

1 **The Gradual Normalization of Behaviors Which Might Challenge**

2 **Ethical and Professional Standards**

3 **in Two British Elite Sports Organizations**

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Abstract

10 We examined how two elite British sports organisations began accepting behaviours that might
11 challenge ethical and professional standards. The data for the current paper came from two sepa-
12 rate ethnographic studies. We used Alvesson and Einola's (2018) Functional Stupidity to analyse
13 the data for processes of a lack of reflexivity, lack of justification, and a lack of substantial rea-
14 soning presented in three vignettes for each case organization. We then carried out a cross-case
15 analysis and show that periods of significant change are high-risk for the spread of unethical and
16 unprofessional behaviours. The common rationales for accepting such behaviours were: (1) you
17 have not spent time in the trenches, (2) it has always been like this, (3) policing space, (4) I am
18 just doing my job and (5) giving opportunities to those close to me. Our findings suggest a sense
19 of banality to wrongdoing where normal people slipped into ethical problem areas.

20

Keywords: sports management, Olympic Sport, Organizational culture, Leadership

21 **The Gradual Normalisation of Behaviours which might Challenge Ethical and Professional**
22 **Standards in Two British Elite Sports Organisations**

23 The rise of the United Kingdom (UK) as a global powerhouse is also the story of a trium-
24 phant elite sports system. A study of sport policies leading to international success (De Bosscher
25 et al., 2007) suggests that the success might be due to the UK being a nation with strong sport
26 policy. The study highlighted the apparent strength of athlete support and coaching provisions in
27 the UK. However, as Team GB increased their medal tally and outward success, a darker side
28 emerged in parallel. There have been investigations into behaviours challenging ethical and pro-
29 fessional conduct in British Cycling (King, 2012; Phelps et al., 2017), British Canoeing (Sport
30 Resolutions, 2017) and duty of care in sports in the UK (Grey-Thompson, 2017). At the time of
31 writing, British Gymnastics is undergoing a review after allegations made by numerous current
32 and former elite athletes. Yet, at the same time, these organisations produced functional outcomes,
33 such as winning medals on the world stage. How can a nation that is praised for its strong sporting
34 policies and high competency levels in the workforce also experience behaviours that challenge
35 professional and ethical conduct?

36 Most findings from independent reviews of sports organisations highlight that the culprits
37 are either senior management (Sport Resolutions, 2017), a “power pocket” in the leadership
38 (Phelps et al., 2017) or an autocratic leader (King, 2012). Such views attribute the issues to a single
39 person or a few people. However, a scrutiny of the independent reviews shows that claims of
40 ignorance or being uninformed by boards and other groups in the sport are pervasive (Sport
41 Resolutions, 2017). For one, Phelps et al. (2017) suggested that findings concerning negative be-
42 haviours were not acted upon by the board of directors. Participants in these reviews also often
43 describe themselves as “defensive of their own position” (King, 2012, p. 5) to explain why they

44 could not cooperate with other groups in the same organisation. These three examples are con-
45 sistent with findings regarding the emergence of destructive cultures (Feddersen et al., 2020). They
46 are also consistent with reports on failed leadership in situations of a damaging culture in Danish
47 Swimming (Kammeradvokaten, 2020), systemic failures in protecting youth athletes in USA Gym-
48 nastics (Daniels, 2017), corruption and doping in biathlon (IBU External Review Commission,
49 2021), and ball tampering in Australian cricket (The Ethics Centre, 2018). We focus on the British
50 context, and yet, the examples above show that unprofessional and unethical behaviour are perva-
51 sive across the world. The reviews also suggest that cultures of fear, intimidation, or bullying, do
52 not hinge on an autocratic leader alone. More people may be involved either through non-action
53 or through inadvertently joining practices that might challenge professional or ethical standards.
54 Indeed, in Kihl's (2007) study of practical morality amongst Pacific 10 Conference Compliance
55 Officers, the phenomenon of 'hiding behind the rules' of organisations was a well noted mecha-
56 nism for shielding oneself from personal moral responsibility. Outside sports, researchers have a
57 similar process and linked it to people 'not thinking too much' about compliance (Paulsen, 2018)
58 or the negative effects of behaviour (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). These considerations suggest that
59 it might be more complicated than a single evil mastermind; other processes might be in play.

60 The current paper focuses on behaviours that violate ethical and professional standards.
61 Pfarrer et al. (2008) explain that organisations can have different perceptions of what constitutes
62 socially desirable, ethical and professional behaviours. Indeed, the very notion of ethical leader-
63 ship has been challenged within large scale sporting organisations, as often the needs of staff and
64 athletes can appear conceptually incompatible with those of the organisation (Nite & Bopp, 2017).
65 In the current study, we build on assertions from several reviews of Olympic sports that call for
66 sports not to think of themselves as special and outside societal norms. Legitimacy, as proposed

67 by Pfarrer et al. (2008), has been used in research on destructive cultures in sport (authors removed
68 for blinded review). Therefore, it can help examine behaviours that violate broader societal norms
69 or standards of conduct. The contribution of the current paper is that it disturbs a common assump-
70 tion of how organisations operate. We provide an investigation of potential restrictions on cogni-
71 tive capacities in organisational life. In doing so, we seek to examine how stakeholders in two elite
72 British sport organisations begin accepting behaviours that might challenge ethical and profes-
73 sional standards.

