The personal meanings and experiences of resilience amongst elite badminton athletes in the build up to competition

Date of submission: 24/01/2019

Abstract

The concept of resilience has a wide theoretical framework with a growing body of research addressing resilience in sport. With competitive athletes experiencing multiple stressors and adversities throughout their sporting careers, it is important to further understand resilience within a sporting context. The aim of this study was to explore elite athletes’ personal meanings and experiences of resilience in the build up to competition in the sport of badminton. Six professional badminton players were interviewed and interpretive phenomenological analysis was adopted to analyse the qualitative data. Four themes emerged: (1) An optimistic appraisal of pressure as integral to resilience; (2) Shift from negative emotional state to acceptance; (3) Striking a balance between life and sport; and (4) A quality relationship between coach and athlete facilitating optimal performance. The findings have implications for sport professionals who work closely with elite athletes aiming to foster resilience and improve performance.

Keywords: sport performance, qualitative, excellence, stress, resilient characteristics

Introduction
The build up to, and participation within an important sporting competition is a period in which an athlete is likely to encounter multiple stressors and adversities (Gould & Maynard, 2009; Tamminen, Holt & Neely, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Recent research has begun to examine athletes’ experiences of stress both qualitatively and quantitatively across multiple sports. Studies suggest that certain common sources of stress can be identified including: the pressure to perform at an excellent standard, worries about training and competition settings, lack of confidence and fear of under-performance, worries about injuries, challenges in the coach-athlete relationship and balancing personal commitments inside and outside of sport (Anshel & Anderson, 2002; Kaiseler, Levy, Nicholls & Madigan, 2017; McKay, Niven, Lavallee & White, 2008; Myers, Ntoumanis, Gunnell, Gucciardi & Lee, 2017; Nicholls, Levy, Carson, Thompson & Perry, 2016; Thelwell, Weston & Greenlees, 2007).

The stressors experienced by athletes in the build up to competitions may include personal, relational, environmental or situational influences (Gould & Maynard, 2009). While research has pointed to the importance of managing stress in attaining high level sporting performance (Gould & Maynard, 2009; Gustafsson, Sagar & Stenling, 2017; Nicolls et al, 2016), an emerging body of work has sought to specifically investigate resilience in elite sporting athletes (Sarkar, 2017; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; 2016; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2013; 2014; 2016; Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Wagstaff, Sarkar, Davidson & Fletcher, 2016).

The concept of resilience has a wide theoretical and conceptual framework as both a trait and a process (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). When conceptualised as a trait, resilience has been defined as “the positive role of individual differences in people’s response to stress and adversity” (Rutter, 1987, p.316). Resilience conceptualised as a dynamic process is identified
as a changing and adapting ability which develops over time in the context of the individuals’
biospsychosocial experiences (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Richardson, 2002; Wu et al.,
2013). Contemporary resilience research in a sporting context has advanced this definition to
encapsulate features of both trait and process conceptualisations defining resilience as “the
role of mental processes and behaviour in promoting personal assets and protecting an
individual from the potential negative effect of stressors” (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012, p. 675; 2013, p. 16).

In defining resilience there is a specific focus on the individuals’ protection from the
negative effect of stressors rather than a positive coping response or adaptation to adverse
circumstances. This definition suggests that resilience and coping are conceptually distinct
constructs, specifically “resilience is characterised by its influence on one’s appraisal prior to
emotional and coping responses and by its positive, protective impact, whereas coping is
characterised by its response to a stressful encounter and by its varying effectiveness in
resolving outstanding issues” (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013, p.16). Resilience is the maintenance
of normal functioning throughout stressful experiences, while coping is the response to stress
when normal functioning cannot be maintained without effort.

There has been a growing body of work in the last decade that has explored the concept
of resilience within a sporting context (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Galli & Vealey, 2008;
Machida, Irwin & Feltz, 2013; Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; 2015; Martin-Krumm,
Sarrazin, Peterson & Famose, 2003; Mummery, Schofield & Perry, 2004). These studies have
researched resilience in competitive sport, however, only three studies have used a sample of
elite athletes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; 2014; Morgan, Fletcher &
Sarkar, 2013). In one of the first studies to investigate resilience in elite athletes, Fletcher and
Sarkar (2012) interviewed twelve Olympic gold medallists to examine the relationship
between resilience and optimal sport performance. They found that multiple psychological factors shielded these athletes from the possible negative effect of stressors by influencing their challenge appraisal and meta-cognitions. These psychological factors included positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). A significant finding to emerge from this study was the athletes’ changing appraisals of challenging situations. When experiencing stressors, particularly in highly pressurised performance environments, the Olympic athletes appear to reflect on their initial negative appraisal of the stressor and further evaluate the consequential emotion as having the potential to facilitate their performance (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Sarkar, 2017).

