



## 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Sport and Fitness Conference

### Competing in the Dark: Mental Health in Sport 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018

#### Conference Booklet



@OU\_SportConf #CompetingInTheDark

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Competing in the Dark: Mental Health in Sport Conference  
The Open University, Milton Keynes  
Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018



The Open University



@OU\_SportConf #CompetingInTheDark

## Welcome

Building on the success of previous conferences, we are pleased to welcome you to our 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual event: *Competing in the Dark: Mental Health in Sport*. This year the event brings together academics and practitioners to raise awareness of mental health issues in sport and explore contemporary research and practice in the field and strategies to support athletes.

We are delighted to have so many fantastic presentations today and hope that you find the programme both enjoyable and informative. We will be tweeting during the conference from @OU\_SportConf. If you wish to tweet about the conference please use #CompetingInTheDark

The event will be live streamed for Open University intranet users and may be viewed at <http://stadium.open.ac.uk/stadia/preview.php?whichevent=3045&s=1> The recordings will be available to view after the event on our YouTube channel.

The Conference Team



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Funded by The Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology (CREET)  
The Open University  
Poster Competition Sponsored by Switch the Play



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Programme			
The 3 <sup>rd</sup> Annual Sport Conference – Competing in the Dark: Mental Health in Sport			
Time	Presenter	Topic Area	
0900-0930		Registration and Coffee, Berrill Balcony	
0930-0945		Welcome and introduction to the Conference – Berrill Lecture Theatre <b>Dr Karen Howells and Dr Caroline Heaney</b> (Open University)	
0945-1045	<b>Helen Richardson-Walsh MBE</b> <b>(GB Hockey &amp; Olympic Gold Medallist 2016)</b>	Introduced by: <b>Candice Lingam-Willgoss</b> Reflections on a career in elite sport	
1045-1115	<b>Jessie Barr</b> <b>(University of Limerick: Invited PhD speaker)</b>	Introduced by: <b>Dr Caroline Heaney</b> Mental health stigma within an Irish sport context	
1115-1130		BREAK (Coffee)	
1130-1230	<b>Richard Bryan</b> <b>(Rugby Players Association: Director)</b>	Introduced by: <b>Dr Karen Howells:</b> Lift the weight: A player association perspective on mental health in professional sport	
1230-1315		LUNCH – The Park, The Library (2 <sup>nd</sup> Floor)	
	<b>Room 1: Chair: Jessica Pinchbeck</b>	<b>Room 2: Chair: Dr Alex Twitchen</b>	<b>Room 3: Chair: Dr Karen Howells</b>
<b>Breakout 1: 1315-1415</b>	<b>Sophie Gibbs-Nicholls</b> - “On the outside looking in”: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of transgender experiences in UK Sport	<b>Steve Mellalieu</b> - A longitudinal examination of coach and sport science staff mental health and wellbeing	<b>Martin Turner</b> - The irrational beliefs and psychological distress of athletes.
	<b>Dan Callwood</b> - Out on the Pitch: Sport and challenges to mental health among LGBT people	<b>Ian Braid</b> - Duty of care in sport; a personal insight into mental health in performance sport on and off the field of play	<b>Hester Hockin-Boyers</b> - From risk to recovery? Exploring the intersections of disordered eating, bodybuilding and mental health
	<b>Room 1: Chair: Kieran McCartney</b>	<b>Room 2: Chair: Simon Rea</b>	<b>Room 3: Chair: Dr Ben Langdown</b>
<b>Breakout 2: 1420-1520</b>	<b>Alex Hodge</b> - In love and alone: Exploring the downside of nonhuman relationships with sport	<b>Andy Smith</b> - ‘I don’t want them to think I’m crazy’: Privatizing mental illness and projecting public selves in elite sports work	<b>Alan Tonge</b> - “You get knocked down you get back up again, it’s the only way” An auto-ethnographical account of a professional footballer’s journey
	<b>Thomas McCabe</b> - Portrayal of mental health issues of elite athletes in UK newspapers	<b>Shakiba Moghadam and Paul Gorczynski</b> - Tackling the hidden problem: Investigating the mental health literacy of rugby union players	<b>Candice Lingam-Willgoss</b> - Maintaining positive mental health throughout sporting transitions: A case study of elite sporting females
1520-1540		BREAK (Berrill) Poster Displays – Judged by Switch the Play <b>Chair: Ben Oakley</b>	
1540-1640	<b>Dr Kitrina Douglas and Dr David Carless</b> (Leeds Beckett University)	Introduced by: <b>Dr Helen Owton</b> “I couldn’t be successful without it being the most important thing”: The impact of stories on mental health in sport	
1640-1645		Final Comments ( <b>Dr Karen Howells</b> ) & Poster Presentation ( <b>Switch the Play</b> )	
		CLOSE	