74 **Theoretical Framework**

75 Alvensson and Spicer (2012) suggest that there is an enormous body of research building on
76 a common assumption of “smartness” and that organisations are inherently based on knowledge,
77 information, competence, wisdom and so forth. On the contrary, studies on nonrationality, includ-
78 ing those on groupthink (e.g., Fernandez, 2007; Janis, 1991), hubris (Frontiera, 2010; Judge et al.,
79 2009) and rigid adherence to wishful thinking (e.g., Wagner, 2002), remind us of the limitations
80 of the mobilisation of cognitive capacities.

81 Alvensson and Spicer (2012) propose the concept of *functional stupidity* to capture pro-
82 cesses that are neither purely stupid nor semirational. This concept refers to an unwillingness to
83 mobilise reflexivity, substantive reasoning and justification in other than short-sighted ways
84 (Alvensson & Spicer, 2012). Using this framework, we look at what happens when intelligent and
85 knowledgeable people actively refrain from using intellectual resources outside a narrow field
86 (Paulsen, 2017). Alvensson and Spicer (2012) explain that the focus is not intellectual short-com-
87 ings, incompetence or mistakes. Rather, researchers should focus on different rationales that influ-
88 ence reflective attitudes and the effort to “not think too much” about organisational outcomes
89 (Paulsen, 2017). Along these lines, the independent review of British Canoeing mentioned that

90 “Sprint could have continued for as long as they did, notwithstanding the numerous ‘red flags’ that
91 existed” (Sport Resolutions, 2017, p. 2). Alvesson and Einola (2018) suggest that such a superficial
92 approach can happen in organisations where high performance is a key denominator, and that such
93 organisations are, to some degree, based on functional stupidity. These organisations are likely to
94 develop their own rationales for behaviour based on the occupation and field (Paulsen, 2017).

95 Viewing organisational functioning in sports through this lens could be interpreted as a
96 rather bleak outlook on the recent events in sports and the normalisation of cultures that might
97 deny, ignore or allow unacceptable behaviours to happen. However, despite the negative connota-
98 tions, selective stupidity can prove functional and lead to success. Fagerberg et al. (2020) state that
99 many organisations might rely on some degree of functional stupidity, which facilitates smooth
100 functioning. Doing so might relieve an individual's anxiety relating to the job or provide a basis
101 for strong shared belief in procedures that maintain taken-for-granted practices. The effort to main-
102 tain organisational functioning could involve a form of organisational compliance. Fagerberg et
103 al. (2020) explain that organisational compliance involves ignoring how some actions or behav-
104 iours might challenge what individuals consider ethically or professionally correct, while carrying
105 out such actions.

106 Both Paulsen (2017) and Alvesson and Einola (2018) state that a key feature of functional
107 stupidity is gradual normalisation. Further, Alvesson and Spicer (2012) outline three tell-tale signs
108 of functional stupidity: (1) lack of reflexivity, (2) lack of justification and (3) a lack of substantial
109 reasoning. The three can be intertwined and overlapping (Paulsen, 2017). *Lack of reflexivity* entails
110 “an inability or unwillingness to question knowledge claims and norms” (Alvesson & Spicer,
111 2012). It is, therefore, an act of taking one’s assumptions as a given without questioning dominant

112 beliefs (Alvesson & Einola, 2018). Instead, current norms, standards of conduct and success for-
113 mulas are accepted and reproduced. They are, in other words, accepted even though people think
114 that they are problematic (Alvesson & Einola, 2018). An example used by Alvesson and Einola
115 relates to Jackall (1988), who explains that “what is right in the corporation is what the guy above
116 you wants from you” (p. 6). In addition, Alvesson and Einola (2018) upward mobility sometimes
117 requires one to “stop thinking too deeply about issues” (p. 292). In elite sports, Krane and Waldron
118 (2020) suggests that not questioning taken-for-granted practices is critical to receive the benefits,
119 position in a hierarchy, and resources.

120 *Lack of justification* involves not looking for reasons why certain practices (e.g., hiring or
121 promotion) are in place (Alvesson & Einola, 2018). Justification of “why” are often ignored or
122 dismissed with reference to hierarchy, taboo subjects, and convention (Alvesson & Einola, 2018).
123 Not questioning established practice stops short of communicative action, wherein individuals en-
124 gage in dialogue to negotiate rationales for doing something (Habermas, 1984). With the metaphor
125 of “slipping” into functional stupidity, not asking for justification might be an ethically ambiguous
126 situation, which nonetheless might bring an organisation closer to a short-sighted performance aim
127 (Paulsen, 2017). An example of a practice that could become problematic if subject to a lack of
128 justification is promoting diversity in sport leadership. In promoting diversity, organisations high
129 on functional stupidity might support ‘occasional tokens’ to obtain ‘powerful and privileged posi-
130 tions, but with little true support and virtually no ability to make meaningful change’ (Krane &
131 Waldron, 2020, p. 9). Pursuing the short-term performance goal of diversity in leadership could
132 lead to marginalised individuals engaging in ‘silent collusion’ or ‘silent complicity’ even though
133 they do not agree with the practices. Such organisations would be in stark contrast to organisations

134 prepared to challenge the status quo and work for fundamental systems change. The lack of justi-
135 fication and functional stupidity would be the feature, which separates the two.

