinical problem, then they hand you back, but they're not prepared for normal life and that's why it often breaks down again." In this way, the participants highlight that psychology practitioners have a role in ensuring the efficacy of the intervention, and therefore, clinical and sport psychologists must collaborate effectively when helping athletes through performance blocks.

Collaboration

Both the coaches and sport psychologists shared that intervening in performance blocks was "a team thing," and required collaboration between the coach, sport psychologist,

clinical psychologist (if present), wider multidisciplinary team (e.g., strength and conditioning coach), and the athlete's parents, for example, one sport psychologist commented, "it was very much a joint effort, because we were all talking and communicating, and, you know, sharing ideas." The following participant explains that collaboration between the coach and sport psychologist was particularly important to ensure that the athlete was receiving clear and consistent messaging:

> There's no point a psychologist meeting one-on-one with an athlete … and they're working on, for example, external focus of attention … and then they go and spend fifteen hours a week with a coach who's telling them to really focus on the position of the arms or the legs or whatever technical element, they'll be countering each other … .If it's not aligned, then you can be getting mixed messages from different people, and that doesn't help with the regulation and the clarity of thought.

Overall, when asked about the relative success of their intervention attempts, the participants often described short-term success with all intervention attempts, but the performance block would soon come back or the athlete would quit. However, the participants' who reported long-term success in managing performance blocks most commonly did so by lowering the psychological demand on the athlete and increasing the amount of coping resources available to them. Also notable, the coaches and sport psychologists consistently highlighted that successful intervention was largely attributed to collaboration with the athlete and with those surrounding the athlete, because working with performance blocks is complex and requires trial and error to find effective strategies. This process of trial and error was difficult to manage and involved a flux of emotions, as described in the participants' emotional experiences of working with performance blocks.

Experiencing the emotional "rollercoaster"

This overarching theme describes the participants' fluctuating emotions throughout managing performance blocks, described by one coach as a "rollercoaster of emotions." This overarching theme included six subthemes: stress; frustration; helplessness; empathy; relief; and emotional labor.

The coaches and sport psychologists described feeling stressed because performance blocks were complex and difficult to manage. The following coach described feeling stressed because performance blocks are a life-threatening situation, explaining, "You're putting your life in the coach's hands, basically, you know, if you're going to do a double somersault to land on floor … You land on your head, you're dead." Another coach described feeling stressed because "You feel like you want to be in there with them and you do that by exposing yourself and showing your vulnerability and being vulnerable for them. That does take a toll."

The subtheme of frustration included frustration with the coach (limited to sport psychologist participants), frustration with the athlete, and frustration for the athlete. The following sport psychologist described feeling frustrated when the coach put more pressure on the athlete to regain the lost skill, hindering the intervention and exacerbating performance blocks:

> I was angry, because it was increasing the anxiety of the athlete, which was undermining the intervention and the progress of it. I was trying to fucking reduce it by making it easier. And they just increase the anxiety. So although the skill's got easier, the anxiety is

> still the same. And they're going, 'why aren't they improving?' And it's like, well, yeah, because the fucking skill's got easier but the anxiety level hasn't changed, because of you and what you're doing, so it was like undermining the intervention, so there was that frustration.

The participants also described feeling frustrated with the athletes, as one coach said, "you can feel anger, like, for God's sake, why don't they just do whatever it is?" However, the participants often described feeling frustrated for the athlete rather than with the athlete, because they knew the athlete was capable of performing the skill.

The subtheme of emotional labor describes the coaches' and sport psychologists' attempts to hide or bracket their emotions, which was considered imperative when working with performance blocks to avoid placing added pressure on the athlete. The following sport psychologist explained:

> It's important that when you're working with it, you're doing it from a rational place. So being able to identify what emotions I'm experiencing, and not bringing those with me and be able to bracket them. Because yeah, like, I don't want to be on the sidelines going 'oh yeah!' or 'ugh!' Because then that's, that's kind of tying in to almost some of that expectation [to perform the skill].

Coping with the emotions

The participants engaged in various strategies to cope with the emotional rollercoaster and emotional labor associated with supporting an athlete with a performance block. This overarching theme included two subthemes: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, both of which were used by both coaches and sport psychologists.

Problem-focused coping includes the participants' attempts to cope by changing the situation, for example, by reading about performance blocks, attending psychology courses, or consulting with other coaches and sport psychologists. The following sport psychologist said, "Chatting with other psychs, finding out how they handle it is great because you learn about different ways that other individuals would experience it and that they've experienced the same thing." Speaking with other coaches and sport psychologists was also an emotion-focused coping strategy, as the following coach said, "It makes you kind of feel reassured that you're not the only one going through it."