## Keynote Speakers

### Helen Richardson-Walsh MBE



Helen Richardson-Walsh is one of the most experienced members of the GB women's hockey team. Having started her international career in 1999 at the age of 17, she became the youngest ever woman to represent GB hockey at an Olympics in Sydney the following year, and has gone on to compete at four Olympic Games. As part of the senior leadership group she played a central role in propelling the women's game to victory on the world stage in Rio 2016. As she stepped on to the podium alongside her team mate and wife, GB captain Kate

Richardson-Walsh, they also entered Olympic history as the first same sex married couple to win an Olympic medal playing for the same team. Today, years on from her first Olympic Games, and having stepped down from international duty with almost 300 caps, Helen continues to play at club level with her wife for Bloemendaal in Holland. Alongside this she is studying for a degree in psychology at The Open University, inspired by her experience in battling back from the doubts of her injury, and her experience of elite performance and winning teams.

### Richard Bryan



Richard Bryan is the Rugby Director at the Rugby Players Association (RPA). The Rugby Players' Association looks after the collective welfare interest of the 700 current male and female RPA members in England, as well as over 400 former players. Often the pressures and strains that can act as a catalyst to mental health issues are magnified for professional sportspeople. In February 2017, the Rugby Players' Association (RPA) launched its Lift the Weight campaign to raise awareness of mental health issues in professional rugby, to help reduce stigma and to signpost rugby players towards available support. This talk will outline the role of RPA in supporting its current and retired members generally and specifically in relation to mental health, why it offers the support it does and how. It will further outline the obstacles faced in providing mental health support to players and what the RPA has learnt from supporting its members. The talk will also focus on the Lift the Weight campaign itself and what it has achieved to date.

## Jessie Barr



Jessie Barr is a PhD student at the University of Limerick looking at mental health in elite athletes and specifically how elite athletes are affected by injury. Jessie was an Olympian in London 2012 competing in the 4x400m relay. Her presentation will address that despite consensus that sport is beneficial to mental well-being, recent research indicates that participation in high performance sport may compromise athletes' mental health. It has been suggested that up to 50% of athletes will experience a mental health issue throughout their career, compared to a lifetime prevalence of 25% among the general population. Intense physical demands and uniquely challenging psychological stressors (e.g. injury) associated with elite sport may leave athletes vulnerable to developing mental disorders. Additionally, a significant proportion of this population fall within the highest risk age bracket for the onset of mental health issues (16-25 years). The greatest barrier to improving athlete mental well-being is the existence of negative attitudes and beliefs about mental health issues - or "stigma" – within society. A report by the Irish Health Service Executive in 2007 found that 62% of those surveyed "wouldn't want someone know if they had a mental health issue". This type of social stigma subsequently reduces athletes' engagement with psychological services for fear of being labelled as "weak". Despite growing research into athlete mental health, little is known about mental health stigma in sport. This research project has been designed to investigate the barriers that deter athletes from engaging in mental health help-seeking behaviours, with a specific focus on the barriers presented by the perceived existence of mental health stigma. An online survey of over 2,500 athletes, sports professionals and members of the general public measured attitudes towards psychology and mental health service provision and towards those who engage with these services. Preliminary results suggest that the perception of a social or public stigma remains as the most significant barrier to help-seeking behaviours, as well poor mental health literacy. It is proposed that the results from this research will inform the development of a sport-specific educational intervention in a bid to demystify mental health disorders, reducing stigma within a sports context.

## **Dr Kitrina Douglas and Professor David Carless**



Dr Kitrina Douglas and Professor David Carless are currently at Leeds Beckett University. Kitrina is an ambassador for the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), a member of the National Anti-doping panel for sport and a Visiting Fellow at the University of Bristol. Given that Kitrina

played professional golf for 20 years it is perhaps unsurprising that she has an ongoing research interest in many of the problematic areas associated with performing at the top level in sport. These include; taboo issues, identity foreclosure and mental health problems. David's professional background spans physical education, health and the performing arts. He has worked as a primary school teacher, musician, freelance researcher, and educational consultant. His current role is conducting and disseminating research alongside postgraduate teaching and supervision. In their presentation Kitrina and David will draw on two decades of elite sport research to explore how stories impact the mental health and wellbeing of athletes. They will share in-depth narrative case studies of professional sportspeople who have participated in their research and who described mental health problems during and/or following their sport careers, which have led to self-harm, attempted suicide, depression and a diagnosis of bi-polar. Their experiences show how a dominant 'narrative type' – a particular storyline – within elite sport culture threatens long-term mental health while, at the same time, reducing the likelihood of adaptive responses. They will conclude that, if we wish to improve mental health among high-level sportspeople, we need to rethink the kinds of stories we tell and retell about life in sport.

