

# Experiences of occupational stress and social support in Australian Football League senior coaches

Sophie Knights and Mandy Ruddock-Hudson

## Abstract

Sports' coaching has evolved into a recognizable occupation that requires multiple roles and responsibilities. The Australian Football League is considered one of the highest profile sports in Australia, and as a result, Australian Football League coaches are perceived to operate in a complex and stressful environment; yet, there is no evidence to support this notion. The purpose of this research was, therefore, to examine the experiences of occupational stress and social support of Australian Football League senior coaches. A total of 12 senior Australian Football League coaches were involved in one semi-structured interview. Five themes emerged from the findings. These included: (i) pressurized workplace environments; (ii) development and improvement of others and self; (iii) accountabilities and responsibilities to others; (iv) advice, support and comfort from others and (v) stress and adversity—the ramifications. This research has contributed to the Australian sports coaching industry and is a critical step in gaining a richer and broader understanding of stress and social support among elite coaches globally.

## Keywords

Occupational Stress, Work-place Stress, Social Support, Sport Coach

## Introduction

Occupational stress has become increasingly prevalent within the workplace.<sup>1–3</sup> More recently, research surrounding occupational stress has evolved within the sports coaching literature.<sup>4–6</sup> A sports coach stimulates and sustains participation in recreational sports, with the aim of enhancing and optimizing the performance of athletes in competitive sport.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, a sport coach has numerous goals, such as developing and improving their athletes' behavior within the sporting context.<sup>8</sup> Due to the complex and ever-changing environment in which a sport coach works, and the multiple roles and responsibilities, including that of an instructor,<sup>9</sup> friend,<sup>9</sup> mentor,<sup>10</sup> organizer,<sup>10</sup> counselor<sup>11</sup> and educator,<sup>9</sup> the examination of stress and social support in sports coaching has attracted interest.<sup>4,7,9</sup>

The expectations of a sports coach are to successfully produce performing athletes<sup>11</sup> along with positive athletic outcomes,<sup>12,13</sup> thus potentially increasing the stress experienced within the workplace.<sup>7</sup> Pressures which result from win–loss percentage,<sup>12,14</sup> expectations of player development,<sup>15</sup> responsibility to athletes and managing athlete concerns<sup>11</sup> and success at

the national or international level<sup>13</sup> have all been identified as stressors within the sports coach workplace.<sup>11</sup> For example, when interviewing 10 Division 1 coaches from the National Collegiate Athletic Association, Frey<sup>12</sup> highlighted that 40% of coaches identified competition performance and outcome, along with meeting expectations to succeed as the main sources of stress within their line of work.

Coaches have varying experiences and effects to the stress and pressures within their workplace.<sup>11</sup> Ways in which coaches experience stress include: psychological responses such as anger, frustration and feelings of self-doubt<sup>12</sup> and behavioral responses such as breaking down in tears, poor body language, tone and rate of speech.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, drops in motivation and consequences to relationships outside work<sup>16</sup> have been

School of Psychology and Public Health, College of Science, Health and Engineering, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

### Corresponding author:

Sophie Knights, School of Psychology and Public Health, College of Science, Health and Engineering, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC 3086, Australia.

Email: sl3knights@students.latrobe.edu.au

identified as outcomes as a result of stress. As well, coach stress has potential ramifications on athletes resulting in athletes getting annoyed/angry,<sup>14</sup> loss of confidence,<sup>12</sup> negatively affected performances<sup>12</sup> and the breakdown of the coach and athlete relationship.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, it has been proposed that stress felt by coaches impacts their moods and varying degrees of burnout.<sup>12,14</sup> For example, it has been identified that stress can negatively impact the mood of sports' coaches as they became more emotional, as a result, having a detrimental impact on their ability to focus,<sup>12</sup> consequently imposing heavily weighted ramifications upon a coach, effecting their behaviors and longevity in the coaching field.<sup>14</sup>