In their investigation of team resilience, Morgan et al. (2013) conducted focus groups with five elite teams from a range of sports to examine how they positively adapt to adversity as a cohesive group. Their findings revealed that elite sport teams shared four significant characteristics including group structure, mastery approaches, social capital, and collective efficacy. They found that the quality of relationships amongst team-members were vital for team resilience which was evident across all four characteristics. Additionally, they found that learning and team resilience are intertwined, specifically, the teams gained collective confidence and subsequent learning through experiences of success while also learning from their experiences of adversity by accumulating past challenges and creating the belief that they can overcome future setbacks (Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013).

Following this study Morgan et al. (2015) analysed the autobiographies of eight members of the 2003 England rugby union World Cup winning team. The objective of this study was to explore the psychological processes of team resilience in elite sport to aid in developing an understanding of how resilient teams function. Their findings demonstrated that the resilience process was integral for the achievement of success and excellence at an elite sporting level.
Specifically, the findings revealed five main psychosocial processes underpinning team resilience: transformational leadership, shared team leadership, team learning, social identity, and positive emotions. Additionally, in agreement with Fletcher & Sarkar (2012), the findings of the study revealed that team resilience was illuminated through a progressive narrative form as team members were found to evaluate stressors positively, focussing on moving forwards as a team despite setbacks (Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2014).

This work has enabled researchers to come closer to an understanding of the psychological attributes, behaviours and social support networks which are necessary for athletes to acquire the greatest sporting success (Greenglass & Fikesnbaum, 2009; Lelorain, Tessier, Florin & Bonnaud-Antignac, 2012). Indeed, in their development of mental-fortitude training, Fletcher & Sarkar (2016) have identified the three main aspects of resilience for sustained success, specifically: personal qualities, facilitative environments, and a challenge mind-set. Research into this field is of importance for informing sporting professionals involved with the cultivation of resilience in elite athletes.

While there is an emerging body of resilience research within sport, little research has specifically focused on one of the most stressful components of competitive sport identified by elite athletes; that being the build up to competition. Studies have tended to focus on the negative appraisals and emotions experienced by athletes (Neil, Hanton, Mellalieu & Fletcher, 2011) and how challenging such appraisals can be an important resilience-related mechanism for athletes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). The current study sought to build upon existing work, through exploring the personal meanings and experiences of resilience amongst elite athletes in the build up to international competitions. As outlined above, the build up to important competitions is a time in which athletes are likely to experience a variety of stressors and adversities. Thus, it is believed that gaining an understanding of
athletes’ experiences at this time will add to pre-existing knowledge of resilience in elite
sport.

In elite sport, the specific attributes needed to be successful vary depending on the sport
in question. The study focusses on elite badminton players as, to date, little resilience
research has been conducted with such athletes. It was also a sporting population that the lead
researchers had access to through sporting connections in the elite, competitive circuit.

Badminton is a highly explosive and skills based sport and it is said to be the world’s fastest
racket sport (Gowitzke & Waddell, 1979). In order to be successful at an elite level, the
player must possess superior technical skills, game tactics, fitness and psychological
preparation (Omosegaard & Tindholt, 1996; Ooi et al., 2009). It is a technical, multi-
directional sport which involves fast paced decision making and creative play (Seth, 2016).

Thus, at an elite level, badminton requires a dynamic set of athletic skills with combined
elements of both power and endurance (Hughes, 1995). Thus, elite sporting performance, as
required in competitive badminton, provides a good illustration of resilience at work
(Frydenberg, 2017).

The current study sought to contextualise and interpret the personal meanings and
understandings of resilience in the build up to competition, amongst elite, professional
badminton athletes. The study aimed to explore how elite athletes’ understand resilience
according to their experiences of preparing for competitions; as well as factors which may
have hindered such resilience.

**Method**

**Participants**
The participants were six elite full time badminton players who were all working and competing at the National Badminton Centre in the UK at the time of the study.

Procedures

The athletes were recruited on a voluntary basis by the researcher through a key contact who played badminton at an international level. The Performance Director of Badminton UK gave permission for the research to take place and provided professional badminton players with information about the study with the lead researcher’s contact details should they wish to take part. Participants were then provided with the opportunity to ask the lead researcher any further questions about the study and what their involvement would be, before agreeing to take part. Ethical approval was granted from The University of Glasgow School of Education prior to conducting the research and informed consent was gained from participants.

Six participants were chosen as this is the suggested number for a study using IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Purposive sampling, a technique widely used in qualitative research (Patton, 2002), was adopted to recruit a small and situated sample. This involved identifying and selecting individuals with experience of competitive badminton at an elite level, that were also available and willing to discuss their experiences. This approach also allowed for individual participant’s data to be attended to ideographically before a comparative analysis of participant material was performed. Keeping the sample size small and situated is a strategy that retains an idiographic emphasis whilst embedding any emerging patterns in the data within a social and historical context (Snelgrove, Edwards & Liossi, 2013).
Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) note the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. In contrast, probabilistic or random sampling is used to ensure the generalizability of findings by minimizing the potential for bias in selection and to control for the potential influence of known and unknown confounders.

