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Implementing trauma-informed approaches to coaches' workplaces in sport to enhance their safety and wellbeing: A critical commentary

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ABSTRACT

Although safe sport strategies have focused on protecting athletes, coaches' wellbeing and safety has received less attention. Given recent safe sport directives have been expanded to include *all* members involved in sport being protected from harm, coaches should not be left out of the discourse. In this critical commentary, we focus on coaches' potential exposure to adverse events in their workplace, which may lead to them experiencing trauma. To underscore our commentary to include coaches, we draw on composite vignettes and media excerpts focusing on traumatic events experienced by coaches across sports and levels. Examples include coaches being threatened with, or being the recipient/s of violence, witnessing abuse, witnessing traumatic injury or death, and being bullied/cyber bullied, all of which have been linked to trauma. These examples support a case for why trauma-informed work environments should be prioritised by sport organisations to support coach wellbeing and enhance coach safety.

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Introduction

Trauma is recognised as a global health epidemic, due to many people experiencing an adverse or traumatic event at some point in their lives (Magruder et al., 2017; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014, 2017, 2023). Trauma may occur when a person is exposed to an adverse event, or series of adverse events and has potentially lasting effects on their functioning as well as their mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being (SAMHSA, 2014,

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2023). Adverse events shown to cause trauma include: exposure to, witnessing or reporting (i.e. recalling) abuse, systemic discrimination, bullying/harassment, being threatened with violence, traumatic accident/injury, having a family member with a mental health or substance use disorder, systemic discrimination, bullying, terrorism, racism, serious illnesses, acquiring a traumatic injury, cancer, sexual assault, domestic violence, war, natural disasters, incarceration or death of someone close to you and witnessing traumatic injury or death (Pinderhughes et al., 2016; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023).Within the context of sport, and because a large number of athletes have been exposed to abuse (i.e. up to 67%) (Kerr et al., 2019; M. Mountjoy et al., 2016), trauma has become a more prevalent concern. In addition to experiencing abuse, many athletes who have recalled or reported abuse experiences have also experienced trauma (M. L. Mountjoy & Verhagen, 2022) detrimentally impacting health and well-being (Dye, 2018; Magruder et al., 2017; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Trauma has been linked to decreased performance (Aron et al., 2019), health problems (e.g. disordered eating, depression, suicide) (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014; Roderick et al., 2017; Smith, 2019) and engaging in self-injury (McMahon & McGannon, 2021).

In response to high rates of athletes experiencing abuse and potential short/long term effects (i.e. trauma), the promotion of athlete safety and strategies to minimise harm has been of central focus for many researchers and sport organisations over the last decade. The promotion of safety has resulted in a plethora of research investigations centring on the extent and types of abuse occurring in different sport contexts (Kerr et al., 2019; Pankowiak et al., 2023; Parent et al., 2019) and evidence-based abuse education initiatives being developed (McMahon et al., 2022, 2023; Rulofs et al., 2015). Some other recommendations that have been made include the need for independent reporting bodies to be established where abuse can be reported (Johnson et al., 2020) and collaboration between sport organisations and athlete abuse survivors (e.g. speaking invitations, sharing stories, survivor-led education initiatives) (McMahon et al.,2022, 2023; Mountjoy & Verhagen, 2022). Conversations by researchers centring on abuse and an awareness of how trauma occurs, its effects, as well as position statements (e.g. IOC [harassment & abuse], Sport Integrity Australia) have led to recommendations being made for trauma-informed approaches to be implemented into sport contexts (McMahon & McGannon, 2024b; Mountjoy & Verhagen, 2022). However, many of these strategies proposed to mitigate harm, in particular the trauma-informed recommendations have been primarily related to protecting the wellbeing and safety of athletes.

The focus on athlete wellbeing is unsurprising given the high rates of abuse occurring in athlete populations as well as the recommendations made by researchers in the 2016 International Olympic Committee (IOC)

consensus statement on harassment and abuse (M. Mountjoy et al., 2016). Mountjoy et al. (2016) highlighted in this statement that all athletes have the right to engage in sport free from harm. However, more recently, independent sporting organisations such as Sport Integrity Australia (2024) have outlined in their safe sport directives, for *all* members who are involved in sport whether it be officials, parents, athletes, coaches and/or team managers to be protected from harm including bullying, discrimination, harassment or abuse and its effects.