Individual's ability to cope,<sup>17</sup> individual personality traits<sup>18</sup> and social support systems<sup>19</sup> have all been identified as factors that either contribute or reduce stress in the sports domain. More specifically, it has been suggested that social support can minimize one's exposure to stress,<sup>20-23</sup> enhance one's coping efforts,<sup>24</sup> lower levels of job stress,<sup>25</sup> as well as having a buffering effect on stress.<sup>25</sup>

In research, utilizing athlete samples support from coaching staff has been identified as having a positive influence and effect during the athlete's rehabilitation process.<sup>26</sup> When examining perceived support reported by athletes, Robbins and Rosenfeld<sup>26</sup> administered a modified version of the Social Support Survey<sup>27</sup> to examine athlete's perceptions of the effectiveness of social support provided by their head coach and coaching staff pre-injury, and during rehabilitation, it was found that the social support received from the trainers had positive effects on the athletes' recovery efforts. Although the study employed athletes from a variety of sports, it is important to note that this research was limited due to its comparatively small sample size in addition to the sample only including a representative sample of Division 1 College athletes. Furthermore, it has been reported that post injury athletes need various types of support.<sup>24</sup> For example, when interviewing 10 Canadian elite downhill skiers who had recovered from serious sports injuries, it was found that that the athletes were satisfied with the support they received during their rehabilitation experience.<sup>24</sup> It was further noted that the support received from allied health professionals and coaches contributed to enabling emotion and problem-focused coping forms of rehabilitation. Furthermore, it was found that the social support the skiers' received not only facilitated coping at various times of their rehabilitation, but it also reduced feelings of distress and increased motivation throughout recovery.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, these studies relied on retrospective data to gain insight into the athletes support needs during different phases of their injury; thus, their

memory and recollection of these events may not be entirely accurate. It is further possible that the participants may have biased opinions due to the outcome of their recovery and the relationship status and quality with the support providers discussed in the interviews. This has been supported by previous research that indicates that the presence or perceived presence of social support can have a positive and buffering influence on stress.<sup>25,28-30</sup> For example, in a study conducted by Rees et al.<sup>29</sup> examining high-level performing golfers, it was found that social support aided participants' performance and had a positive influence regardless of the level of stress they were experiencing.

While previous research has been consistent with the findings surrounding stressors in elite sports coaching, it is noteworthy that numerous limitations have been identified. For example, organizational factors such as different organizational structures along with a lack of support and funding from governing bodies,<sup>11</sup> the time of data collection such as the preparation phase of a competition cycle<sup>16</sup> as well as studies utilizing coach samples from different levels of competition which may influence coach responses, for instance, community coaches,<sup>31-33</sup> sub-elite coaches<sup>14</sup> and elite coaches.<sup>4,11</sup> In addition, while previous research has emphasized the ramifications of the expectations placed upon community and elite coaches in the US and UK, there is a dearth of research examining stress in coaches from Australian populations. The Australian Football League (AFL) is one of the highest-profile sports in Australia.<sup>34</sup> AFL coaching is a full-time employment with the AFL industry now consisting of over 180 full-time coaches.<sup>35</sup> The AFL consists of 18 clubs nationally, comprising 18 senior coaches and approximately 10 assistant coaches per club. Notably, the stresses experienced by an AFL senior coach along with their awareness and encounter of social support have yet to be examined. Given the highly profiled nature of this coaching cohort,<sup>36</sup> the multimillion dollar industry which now consists of over 20,000 coaches at the community, sub-elite levels and elite level,<sup>36</sup> as well as the limitations in previous research<sup>11,16,33</sup> including the transferability of findings to other sports settings<sup>11</sup> and the timing of the data collection<sup>16</sup> coaches within the sport of Australian football was warranted. Given the increasing popularity in sports coaches and the evaluation of a now recognizable occupation that is fast advancing,<sup>10,37</sup> the Australian coaching population warrants further investigation. Exploring and examining this area is a fundamental step for the development of empirical research into the stressors and ramifications of these stressors of elite level coaches.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of occupational stress and social support of AFL senior coaches and to overcome the limitations of previous research such as the generalizability of findings,<sup>38</sup> measuring only sub-elite coaches<sup>14</sup> and the reliance on self-report data.<sup>39</sup>

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study were 12 of the 18 national AFL senior coaches. Coaches ranged in age from 37 to 58 years ( $M = 44$ , standard deviation (SD) = 6.38), with 1 to 12 years of senior coaching experience ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 3.47$ ). Coaches were volunteers, and no payment or incentive was offered to the participants.