The participants were aged between 21 and 26 years of age (mean = 23.10) with four male and two female participants. The athletes varied in their level of experience within the sport, ranging from four to eight years of professional experience (mean = 5.50 years). All participants were within the top 100 in world rankings. The participants were not recruited due to their success at an international level. The researcher wanted to gain the perspective of elite athletes over a range of abilities and stages in their professional badminton careers.

**Data Collection**

The data was collected through individual, semi-structured interviews with each participant. With the participants’ consent, each interview was recorded using a digital audio recorder. A notebook was also used for keeping reflective field-notes. The interviews were organised around the athletes’ training schedules and took place at the National Badminton Centre. As with the majority of qualitative research, interviewing is well suited method for IPA studies, given that it inherently involves the co-production of knowledge and experience by the two (or more) individuals who are involved in the conversation (Smith & Sparkes,
Given that the participants were experiential experts with respect to the topic of investigation, the researcher sought to enable the participants to evoke and bring to life their own lived experiences and understandings of resilience in competitive badminton.

The lead researcher’s positionality was that of an ‘outsider’ of the sport (Elias & Scotson, 1994); it was important for the researcher to be open and receptive to novel and/or unexpected topics or issues introduced by the participants (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The lead researcher was unaware of the specific etiquette, norms and values held by the athletes within their sporting context and therefore sought to learn and reflect on such processes and how this impacted on her interpretation of the data.

During the interviews, participants were asked questions to about their conceptualisations of resilience and their experiences of stress in the build-up to international competitions. The questions were developed from a review of previous qualitative studies exploring resiliency in sport literature (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Galli & Vealey, 2008; Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013, 2015). For example: What does resilience mean to you (in the build up to an international competition)?; What causes you stress when preparing for an international competition?; How does the build-up to an important competition alter your training schedule?; Which people in your life do you rely on in times of stress?; Are there any other factors you think are important in fostering resilience? The length of the interviews ranged from 23 to 33 minutes with a mean of 29 and a standard deviation of 3.69. The interviews were principally led by the participants, as the richness and depth of the results relied on the participants’ open and authentic dialogues in expressing their unique understandings, feelings and experiences of the sport. After the interviews were held, the data was transcribed in full verbatim.

IPA and Philosophical Underpinning
An IPA approach was used to analyse the data (Smith, 1996; Smith, 2011). The benefit of using IPA within this research was the potential to uncover novel aspects of meaning and experience which were particular to this population. The aim of IPA is to generate an in-depth interpretation of how individuals understand their world through the unique meanings that particular experiences, events and states hold for them. The theoretical underpinnings of IPA are rooted within phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography.

The phenomenological approach is predominantly concerned with lived experience; it states that each individual’s world is wholly unique from another, as they experience their world in a specific way and provide unique meanings and relations to each phenomenon they encounter (Joseph, 2014). For this reason, phenomenology asserts that an individual’s world can never be fully understood by another. Keeping this in mind, IPA endeavours to gain the best possible understanding of the participants’ worlds through their descriptions of certain features of their lived experiences (Smith, 2011).

The researcher has an active role in the analysis of the data through a process of engagement and interpretation as their own world of individual conceptions complicate the work while also making it possible (Smith, 2004). The researcher’s personal concepts are essential in order to make sense of the participant’s understandings through a process of interpretive activity; the researcher is engaging in a double hermeneutic in which they are trying to make sense of each participant trying to make sense of their world (Smith, 2011).

Each of the transcripts were read and re-read by the lead researcher to ensure complete familiarity with the text. The lead researcher then began an idiographic case-by-case thematic analysis of each individual transcript, searching for meaning through the words of each participant. Each individual transcript was read as wholly independent so that the researcher was not influenced by themes which had previously emerged. Once each transcript
had been read individually, all the themes which had emerged were searched for patterns across the cases (Smith, 2016). These themes were then ordered into clusters, while the researcher continuously related back to the transcripts so that their interpretations connected to what was actually said by each participant. In turn, these themes were examined critically, compared with each other as well as with the lead researcher’s evolving and shifting fore-understandings (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In this sense, adopting an IPA approach involved a synthesis between the research participants’ sense making and that of the lead researcher during each stage of the analysis, providing an entire framework for conducting research (Smith, 2009). All themes were cross checked by the co-researcher as a means of ensuring the credibility and quality of the analysis (Patton, 1999).

Results

The participants’ accounts clustered around four subordinate themes: an optimistic appraisal of pressure as integral to resilience; a shift from emotion to acceptance (allowing for change and recovery); striking a balance between life and sport; and a quality relationship between coach and athlete facilitating optimal performance (see table 1 for a summary of the subordinate and sub-themes). The subordinate themes are presented in bold and the associated sub-themes are presented in bold with italic. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants and quotes from the transcripts are presented to evidence the emergent themes.