While athletes have been of central focus in safe sport and wellbeing strategies to date, in contrast, coach wellbeing has received far less attention. One such reason may be that coaches' experiences of adverse or traumatic events in their workplaces are still emerging. Another potential reason for there being less emphasis on coach wellbeing and safety in these safe sport strategies may be due to them being shown as the primary perpetrators of athlete abuse (Kerr et al., 2019; M. Mountjoy et al., 2016; Pankowiak et al., 2023; Parent et al., 2019). While researchers have shown this to be the case (Kerr et al., 2019; M. Mountjoy et al., 2016; Pankowiak et al., 2023; Parent et al., 2019), coaches are not immune to experiencing adverse events (e.g. violence, bullying, witnessing abuse or death) within their coaching workplace (C. Lewis et al., 2020; C. J. Lewis et al., 2018; Zehntner et al., 2023) or the trauma that may consequently result.

To build on calls for *all* participants in sport to be protected from harm (Sport Integrity Australia, 2024), the aim of this critical commentary is to centralise coaches' experiences of trauma in the workplace and why a focus on them is inherently needed. To make this case, we explore some examples of adverse or traumatic events coaches have been exposed to in their work, shown in literature to cause trauma. We incorporate composite vignettes created from Zehntner (2016) and Zehntner et al.,'s (, 2023) research (detailed further below), along with media excerpts to demonstrate some events that may cause trauma in coaching work. Because trauma-informed work is in its infancy in the coaching workplace, our intention was not to conduct an empirical study at this stage. Rather, our intention is to build on research and show compelling personal and public stories that are emerging concerning trauma in coaching workspaces. We then advocate a need for coaches' workplaces to be trauma-informed, which centre on an increased awareness and understanding of trauma, how it is occurring, and the impacts for these sports workers.

Understanding trauma

To contextualise our focus, it is useful to outline the ways in which trauma can have an ongoing impact on a person's wellbeing. As detailed in the opening section, trauma may result due to being exposed to adverse events.

Not only does directly experiencing or witnessing an adverse event potentially cause trauma but indirect exposure, such as hearing about an adverse event after the fact can also potentially lead to trauma (Acosta, 2017; McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, 2024b, McMahon et al., 2024). The impacts of trauma can vary, in that, it may occur directly following exposure to the adverse event, or be delayed in its onset, referred to as the "silent period" (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, 2024b, McMahon et al., 2024; Teicher & Samson, 2016). However, not everyone subjected to a traumatic event will experience trauma, but, if they do, neurological, physiological, and psychological impacts can occur (Dye, 2018, McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, 2024b; McMahon et al., 2024; SAMHSHA, 2014, 2023). Trauma has also been shown to contribute to the development of different forms of mental illness including depression, anxiety disorders, alcohol and substance use disorders, changes in behaviour and performance, self-harm and/or suicide-related behaviours (Heim et al., 2010; Phoenix Australia, 2019; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Coping resources can also be impacted which means ongoing, varied and considered support will be needed otherwise re-traumatisation risks are high (Dye, 2018, McMahon & McGannon, 2024a; 2024b; McMahon et al., 2024; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023).

Adverse experiences and trauma in the coaching workplace

Within this next section, we build a foundation for centring coaches in trauma-informed work, by showing how some coaches have been exposed to adverse events in their sport workplace, potentially placing them at risk for trauma. We do this by using coaches' trauma stories presented as composite vignettes (i.e. multiple experiences/incidents are combined into one story) generated from the research of Zehntner[1] (2016) and Zehntner et al., (2023). These vignettes may reveal abuse and harm. Vignettes can provide a powerful form of representation by foregrounding [coaches'] experiences, perceptions, beliefs, practices and behaviours, and provide opportunities for others to resonate (Allen-Collinson et al., 2016). While trauma was not the original focus in Zehntner's work, it was found to be a consequence of the gender-based violence and hegemony (i.e. a preferred dominant coaching style) that female coaches were exposed to in their workplaces. The trauma stories that were shared by the female coaches have thus been used in this commentary piece in the form of vignettes.

To further detail coaches' trauma experiences and make the case for their inclusion in trauma-informed work, we also draw on media examples. While we did not conduct a formal analysis of the media, we do share the examples as a reminder that particular truths via stories, in discourses, can contribute to learning (McGannon et al., 2024; Wrench & Garrett, 2018). To find the media examples, we used google media search with the search

phrase (i.e. term) "coaches who experienced trauma/abuse in the workplace". Despite using this phrasing, media articles centring on coaches who inflicted trauma or abuse to athletes were shown. There were less than 20 media examples in total that showed coaches who experienced trauma because of their workplace. A reason for this may be that coaches are not reporting their trauma, and the media is not reporting it. Or alternatively, the media may not be reporting the adverse events that coaches are experiencing in the workplace as traumatic. From the 20 or so articles that we found, we removed the ones that were reported more than once and then narrowed it down to ensure a cross section of sports, coach levels and genders were included which are presented below.