## Oral Presentations – The Library Rooms 1-3

**1315 – 1415**

### Room 1

**Chair: Jessica Pinchbeck**

**Sophie Gibbs-Nicholls** - “On the outside looking in”: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of transgender experiences in UK sport

**Background:** Limited research exists focusing on the lived experiences of transgender sports participants and the role for sport psychologists in promoting identity coherence and psychological wellbeing. **Methods:** Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study utilised semi-structured interviews with five transgender sports participants, aged 28 to 58. Participants were competing regularly in their sport and their level of involvement ranged from participation to elite. The participants' stage of transition was pre- or post-surgery, of which four were transitioning from male-female and one was transitioning from female-male. **Results:** Analysis revealed three core themes: the experience of personal and social acceptance of identity, the battle between identity and expression, and the changing role that sport played during transition as a facilitative or debilitative coping resource. Each participant had expressed the importance of social acceptance within their sport and how sport has provided a vehicle by which their chosen identity could be expressed. For some of the participants their perceived or actual inability to express their chosen gender identity resulted in withdrawal from participation. Their sporting experiences were expressed as ‘playing a role’, and feeling ‘a fraud’ prior to disclosure but also ‘a total release’, that the ‘journey was complete’ and experiencing ‘total freedom’. These expressions highlight that the experiences of participants were multi-dimensional and dynamic. **Conclusions:** The findings indicate areas where psychology support may enhance the transitioning experience of transgender sport participants by improving feelings of inclusiveness, a sense of acceptance and promoting overall mental wellbeing.

**Dan Callwood** - Out on the Pitch: Sport and challenges to mental health among LGBT people

Engaging and competing in sport raises special challenges for many members of the LGBT community. Even if the growth of sporting organisations, and the willingness of sporting bodies to promote diversity has meant that some have had positive experiences with sport, many still carry with them memories of past negative experience, be that at school or in adult life. In many cases, these interactions with sport have left a lasting negative impact on mental health. This paper discusses some of the preliminary findings of the Wellcome Trust Seed Award-funded project Out on the Pitch Sexuality and Mental Health in Men's and Women's Sport, 1970-Present. As a part of this project, I have been conducting oral history interviews with LGBT people involved in sport, investigating the impact of sport on mental health. These interviews provide a window into some of the challenges that sport poses for LGBT people at different ages, different ability levels and in different sports – particularly challenges related to self-esteem, gender-identification, body issues, homophobia and bullying. The paper will also compare and contrast negative LGBT experiences across time using a study of sports autobiography since the 1970s. The paper will ultimately ask whether sport's impact on mental health for LGBT people has changed over time, and to what extent we can talk of a shared experience for LGBT people participating in sport.

## 1315 – 1415

### Room 2

#### Chair: Dr Alex Twitchen

**Steve Mellalieu** - A longitudinal examination of coach and sport science staff mental health and wellbeing

Building on an emerging interest in the welfare of those responsible for facilitating the performance of athletes (e.g., Hings, Wagstaff, Anderson, Gilmore, & Thelwell, 2017; Neil, McFarlane, & Smith, 2016), this study longitudinally examined the wellbeing and mental health of coach and sport science staff operating within performance sport. Participants ( $n = 17$ ;  $M$  age = 30.53,  $SD = 5.27$ ) were sampled from UK and European performance departments and completed a bi-monthly online survey across a 12 month period. Measures included the Wellbeing Process Questionnaire (Williams & Smith, 2012) and Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Wellbeing (Waterman et al., 2010). Preliminary analysis indicated changes over time in job stress and feeling in control of work. Positive influences on wellbeing included a good work-life balance, time spent with family and friends, recognition and appreciation from work colleagues, and a good working environment. Negative factors included an unhealthy work-life balance, poor working relationships, excessive workload, and a lack of support in the work environment. The findings provide insight into the dynamic nature of, and challenges to, the wellbeing of individuals working in performance environments. Specifically, the discrepancy between desired and current work-life balance, and the perceived lack of support received within the work environment. Supervisors of sport performance support teams need to consider staff workload, subsequent support offered to manage this workload, and deployment of strategies to equip staff with the necessary resources to cope with the demands of operating in performance environments.