136 *Lack of substantial reasoning* suggests that people stop considering objectives and wider
137 consequences of taken-for-granted practices (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Instead, “[t]echnical ques-
138 tions about the most efficient way to do something completely trump more basic questions, such
139 as whether it should be done in the first place” (Alvesson & Einola, 2018, p. 293). People would,
140 therefore, work with a limited mindset where dominating objectives, structures and practices are
141 viewed as a given. In organisations high on functional stupidity, myopic or narrow rationalising
142 (e.g., focusing only on technical questions) acts as the foundation for refining practice (Alvesson
143 & Spicer, 2012). Similar points are made by Robertson and Constandt (2021) where narrow rea-
144 soning leads to a diffusion of responsibility by using euphemistic language.

145 **Methods**

146 We examine the gradual normalisation of a lack of reflexivity, justification, and reasoning,
147 which might be well-suited to unpicking some of the recent issues in sport. The value of this ap-
148 proach is that it affords researchers a language through which to consider change over time rather
149 than post hoc rationalisations of negative behaviours. To this end, and in looking to challenge the
150 dominant assumptions of how sporting organisations operate, this study draws on data from two
151 ethnographic case studies. Combining the methodological considerations of both ethnographic and
152 case study research, this methodology focuses on the interrogation of cultural, group, or commu-
153 nity formations, whilst specific regard is paid to capturing the contexts of sociocultural phenomena
154 (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Thus, the phenomenological and contextual attention present within
155 the lived experience of case study work (Stake, 2000), is combined with ‘thick’ accounts of pat-
156 terned social relations captured through extended durations of ethnographic work (Fettermen,

157 2009). Certainly, such a narrative important to understanding any sense making organisation. Each
158 of the cases reported were purposively sampled as to be relevant to the research question (Bryman,
159 2016) and were approached via organisational contacts known to the researchers. The details of
160 each case are discussed below.

161 **Case 1: A National Governing Body in a Longstanding Olympic Sport**

162 Case 1 consists of a national governing body (hereafter referred to as the NGB-A) in a
163 longstanding Olympic sport and the sporting community within that sport (i.e., approximately
164 15000 members). The sport has had gender balance in events and potential medals since the 2008
165 Summer Olympic Games. All other details of the sport are confidential as per agreement with the
166 NGB-A leadership. The first author carried out 16 months (June 2017–November 2018) of eth-
167 nography at various sites in the UK. An initial focus group with leadership and staff (n = 4; one of
168 whom was a woman) identified four other important stakeholder groups, where participants took
169 part in both individual interviews (n=22) and focus groups (n=9). The stakeholders were: athletes
170 aged 18–23 years (n = 15; eight of whom were women), coaches (n = 11; one of whom was a
171 woman) and parents (n = 12; seven of whom were women), and talent development stakeholders
172 (n=9; i.e., talent managers from other NGBs, stakeholders from UK Coaching, UK Sport, the Eng-
173 lish Institute of Sport, Sport England, and a UK based university with a sports scholar programme.
174 Two of whom were women)(for a full overview of the participants, see *blinded for review*). NGB-
175 A was in the process of transformation due to staff changes and the implementation of new talent
176 and performance programmes. The change process involved retrenchment to core services
177 (Bostock et al., 2018) immediately after the 2016 Summer Olympics and subsequent reorganisa-
178 tions and implementations of new programmes from April 2017.

179 Case 2: A National Performance “Institute” for an Olympic Sports Organisation in the UK

180 The second author was embedded within the central Performance hub (referred to by staff
181 as the “Institute”) of NGB-B for a 13-month period. Six professional coaches and three adminis-
182 trative staff (Performance Director, Head Coach and Performance Hub Manager) were purposively
183 sampled. Of the 9 participants, 7 were male and 2 were female, with an age range of 37-62 years
184 (mean age for men: 48, mean age for women: 40). The second author also carried out extensive
185 fieldwork to evaluate organisational operations, behaviours and policies as they related to work-
186 force development and the delivery of the World Class Performance Programme. This was
187 achieved by becoming embedded within the organisational operations for four out of every five
188 working days. The fifth day was utilised for reflexive engagement and concurrent analytical pro-
189 cesses. At the time of data collection, the organisation was undergoing change following the ap-
190 pointment of a new performance director (organisational lead), the start of a new Olympic funding
191 cycle (2013) and a reduction in supported national high-performance centres (from three to one).

192 In the case of NGB-B, 18 interviews were conducted (two per participant), nine within the
193 first month of the study (to attain an initial, broad understanding) and nine during the final month
194 of the study (exit interviews to supplement/support observations), with a duration of between 26
195 and 58 min. In both cases, an open-ended question format focused on the "how", "what" and "why"
196 of participants' experiences, capturing socially and contextually negotiated narratives of partici-
197 pants' organisational practices (Hoffmann, 2007).