Coaches' trauma experiences shared in the media or in this commentary below are thus *pedagogical resources* as they allow others to witness their adverse experiences, struggles and/or impacts occurring, which can lead to awareness and potential advocacy (McGannon et al., 2024). While there were many media stories detailing adverse events which coaches have been subjected to in their workplace, we only used media excerpts that foregrounded coaches' voices detailing their trauma resulting from their exposure to adverse events. Adverse events found included witnessing traumatic injury and/or death, witnessing abuse, experiencing bullying/harassment and being threatened with, or the recipient of violence. Only choosing media excerpts that foregrounded coaches' detailing their trauma was important because, as outlined earlier in this piece, not all people who are exposed to adverse events will experience trauma (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023).

Witnessing traumatic injury and/or death

Directly witnessing an adverse event, such as a traumatic injury or death, or hearing about it indirectly (e.g. after the event) can cause trauma (Day et al., 2013; Pinderhughes et al., 2016; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023; Vernacchia et al., 1997). Within the coaching workplace, some media reports have shown how coaches across sports and levels have witnessed the traumatic injury and even death of their athletes. For example, as reported by Ryan (2006), Australian women's' cycling coach Warren McDonald was in a team vehicle following a group of Australian elite female cyclists he coached while they were on a pre-race training ride in Germany. During that ride, Coach McDonald witnessed an out-of-control car crash into his group of riders killing one of his athletes and severely injuring the remaining. Coach McDonald stated,

> I saw it all unfold in front of me. I saw the accident happen in front of my eyes because I was following behind at somewhere between 60 metres to 100 metres. Amy got hit

> by the car and she got flung back and landed on the ground, rolling into the ditch. (cyclingnews.com, 2006; Ryan, 2006, n.p.)

News reports also stated how two of Coach McDonald's other riders were left unconscious at the scene and were put onto life support upon arriving at hospital (Cyclingnews.com, 2006; Ryan, 2006). Cyclist Louise Yaxley, also in the group was so severely injured that damage to the frontal lobe of her brain resulted in a clot, as well as collapsed lungs and damaged ribs. The windscreen glass shards cut Yaxley's arms so badly that her right arm was basically torn off (Cyclingnews.com, 2006; Ryan, 2006). Coach McDonald recalls the incident where he found

> Amy Gillett, already dead, and the others injured or unconscious, and he was faced with the dilemma of which athlete to help first (Australian Broadcasting Commission [ABC], 2006). He said, "it's the hardest decision you have to make, to survey the scene and decide what to do. That's a decision which lives with me for the rest of my life" (ABC, 2006, n.p.). The accident left Coach McDonald with a devastating impact on his own mental health. He explained how he feels guilty that one member of the team under his care did not return from the trip, and he sometimes wishes the car had struck him instead (ABC, 2006).

In the sport of ice hockey, another incident where a coaching team witnessed the death of an athlete was recently reported. As detailed by Hartley (2023), coaching staff of the Nottingham Panthers, UK were on the sidelines during the match when their player, Adam Johnson was struck in his neck with a skate, cutting his throat. Assistant Coach Rick Strachan spoke of the incident explaining how the coaching staff "will never get over it. We have been involved in professional sport for 40 years and it was shocking and traumatic" (Hartley, 2023, n.p.). In another example, in the sport of artistic swimming, during the women's solo free artistic swimming finals at the Budapest 2022 World Aquatics Championships, team U.S.A. coach Andrea Fuentes witnessed the athlete she coached, Anita Alvare black out (i.e. become unconscious) midway through her routine. This caused the athlete to sink to the bottom of the pool. Coach Fuentes said, "I was scared because I could see she wasn't breathing" (Motherwell, para. 6, 2022) and had to dive into the pool to retrieve her from the bottom and apply immediate first aid (Chappell, 2022). Coach Fuentes further said, "I had no choice but to act. I was not going to stand by, and watch Anita drown. Victor [husband and ex-Olympic gymnast] has helped me a lot emotionally because it was a shock. The next day I woke up and I couldn't even walk" (Romano, 2022, n.p.).