### Procedure

Following ethics approval, all 18 Australian national coaches were informed about the nature and confidentiality of the proposed research at the national Annual General Meeting. Following the distribution of an information sheet and informed consent form, participants were invited to take part in one semi-structured interview lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants were under no obligation to take part in the research, and participants were informed that interviews would take place either face-to-face or via the telephone by a member of the research team at a convenient time and location for the participant. No dissimilarities among participant data collected by phone versus face-to-face interview has been previously identified,<sup>40</sup> and with permission from the participants, the interviews were audio recorded. The semi-structured interview guide was designed by researchers and addressed key areas that had been guided by previous research<sup>11,41,42</sup> and identified by the AFL coaches governing body, the AFL Coaches Association. The core areas of the interview schedule included: (i) participant demographic information including background/history of coaching experiences (e.g. Can you tell me about your previous coaching history?), (ii) stress as a general concept (e.g. What is your understanding of stress?), (iii) occupational stress in the workplace (e.g. How would you define or explain occupational stress?) and (iv) social support networks and systems (e.g. Can you elaborate on your main source of social support in your role as a senior coach?). A member of the research team who had previous experience in AFL research undertook each interview. The progression of interview questions changed to accommodate the coach's

responses, thus providing the flexibility in the interview process suitable for in-depth responses.<sup>40</sup>

### Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. To ensure and improve familiarity with the interview data, the transcripts were repeatedly read and analyzed via thematic analysis utilizing the guidelines suggested by Braun and Clark.<sup>43</sup> Thematic analysis is a constructionist method, whereby participants create meaning of their individual experiences by reporting their events, meanings, experiences and realities.<sup>43-45</sup> This approach has been viewed as a foundational method for qualitative analysis and is a flexible and useful research tool that can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data.<sup>43-45</sup> While there is no best framework or method for conducting qualitative research, it is essential that the chosen framework and methods match what the researcher wants to identify, along with acknowledging these decisions, and recognizing them as decisions.<sup>43</sup>

The data analysis process was guided by the guidelines employed by Braun and Clarke.<sup>43</sup> This process allows for the transcripts to be thoroughly read, ensuring the researcher has a comprehensive understanding and can make sense of what was said by the participants as a group.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it ensures that the researcher identifies all themes or repeated patterns of meaning' in the data.<sup>43,46</sup>

The six-stage guidelines by Braun and Clark<sup>43</sup> include: (i) becoming familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, (ii) creating initial codes across the complete data set, (iii) searching for potential and relevant themes within the data, (iv) revising the themes established, (v) generating clear definitions and names for each theme, and (vi) constructing the final report with vivid examples, analysis and relating back to the research questions and literature.<sup>43</sup>

The process of thematic analysis commenced prior to the completion of the 12 interviews. This allowed for personal reflection and a critical analysis of the researchers interview approach.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it enabled for any amendments or moderations to be implemented in proceeding interviews to improve and/or allow for a richer and more detailed data collection through the interviewing process.<sup>43</sup>

To enhance the credibility, and trustworthiness of the data, member-checking<sup>47</sup> investigator triangulation<sup>47</sup> and reflexivity<sup>48</sup> were undertaken. Member checking was achieved by providing a random selection of participants with a copy of their transcripts. Participants were encouraged to provide feedback on the narrative. In addition, all participating coaches

were provided with the emerging themes from the final data analysis. Coaches were given the opportunity to review the themes and make further suggestions and recommendations. There were no specific comments or recommendations from the 12 coaches; therefore, it was accepted that all participants were satisfied with the results produced.