**Ian Braid** - Duty of care in sport; a personal insight into mental health in performance sport on and off the field of play

As the CEO of the British Athletes Commission – the union for world class Olympic and Paralympic athletes in over forty sports - I saw at first hand the adverse consequences that performance sport can have; not only on athletes' mental health but coaches and administrators like myself too. My job led me to be involved at different levels in the many investigations into the culture of sport in the last two years. With some it was to offer support to the athletes, in others it was to lead and challenge the System on their behalf. The athletes operated in many cases in fear of reprisal if they spoke out and questioned whether anything would positive would happen if they did.

I left the BAC last summer after four and a half years. Burnt out. My psychotherapist said I had suffered from long term vicarious trauma. The duty of care as highlighted in the DCMS report authored by Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson in my belief extends beyond athletes and the field of play.

My presentation will give an insight into the what happened to me and why and look at the undisclosed cost in people terms of the desire for medal success and what more could possibly be done.

**1315 – 1415**

**Room 3**

**Chair: Dr Karen Howells**

**Martin Turner** - The irrational beliefs and psychological distress of athletes.

It is not fully understood to what extent cognitive mediators are involved in the transaction between contextual factors and athlete mental health. Rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) holds that primary irrational beliefs lead to psychological distress through secondary irrational beliefs. This talk introduces delegates to the concept of irrational performance beliefs, the risk factors associated with irrational beliefs, and the measurement of irrational beliefs in athletes. Then the talk details a recent study examining the relationships irrational beliefs and psychological distress (anxiety, depression, and anger symptomology) across three sport participation groups; non-sport participants, recreational sport participants, and athletes. The studies also examine the differences in irrational beliefs and psychological distress between individual and team sport participants, between females and males, and across the three sport participation groups. Data revealed that secondary irrational beliefs (awfulizing, low frustration tolerance, and depreciation) mediated the relationships between primary irrational beliefs (demandingness) and psychological distress. Between-groups analyses revealed that elite athletes demonstrated smallest depreciation irrational beliefs, and elite female athletes reported greater depression symptoms than elite male athletes. The results are contextualized within the extant research and the use of REBT to reduce irrational beliefs is ventured. The implications of the findings for research and applied work are also discussed.

**Hester Hockin-Boyers** - From risk to recovery? Exploring the intersections of disordered eating, bodybuilding and mental health

My research explores the complex relationships between disordered eating, bodybuilding and mental health. Academic literature on this topic often focuses on the mental health risks associated with the sport, such as disordered eating and negative body image, as well as emergent conditions like “bigorexia” and “orthorexia”. While there is significant evidence to support the notion that other forms of exercise can have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing, bodybuilding practices are perceived to be excessive and problematically ritualistic. However, this discourse fails to acknowledge the potential for bodybuilding to act as a healthy and containable outlet for individuals with perfectionist or obsessive compulsive traits.

Within online spaces and on social media, members of the amateur female bodybuilding subculture frequently share their experiences of using bodybuilding to overcome issues related to disordered eating, body image, and mental health. For these women, bodybuilding is a tool with which they can track and monitor their diet and exercise (and appearance) in a healthy and sustainable way. By engaging with these communities, I hope to develop an understanding of how a sport that is highly appearance-oriented and self-regulatory can contribute to positive health and wellbeing among women with a history of eating disorders.

In this presentation, I will address academic discourses on the mental health risks associated with bodybuilding. Subsequently, I will introduce the concept of bodybuilding as a mode of “recovery” from disordered eating, negative body image and mental health issues, and provide a theoretical framework for understanding this reconceptualization

## 1420-1520

### Room 1

#### Chair: Kieran McCartney

**Alex Hodge** - In love and alone: Exploring the downside of nonhuman relationships with sport

The use of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) to understand interpersonal relationships within sport is on the rise (Felton & Jowett, 2014), as is our understanding of how we form attachments to nonhumans figures (e.g., deities, pets, places; Keefer, Landau, & Sullivan, 2014). My thesis focussed on the intersection of these domains, and demonstrated that athletes form nonhuman relationships with sport. When compared to interpersonal relationships, relationships with sport more likely to provide opportunities for growth, to be viewed as permanent, to be physically harmful, and to become obsessive to the point of over-investment. Additionally, they were found to be less intimate and protective than interpersonal relationships, as well as being less open to communication. At an aggregate level, nonhuman relationships with sport demonstrated the ability to act as secure attachment figures, were associated with improved mental health and wellbeing, and were able to restore a sense of belonging. Athletes indicated that their relationships with sport change multiple aspects of their lives (e.g., peer groups, geographic locations, clothing), and that relationships with sport allow athletes to experience omnipotent control. Despite these seemingly positive results at an aggregate level, multiple athletes reported that the intensity of their relationship with sport caused them to struggle with interpersonal relationships, leaving them to feel in love with their sport, yet alone. This presentation will focus on the downsides of forming nonhuman relationships with sport, particularly when athletes' relationships with sport grow too strong.