Witnessing abuse

Witnessing abuse has been associated with trauma and other negative mental, physical and behavioural health outcomes (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Recent commentary suggests how witnessing abuse carries the same risk of harm as being abused directly (O'Donnell & Quarshie, 2019). Furthermore, if a person who witnesses abuse, has been an abuse victim themselves, their risk of re-traumatisation becomes exacerbated (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, 2024b; McMahon et al., 2024; SAMHSA, 2017b). Given the recent push by sport federations to fast-track athletes into coaching roles as a means of ensuring familiarity in sport leadership styles and systems (Blackett et al., 2015, 2019), there is a possibility that an athlete fast-tracked into a coaching role has experienced or witnessed abuse themselves given the high rates shown across sports and levels (Kerr et al., 2019; M. Mountjoy et al., 2016; Pankowiak et al., 2023). If so, the re-traumatisation risk for fast-tracked former athlete coaches is high in their work, particularly if they are in a situation where they witness an event, such as abuse, which may resemble their own traumatic experiences (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, 2024b; McMahon et al., 2024; SAMHSA, 2017b). If re-traumatisation occurs, anxiety, feelings of pessimism and fatalism, intense flashbacks/nightmares, paranoia, increase in vulnerability to triggers, greater reaction to stress and higher incidence of self-harm may result (BrightQuest, 2023; Menschner & Maul, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Next, we present a composite vignette constructed from Zehntner's qualitative study with women coaches in Australia (aims outlined earlier). In the following vignette, a female coach details how witnessing the abuse of a female swimmer (re)triggered her own engagement with disordered eating which she learned during her adolescence as an athlete. As the vignettes may bring together different events or periods of time into one story, different tenses are subsequently used accordingly.

Cakes and slices

Before I was a coach, I was a swimmer. Every Monday or Wednesday morning, my coach would weigh only the female athletes. If you were the heaviest girl, there would be punishment. So, you did that little bit extra to make sure you were not. I would often skip meals the day before weigh-in which made it tricky when coach wouldn't tell us whether it was on a Monday or Wednesday. I often found myself hardly eating on a Sunday and Tuesday. As well as skipping meals, I would run miles after training to burn calories and shred fat. I buried myself physically to make sure I was not fat according to my coach. When I was carrying fat, I was not good enough

in his eyes, but then when I was fatless and a low body weight, I got so much praise from him.

As a coach now, there are still so many of those types of coaches who are still involved in the sport. They are dogmatic in their approaches – they think they own their athletes, own their eating rights and own their training rights. Given that an eating disorder finished my career, and led to me ending up in hospital, these types of coaches continue to unsettle me, even though I am now an adult, and they are my colleagues.

I am selected on my first camp. I am excited to be here. We are only on the first day of camp when I am alerted to two young female swimmers. I notice these girls on their phone scrolling through Instagram looking at food, in particular, the most amazing cakes, biscuits and sweet treats. I remember that I used to do the same when I was an athlete. I became fixated on the food which was forbidden. So, I started to watch these swimmers a little more closely as I sensed something was not right with them. At dinner, I noticed their plates are only half filled. I also noticed their "seasoned senior" home coach who was also on the camp come and whisper in their ears before they started eating. He then casually walks off and collects his own food. The body language and mood of the girls immediately changes after their interaction with the coach. Their coach then comes and sits at the table with the other coaches, which is where I am. He makes a joke, and all the other male coaches laugh. Then only minutes after the girls start eating, their coach inconspicuously gets up from my table, grabs something from the food bar, but then swings by the two girls, whispering in their ears yet again. After doing that, the two young swimmers get up, leaving their table, having only eaten the smallest of amounts and not nearly enough to sustain their training.

Being a witness to this incident was so triggering for me. It brought up memories from my own disordered eating days when my coach monitored my body and my food intake, praising me when I was fatless, and punishing me when I carried fat. What I was not expecting was witnessing this event to unsettle me so much, that I started re-engaging in some of the disordered eating practices that I learned as a swimmer. I began eating the smallest amounts in front of my male colleague coaches. Then after going back to my room and when I was alone, I would purge the food I had consumed.

Bullying and harassment

Bullying is an unwanted and aggressive behaviour which includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumours or falsehoods, attacking someone physically or verbally and deliberately excluding someone (Arzt, 2024; M. Mountjoy et al., 2016). Bullying has been shown to lead to trauma (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Similarly, harassment can be verbal or physical in

nature and includes unwanted behaviours such as intimidation, offending or humiliation of another person and does not have to occur repeatedly for it to be considered harassment (National Sports Tribunal, 2024, Sport Integrity Australia, 2024). The two following vignettes show examples of bullying and harassment occurring for two different coaches in their workplace. The first vignette "tear them down" shows the potential impacts on young youth coaches (i.e. leaving the profession). The second vignette shows harassment and the potential impact on female coaches (i.e. changing the way she dresses to avoid being berated by male colleague).