Investigator triangulation<sup>47</sup> was achieved by providing a portion of a number of transcripts to a member of the AFL coaches association who has experience in qualitative research. Once the independent researcher had analyzed the data, the principal researcher and the independent researcher collaborated to discuss the emerging themes. There was limited discrepancies between the findings, and thus, the emerging themes were validated.

Finally, to ensure that the principle investigators' views and opinions did not affect or influence the study process, reflexivity was conducted.<sup>48</sup> The principle investigator achieved this by analytically and critically reflecting on and analyzing all the decisions made during the research procedure. A reflective description was developed in the form of analytical notes that was reviewed by the other member of the researcher team to ensure personal assumptions were not influencing the research project.

## Results

Pertaining to the purpose of this study, five dominant themes emerged from the interview data. These included: (i) pressurized workplace environments; (ii) development and improvement of others and self; (iii) accountabilities and responsibilities to others; (iv) advice, support and comfort from others and (v) stress and adversity—the ramifications. Due to the highly profiled nature of the participants and the sensitive nature of the research topic in relation to workplace environments, the results have been presented as collective group findings. In accordance the Ethical Code of conduct and the policies in the AFL, attempts were made to avoid reference to potentially identifying information. This was achieved by not presenting coach age, years of coaching involvement and club names. As a result, no personal data have been provided in this research. Although specific case studies and narrative data would have been the most effective way to interpret the data, the need to preserve the confidentiality of each participant was of vital importance. Thus, it was not deemed ethical to produce a descriptive case study and reproduce participant information.

### *Pressurized workplace environment*

All 12 senior AFL coaches discussed the pressurized workplace environment. These included internal

pressures, work–life balance, self-imposed demands, the feelings of loneliness and isolation, as well as external scrutiny from the public and media, the pressures of performance outcomes and the sacrifice of personal time.

Interestingly, a few of the coaches discussed the feeling of isolation and loneliness experienced in the position as a senior coach.

On an individual level within my position I think the two things that I've struggled with the most are the isolation of being a senior coach. When you don't know who to trust, it's very isolated and that's probably the main thing about the job, its very isolated... There are not many people you can turn to and ask, "should I be doing this differently?"

Nevertheless, the majority of participants articulated that "to fully understand the stress and pressures that a senior coach is faced with you have to be a senior coach."

It's difficult to put yourself in the position of the head coach, and as much as people talk to you about it and try to empathize I don't, I don't think there is anyone that understands. There isn't a lot of people in the exact same position; there are plenty that can empathize, but there's not many that understand.

Self-imposed demands that contributed to the sense of isolation were discussed by only some of the coaches. These coaches expressed that it was the self-imposed demands of carrying full responsibility of club outcomes and constantly being under the "spotlight" that contributed to their feelings of isolation. For example:

You are steering the ship now and that full responsibility almost falls on your shoulders. You have to deal with the losses and stuff yourself and the preparation and the issues of the club, all falls back on to you, and you are the of that as well. You are the one that has to face the media.

All 12 coaches discussed external scrutiny from the public and the media. Scrutiny from the public and media led the coaches to at times, feeling vulnerable, stressed and frustrated. For example:

The one negative is when you feel as though the message that you're publicly putting out there is misrepresented in the media and the feeling of helplessness that you really can't do anything about it, yet if you go out to try and justify that it's been misrepresented, just builds on the actual story.

### *Development and improvements of others and self*

Coaches identified that the development and improvement of individual players, the playing group, staff and the self were all key components and motivating factors to being a senior coach.

To continually get the best out of ourselves, whether it's coaches, staff or players, it's continually trying to improve so that you maintain a competitive spot in the competition and that's the thing that drives me every day when the alarm goes off in the morning.

All coaches expressed that "growth" was a fundamental requirement of a football club to maintain a competitive edge in the continually developing game of AFL. For example, one coach shared that "getting all aspects of the football club and particularly the team performance" were how they measured their clubs development and progress.

Coaches expressed their passion toward developing their players not only as footballers but as respectable men and the joy they received when seeing an athlete achieve their goals.

There's the personal level, which is the one to one interaction that I've had with individual players, where they have obviously been battling personal issues or battling confidence or form. Just by working with them and just putting a plan in place and they turn it around and they find form again or they get their confidence back or their life is back in order in some way.