An Optimistic Appraisal of Pressure as Integral to Resilience

The idea that one must be optimistic in order to be resilient and compete well during high-pressured badminton competitions resonated throughout all of the participants’ accounts. Emphasis was placed on the mental component of preparing for competitions, as James commented “It’s all mental for me”. In particular, being in the “right frame of mind”
(Mark), both before and during a badminton match, was seen as crucial. Having the required focus, concentration, motivation and determination were seen as essential in maintaining an optimistic frame of mind in order to perform optimally in competitions. Emma described the importance of maintaining this optimal state of mind on the build up to competition in order for her to have an unshakeable confidence in her ability to achieve her full potential during badminton competitions:

I think my motto is always kind of like, ‘don’t leave any stone unturned’, so if that last rep in the gym that you don’t feel like doing, do it, because in the long run (pause) otherwise it may make you doubt yourself (Emma).

This was followed by committed action towards a training schedule that would optimise competitive performance. Her interesting use of the idiom “don’t leave any stone unturned” as her core motto acted as a vow to herself to do everything within her power to be the best she could possibly be without the exception of even missing one last repetition in the gym. It seemed Emma’s resilience stemmed from a constant drive towards putting all her focus, energy and ambition into her training; creating a sense that she could perform to her full potential.

**Pressure (Internal & External) and Drive to Perform and Achieve**

The feeling of a constant pressure to perform and achieve was reiterated across all the participants’ accounts with mixed appraisals of the effects this had on their mental state during the build up to competitions. This pressure emanated from both internal and external factors and affected each athlete differently. The personal pressure and drive to perform optimally in competition was experienced by all the participants. Mark appraised the internal pressure he experienced before a competition as a positive factor that contributed towards his own sense of resilience:
Obviously you are going to get a bit tense [before an important match], but I actually look forward to those tight moments, because I think that is when I’m at my best, because I’m the most concentrated. Because I hate losing so I just go into every match, it doesn’t really matter what it is, I always want to win.

Mark described how he thrived off the stress and pressure associated with performing in competitions. It seemed to be his competitiveness and drive to win which allowed him to foster the resilience he needed to react positively during the stress of competing at a high standard.

In contrast, Theo explained how his sense of resilience was hindered on the build up to competitions as a consequence of the perceived expectations of others and concern with being negatively judged:

It can be quite tough. Like being able to kind of bring your optimum level when you’ve got someone kind of coming at you, wanting to beat you that much, and for you it feels like, well if I win I’m expected to win, but if I lose then everyone’s going to kind of judge you for it. So it’s a kind of lose, lose situation.

Theo’s concern with being beaten by opponents and experiencing negative appraisals from others were viewed as having a detrimental impact on mental state.

Similarly, Jenna’s experience of how her own high expectations of beating an opponent at the European Championships played a part in her and her doubles partner’s subsequent loss:

There’s pressure when you know that medal is within grasp (pause). We had the first round but we ended up losing and they were nowhere near as good. There’s just that pressure because we knew we were capable and had the training to get
the medal. That put too much pressure on us and then we went on court and we
were quite tense and tactically not very good.

Jenna’s vivid description of how “that medal [was] within grasp” encapsulated her
appraisal of the medal as metaphorically close enough to experience, as if she could have
imagined the feeling of winning it. Here, the pressure of Jenna’s internal expectations,
stemming from her confidence in both her own abilities, her partner’s abilities and the quality
of their training, were considered to have hindered her performance. In order to feel a sense
of resilience and play optimally, Jenna sought to find the balance between healthy levels of
pressure encouraging motivation and negative levels causing a decrement in performance in
the build up to competitions.

Shift from Negative Emotions to Acceptance (Allowing for Change and Recovery)

All the participants repeatedly described how they evaluated stressful situations and
circumstances in the build up to competitions with initial feelings of negative emotions;
especially that of frustration, anger and fear. The circumstances they frequently appraised as
stressful included attaining injuries and the experience of losing in badminton competitions.
Participants often used combative language associated with a “battle” (Ross) to describe
being on court during competitions. Ross explained how he considered his opponents to be a
major cause of stress:

I think the main thing for me would definitely be the opponent getting inside your head
rather than focusing on what you need to do.

This strong visual metaphor highlighted the distraction he experienced from the
presence of his opponents at a crucial time when he needed to remain focused in order to
perform optimally. He explained how this dynamic often had an influence over his emotions:
For me sometimes I get a bit too, like into it and I get a bit angry. If I’m into the game and I think I can win sort of thing and then something doesn’t go my way I can sort of kick off a little bit and get in like a battle with my opponents.

Ross’s anger caused him to enter into a “mental battle” with his opponents which negatively impacted on his performance, hindering his resilience and causing him to lose focus. Ross explained that this was “not the best way to deal with it”; he sought to build his future resilience by coping with the stress he experienced on court instead of reacting with unhelpful emotions. If Ross has the previous knowledge that he can cope effectively with the potential stressors of a match, he will be able to foster the resilience necessary to withstand the pressures of these stressors in future competitions. Similarly, Mark recognised the need to develop resilience for dealing with set-backs in competitions:

You can keep down the same path forever, making the same mistakes over and over, or you can change and make yourself better.