**Thomas McCabe** - Portrayal of mental health issues of elite athletes in UK newspapers

**Introduction** - There appears to be a greater focus and a national acceptance of mental disorders within the UK media when compared to previous research. Added to this there has been various anti stigma campaigns from various sporting bodies highlighting sport as a means of treatment for mental health disorder and also sportspersons highlighting their own personal battles. Elite sportspersons have their own individual stressors leading to mental health issues and unique risk factors from the general population.

**Objectives** - To examine the coverage of mental health issues of elite athletes in U.K. national newspapers.

**Methods** - A content analysis was performed on articles published by the Guardian and Daily Telegraph newspapers throughout 2017. The articles were sampled for sport highlighted, sex, current playing status, diagnostic focus and article type (news, feature, opinion), campaign exposure and treatment discussion.

**Results** - 17 differing sports were included in the analysis of 92 articles. Of these the football ( $n = 27$ ), rugby union ( $n = 15$ ) and cricket ( $n = 14$ ) were the most common. The most common topics covered were depression ( $n = 38$ ), concussion ( $n = 27$ ) and cocaine use ( $n = 13$ ). 69 out of 79 articles included male athletes. Exactly half were written about or by athletes still competing at an elite level.

**Conclusions** - This study provides evidence that elite sportspeople have access to services and are aware of the various mental health campaigns. There were no descriptions of adverse outcomes described.

## **1420-1520**

### **Room 2**

#### **Chair: Simon Rea**

**Andy Smith - 'I don't want them to think I'm crazy': Privatizing mental illness and projecting public selves in elite sports work**

Drawing upon in-depth interviews conducted with 32 elite British athletes, this paper reports the findings of an ongoing sociological study which examines the privatization of mental illness and projection of public selves in elite sports work. It considers the contradictions, anxieties and uncertainties which characterized athletes' everyday lives, the comingling of their public and private selves, and the associated impact on athletes' experiences of mental illness and mental health more broadly. In particular, the paper explores athletes' experiences of: (i) managing – usually in highly privatized ways – mental illness; (ii) stigma, self-stigma and shame as everyday emotions; (iii) self-hate and suicidal ideation; and (iv) projecting a desired and authentic public self. The paper argues that the sociogenesis and psychogenesis of athletes' experiences of mental health and illness can only be adequately understood by locating these within the complex interdependencies which constitute athletes' working and personal lives, and the various constraints which characterize their performance-oriented workplace situations. In this regard, the paper argues that more sociologically-oriented work is needed which explores how elite sports workers navigate the problems of their interdependence with others inside and outside of modern sports worlds, how working in sport comes to impact on mental health and illness, and how workers encounter stigma and discrimination of other kinds which compromise mental health. The implications of the findings for athletes' mental health are discussed in the context of the author's contribution to, and recommendations made as part of, the recently published Duty of Care in Sport Review.

**Shakiba Moghadam and Paul Gorczynski - Tackling the hidden problem: Investigating the mental health literacy of rugby union players**

Mental disorders, such as depression, are predominant worldwide and can affect up to one fifth of the population. Evidence indicates that athletes can experience severe clinical depressive symptoms, but have less of a positive attitude towards help seeking behaviours in comparison to non-athletes. More precisely, within rugby, players are placed under intense psychological and physical demands, where the high incident of tackling during the game increases injury risk such as concussion. Such demands may increase athletes' susceptibility to certain mental health problems and risk-taking behaviours. Moreover, the highly specific sociocultural context of rugby as a typical "male-dominated" sport, may result in psychological pressures which could be detrimental to players' mental health wellbeing. Consequently rugby players may not seek support for mental health problems, for reasons such as stigma, lack of understanding about mental health and the perception of help seeking as a sign of weakness. Given the lack of research on the mental health wellbeing of rugby players, the present project aims to ascertain the level of mental health literacy and wellbeing among elite Rugby Union players through a mixed methods approach. Findings from this project will be used to create a mental health literacy intervention designed to help support Rugby Union players.