Tear them down

I am selected as a coach to attend the National Age camp which has a focus on preparing swimmers and coaches for more advanced squads such as the National Open Team. It is not only a learning opportunity for the swimmers, but also the up-and-coming coaches. I dream about the abundance of information I will bring home to my own squad after this camp. My mind is racing with the possibilities.

At the completion of the first session with the swimmers which was supposed to be a recovery and technique focus, the coaches all gather in a cramped room. The head coach begins the session with the coaches,

> Head Coach: "If you are selected as a coach on a national open team, there will be a huge expectation placed on you to deliver quality results for your swimmers and the team. As a part of the process of learning how things happen on the national team, you will be expected to defend your sessions to the other coaches on the team on this camp".

As he says this, I am thinking to myself, ok, so I am supposed to talk about what I propose to do, and other coaches will offer input.

> Head Coach: "It is not going to be very pleasant for you, but just know, we had to go through this in our time".

The head coach then moves to the front of the group and glares over our heads towards one coach who is seated at the back. In an aggressive tone, he singles out Olly.

> Head Coach: "Olly, as you are one of the more experienced coaches here, I have decided to look at your program from this morning".

He pauses briefly, almost as if he is gathering momentum for the onslaught that was about to follow. The head coach continues, but this time he is yelling.

> Head Coach: "Olly, why the hell would you do a hard butterfly workout this morning, so soon after a big competition?"

Everyone in the room is deathly quiet, I feel myself sink down into my chair, trying to make myself invisible. The coach then calls Olly to the front of the room, so he is on display in front of all the other coaches. Olly is usually outgoing but as he makes his way to the front of the room, his body becomes slightly slumped. When he gets out the front, he responds to the head coach's question,

> Olly: "I chose a hard butterfly set because I felt the swimmers in my lane needed . . . "

The head coach interrupts him continuing to yell, cutting Olly off midsentence,

> Head Coach: "I am not sure if you were looking at the same swimmers as I was. They were struggling physically. Their technique was poor, a shit choice! Have you spoken to their home coaches? Have you determined from the swimmers, their mental and physical state? Are you even looking at how they hold themselves in the water?"

Olly again tries to respond,

> Olly: "I thought by reintroducing hard efforts, their bodies would not turn off and begin to relax . . . "

The head coach again interjects aggressively,

> Head Coach: "Turn off? Are you kidding? They will shut down . . . That is just ridiculous, he screams".

Olly now responds quietly, almost at a whisper as if he is speaking to himself,

> Olly: "I do this in my home programme after some competitions . . . "

> Head Coach: "I don't care about your home programs! You are dealing with other coaches' swimmers here. These kids are obviously not coping with what you are giving them. Can you see that?"

The questions are rhetorical as each of Olly's responses, no matter the validity is cut short or picked apart aggressively by the head coach. This scenario continues for some time in front of everyone with rapid fire questions, where Olly tries to respond and the Head coach doesn't let him, interjecting, and berating him in front of his peers. Ten to 15 minutes pass and the yelling attack is not letting up, I watch with mounting trepidation as Olly becomes weaker, less convincing, and eventually stops all together. His face is flushed with colour. The head coach then snatches the programme which Olly is holding out of his hand, tearing it up into tiny pieces in front of everyone.

Over the course of the next five days of the camp, whether it be in a group meeting or on pool deck in front of the athletes, Olly is continually targeted by the head coach, along with two other coaches. At the end of the camp,

I am rattled, disillusioned and am re-considering coaching as a career because I did not sign up for this. It is only months later, when I quit the career all together.

Lipstick, tailored suit, Blow-Wave and heels – coach Katie

It is so tense between myself and Coach R who is my colleague. He is constantly jibing me, putting me in my place, having a go, criticising. Even though I have been coaching for a similar time as him, he constantly tries to put me down. At this competition, it is no different. I arrive for the finals session. I was able to duck home in the few hours break between the heats session and the finals session. I refreshed with a shower, blow-dried my hair and put a little make-up on. The finals are always so prestigious, and it is such an honour to have athletes competing in them. There is a different atmosphere in comparison to the heats and this is usually mirrored in the attire which my male counterparts wear. I have six athletes competing tonight so to celebrate, I wear my black suit with white top and small heels. My hair is smooth and wavey. My lips have a glossy veneer from the lipstick I applied. My skin is flawless from the foundation. I feel good as I enter the complex for warm up. I put the athletes through their normal pre-race routine. They are all nervous but excited. I head back to the grandstand where coaches gather for the finals session sitting beside my male counterpart. After I sit down, and as I am looking through the program of events, Coach R turns towards me and says,

> Coach R: "What is that?"