All of the participants had encountered injuries during their sporting careers. Injuries were appraised as extremely stressful and recognised as a time in which high levels of resilience were needed in order to get through the recovery period and continue playing; as Jenna explained:

All I’m doing is rehab. I can’t actually play properly, but then things like resilience kicks in and that makes you want to overcome it and get back on court.

The constant “ups and downs” (Theo) of being injured and not knowing the full timescale of recovery was appraised by all the participants as a difficult aspect of being an athlete, as captured by Jenna’s account:
I think it’s hard for everyone because you think you’re back and fit and I’m on court again and then all of a sudden it starts again and it’s like pretty upsetting and you’re a bit like frustrated and angry to start with and I think, then you kind of just have to knuckle down and try and beat it again and again.

When Jenna’s injury persisted she described an initial response of intense negative emotions, moving to an acceptance of the injury. Removing oneself from the initial feelings of intense, negative emotions and reaching a sense of acceptance seemed to be an important factor in aiding the athletes to build the resilience needed in order to overcome injuries, continue with their training and begin competing again.

*Loss and Defeat as Opportunities for Learning*

Both fear of losing and the experience of defeat at badminton competitions were expressed as being significant stressors by participants. Whilst such stressors were initially experienced as frustrating, they were also appraised as opportunities for learning, as Jenna capsulated:

Everyone has those tournaments where you don’t play your best, but it’s not letting that affect you when you play the next one or the one after that. Rather than (pause) hopefully that’s one out of the way now [laughter] and I played really good all summer! And we’ve got some big ones coming up [European Championships], so I’m kind of just taking that approach and learning from it, I can’t change it now, so you have just got to look forward.

Jenna was able to accept her past defeats with a comforting generalisation that losing is something every player must experience. It seemed that her resilience after a difficult defeat was aided by this acceptance which allowed her to look optimistically
towards the future with the recognition that the past cannot be changed. An emphasis
was placed on “learning, learning from every tournament” (James) by the participants.
James described how his initial disappointment following a defeat turned to acceptance
after losing at a competition:

The disappointment was an initial feeling, so I just use it as a building block for
years down the line em, so we have to take it with a pinch of salt really, and so
we always have more in the future to build up to.

The focus on learning allowed James to accept loss as a necessary “building block”
(James) in order for him to improve as a professional badminton player. It seemed that this
acceptance enabled him to foster resilience with a look to his future improvements and
potential achievements. Indeed, acceptance, learning from defeats and improvement as a
constant and integral factor of continued success was central to all the participants’
experiences, as captured by Mark:

Actually accepting that you can improve something is where you can become
better. If you look at someone who maybe would say that they’re not resilient or
they’re not very good at dealing with something bad, that is where they stay at the
same level, because they can’t accept that something is wrong. You have to be
able to say like I’m not good at, you know, a back hand shot, I need to work on
that, but until you can admit to yourself that something is affecting you then
nothing is going to change.

In this sense, resilience may be fostered through an acceptance that both loss and
defeat are inevitable conditions within competitive sports, yet can be intrinsically
linked to learning opportunities, continued improvement and personal growth as a
player.
Participants expressed the importance of striking a balance within their sporting careers; both in terms of their support networks and in their training regimes. They emphasised the huge commitment being a professional badminton player involved in terms of their time and commitment yet also placed importance on “having a life outside the sport” (Ross). This was captured in Mark’s account after struggling with a significant break-up of a relationship whereby he described:

I realised how important, not just badminton is, but life is as well because you take for granted how happy you are or what you are doing out of court sometimes, because it’s not the priority, because you are just concentrating on badminton. But if you don’t do both, then I don’t think you can be successful at badminton.

Long hours of training, limited flexibility in training schedules, and extensive travel for competitions were just some of the lifestyle factors of being a professional badminton athlete that impacted on their abilities to maintain a work-life balance. At the same time, they recognised the need for peer support, personal networks and time away from the sport as positively influencing their personal resilience in coping with the demands of being a competitive player.

In order to achieve higher levels of resilience and play optimally, the athletes sought to find the balance between healthy levels of pressure encouraging motivation and negative levels causing a decrement in performance in the build up to competitions. Mark described how his aspirations for success and his drive to achieve were mirrored by his peers:

I’ve always wanted to achieve. I mean I came from a group of people who, well there is still a few of us here, where we all trained together and we were like eight,
nine, ten years old and we always had a dream that we would be here, you know, competing for Olympic medals, that kind of thing so I wasn’t gonna let an injury get in the way of that. So I mean, I knew that if I did everything right that I would be able to play again. I think the thought of stopping playing never occurred to me. So I just knew that was my only option at the time, to make myself better really (Mark).

Mark appraised the injury as a barrier which had the potential to destroy his lifelong dream of competing for Olympic medals. The resilience Mark needed to break down this perceived barrier and return to sport stemmed from an innate drive and pressure to achieve as well as a recognition of the importance of the support he received from his peers.