198 Data Collection Strategies

199 Embracing the recommendations of Maitland et al. (2015), the reported studies adopted
200 emic data collection strategies. Doing so focused the discourse on participants' ways of communi-
201 cating, behaving and interacting (Scarduzio, 2017) as a means of capturing organisational working.

202 Within both cases, data were generated through ethnographic observations (Krane & Baird, 2005),
203 semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) and focus groups (Kitzinger, 1995). Inter-
204 view protocols were driven by the observation of organisational practices within each case, focus-
205 ing on the “how”, “what” and “why” of participants’ experiences to create a socially and textually
206 negotiated narrative of each context. For example, in the case of NGB-B, questions such as “Where
207 does professional development/learning fit into the ethos of the organisation?” were asked of par-
208 ticipants following expressions of being time poor and under supported. For greater detail, probes
209 such as “How were any development opportunities communicated to you?” and “Whose respon-
210 sibility is workforce development?”.

211 In each case, the authors adopted the role of the “critical friend”. Embedding themselves
212 within the cultures of their respective contexts made them recognisable members of the social
213 space. From here, extensive field notes (e.g., memorandums and diagrams) were recorded to cap-
214 ture events and interactions as they occurred. The value of this approach was the opportunity to
215 become familiar with the organisational and performance context of each case.

216 **Data Analysis**

217 Data analysis entailed three phases of abstractive thinking, utilising a deductive–inductive
218 approach (Henriksen et al., 2010) to transcription/coding, which resulted in an iterative process of
219 concurrent meaning-making (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). The initial deductive coding was
220 driven by a node tree of higher-order themes built to reflect a working model of: (1) a lack of
221 reflexivity, (2) a lack of justification and (3) a lack of substantial reasoning (Alvesson & Spicer,
222 2012). This was followed by an inductive expansion of the node tree, incorporating lower-order
223 themes classified to produce an ordered and descriptive account of organisational practice and the

224 cultural boundaries within each case. Finally, lower-order themes were subjected to meaning con-
225 densation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), whereby participants' statements were condensed into
226 more precise formulations of intent and experience. This approach served to create an empirically
227 driven model, while allowing for recognition of the uniqueness of each case. The goal was to move
228 beyond latent understandings of practice and engage in more abstractive meaning-making sensi-
229 tive to the nuances of each case (Smith et al., 2014).

230 From the initial case-specific analysis, a cross-case examination was conducted in two
231 phases. The first phase was informed by Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) three axes approach, com-
232 paring cases: horizontally in respect to how the social policies or phenomena that unfold in distinct
233 locations that are socially produced (i.e., the use and allocation of World Class Programme fund-
234 ing); vertically, comparing influential phenomena at different levels/scales (i.e., the influence of
235 organisational practices across broader sporting domains and the immediate World Class Pro-
236 gramme); and transversely comparing cases over time (i.e., considering the historical and situated
237 nature of social process development).

238 Once comparative similarities were identified, suggestions from Paulsen (2017, pp. 193–
239 194) guided the development of rationales. Within other studies of this nature (i.e., Fagerberg et
240 al., 2020; Paulsen, 2017), rationales reflect modes of compliance to behaviours that do not question
241 “what is” or challenge the “normalising” capacity of society. In light of this, the following ration-
242 ales for functional stupidity were identified from the reflective accounts reported in this study: (1)
243 you have not spent time in the trenches, (2) it has always been like this, (3) policing space, (4) I
244 am just doing my job and (5) giving opportunities to those close to me. These rationales are used
245 to frame the discussion in the closing section of the paper.

Rigor

247 In considering the notion of research credibility, this study embraces Sparkes and Smith's
248 (2009) invitation to adopt a relativist approach when evaluating quality in qualitative research. We
249 abandon universal criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1990) in favour of contextually situated criteria. Our
250 view is that the latter are more clearly aligned with the work of constructivist, interpretive and
251 critical researchers (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Here, we ask that readers consider these criteria as
252 "suggestions and possibilities" (Burke, 2016, p. 336) for exploring the nuances of research quality.
253 In exploring the potentially transient and unreflective practices of performance sports organisa-
254 tions, we consider the following questions helpful to demonstrate the potential value of this case
255 study research: does the study address gaps in the existing knowledge base? Does the study gen-
256 erate new questions or research? Does the study consider rigor by making explicit the coherency
257 between data collection and analysis? Is the study relevant, timely, significant and interesting?
258 While we are wary of advocating more universal criteria, we recognise the general consensus re-
259 garding good qualitative research. We hope that these contextual questions highlight notions of
260 rigor, credibility, resonance, significance and coherence (Tracy, 2010), while exercising caution in
261 making generalist claims.

Findings

263 The findings are divided into the two cases to provide analyses of the gradual normalisation
264 of behaviours that might challenge professional and ethical standards. Afterwards, we present the
265 cross-case analysis, which focused on rationales.