He looks my body up and down. I immediately feel my heart sink but am hopeful he is not saying what I think he is saying? So, I respond.

> Coach Katie: "What do you mean?

Coach R then leans into me, his expression is angry. His teeth are clenched, and he says,

> Coach R: "if you ever wear makeup and heels to a competition again, I will make sure it is your last. You look unprofessional. You look ridiculous. You are embarrassing me".

I feel defeated. I will never wear makeup and heels to work again.

Cyber-bullying and harassment

Cyberbullying occurs in an online environment and involves repeated, unwanted, intentional and aggressive behaviour. Due to the growth in online accessibility, this is another avenue (i.e. platform) through which

bullying, harassment and abuse may be perpetrated (Kavanagh & Mountjoy, 2024). With the increased use of "smart" devices, together with the prevalence of social media, coaches may be subjected to cyberbullying as others (e.g. parents, athletes, public) may have continuous access to them (Jane, 2018; Kavanagh & Mountjoy, 2024; M. Mountjoy et al., 2016). As with other forms of bullying, harassment and abuse, cyberbullying has a range of impacts on people (M. Mountjoy et al., 2016). Kavanagh and Mountjoy (2024) explain how coaches as well as officials, as well as athletes and sports journalists, have all been targets of online abuse linked to their job roles. Thus, Jane (2018) warns that online abuse may constitute a worker's-rights issue.

Various media outlets have reported that coaches have been exposed to cyber-bullying and harassment (Casselberry, 2023; Morgan, 2023; Parker, 2022). For instance, Casselberry (2023) reported how the constant online abuse that Arkansas football coach Sam Pittman faced, led him to delete his social media account on X, formerly known as Twitter as a method of self-protection (Casselberry, 2023). This self-preservation tactic in turn was also criticised by the public leading to further harassment and bombardment from the public (Casselberry, 2023). Coach Pittman said, "everybody knows I'm fat. Everybody knows I've got a big chest. To say that – who does that make feel better? It's not right". But going and attacking me, it's not right. I'll never feel like it's right . . . Well, I got tired of taking it, and I closed my Twitter account as it was affecting my health" (Morgan, 2023). Similarly, Sydney Carter, a former DeSoto girls basketball standout turned women's basketball coach at Texas A&M University was repeatedly trolled and attacked online for her courtside coaching attire (i.e. pink fitted trousers) (Parker, 2022). After an image of her wearing pink trousers and heels at a game was published, a barrage of bullying and criticism occurred online regarding what is considered professional attire in the workplace for a female coach which she stated impacted her mental health (Parker, 2022).

Threatened with, or the recipient of, violence

Adverse events such as being threatened with, or the recipient of violence will not only impact a person's immediate safety but has been shown to cause trauma (Nielsen et al., 2014; Pinderhughes et al., 2016; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Within the coaching workspace, several media reports have shown situations where coaches have been threatened with, or the recipient of physical and/or verbal violence. Alarmingly, Borelli (2023) reported how a St. Louis youth [American] football coach of 9 and 10-year-olds was shot four times by an angry parent who was upset with the duration of the playing time given to his son. Coach Shaquille Latimore was quoted as saying, "I didn't see his gun until it was already too late. I ran, and he shot

me in the back. I fell and he shot me a couple more times" (Hendeson, 2023). While no one else, including the children who witnessed the shooting were injured, Coach Latimore had to undergo lifesaving surgery and has been left with ongoing trauma in the form of flashbacks and nightmares (Hendeson, 2023).

Meanwhile in Northern Virginia in the sport of soccer/football, it was reported that youth Coach Vince Villanueva was savagely beaten by an out-of-control parent who attacked him with a metal water bottle causing serious injury to his face, including a broken eye socket (Carey, 2023, n. p.). Coach Villanueva's face was left so badly bruised after the incident, that his eyes were swollen shut and blackened, with his left orbital wall fractured. Coach Villanueva said, "seeing the escalation of violence toward coaches and stuff like that within these sports – I'm still processing thinking about, is this something that I want to continue doing as I have general fear about getting back on the field" he said (Carey, 2023, n.p.). Physical violence was also experienced by a high school basketball coach in Texas who was attacked by one of his players who he benched during a game earlier in the evening (Harworth, 2023). The violent attack which also involved family members of the alleged athlete perpetrator occurred in the parking lot after the game with the coach concerned sustaining serious physical injuries in the attack which have led to ongoing anxiety (Harworth, 2023).