## **1420-1520**

### **Room 3**

#### **Chair: Dr Ben Langdown**

**Alan Tonge** - “You get knocked down you get back up again, it’s the only way”

An auto-ethnographical account of a professional footballer’s journey

Previous literature within sport psychology offers little detailed discussion regarding the lived experiences of a professional footballer (from entry to exit). This research presents an auto-ethnographical narrative (Sparkes, 1996; 2003) which examines the consistent highs and lows within the professional game, focusing on topics such as critical moments, identity (Stephan, Billard, Ninot and Delignieres, 2003; Brown and Potrac, 2009, Nesti, 2010) and meaning (Lally, 2007). Some of the lived experiences occurred within one of the biggest clubs in world football. The narrative opens up the often closely guarded world of elite level professional football and provides a unique perspective of the daily complexities of a professional footballer’s world. Key existential themes such as authenticity, courage, identity and anxiety (Corlett, 1996; Nesti, 2004) are considered from a “feeling and emotional insider” rather than a “detached, but interested” outsider. The narrative presents several psychological challenges across a career including transitions and development, acceptance and culture, experiences with managers and coaches, de-selection and coping with the end of a career before exiting the game (Brown and Potrac, 2009). It also attempts to provide a greater understanding of the mental demands of participating within elite level football through the eyes of someone who has journeyed through it. Suggestions are offered with reference to the contemporary role of an applied sports psychologist and allied practitioners in supporting players within the pressured and demanding culture of elite level professional football.

**Candice Lingam-Willgoss** - Maintaining positive mental health throughout sporting transitions: A case study of elite sporting females

Objectives: Current research exploring career developments in sport has acknowledged them to be both unstable and multifaceted containing many emotional transitional episodes. While this area has had extensive investigation there still remains a gap in research focusing on both positive experiences of transition and the experiences of elite female athletes. The study aimed to examine the lived experience of transitional episodes focusing on factors that have led to positive transitional experiences of elite female athletes. Design: The study was informed by the qualitative traditions of phenomenology and narratology in order to gain a deep and holistic understanding of the psychological experiences of each athlete. Methods: Four elite athletic mothers were purposively sampled, two were from high risk sports and two from low risk sports, all had competed at international level with three competing at multiple Olympic Games. Semi structured interviews were conducted with each athlete. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using an inductive approach whereby patterns, themes and categories were identified.

Results: Key themes were identified within the narratives of each athlete that related to: planning, support networks, acceptance and change of focus as factors that contributed to their positive experiences of transition. Conclusions: Findings of the study suggest transitions within an athlete’s career and retirement can be a highly positive experience but that this is down to clear planning and support. Even when a transition held uncertainty such as pregnancy and motherhood the creation of a new identity seems to protect elite females from negative emotions associated with retirement.

## Poster Presentations – Berrill Balcony

SWITCH THE PLAY

The Poster Presentations are sponsored by Switch the Play. Switch the Play believe in the value of research and insight to properly understand the dynamics around rejection and transition in sport. This unparalleled knowledge – along with their extensive industry experience – means they can shape or inform policy at the very top. Switch the Play work with organisations to audit, monitor and evaluate duty of care, helping to implement change in the best way possible. They also work directly with athletes, players, students and support staff to deliver positive life-shaping outcomes through their membership body Switched On and their Masterclasses.

**Note to all presenters:** Please ensure that your poster is in place before the start of the morning sessions. You will be expected to be standing by your poster from 1520-1540 prepared to answer questions asked by the judges.

**Lead: Ben Oakley**

**Poster 1**

**Dan Sly - The flourishing athlete**

**Aims/Objectives** - The term “flourishing” has been described as both a range of optimal human functioning and the epitome of mental health. However, within sport, research relating to athletic populations perceptions of what it means to flourish remains largely underexplored. As such, the current study aims to examine how athletic populations conceptualise flourishing within the context of sport.

**Methodology** - *Participants*- 200 participants were recruited, via the employment of an opportunistic sampling method, with the only stipulation being that participants were above the age of 18 and had been involved in sport in some capacity. *Design*- A two stage methodology was employed in the present study. Stage 1 Utilised an inductive qualitative approach, in which participants (n=100) were provided with an online questionnaire comprising of three questions: 1) How do you define the term flourishing?; 2) Can you provide an example of a time in which you feel you were flourishing; 3) Can you provide a list of features you feel contributes to your flourishing. The responses provided in Stage 1 were consolidated and added to a list of features which had previously been identified within existing models of flourishing (e.g., Keyes 2005; Seligman 2011). Stage 2 utilised a deductive quantitative approach in which participants (n=100) were provided with a list of the flourishing features. Participants were then asked to rate on a scale of 1-8 how important they felt each of these features were to their experience of flourishing.