### *Accountabilities and responsibilities to others*

Key roles and responsibilities as a senior coach were extensively discussed. Coaches reflected on the roles and responsibilities that are undertaken by a coach. For example, winning games, ladder position, training and match planning, team selection, delivering "bad" news to players, developing and caring for players and management of coaching staff and other staff members. Coaches acknowledged that a certain level of stress accompanied their responsibilities. However, their "love of the game" and "passion for the game" were the motivating factors that attributed them to taking on the position as a senior coach. For example:

I love the game, that's the first motivating factor. The second one would be I love this footy club. I have invested so much into it and because it has provided me with so much I really do feel a strong connection to the club and the game

In addition, another coach shared how once their playing career was over and they were more interested in coaching.

I just love coaching, I love helping people get going and seeing them develop, even from the very start, as soon as I finished playing football, I was more interested in the coaching than the playing. I really like the challenge of helping a team and young people get better.

All coaches described that developing players in terms of becoming better footballers and men was a focus. Coaches acknowledged that they are "responsible for mentoring their players as people, not just as footballers." In addition, building a strong relationship between the player and coach was essential.

Some coaches discussed that their role as a senior coach extended beyond just "a footy coach." It was reported that they also took the position of a counselor, mentor and leader. That is, counselling young players during emotional struggles, whether that be struggling with performance or a personal issue away from football, mentoring players by setting an example through their own work ethic or work-life balance and demonstrating leadership qualities such as "leading the organization" and being a positive and "public face of the club." One coach discussed that one of the main roles as a senior coach is "preparing players both on and off field to get the most out of themselves. Educating them as the way they should lead their lives, and educating them as best to perform on field as well."

We take over these boys' lives. We are responsible for mentoring them as people not just as what they do... We are dealing with players that have their own mental health issues... So yeah, we are dealing with a range, which was like right up there in terms of intensity. Even in performance with players with depression and being able to translate that into performance, you've got to be really careful at times.

### *Advice, support and comfort from others*

The support that coaches received from others was a dominant theme that emerged from the interview data. Coaches discussed that they were satisfied with support they were provided from their support networks during their careers as senior coaches. Family members, partners, children, assistant coaches, football managers, senior players and staff were extensively discussed by a majority of the coaches. The main support providers for all 12 coaches were reported to be partners,

assistant coaches and football managers. For example, one coach shared how his family opinions and point of view to football was something that he cherished and highly appreciated.

I think my family's got a really good point of view; a good outlook to AFL footy. They enjoy it but it's not their life. They don't live my life. They would say "senior AFL coaching is what my husband or what my dad does. It is not who he is." So I think they have got a really good balance there and that's important for me to be able to come home to that type of thinking in that environment.

Coaches shared the unconditional support they received from their partners, children, friends and family through their time as a senior coach. One coach discussed how his wife provided him with support by taking him away from the job. "She can take me away from work domination thoughts, and my conversations and my actions."

The genuine advice, communication and care from the assistant coaches and football managers were repeated factors. For example:

The most important by far for me is the football manager. We have a great relationship which helps, but I think he sees an important part of his role as, more so a sounding board of ideas and concepts that I have. The assistant coaches are a little bit different. They are still sounding boards but I lean on them to do the things that I might not have time to do.

### ***Stress and adversity: The ramifications***

Coaches discussed their experiences, perceptions and outcomes of stress. A few of the coaches acknowledged that at times, the stress of the job caused them to feel "physically ill." These coaches also explained that the impact of stress also affected their partners, family, children and friends. In particular, one coach disclosed how it was common for him to experience both emotional and physical ramifications of stress. For example:

Stress as it relates to me is a thing that has a mental or physical impact on the way I live my life... I really struggle to sleep... stress for me manifests mainly in bad moods, so when I'm home and I don't talk to my wife and it affects the way I feel, affects the way I should be living my life away from footy and that's when I know that I am stressed. It really manifests itself physically for me, a lack of sleep; feeling annoyed all the time, feeling tired, grumpy.