The subtheme of emotion-focused coping describes the participants' attempts to cope by changing their emotions, for example, by seeking support from family and friends, reframing the situation "as an exciting challenge," and accepting the occurrence of performance blocks. One coach said, "As a coach, you just have to accept they're going to happen. You do your best to overcome them. You equally have to accept that in some cases, like in all walks of life, you'll fail." Emotion-focused coping also included meaning-making, as the participants reflected and learned from their experiences of performance blocks which helped their understanding of performance blocks.

Learning

This overarching theme included two subthemes, reflecting from the past and learning for the future, to highlight the knowledge gained and further knowledge needed when working with performance blocks.

Reflecting on the past

This subtheme relates to the participants' attempts to reflect on and learn from their experiences of performance blocks so that they were better able to identify and manage performance blocks in the future. Specifically, the need for experience and learning from experience was considered important because it meant they had a better understanding of performance blocks and were less stressed when working with the athlete, as explained by the following coach:

> You don't know any different when you start coaching and you've got somebody with a block. Like, deep down, you panic, you think what do I do? You don't know what to do with them. But then if you've experienced it before, you know to approach it a little bit calmer. So yeah, I think with experience, it definitely helps.

Learning for the future

This subtheme includes the participants' recommendations for progressing the field. These recommendations often involved providing coach education, for example, one coach suggested "coaching courses, add-on modules, any supplementary information, leaflets, handbooks, that sort of thing, anything you can get at a level that everyone understands rather than just the ones that have had the experience." The sport psychologist participants also advocated for more research in the field to improve the overall understanding and management of performance blocks. The following sport psychologist said:

> Yeah, continuing the work looking into it because of how complex it is, in a way that's going to have an impact on applied work. And then disseminating that knowledge both in academic circles, but also in applied circles, too. So it's there so exactly when it's needed so that people can utilize that knowledge and understanding.

The coaches and sport psychologists in this study shared that they had an important role in preventing and managing performance blocks, but the lack of understanding of performance blocks presented a barrier. As such, increased education and research surrounding performance blocks would help them to overcome this barrier to fulfill their role in future experiences of performance blocks.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore coaches' and sport psychologists' lived experiences of supporting athletes through performance blocks. To date, research surrounding performance blocks has focused on athletes' experiences of performance blocks to explore the causes, symptoms, and potential treatments. Thus, this study has showcased underrepresented voices in the performance blocks literature and offered novel insights to a process that extends beyond traditional coaching or sport psychology support, given the subconscious nature of performance blocks. The results highlight the complexity of supporting athletes with performance blocks; doing so is a complex and dynamic process. A conceptual framework was developed to represent the process of performance block management which was an iterative process. The coaches and sport psychologists first focused on understanding the athlete experience, which then informed a process of

trialing various intervention strategies. The trial and error process was emotionally impactful and required the coaches and sport psychologists to implement coping strategies to cope with the emotional labor of supporting athletes with performance blocks. At the end of their experience, the participants reflected on the knowledge gained and knowledge still to be gained in managing performance blocks, which influenced future experiences of managing performance blocks.

It is evident that coaches and sport psychologists deemed managing performance blocks as an interpersonal process, underpinned by a trusting coach-/sport psychologist-athlete relationship in a psychologically safe environment. Intervention can be enhanced through collaborative relationships with the coach, sport psychologist, clinical psychologist (if present), wider multidisciplinary team, and the athlete's parents. Indeed, recent research has shown that psychologically safe environments, characterized by a shared feeling that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (i.e., expressing vulnerability) (Edmondson, 1999), improves satisfaction with team performance, and individual wellbeing (Fransen et al., 2020). More specifically, previous literature has shown that mutually trusting and empathically accurate (i.e., accurately perceiving one another's emotional state; Ickes, 2003) coach-athlete and therapist-client relationships improves performance success and psychotherapeutic outcome, performance and relationship satisfaction, and helps athletes during emotionally and psychologically difficult periods (Hoffman & Hayes, 2015; Jowett, 2017). This paper also illustrated the salience of collaboration with those surrounding the athlete, which is comparable to the findings of previous research showing that collaboration encourages athlete wellbeing and excellence (Mellalieu, 2016; Tod et al., 2017), promotes positive therapeutic outcomes (Sly et al., 2020), and enhances coaching efficacy (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Coaches and sport psychologists can facilitate this collaboration by encouraging constant communication and sharing of ideas between and within the team surrounding the athlete, ensuring that those involved are in agreement of an intervention strategy, and, relatedly, ensuring that the athlete receives consistent messaging from each surrounding team member. Furthermore, this study has specifically provided support for Bennett's (2015) finding that sport psychologists must work closely with clinical psychologists to ensure a holistic approach when managing performance blocks, for example, by scheduling training and therapy appropriately (Bennett & Maynard, 2017), given that clinicians' work may soon break down in the volatile demands of elite sport.