266 Case 1: A National Governing Body in a Longstanding Olympic Sport**267 *Lack of Reflexivity: Not Questioning Taken-for-Granted Practices***

268 Our findings showed that an absence of reflexivity was inherent in the coaching practices
269 in the sport. We found a consensus among the athletes, parents and the NGB staff that many
270 coaches had “archaic” coaching styles. One parent in a focus group said, “I’m afraid that I’m very
271 disappointed, if anything it is lower-level than at our club [...] where the coaching is of a much
272 more modern style” (Focus Group, Parents of Athletes). The NGB staff claimed that some coaches
273 deliberately make “the session itself almost as unappealing as possible so that the person who will
274 stick with it will be the one that will stick with it forever” (Focus group with NGB-1 staff and
275 leadership). Some practices were taken for granted by almost all coaches. Yet, the coach develop-
276 ment manager often questioned them:

277 A group of 20 people in a line. Their faces tell you they are bored. There is no way
278 on earth these kids are getting any individual work to get any better. That is a
279 standard drill. [...] No meaning, no context, no nothing. It is just poor. It is the
280 accepted [practice]. You see it everywhere. It is the one drill everybody will do
281 and call footwork. (Focus group with NGB-1 staff and leadership)

282 The coach developer’s argument was confirmed by the first author’s observations: “The
283 footwork drill involves all athletes in a line doing slow foot movements with one coach holding a
284 whistle. The remaining coaches stand in a separate area of the gym chatting” (field notes). When
285 asked about this practice, coaches often deflected and argued that they should be allowed to carry
286 out training as they see fit. As illustrated by one coach:

287 The manager, he needs to do everything to make my programme happen. But from
288 his point of view, when I do a footwork drill, he says it’s just footwork and he

289 needs to be challenging that, like: ‘Why is it, like, two days footwork?’ This guy
290 is a total idiot and I don't want to be part of this. (Interview, Coach)
291 Footwork was a proxy for several norms and coaching practices that the coaches found
292 natural. Very few coaches questioned the deep-rooted assumptions of their practice.

293 Not questioning practices was illustrated by the hiring of a new coach in the wake of a
294 conflict with a former talent head coach. The conflict revolved around an unwillingness to discuss
295 the taken-for-granted practices and social dominance behaviours (e.g., assuming unilateral control
296 and demanding explanations for otherwise normal activities) when other coaches proposed new
297 approaches. Yet, although the new coach did not exhibit social dominance behaviours, the coach
298 did reproduce the taken-for-granted practices (e.g., footwork drills run by one coach for more than
299 50 athletes).

300 ***Lack of Reasoning: How Bureaucracy Created the Conditions for Turmoil***

301 We found a contrast between freedom and control in the funding relationship between the
302 NGB and the funding organisations, UK Sport and Sport England. On the surface, the funding
303 organisations encouraged the NGB to innovate and be independent. In contrast, managers and
304 NGB staff often described how they worked towards living up to imposed targets, since they
305 thought that not meeting targets would see them lose funding. These opposing forces were increas-
306 ing conflicts between the NGB and the community in the sport. The talent manager and others in
307 the NGB focused on complying with the funding rules. One motivation for doing so was explained
308 by an NGB staffer: “we’re relying on external funding. If that doesn't exist ... then they will stop
309 [doing the sport], and we want them to keep people [doing the sport]” (Interview, NGB staffer).
310 The opposition to the change effort from the NGB was articulated by a coach in a focus group:
311 “What we are discussing is to give people the opportunity to participate and engage when they can,

312 rather than dictating when it is going to happen and having to change everything” (Focus Group,
313 Coaches).

314 Compliance with the funding structure created conditions for turmoil and increasing con-
315 flict within the NGB and the community. Yet, several GSO participants from Governing Sports
316 Organisations (e.g., UK Sport, Sport England; GSO) argued that trusting the system and collabo-
317 rating with GSOs would be enough to win over the sports community. One GSO participant de-
318 scribed how collaborating with Sport England would give NGBs “power by proxy or power by
319 affiliation”. Another GSO participant agreed that GSOs put in much effort to “pushing” the NGBs
320 to change (Interview, GSO participant). Altogether, the findings showed how the espoused inde-
321 pendence was challenged by increasingly stricter bureaucracy, which was a source of tension
322 within the NGB. Nonetheless, complying with the funding restrictions also led to the NGB “smash-
323 ing” the four-year target in 18 months and to two more years of funding.

324 ***Lack of Justification: When Smart People do Bad Things***

325 Our findings showed that parents of athletes often failed to justify why they engaged in
326 certain behaviours. We found that some parents often sought to demonstrate their intelligence in
327 dealings with the NGB. As the quote indicates, this could influence the parent–NGB relationship
328 in a negative way:

329 [What] we have is an exceptionally high number of people who are educated to a
330 level 4 or so, degree or above level people. So virtually everyone in [our sport]
331 has a degree. And that is something that has its challenges. We have observed that
332 it can be twofold. We have a lot of people who are very bright and intelligent and
333 lawyers and like to pick apart everything that you write. (Focus group with NGB-
334 1 staff and leadership)

335 Parents often discussed the most minute policy changes or even starting times for training
336 camps. A result of such critical questioning led to the following field notes:

337 I am standing in an industrial area in a large northern city. It is 15 minutes after
338 the official starting time of the training camp which brings together the youth na-
339 tional team. I am alone and have been for the past 45 minutes. It is one hour after
340 starting time, and the first coach just arrived. The coach informed me that the time
341 had been pushed back due to parental pressure. The time is now after 11am. (Field
342 Note)