Many of the coaches discussed the negative aspects and experiences of the job that caused stress or increased their levels of stress. For example, "dropping a player" who had not been performing to the required standard, ending players' careers and not re-signing them for another season, managing player and staff poor behavior and a failure to collaborate and compromise with staff. A number of coaches discussed that ending a player's career was the most negative aspect of the job, for example:

The negative experiences in the job is when you end peoples careers, it is something that you never quite get used to, it is something you know and understand—it has to be the job and you know you have to do, but it is not a pleasant thing to do and when a young player thinks he has a long career in front of him and he sees that taken away, it is a disappointing thing for him and it is a challenge to deliver the bad news, but it has to be done.

In light of the negative ramifications associated with coaching, all 12 coaches did reflect on the positive aspects and experiences of their coaching work. These included, strengthening and rebuilding the club so that they remain a "strong competitive side" not only on the field but also having a membership base that is continually growing annually, "winning games, playing finals and winning finals" were positive aspects and experience of their coaching. Furthermore, the recruitment of new young players to the club through the Australian national draft, seeing the joy of the supporters after a win, development of players along with overcoming negative situations were also positive aspects of the role of a coach. One coach divulged:

Most of the really positive experience for a young team has come from some adversities in the past. Trying to educate our players and watching them struggle. Being really badly beaten by the good teams and then coming through now and beating the best teams in the competition by significant margins, has been really satisfying. That comes back to the fact about watching people and players under your care, grow and develop.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of occupational stress and social support among AFL senior coaches. The study was exploratory in nature and was designed to gain an overview of the experiences of coaches. This study advances the current sport stress and sport coaching literature by investigating a unique cohort within the Australian

sports field, which is a critical step in gaining a richer and broader understanding of stress and social support among elite coaches globally. Five dominant themes emerged from the data: (i) pressurized workplace environments (i.e. internal pressure, work–life balance self-imposed demands), (ii) development and improvement of others and self (i.e. helping a playing overcome person adversity, working through performance slumps), (iii) accountabilities and responsibilities to others (i.e. training and planning, management of staff, development and care for players), (iv) advice, support and comfort from others and (v) stress and adversity: the ramifications (i.e. key support providers, partners, family, staff). Although it may appear that each theme was very unique, there were some overlapping elements within the themes. For example, although isolation was a dominant theme to emerge, this was counteracted by the support, advice and comfort that were received within the workplace and within the coaches' personal networks. Hence, this supports the notion that the presence of social support and the perceived presents of social support can have a positive and buffering influence on stress and stress-related outcomes.<sup>25,28–30</sup>

Findings from this study suggest that AFL coaches experience numerous stressors both physically and mentally. Times of isolation, such as not knowing whom to trust, along with the many responsibilities to athletes, staff and the organization, the pressures and expectations from hierarchy within their club and self-imposed pressure attributed to the levels of occupational stress experienced by AFL coaches. These findings in part support previous qualitative research with coaches from collegiate, national and world-class levels.<sup>11,12,49</sup> Consistent with the current study, Thelwell et al.<sup>15</sup> identified numerous factors and roles of a sports coach that lead to feelings of stress. For example, responsibility and the performance of athletes, organizational leaderships, such as managing athletes and looking after staff, along with personal factors such as lack of job stability.<sup>15</sup> An interesting finding was in relation to the interpretation of stress by coaches. A number of senior coaches commented that stress was something that manifested and led to feelings of anxiety, bad moods, helplessness and at times feeling claustrophobic. Whereas other coaches discussed that stress was something that was in their control and individualized based on personal belief. This finding was consistent with Robbins<sup>50</sup> who explained that stress was a response that occurred from an opportunity, demand, constraint, threat or challenge, when the results of the event are important and uncertain. This is further consistent with the World Health Organization<sup>51</sup> that identified that workplace stress arises as a response when an individual is presented

with work demands and pressures in which their knowledge and abilities do not match.

