



## Understanding team resilience in the world's best athletes: A case study of a rugby union World Cup winning team



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Although team resilience research has identified the characteristics of elite sport teams that positively adapt to adversity, further research is required to understand how resilient teams function. The objective of this study, therefore, was to explore the psychosocial processes underpinning team resilience in elite sport.

**Design:** Narrative inquiry was employed to better understand team resilience.

**Method:** The sample consisted of eight members of the 2003 England rugby union World Cup winning team. The autobiographies of these team members were analyzed using three types of narrative analysis: holistic-content analysis, holistic-form analysis, and categorical-form analysis.

**Results:** Findings revealed five main psychosocial processes underpinning team resilience: transformational leadership, shared team leadership, team learning, social identity, and positive emotions. An examination of narrative structure within the autobiographies revealed a progressive narrative form characterized by a collective positive evaluation of setbacks.

**Conclusions:** This study extends previous team resilience research by going beyond the identification of resilient characteristics to explaining underpinning psychosocial processes. The team resilience processes are discussed in relation to previous research findings and in terms of their implications for practising sport psychologists. It is anticipated that this study will provide practitioners with a framework to develop team resilience at the highest levels of sport.

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Psychological resilience represents an important phenomenon that explains the development of people who positively adapt to adverse events. Fletcher and Sarkar recently defined psychological resilience as “the role of mental processes and behavior in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors” (2012, p 675; 2013, p. 16). In the context of the present study, resilience is required in response to both adversity, defined as “... negative life circumstances that are known to be statistically associated with adjustment difficulties” (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 858), and stressors, defined as “the environmental demands (i.e., stimuli) encountered by an individual” (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006, p. 359).

The ability of individuals and teams to withstand stressors is a prerequisite for sporting excellence (Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996)

and for this reason sport psychology researchers have begun to investigate resilience in competitive athletes (see e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Galli & Vealey, 2008; Gucciardi, Jackson, Coulter, & Mallett, 2011). In 2008, Galli and Vealey explored individual athletes' perceptions and experiences of resilience. The athletes reported that positive adaptation occurred gradually and often required numerous shifts of thought. Moreover, the findings indicated that the resilience process (described as ‘agitation’ by the authors) operated over time and involved a variety of factors including personal resources and sociocultural influences. More recently, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) interviewed twelve Olympic champions to explore and explain the relationship between psychological resilience and optimal sport performance. The findings revealed that numerous psychological factors (relating to a positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support) protected the world's best athletes from the potential negative effect of stressors by influencing their challenge appraisal and meta-cognitions. These processes promoted facilitative responses that preceded optimal sport performance. Resilience studies in sport have tended to focus on individual resilience and,

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therefore, further research is needed to better understand resilience at a group level.

Resilience researchers, in various subdisciplines of psychology, have lately turned their focus to the group level (e.g., Carmeli, Friedman, & Tischler, 2013; Stephens, Heaphy, Carmeli, Spreitzer, & Dutton, 2013). Within the sport psychology literature, Morgan, Fletcher, and Sarkar (2013) conducted the first study of team resilience in sport. Employing focus groups with members of five elite sport teams, a definition of team resilience was developed and the resilient characteristics of elite sport teams were identified. Specifically, team resilience was defined as a “dynamic, psychosocial process which protects a group of individuals from the potential negative effect of the stressors they collectively encounter. It comprises of processes whereby team members use their individual and collective resources to positively adapt when experiencing adversity” (p. 552). Team resilience was described as a dynamic phenomenon with participants stating that it was “dependent upon what time of season it is” or “whether there is an injury in the team”. In terms of its protective function, the participants described team resilience as akin to “having a barrier round you” and “having a thick skin”. Furthermore, the participants emphasized that team resilience involved a shared experience of stressors (e.g., team disruptions, low team morale) and this was revealed through comments such as “we have been through so many setbacks together”. Four resilient characteristics of elite sport teams emerged from this study: group structure (i.e., conventions that shape group norms and values), mastery approaches (i.e., shared attitudes and behaviors that promote an emphasis on team improvement), social capital (i.e., the existence of high quality interactions and caring relationships within the team), and collective efficacy (i.e., the team’s shared beliefs in its ability to perform a task).