343 Another field note illustrates the depth of the relentless critique:

344 One of the senior managers just informed me that they often receive phone calls
345 and emails from parents of athletes trying to ‘game’ the policies and regulation.
346 ‘Gaming’ policies is understood as finding loopholes to, for example, secure se-
347 lection for their children onto the youth national team. The senior manager in-
348 formed that a significant part of their day is just responding to complaints and
349 critical questioning from parents around selection to teams. (Field Note)

350 Parents were often described as “gaming the system”, meaning that they tried to find loopholes in
351 selection policies and competition regulations to ensure that their children earned a spot on the
352 national team. We found that parents in the sport revealed thoughtlessness in terms of interpersonal
353 relations. The thoughtlessness included a disregard for how their intelligence could otherwise be
354 employed to strengthen relationships with coaches and the NGB. Instead, an overeagerness to get
355 their children on the national team led to increasingly negative parent–NGB relationships. The
356 consequential finding was that the parents’ relentless critique was often rewarded (e.g., with their
357 children’s selection for the youth national team).

358 **Case 2: A National Performance “Institute” for an Olympic Sports Organisation in the UK**
359 *Lack of Reflexivity: Entrenched Behaviours—Medals and More?*

360 In the case of NGB-B, the absence of reflexivity was evident in the entrenched practices
361 and performative functioning of the sport. Interestingly, at the time of data collection, the perfor-
362 mance director was trying to instil a new organisational ideology, that of “collaborative and col-
363 lective thought”. Here, the performance measure was said to not be “whether your athlete wins a
364 medal” but instead, “being part of the collective group” and “contributing to the organisation and
365 its knowledge base as a whole” (Interview, Performance Director). The organisation went as far as
366 to include this stipulation in the coaches’ contracts.

367 That being said, data illustrated that coaches’ behaviours remained grounded in the assump-
368 tion that coaching success would forever be judged by the tally of medals. As NGB-B staff sug-
369 gested:

370 I think that it is an unrealistic goal to have as a target in a sport like ****, which
371 is very individual in nature and has, [laughs] has coaches who are very individu-
372 alised in the ways that they work as well... For me that is completely to do with
373 the nature of these elite talented coaches. Talented coaches are a lot like talented
374 athletes in the way that they do things. They can have very bespoke ways of doing
375 things, they like to be competitive, which I think is then hard to integrate... this is
376 why I don’t think the collaborative sharing and working together has really hap-
377 pened. People are just doing what they have always done, look after themselves.
378 (Interview, Coach 1)

379 The nature of our world [sport] is that the athletes are rivals and this kind of makes
380 the coaches rivals too, although altogether we are one team, this only happens

381 once, twice, three times a year. So, there is a challenge we haven't found the an-
382 swer to yet in bridging this gap. (Performance hub manager, field note)

383 In light of this, coaches described the performance director's intentions as "naively optimistic"
384 and "utopian", driven ultimately by "a lack of time spent in the trenches" (Interview, Coach 2).
385 NGB-B staff validated this belief by reflecting on the interplay between "medal winning politics"
386 and their roles in the past:

387 We all know that every four-year cycle there is the risk that the PD [performance
388 director] will get fired for missing the medal target, the funding might be cut, or
389 the staff made redundant. Before this cycle we had 14 NGB coaches; now we have
390 seven because we have less money to play with. They all had to apply to the same
391 jobs. It's not really a wonder that they struggle to put that to bed. (Interview, Per-
392 formance Hub Manager)

393 The result was a workplace underpinned by competitive isolation, where collaboration be-
394 tween staff was not just limited, but at times actively avoided. It was through a lack of reflexive
395 questioning that the conditions of this sport were left unchecked, and assumptions made as to what
396 was organisationally possible. As the head coach suggested, "We assumed the coaches would want
397 to work together and that creating the space to do that would be enough... it wasn't" (Interview,
398 Head Coach). That being said, the outcome of this organisational behaviour did serve to "create
399 space [for staff] to make it [the institute] what they wanted it to be, to get on with their own plans"
400 (Interview, Coach 3), acting as a form of emancipation from the confines of organisational expect-
401 tations.

402 *Lack of Reasoning: Bureaucracy, Money and a Leadership Vacuum*

403 Within the findings for NGB-B, it was apparent that the politics and bureaucratic decisions
404 surrounding the distribution of UK Sport funding was a significant mediator of coaching practice.
405 The aforementioned reduction in the funding allocation for NGB-B staff brought with it a new
406 management structure, employing both a head coach and a performance director. The study took
407 place during the first iteration of the NGB-B to include both roles concurrently; historically, both
408 roles had acted as the “head of operations” independently. What followed this change was a lack
409 of role clarity, as the following data demonstrate:

410 When you ask either the head coach or the performance director what their day-
411 to-day looks like, you tend to get the same answer—‘strategically driving the
412 sport, the centre, the coaches’—where each believes the other is responsible for
413 acting as the link between the strategy and the coaches themselves, ‘delivering and
414 instilling the organisational message... collaboration’. (Field note)