Coaching: a need for trauma-informed workplaces

The above media excerpts and composite vignettes show how some coaches across different sports and levels have been exposed to adverse or traumatic events in their workplaces. Indeed, not only is workplace trauma shown in this data, but nuanced aspects of trauma that sport environments create for coaches are also highlighted. For instance, the very nature of coaching workplaces places coaches in close physical proximity to experiencing potential adverse traumatic events. Furthermore, some of these adverse events (i.e., witnessing death/traumatic injury) as shown above, occurred to people (i.e. athletes) that coaches have built close working relationships with over extended periods of time and further, and had a duty of care towards. Not only that, but all of this occurred in the public spotlight that is associated within a sport arena. The combination of these factors indeed places coaches in a precarious position that is far from what is perceived a normal and safe workplace.

It should also be noted that vicarious trauma may also be a risk for coaches. While this commentary focused on coaches who were directly exposed to adverse events within their workplace, other coaches not directly involved may indeed experience vicarious trauma when they hear about the event or encounter later. Vicarious trauma subsequently also carries trauma

consequences (Acosta, 2017, McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, 2024b; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023).

This points to an urgent need for sport organisations to prioritise coach safety in the workplace particularly as trauma can be subtle or outright destructive (Dye, 2018; Magruder et al., 2017; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023) causing health consequences. Furthermore, the psychological and emotional impacts of workplace trauma for coaches may persist long after one's exposure to the initial adverse event or period of distress and may permeate beyond work contexts into personal lives. This was consequently shown in coaches' trauma stories presented (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023; Botwin, 2023).

As some coaches are at risk for, and/or experience workplace trauma, trauma-informed work environments should be prioritised by sport organisations to support coach wellbeing otherwise burnout, job dissatisfaction, compromised safety, health issues and/or resignation/s may result (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023; Botwin, 2023; Gunderson, 2021; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). A trauma-informed work environment is one where sport organisations need to operate with an understanding of trauma, including how it occurs in the coaching workplace, along with the impacts on its coach employees. It would then need to strategize to mitigate the situations which may cause the trauma and its effects (Manning, 2022). Indeed, organisations which implement evidence-based strategies to ensure work environments are trauma-informed, also would need to focus on the strengths of their employees (i.e. strengths-based) and assist or support them in their trauma recovery (National Center for Parent, Family and Community Engagement, 2024). For a sport workplace to be trauma-informed, SAMHSA (2017a) outlines four distinctive characteristics that are necessary including 1) the organisation's acknowledgement of trauma, its impacts and recognition of potential recovery strategies, 2) all staff at all levels within the organisation recognise the prevalence, signs, and symptoms of trauma, 3) all staff are respected and treated with care and consideration, and 4) the implementation of evidence-based trauma-informed principles within the organisation (Administration for Children and Families, 2024; SAMHSA, 2017a). Only with the intentional and comprehensive incorporation of "trauma-informed principles and practices into an organisation's structure, delivery, and culture" can the physical and emotional safety of coach employees be attained (SAMHSA, 2023, p. 1).

The practical guide for implementing a trauma-informed approach (2014; 2023), developed by SAMHSA is one framework which has been successfully applied to address workplace trauma. This framework has been recommended by researchers in other areas of the sporting sector such as education programmes which teach about abuse (McMahon et al., 2023), Olympic sites (McMahon & McGannon, 2024b), sports medicine doctors'

practices (M. L. Mountjoy & Verhagen, 2022) and recreational sport contexts (Darroch et al., 2020). The framework is co-produced with trauma specialists and survivors and is influenced by existing trauma literature and best practices undertaken by trauma specialists (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). Guided by the four assumptions and six key principles, sporting organisations who employ coaches would need to "realize" the pervasiveness of trauma, as well as "recognizing" the symptoms or effects of it (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a). "Respond" would involve sporting organisations putting theory into practice, and in turn, "resist" doing further harm (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). The core focus of SAMHSA's framework (2014; 2023) is to "prevent doing further harm" whilst affirming strength and coping (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, p. 5). The six key principles would need to inform everyday practices occruing within the sport organisation and include—*safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer-support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; cultural, historical and gender issues* (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023).