Finding the ‘Fine Line’ Between Peaking and Over Training

All the participants believed they had experienced the effects of over training during their sporting careers. They had struggled to find the “fine line” (Theo) between peaking and over training. Rapid changes in training regimes, strenuous competition itineraries and overcoming sporting injuries often led to athletes searching for ways to aggregate gains over time in terms of their sporting performance. Theo evaluated the constant possibility of over training:

It’s like the balance between, you know, you’re training really hard and trying to do really well but you have to not then over train otherwise that will hinder it.

The participants sought to find the balance between training hard and not pushing themselves too far both physically and psychologically. They recognised the potential personal costs of over-training in terms of increased risk of injury and the consequent mental pressure and exhaustion they experienced and how this often had a detrimental impact on their performance. Emma described how she found it difficult to know her own personal
limits when it came to training optimally and the subsequent negative emotions she experienced:

I get a bit more frustrated now because I push myself quite a lot so I’m always on that edge of like, I think everyone here is always on that edge of where you can over push yourself, but I’ve been injured quite a lot, I like to think I know where that line is, and sometimes I cross it and that’s really annoying but I can’t help it!.

The difference between Emma’s experiences of training optimally and over training as being “always on that edge”, suggests that the space between the two was extremely small. The balance between training optimally and over training was not necessarily easily achieved, even for athletes who had experienced both physical and psychological injuries as a consequence of over training. Participants had found it difficult to stop themselves from surpassing their limits; their “competitiveness and drive” (Mark) which had helped them to become elite athletes could, at times, work against them resulting in over training.

Support From Those Who Understand the Life of Sport

The continuing support of both friends and family was appraised by every participant as extremely important in fostering a sense of personal resilience in the build up to competitions. There was an interesting contrast between their perspectives of support from those who “understand the life of sport” (Mark) and those who were perceived as “outsiders” (James). Theo placed significance on gaining support from those with shared experiences when training for an important competition:

If you’re the only one going through it [training] then it can be quite tough to relate to other people. Whereas, if you have someone who is going through that sort of pain and suffering with you, then it does make it a lot easier I think.
It seemed that Theo built the resilience he needed to endure the “pain and suffering” of training through the support of those around him who were sharing his experiences. All the participants placed importance on having the support of those who had a shared understanding of the lifestyle of being a competitive, professional badminton player. At times, participants had found that familial and/or social support networks outside the sport of badminton were less able to provide the support they needed. Jenna compared the support she received from her partner who also played professional badminton to that of her parents:

We both kind of know what it feels like when you’re not playing well or you’re a bit annoyed [partner]. I’ve got my mum and dad as well but I find myself arguing with them quite often, like after I lost [European Championships] but he [boyfriend] understands that you can’t play your best all the time and it’s good to have that person there.

The contrast between the support Jenna received from her partner and that of her parents was striking. Even though she understood that her parents wanted “the best for me” (Jenna), without an adequate understanding of her sporting experiences they were unable to offer her the support she needed. It seemed that resilience was built through the dynamic support of others during times of stress, with a particular emphasis on the value of support from those with shared experiences.

A Quality Relationship Between Coach and Athlete Facilitating Optimal Performance

Having a good quality coach-athlete relationship was foreseen as being a significant factor in fostering resilience in the build up to a competition. In discussing both successes and set-backs within their sporting careers, the participants made reference to this relationship, as James stated “The coaches are the ones that will get you far”. The quality of this relationship was considered as being instrumental in helping them to perform optimally and achieve
success in their sport. Trust, respect, commitment, openness, understanding and effective communication were qualities that the participants’ viewed as being key in developing a “good solid relationship” (Theo). Theo emphasised the need for mutual reciprocity in terms of such qualities in the coach-athlete relationship:

I’ve always been quite open and honest and when you get the same response from your coach and they’re open and honest then, you know, things are always going to work out a lot better.

Dynamism within the coach-athlete relationship was also a quality that participants valued within the coach-athlete relationship. Each of the participants needed something different from their coach as each individual had different attitudes, coping strategies and unique appraisals of stress in the build up to competitions. This individuality was addressed by the participants themselves, as Mark explained: “You’re not going to get someone that’s got everything, so it’s just what works best for you”. Theo elaborated on this point:

You are trying to get the best out of each other; the players trying to learn from the coach and the coach is trying to find the best way to be able to coach the player.

For a coach to have an optimum relationship with each player they must understand them individually and adapt their coaching style to suit each athlete’s unique needs. Emma explained how a coach who understood her could help facilitate her performance in important competitions:

I definitely feel that if you have a coach behind your court that knows you better or that you have discussed like how you are on court and they understand you, I think it goes a lot easier, like the matches you feel a lot more confident. I think if someone doesn’t quite know you behind the court you can almost get into a battle
with them, when you’re trying to play at the same time, so that makes it really
difficult to play because there is always two things going on at the same time.