415 Coaches reported feeling as though they operated within a “leadership vacuum”, left to
416 figure out the new [collaborative] philosophy on their own. It was reported that staff felt “discon-
417 nected” and tended to “forget about working together and returned to looking after themselves and
418 their athletes” (coach, interview). This was exacerbated by a series of bureaucratic decisions that
419 delayed the appointment of a performance hub manager. The performance director explained that:

420 The theoretical line management and the actual line management of the coaches
421 is something that we thought was pretty straightforward, but in fact it’s a bit
422 messy; there are some things that need to be worked out in terms of who should
423 be responsible. It doesn’t fit with me or [the head coach] so we may need someone

424 else, an Institute [performance hub] manager, but we don't have the budget at the
425 moment. (Interview, Performance Hub Manager)

426 Four months into the study, a senior member of staff handed in their notice, freeing up the
427 finances to employ the needed performance hub manager, albeit after a lengthy appointment pro-
428 cess. At this stage, the coaching staff had not had a professional development review in more than
429 12 months, and joked that “we are doing our own reviews... well, I'm asking coaches in other
430 sports how they think I'm getting on because I get nothing here” (Field Note). This lack of con-
431 sidered reasoning at a bureaucratic level had a direct impact on coaches' opportunities to engage
432 in critical reviews of their professional development. However, for some, it provided some sought-
433 after respite: “I've tried to create pockets of space and freedom... it's been nice to get past the
434 politics of the sport” (Interview, Coach 3). The functional outcome of such reasoning, or lack
435 thereof, might be argued to provide relief from the inevitable political and bureaucratic pressure
436 that comes from employment within the World Class Programme.

437 ***Lack of Justification: The Policing of Space and Acceptance of Conflict***

438 For NGB-B, the findings highlighted that coaching staff exhibited signs of entrenched ter-
439 ritoriality regarding areas of the NGB's performance hub. This behaviour mediated coaches' col-
440 laborative engagement with one another, creating the potential for conflict and discomfort when
441 inevitable “boundary crossing” occurred. Interestingly, the rhetoric of “ownership” appeared to be
442 a matter of convention, shared at management levels, with the performance director often suggest-
443 ing we “meet over by Coach X's area”. During our time in the field, it was apparent that staff acted
444 to mark and personalise particular locations in order to signify their control. In some instances,
445 this was explicit—the positioning of a massage bed adorned with initials—while at other times it
446 was covert, with complex programming scrawled across large whiteboards that no one dared to

447 remove. This territorial ownership was only tentatively acknowledged by the coaches themselves.

448 As one coach said:

449 The mezzanine is not mine by any means, but then you have to consider the equip-
450 ment that is here. Of course, if you need to use this space that's fine, but you can't
451 just expect to come and use my equipment or be shoving it around... that will
452 annoy me. (Interview, Coach 2)

453 An NGB physiotherapist described the feeling of working amid the separate training
454 groups of the performance hub as akin to "being in a bullpen", with "egos and testosterone coming
455 from all sides". When questioned, the performance director acknowledged the potential tension
456 but insisted "it's reasonably normal. If you had looked at any centre in most high performing
457 countries you would see the same layout of [training] groups... some minor clashes happen, but
458 its handbags really" (Interview, Performance Director). That being said, data indicated the poten-
459 tial for boundary crossing to lead to conflict and dysfunctional working relationships, as the fol-
460 lowing field note demonstrates:

461 Wow, I saw athletes shoving each other today and coaches shouting at one another
462 across the hub. Two coaches, 1 and 2, support the same discipline, but with sepa-
463 rate training groups. Whilst Coach 1 was the first to be employed following the
464 redundancies, Coach 2's history as an apprentice coach at this centre means he has
465 occupied a particular space within the hub for a greater length of time. Coach 1
466 has therefore positioned himself at the opposite end of the hub to Coach 2, in effect
467 occupying the same real estate but from different ends. Today, this resulted in a
468 shoving match as athletes from opposing groups began niggling each other after
469 getting closer and closer when training, before spilling over into the same space.

492 ical behaviours and used the organisational change to legitimise (e.g., denying responsibility, ig-
493 noring, or denying behaviours, establishing further uncertainty) their behaviours. We found five
494 different rationales which helped explain how individuals slipped into modes of transient func-
495 tional stupidity. The modes were transient in the individual, meaning that an individual would at
496 one point carry out unethical or unprofessional behaviour, and the next rationalise why they and
497 others should not engage in such behaviour. Yet, unethical and unprofessional behaviours were
498 pervasive in both cases. The five rationales were: (1) you have not spent time in the trenches, (2)
499 it has always been like this, (3) policing space, (4) I am just doing my job and (5) giving opportu-
500 nities to those close to me.

501 **You Have Not Spent Time in the Trenches**

502 Participants in both case organisations reported that the NGB personnel's lack of experi-
503 ence in the sport was an excuse for engaging in open opposition. Participants in Case 1 used vari-
504 ants of this rationale to argue that the NGB personnel should not question the at times ultimate
505 authority of the head coach. In Case 2, participants employed the excuse to refrain from following
506 directives written into their contracts on collaborating with each other. Further, individuals often
507 used the rationale *you have not spent time in the trenches* at the same time as *it has always been*
508 *like this* and *policing space*. Altogether, these rationales helped individuals dissociate from goals
509 and agreements they had signed on to pursue.