The many roles and responsibilities placed upon senior coaches both internally and externally have been recognized as contributing factors to their experience of occupational stress in the current study.<sup>11,12</sup> Coaches discussed that the pressure and expectation to win games, management of the club, position on the competition ladder, training and match planning, team selection, delivering “bad” news to players, developing and caring for players as well as managing the coaching staff and other staff members. These findings have in part been supported by previous research.<sup>11–13</sup> In addition, stress was not only an outcome based on the demands and pressure that these roles and responsibilities impinge on coaches but also family members also felt these demands. This important finding has not been identified in previous literature in relation to workplace stress. These findings, therefore, provide evidence and further support the existing literature surrounding the relationship between work–family conflict and health-related outcomes.<sup>52,53</sup>

While previous sport coaching literature has not supported the notion of family conflict, the previous research has identified that behavior can be detrimental to the coach–athlete relationship and the well-being and performance of the athlete.<sup>12,54,55</sup> Consistent with the current research in relation to the implications between the coach and family stress, the implications of stress and the athlete–coach relationship have also been identified; for example, stress experienced by a coach can impact their athletes' performance in a detrimental manner and, even cause the athlete to experience stress themselves.<sup>12</sup> As a result, stress within the work place environment can be caused from heavy workloads, managing work–life balance and job pressures.<sup>56–58</sup> This is consistent with the findings from the AFL senior coaches in that coaches were constantly “thinking” about their work and had difficulty “switching off” their minds. Although the findings from this study identified that coaches understood the concept of work–life balance, the majority of the coaches discussed that they could not get the balance “right” and that it was one of their biggest challenges they faced within their job as a sports coach.

The advice, support and comfort that coaches received from their social support systems were found to have a positive influence on stress levels. The majority of AFL coaches discussed and agreed that their social support networks had a large influence and positive impact on their experience of stress. These findings have in part been supported by previous research<sup>24,25</sup> that has examined social support in the workplace,<sup>58</sup> within the sport<sup>7</sup> and exercise settings.<sup>24</sup> Findings promote that social support has a buffering effect on

health, in particular depression and anxiety.<sup>24,25</sup> As a result, these results are consistent with the stress buffering model that hypothesizes that the presence of social support moderates the effects of stress on health and adjustment.<sup>59</sup> The model further suggests if support is high, then stress is seen as having a more positive influence on an individual's health compared with conditions of low support.<sup>59</sup>

Inconsistent with previous findings<sup>59,60</sup> is the positive influence that social support has on an individual's health and well-being. Previous research has emphasized the significance of social support as a protective factor of health, to modify life stressors as well as assisting in the prevention or improvement of disease.<sup>60</sup> However, although senior coaches reported to be satisfied with the available and received levels of social support, many discussed the health ramifications that they have experienced due to stress, for example, a lack of sleep and feeling physically ill. Although social support is positively associated with health, potentially participants in this study may have resisted seeking social support as a result of the stigma surrounding males<sup>61</sup> and the idea that by a male asking for support is actually showing weakness in their character.<sup>61</sup> Men who hold these traditional beliefs are potentially less likely to comply with health instructions and make fewer healthy lifestyle changes than their less traditional counterparts.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

Findings from this study have contributed to the current literature and provided a strong foundation and practical implications for elite sport coaches. There are, however, several limitations to the present study. The first limitation derives from the characteristics of the sample. The sample was from one Australian sport and potentially the influence of the workplace culture of the sport, whereby all coaches may be "in-sync" to the culture of the AFL may have potentially systematically influenced results. Nevertheless, this study did provide the opportunity for all Australian elite AFL coaches to participate thus providing a cross-section of information from the population of AFL coaches. In addition, it may be difficult to generalize these findings to other sports coaching populations; however, from a practical perspective, this research may potentially be beneficial to Australian football coaches of whom there are roughly 20,000 coaches at the community, sub-elite levels and elite level.

Based on the findings from this qualitative research, this may potentially assist in the development of a quantitative measure specifically established for elite sports coaches to investigate occupational stress. However, given the exploratory nature of this study,

the use of psychometric measures were not considered for the present investigation but may warrant further investigation as a potential tool for triangulation of data in the future.

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