Lack of understanding and/or dynamism between an athlete and their coach could be
detrimental to achieving optimum performance, as Emma described how it caused a
disturbing “battle” between herself and her coach, creating a situation in which she was
playing against her coach as well as her opponent. Having a dynamic relationship with their
coaches was viewed by the participants as a means of fostering the resilience they needed to
play optimally in competitions.

Discussion

In exploring elite athletes’ personal meanings and experiences of resilience in the
build up to competition in the sport of badminton, the current study found that the athlete’s
often equated their own sense of resilience with that of achieving optimal performance in
their sport. In drawing upon both internal and external processes that contributed towards
their sense of resilience, the athletes’ explanations support the conceptualisation of resilience
as a dynamic process of interactions between the person and their environment (Egeland,
Carlson & Sroufe, 1993; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Galli & Vealey,
2008; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Sarkar, 2017). As found in previous research (Galli
& Gonzalez, 2015; Galli & Vealey, 2008), having a personality characteristic of positivity
and optimism was viewed as essential in building resilience in sport.

The athletes within this study experienced a continual feeling of pressure to perform
at a high standard which impacted on their mental state. This pressure was appraised both
positively and negatively by the athletes, influencing them from both internal and external
sources. While for some of the athletes, this pressure was appraised negatively, causing their
performance to be hindered in the build up to competitions, for others it served as a means of
positive challenge creating a heightened confidence and the potential for an improved performance.

This finding adds to a multitude of extant research indicating that athletes with high levels of resilience are able to transform the negative feelings of stress associated with competing into positive expectations of performance (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Hanton & Jones, 1999; Jones, Swain & Hardy, 1993; Kaiseler, Polman & Nicholls, 2009). Given that learning to manage feelings of stress and anxiety associated with competitive sport are skills that can be taught (Hanton & Jones, 1999; Krane & Williams, 2006), coaches and sport psychologists working closely with athletes may be best placed to identify and work with athletes that are struggling in coping with such pressures (Abedalhafiz, Altahayneh & Al-Halig, 2010; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

Similar to earlier work (Galli & Vealey, 2008; Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffett, 2002; Richardson, 2002), the athletes described how having the opportunity to adapt to set-backs allowed for an increase in their resilience once the adversity had been successfully overcome. With this research in mind, it can be postulated that elite athletes aiming towards the highest of success should be encouraged to seek out and welcome challenging situations, coupled with the skills to manage the associated stress and pressures. This may allow for successive adversities and set-backs to appear more tolerable (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) and encourage improvements in future performance (Arnetz, Nevedal, Lumley, Backman & Lublin, 2009; Cronin & Allen, 2015; Danish, Petipas & Hale, 1993; Hobfoll, 2010). The appraisal of adversity as a learning experience is an extremely important element in the fostering of resilience in elite athletes, enabling an acceptance of stressors such as loss, defeat and injury (Galli & Vealey, 2008).
The athletes recognised the fine line between training optimally and over training. Over training was a constant possibility during the athletes’ sporting careers as they explained that it was extremely difficult to know their own personal limits. This finding suggests that it is important for athletes and their coaches to develop an in-depth understanding of periodization allowing for optimal recovery plans (Gould & Maynard, 2009; Schwenk, 2000). In agreement with much past research (Abedalhafiz, Altahayneh, & Al-Haliq, 2010; Evans, Wadey, Hanton, & Mitchell, 2011), injury was appraised as a significant stressor by the athletes. Recent systematic reviews looking at the psychology of sport injuries propose that injury is frequently associated with negative emotions such as grief, loss, frustration, anxiety, anger and depression (Brewerm, 2007; Certel, Bahadir & Karabulut, 2013; Colbert, Scott, Dale & Brennan, 2012; Evans, Mitchell & Jones, 2006; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016; Kirker, Tenenbaum & Mattson, 2000; Sheldon & Aimar, 2001). Indeed, the athletes in the current study described a shift from a negative emotional state to that of acceptance as a means to aid their recovery and adapt accordingly.

In accordance with the findings of Fletcher & Sarkar (2012) the athletes in the study evaluated balancing sport and life as a welcomed necessity in order for them to build resilience and gain a more positive perspective on their sporting careers. The role of social support was paramount in the fostering of resilience during the build up to and during competition. As reported in earlier work (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Freeman & Rees, 2009, 2010; Greenglass & Fikesnbaum, 2009) support from those who understand the life of sport, most notably fellow athletes and badminton coaches, was greatly valued by the athletes.

In agreement with a multitude of previous research, the coach-athlete relationship was perceived by the athletes as being one of the most significant factors contributing to optimal sporting performance and success at an international level (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002;
Athletes require a dynamic support system from their coaches, with each individual athlete relying on different forms of support (Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffett, 2002). The ability of a coach to understand an athlete provides the athlete with a level of trust and self-confidence that has the potential to guide them towards excellence in their sport. In support of previous research (Gould & Maynard, 2009), the most important factors to constitute a strong relationship was open and honest communication allowing for a relationship of mutual understanding and reciprocal trust between the coach and the athlete.