## **Poster 2**

### **Emily Lake - Career ending injury experiences of professional rugby players: A loss perspective**

The present study explored professional rugby players' lived experiences of career ending injuries through a loss perspective. Participants comprised of 10 males between the ages of 23 and 35 who had retired from professional rugby due to injury. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach, face-to-face interviews were undertaken, audio-recorded and subjected to IPA analysis. Participants' initial psychological responses reflected a grief response with some participants experiencing longer term mental health issues. Participants reported a number of losses associated with their experience with the most salient being that of identity. Other losses included a loss of routine, loss of meaning and goal-directedness and a loss of physical functioning. Participants utilised a range of coping strategies throughout the transition, including the use of pre-retirement planning, social support and pursuing a new focus that provided them with a renewed purpose. The majority reported using techniques such as social comparisons and cognitive re-appraisal in order to find some benefit from the experience. Some participants reported that they were able to use their loss experience as an opportunity for growth. The findings have important implications for both athletes and clubs.

## **Poster 3**

### **Lorna Tweed - The negative impact of providing peer support on peer volunteers' mental health within a physical activity intervention**

**Purpose:** Provision of peer support in physical activity (PA) for mental health programmes has been shown to benefit both the recipient and provider (Stevinson et al., 2015). Get Set to Go (GStG) is a peer-led multi-site community-based intervention implemented by Mind (mental health charity) to promote PA in mental health service users. Tailored peer support was provided to registered GStG participants across four priority regions in the UK. The current study aimed to explore the peer volunteers' perspectives of delivering tailored peer support, and the impact this had on their mental health.

**Method:** Thirty peer volunteers (14 males, 16 females,  $M$  age=48  $SD$ =9.5 years) with a range of mental health diagnoses participated in either a telephone interview or one of four focus groups. Experiences of providing peer support to GStG participants were explored. Thematic analysis was conducted across all data transcripts.

**Results:** Despite the benefits of having lived experience of mental illness in facilitating the provision of peer support, peer volunteers discussed facing challenges towards peer volunteering which negatively impacted their mental health. Three main themes were established; internalised pressure when delivering peer support in PA sessions, retention of participants to PA sessions, and establishing boundaries between volunteers and participants.

**Conclusion:** To address the challenges faced by peer volunteers and further incorporate peer support into future PA interventions, we propose practical applications of how to support peer volunteers in their role. These include creating a supportive peer volunteer community, continual supervision and guidance on boundaries associated with volunteering.

## **Poster 4**

### **Ryan Mairs - Mental health in athletes: Exploring the role of the coach**

The pressure and demands of sport as an athlete can be overwhelming. With a recognizable increase in national statistics around mental health as well as increase in anecdotal evidence of elite athletes coming forward publicly to expose the mental health issues in their field, it is vitally important we begin to question the degree to which those in an athletes' network can supply suitable support in this area. The aim of the present study is to address the role of the coach in providing support to athletes based on their mental health and well-being, by interpreting data from semi-structured interviews with 3 male coaches from three different sports with nearly 20 years of coaching experience between them. Through the use of a phenomenological approach, the relevant themes explored within the research study will include the training and education available to coaches, their experience of dealing with mental health issues of athletes, and the reciprocal relationship between these experiences and their coaching practice and philosophy. These themes are discussed in relation to examining ways we can improve the support network for athletes by providing more effective and accessible tools for coaches dealing with these challenges and the need to develop more emotionally intelligent coaching practices and philosophies.

## **Poster 5**

### **Andrew Bethell - On the head: Tackling mental health in football**

Whilst the mental health of professional football players has received increasing media attention in recent years, there remains a paucity of scientific research in this area. Existing literature has focused on the prevalence of mental health difficulties in professional footballers, with very few studies examining psychological predictors of mental health and wellbeing in this unique population.