The emotional impact of performance blocks on coaches and sport psychologists was a novel finding and was inextricably linked with the coach-/sport psychologist-athlete relationship. Hochschild's (1983) conceptualization of emotional labor as inducing or suppressing emotions for one's work is vigilantly condemned throughout her work, and emotional labor has since shown detrimental impacts for workers' health, wellbeing, and job satisfaction (Lee et al., 2015). However, previous research has shown that coach stress (as perceived by athletes) can exacerbate symptoms of performance blocks (Maaranen et al., 2017), and therefore, the coaches' and sport psychologists' use of emotional labor demonstrates a level of emotional intelligence. Salovey and Mayer (1990) have defined emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive, understand, and manage one's own and others' feelings. The coaches' and sport psychologists' use of emotional labor demonstrates the perception and understanding of their own and the athlete's

emotions, and the management of these emotions in the pursuit of treating performance blocks. Thus, this study highlights the importance of emotional intelligence when managing performance blocks, because doing so is an emotionally distressing experience.

The participants' emphasis on coping was also a noteworthy finding. The coaches and sport psychologists discussed coping as a strategy to manage their own emotions, again demonstrating emotional intelligence, and as a strategy for supporting athletes through performance blocks, where, by lowering the psychological demand and increasing the available coping resources (e.g., emotional support, normalizing, meaning-making), the athlete's experience of performance blocks were treated. To the best of the author's knowledge, this study is the first to report lowering the psychological demand and increasing the available coping resources as a strategy to treat performance blocks. As performance blocks are understood as a manifestation of unresolved trauma (Bennett, 2015), existing literature advocates EMDR with graded exposure as a successful strategy to treat performance blocks (Bennett & Maynard, 2017). However, the participants' reported success with lowering the psychological demand and increasing the available coping resources points to an additional explanation of performance blocks, where performance blocks may be a manifestation of an athlete's attempt to cope by subconsciously avoiding the skill. As such, by replacing avoidance coping with alternative coping strategies (i.e., emotional support, normalizing, meaning-making), performance blocks are effectively treated, particularly given that research has consistently shown avoidance coping is typically ineffective as a long-term coping strategy (e.g., Nicholls et al., 2010).

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study was the sample of participants. The sample included coaches and sport psychologists from a variety of sports to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the participants offered a wealth of experience in managing performance blocks at the elite level, and eleven of the participants had represented athletes at international competitions. It was felt that the participants' expertise and experience offset the relatively small sample size of eight coaches and seven sport psychologists. The sample of coaches included four males and four females, offering equal representation in coaches' insights to managing performance blocks. However, the sample of sport psychologists included six males and just one female. As only one female agreed to participate in the study out of the six identified to fit the criteria and invited, it was difficult to obtain equal representation of sport psychologists. Finally, all participants shared past experiences, which meant that this study was retrospective in nature. Therefore, this study was potentially limited as participants may have been biased in sharing the most emotionally intense or salient features of their experiences.

Applied implications

Several recommendations arise for coaches and sport psychologists when supporting athletes through performance blocks. Firstly, it is imperative that coaches and sport psychologists create a trusting relationship with the athlete before attempting to intervene

in performance blocks, for example, through open communication (i.e., making it clear that athletes can discuss any topic), committing to the relationship and to the athlete's progress, and showcasing the knowledge and expertise required to work with the athlete's case (Jowett, 2017; Sharp et al., 2015). We suggest that coaches and sport psychologists actively engage in problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies to cope with the emotional rollercoaster and emotional labor involved in managing performance blocks. Problem-focused strategies may include seeking supervision, peer-mentoring, and reflective practice (Hings et al., 2020), and emotion-focused strategies could include seeking emotional support from family and friends, and social support from colleagues and supervisors and/or managers (Lee & Chelladurai, 2016). Finally, sporting organizations could develop coach education sessions for managing performance blocks, including information on the definitions, causes, and signs of performance blocks, as well as best and worst practice for management. An improved understanding amongst coaches would enhance the availability of support, providing benefit to athletes, coaches, and applied sport psychologists.

Future research directions

To extend this research study, scholars must continue to consider coaches' and sport psychologists' experiences to identify instances of best and worst practice when managing performance blocks. EMDR with graded exposure is a particularly effective strategy of treating performance blocks, though this largely falls into the clinical domain. Therefore, research must address strategies for coaches and sport psychologists to manage, and perhaps prevent, experiences of performance blocks. Based on the present findings, future research is specifically directed to exploring the links between performance blocks and coping and to exploring the effectiveness of lowering psychological demand and increasing coping resources as a strategy to treat performance blocks. Though success was reported by the participants in this study, empirical testing is necessary to confirm these findings.

Conclusion

This study has provided a window into an area otherwise unexplored, bringing to light the current process of support for performance blocks and highlighting the impact of athlete experiences of performance blocks on coaches and sport psychologists. The results showed that managing performance blocks is a complex and emotionally impactful process, worsened by the lack of research, education, and support for coaches and sport psychologists. Nonetheless, findings highlighted several specific recommendations related to intervention and coping strategies, and we are now closer to assisting coaches and sport psychologists in managing performance blocks.

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