As outlined above, this study supports the findings of multiple other studies on resilience in sport. It originally contributes to the literature by specifically focusing on athletes’ experiences of resilience in the build-up to important competitions and opens-up avenues for future research into this area.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

A major limitation of the study was the use of single interviews instead of holding multiple interviews over a period of time. With the increase in the use of qualitative research methods in sport psychology within the last two decades, researchers have addressed the need for more rigorous research designs which incorporate many exchanges with participants using multiple forms of data collection (Culver, Gilbert & Trudel, 2003). Meeting the participants only once limits the amount of depth and comprehensiveness necessary in order to draw conclusions from the data.

Future studies may benefit from utilising a longitudinal interview process which would allow for a thorough investigation of the dynamic nature of athletes’ appraisals of resilience during the process of coping with stress and adversity (Galli & Vealey, 2008).
There is a need for future longitudinal research to examine whether athletes do in fact achieve psychological growth through their dealings with adversity, and the extent to which this development transfers to different types of sport adversity.

From the findings of the current research, it is clear that the build up to an important competition is a time at which elite athletes may experience a huge number of stressors (Gould & Maynard, 2009). This study was limited by only including athletes from one sport and being retrospective in nature. Interviewing athletes from only one sport may reduce the generalizability beyond badminton and asking participants about their past experiences of stress in the build-up to an international competition may have compromised the accuracy of the data through ‘faded’ perceptions of past experiences (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Future research could alleviate these limitations by gaining access to a sample of athletes from a multitude of sports who are training in the build-up to a major sporting event at the time of the study. This will allow for a fuller account of how elite athletes cope with stress in the build-up to an international competition.

It is important to note that all the athletes within the present study described successfully overcoming adversity allowing for resilient reintegration. In order to gain a fuller understanding of resilience in elite sport, future research may benefit from focusing on elite athletes who have struggled to adapt following set-backs in their sporting careers (Galli & Vealey, 2008); for example, those who quit sport after a significant competitive loss and/or injury. This may help shed light on the specific psychological resources which may influence resilience capacities in dealing with stress in sport (Bryan, O’Shea & MacIntyre, 2017).

Implications of Study

The results of this study have implications for sport professionals who work closely with elite athletes and wish to build their resilience and improve both their sporting
performance and well-being. Sports psychologists working with athletes who are experiencing significant stressors should aim to facilitate positive growth as well as recovery, through appraising set-backs, injuries and loss experiences as opportunities for learning (Galli & Vealey, 2008; Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2015). This may be particularly pertinent for athletes that have yet to reach the pinnacle of their sport, in order to optimise their opportunities to perform at the highest level in their sporting careers. Additionally, coach education programmes may benefit from accentuating the importance of building strong support networks amongst athletes, developing coping skills training programmes to enhance resilience in sport (Secades et al., 2016) and monitoring athletes’ training loads to help reduce risk of injuries (Gabbett, 2016). Further research incorporating the views of athletes’ across a range of sporting contexts may help further enhance understandings of how best to both conceptualise and measure this concept as it is applied in sport.

Conclusions

Within this study a variety of situations were appraised by the participants as stressful in the build up to competitions, including internal and external pressures to perform at a high standard, the coach-athlete relationship, injury, training, and loss. A multitude of factors impacted on the athletes’ reactions to the adversity caused by these stressors. This research supports the conceptualisation of resilience as a continually evolving process of interactions between the person and their environment. As the current study demonstrates, the concept of resilience is of importance in sport psychology research as elite athletes must continually endure a variety of internal and external stressors in order to reach and maintain the level of performance necessary to compete professionally.

Further theoretically derived qualitative research, exploring athletes’ unique personal meanings and experiences of resilience across a wide range of sporting contexts will further
enhance understandings of this construct. This may also help uncover the dynamic and transient nature of resilience throughout an athlete’s sporting career and provide a developmental understanding of the processes involved in fostering resilience across the sporting career trajectory.
Table 1: Subordinate Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Master Themes</th>
<th>Subordinate Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>An Optimistic Appraisal of Pressure as Integral to Resilience:</strong></td>
<td>Pressure (Internal &amp; External) and Drive to Perform and Achieve</td>
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<tr>
<td>“It’s all mental for me.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Shift from negative Emotions to Acceptance (Allowing for Change and Recovery):</strong></td>
<td>Loss and Defeat as Opportunities for Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>“You can keep down the same path forever, making the same mistakes over and over, or you can change and make yourself better.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Striking a Balance Between Life and Sport:</strong></td>
<td>Finding the ‘Fine Line’ Between Peaking and Over Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t think you can be successful at badminton if your life isn’t important as well”</td>
<td>Support From Those Who Understand the Life of Sport</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A Quality Relationship Between Coach and Athlete Facilitating Optimal Performance</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“If I could pin point the best times in my career so far it has always been when I’m close to a coach or I’ve understood the coach.”</td>
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References