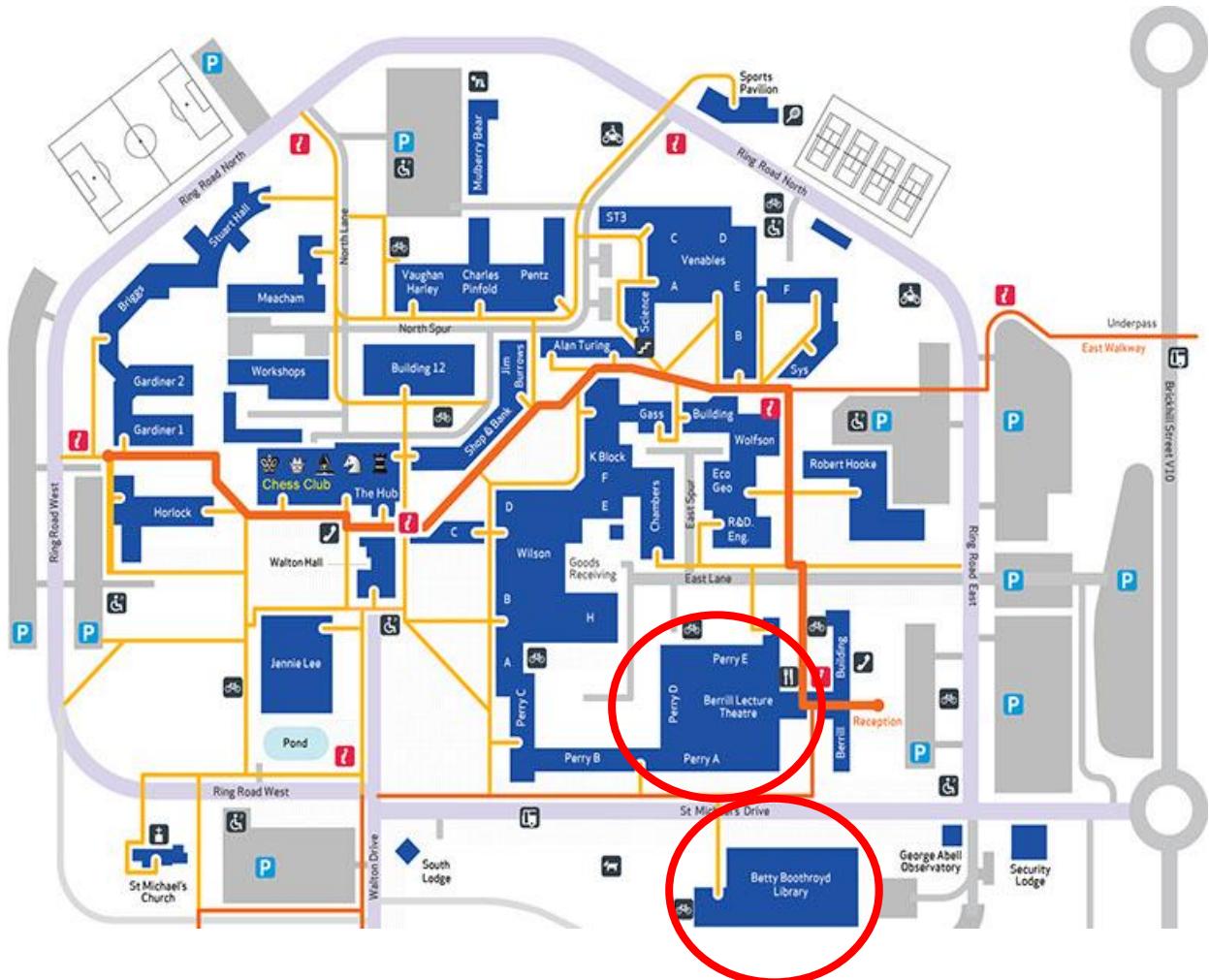
Our quantitative study (On the Head; launching February 2018) is investigating the psychological predictors of mental health and wellbeing in current and recently retired professional footballers in the UK. Both male and female players are eligible to take part.

The research includes a systematic review of literature synthesizing research that has investigated mindfulness and acceptance-based approaches in professional sports people, and a cross-sectional investigation of the associations between psychological flexibility, identity, and mental health and wellbeing in professional footballers.

All participants will be asked whether they would like to be contacted for similar studies in the future, allowing us to establish a cohort of current and former players to serve as an ongoing research network for recruitment to this and future studies.

It is hoped that findings from the study will encourage debate on applied ways to support football players throughout their careers, and aid the proposal and development of psychoeducational and psychotherapeutic support for professional football players.

## OU Campus Map



## Keep in Touch

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Join us at next year's contemporary conference, the theme for Spring 2019 will be Youth, Physical Activity and Sport. Title and date to be confirmed shortly.