Within the organizational psychology literature, group resilience has been conceived as a dynamic process involving continuous anticipation and adjustment during challenging conditions (see, e.g., Gittell, Cameron, Lim, & Rivas, 2006; Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Key psychosocial processes facilitate the ability of groups to positively adapt to adversity. To illustrate, leadership processes have been found to enable pioneering non-profit organizations to survive and thrive over time (see Kimberlin, Schwartz, & Austin, 2011). Specifically, these processes consisted of effective individual leadership, entrepreneurial flexibility, and calculated risk-taking. Furthermore, connectivity to group members has been identified as an important relational mechanism that allows top management teams (TMTs) to respond innovatively to continuously changing environmental demands (see Carmeli et al., 2013). Relational features of resilience have also been explored in TMTs through a focus on emotional carrying capacity (ECC), a relationship’s capacity to express emotions constructively (cf. Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). For example, Stephens et al. (2013) found that ECC mediated the relationship between trust and team resilience.

The recent developments in resilience research have advanced psychologists’ knowledge of the nature, meaning, and scope of team resilience. In the sport psychology literature, Morgan et al.’s (2013) study extended resilience research by providing greater definitional clarity of resilience at the team level (i.e., what team resilience is) and proposing a framework to profile the resilient characteristics of elite sport teams (i.e., what resilient teams ‘look’ like). Although such knowledge provides descriptive information about the factors that enable teams to withstand stressors, these characteristics do not explain how resilient teams function. Importantly, Morgan et al. described team resilience as a “dynamic, psychosocial process” (p. 552), which points to operational aspects of this construct and how it changes over time. They went on to argue that “due to the contextual and temporal nature of team

resilience, future studies should aim to identify the processes that underpin the resilience characteristics” (p. 558). The objective of this study was to address this gap in our understanding of team resilience. It is hoped that this research will advance knowledge in this area by developing the conceptual scaffold required to build this important team-level phenomenon (cf. Chan, 1998; Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999). It is also anticipated that this investigation will advance practitioners’ knowledge and understanding of developing excellence in elite sport teams. Specifically, practitioners will be provided with a framework to enhance team resilience processes at the highest levels of sport and will be offered practical ideas for working with team members and staff seeking to develop excellence. Indeed, Yukelson and Rose (2014) argued that better knowledge and understanding of team resilience is important for developing a culture of ongoing excellence in elite sport.

## Method

### Research design

This study was an exploratory investigation of team resilience that aimed to elicit rich information and hence, qualitative methods were adopted (Silverman, 2006). Ungar (2003) proposed the use of such methods to extend the knowledge base of resilience as a scientific construct. Specifically, he suggested that qualitative methods offer the potential to discover “unnamed protective [resilience] processes” (p. 85). To better understand team resilience processes in elite sport, the present study specifically employed narrative inquiry. The premise of this approach is that individuals and groups structure their experience through a “constructed form or template which people rely on to tell stories” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 2). This “constructed form or template” refers to the patterns contained within stories that make it possible to understand the way people create meaning in their lives. Proponents of narrative inquiry also assert that examining a person’s stories can help explain human cognitions and behavior (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Within the context of elite sport, narrative inquiry has been used to examine the lives of athletes through their own stories to understand the psychosocial factors that form their experiences (see, e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2013). Smith and Sparkes (2009) proposed that narrative research encourages “a focus on the ways relations between people shape, enable, and constrain lives, and the manner in which such sporting practices like team development ... arise through a storied process of social interaction” (p. 6). Therefore, to further our understanding of team resilience processes in elite sport, narrative inquiry is an appropriate method to explore team members’ interpretations of meaning during challenging situations that they collectively encounter (cf. Morgan et al., 2013).

### Sample

The 2003 England rugby union World Cup winning team was selected as an appropriate case for a study of team resilience since the team positively adapted to numerous adversities on their journey to success. Rugby union is an interactive, dynamic collision sport comprising of 15 players in a team. Competing in rugby requires the coordination of various positions and roles. The sport also involves players having to change frequently between offensive and defensive situations and these structural and strategic aspects place numerous demands on a team’s resilience. The England side was a professional team of full-time athletes with the team being re-selected every year and often re-selected during each season. The players were selected from club teams that competed in the professional English league. The team competed in

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