The implementation of these principles into other workplaces (e.g. education, health sector) has seen the well-being of those impacted by trauma be better supported, and has also benefited *all* people, so no disadvantage would result for other employees (McMahon & McGannon , 2024a, 2024b; SAMHSA, 2014; Victoria State Government, 2022). Without the appropriate workplace support underpinned by trauma-informed principles, there may be greater risks of lifelong social, psychological, and health issues for coaches, paving the way for future traumas such as alcohol and substance use/addiction, social isolation, and mental health issues (Felitti et al., 1998; McKay et al., 2021). A caveat associated with the implementation of this framework and associated trauma-informed approaches is that the impact of adverse or traumatic event/s on coaches cannot be predicted, nor should it be viewed and/or understood in a "one size fits all" manner (McGannon & McMahon, 2024; McMahon & McGannon, 2024a; McMahon et al., 2024; SAMHSA, 2023). This is because trauma has been shown to impact in different ways such as immediately following exposure to an adverse event or be delayed in its onset (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, 2024b; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). As such, sporting organisations need to be flexible in how they address or target trauma within their workplaces and the subsequent support they provide to coaches (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a; SAMHSA, 2023). The need for flexibility and safety is also supported by Australian Human Rights Commission (2023) and others (i.e. Botwin, 2023) who state that it is essential for organisations to recognise and respond to trauma in flexible and responsive ways in workplaces (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). To ensure the authentic and impactful uptake of trauma practices, rather than a "tick box" exercise, we recommend that coaches who have experienced workplace trauma be involved in these initial

conversations and subsequent implementation of trauma-informed principles into workplaces (McGannon & McMahon, 2024; McMahon & McGannon, 2024a).

Conclusions

Building on the growing body of trauma research conducted with populations in physical activity and sport, we have made the case that by the very nature that is sport environments, coaches are placed in close proximity to situations that may have them experiencing traumatic events in their work, with the potential to cause them long-term health implications (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a; 2024b; SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). The sport workspace is precarious for coaches, in that, not only does their proximity to experiencing adverse events place them at risk for trauma, but some of these adverse events may involve people (e.g. athletes) that they have spent years building a close relationship towards who they have a duty of care. Vicarious trauma is also a risk for those coaches who hear about their colleagues' adverse events after the fact. Our commentary and the coaches' trauma stories highlight the urgent need for trauma-informed workplaces for coaches. Our recommendation subsequently coincides with public discussions of violence and safeguarding in a "crisis of trauma in sport" discourse, where evidence-based trauma principles are recommended to understand and minimise the impacts of traumatic experiences (Hayhurst & Darroch, 2023; McGannon & McMahon, 2024). We hope our critical commentary has further contributed to these conversations particularly on advancing ways to better support coaches grounded in trauma-informed principles.

In terms of recommendations for future research, it is important that coaches are provided with opportunities to share their trauma stories experienced in their workplaces through co-constructed research opportunities. Adding to this research suggestion is the need for a more systematic exploration of coaching stories related to trauma using various sources such social media platforms, autobiographies, sport media and documentary films. Our discussion of media examples shows the ubiquity and power of public stories and discourses, which are worth exploring to learn more about coaches' trauma in workspaces/contexts. The pedagogical value of coaches' trauma stories is clear (McGannon & McMahon, 2024), but when more stories are made known publicly, witnessing, empathy, advocacy and social action may result (McGannon & McMahon, 2024). Further relating to this point, while sharing such stories may have emancipatory benefits (McGannon & Smith, 2015) for coaches, a caveat associated with telling traumatic stories, is the potential for re-traumatisation to result. For instance, research has shown that re-traumatisation may occur when a person "is required to recall a lived experience of trauma (e.g.

remembering and/or discussing specifics of their traumatic encounter)" (p. 2). Therefore, trauma-informed principles should be applied by coaching researchers in their research practice to minimise such risk (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, Zehntner et al., 2024).

In closing, we hope that our modest dialogue centring on the mounting evidence regarding the traumatic events that coaches may be experiencing in their workplaces will spark further discussions towards addressing and limiting workplace trauma for coaches. Furthermore, while the above commentary raises awareness of workplace trauma for coaches, the vignettes and media excerpts are presented to advocate for change in how trauma is conceptualised, approached and managed by sporting organisations. Regarding future action that needs to occur, rather than sporting organisations adopting biomedical approaches to trauma (e.g. what is wrong with you) with coach employees, they must critically reflect on what has happened to the coaches (Ross et al., 2023). We also encourage sporting organisations to undertake their own research as part of their professional and moral responsibility towards coaches who work within their organisations. From there, it is incumbent upon them to take up trauma-informed principles [TIPs] in an evidence-based, authentic, and impactful way (McMahon & McGannon, 2024a, 2024b; Zehntner et al., 2024). Only when TIPs are applied to coaching workplaces, can coaches experiencing trauma be better supported and their wellbeing and safety be prioritised.

Note

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