510 **It Has Always Been Like This**

511 We found that many coaches reproduced taken-for-granted approaches to training. While
512 this finding is not necessarily new (Blackett et al., 2019; Cushion & Jones, 2014), our analysis
513 showed that it was more than simply carrying out routinised behaviours. For example, coaches

514 would openly espouse goals of employing “cutting edge coaching” or “[moving] away from ar-
515 chaic sessions” but go on to reproduce these criticised coaching sessions. In Case 1, coaches did
516 so even though they reported that former coaches had been fired for such approaches and that they
517 would do things “differently”. In Case 2, similarly entrenched attitudes were evident in the firm
518 belief that competitive isolation were hallmarks of that particular sport. The rationale *it has always*
519 *been like this* therefore suggests that reproducing otherwise discounted practice might be some-
520 thing that can happen when there is a lack of reflexivity. The critical finding was that potentially
521 unprofessional or improper coaching approaches were historically necessary and considered part
522 of past successes, and therefore, were not something to be criticised.

523 **Policing Space**

524 *Policing space* referred to how coaches engaged in “competitive isolation” between groups
525 and events. An example was how coaches of an event would disregard the input of those from
526 other events as having no relevance in their context. Explicit examples included using personal
527 items or equipment to claim physical space. The clear divides between events and the “othering”
528 (Roberts & Schiavenato, 2017) of individuals from other groups were clear to both researchers.
529 Yet, these aspects were rarely acknowledged directly. Instead, participants would describe other
530 coaches, other athletes or other events in euphemistic terms (e.g., they’re nice enough). Policing
531 space and claiming space for oneself could be a rationale for legitimising overt conflict when “the
532 others” stepped into their territory.

533 **I Am Just Doing My Job**

534 NGB personnel often employed the rationale *I am just doing my job* when referring to
535 implementing targets and adhering to funding restrictions. Focusing on the possible benefits of just
536 doing one’s job was likely connected to protecting one’s wellbeing and position rather than asking

537 critical questions (e.g., do these targets even make sense? What result is needed to secure my po-
538 sition?). In case 2 the rhetoric that the performance measure remained inextricably tied to the
539 achievement of medal targets trumped broader performance goals (e.g. interdisciplinary working).
540 In Case 1, it was often related to NGB staff trying to adhere to Sport England and UK Sport im-
541 posed targets. We found many good reasons for focusing on the tasks at hand; however, in some
542 cases, NGB personnel tried to push through regulations (e.g., selection policy) rather than consid-
543 ering the potentially negative repercussions of doing so.

544 **Giving Opportunities to Those Close to Me**

545 *Giving opportunities to those close to me* referred to how participants thought it was fair to
546 use their position or behaviour to afford opportunities to friends or family, or maintain/support
547 existing relationships over new ones. One example was how parents tried to “game” the system,
548 gain youth national team selection for their children and thus gain a competitive advantage in
549 obtaining opportunities for free education (sport scholarship) or access to prestigious universities.
550 One father in Case 1 explained: “wouldn’t it be lovely to say ‘sweetheart, would you like to go to
551 America?’ ... If you are in the [team] you will get in, so it will open up doors for you. I think it’s
552 great for future CVs” (Focus Group, Parents of Athletes). The rationale was also used to justify
553 excluding some voices (e.g., people, experts, genders) because the included voices were experts.
554 Within Case 2, coaches professed a desire to seek support from existing networks external to the
555 Institute, rather than engage with a potentially new community.

556 **General Discussion**

557 The current paper has examined how individuals in two elite sports organisations in the
558 UK participated in behaviours that had become normalised within their organisations, despite the

559 propensity for some of these behaviours to challenge professional and ethical standards. The find-
560 ings show significant change processes are high-risk situations for the emergence and spread of
561 unethical and unprofessional behaviours due to the considerable uncertainty. Individuals engaged
562 in some behaviours (e.g., relentless critique) without recognising the potential for negative influ-
563 ences or effects on others. Crucially, it has been suggested that people might slip into these behav-
564 iours, or normalised social scripts, rather than explicitly choosing them (Paulsen, 2017). We iden-
565 tified five rationales for slipping into functional stupidity: (1) you have not spent time in the
566 trenches, (2) it has always been like this, (3) policing space, (4) I am just doing my job and (5)
567 giving opportunities to those close to me.

568 Our findings suggest a sense of banality to wrongdoing. Wrongdoers were average, normal
569 people who did not have hatred towards hardworking staff nor an evil plan to make others comply.
570 In some ways this complicates the way that we judge unprofessional or unethical behaviours. The
571 reviews presented in the introduction shows that we tend to hold bullies, destructive cultures, and
572 other wrongdoing at arm's length. Yet, instead of providing a clear-cut approach to taking down
573 bullying masterminds, our findings show that slipping into a grey area where potentially destruc-
574 tive behaviours are accepted might be common. It aligns with Hannah Arendt (1981) who proposed
575 that: '[t]he sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their
576 minds to be or do either good or evil.'

577 Using the lens of functional stupidity to consider behaviours which might challenge ethical
578 and professional standard has profound implications for applied practice (e.g., for coaches, NGB
579 staff, funding organisations). Our findings show that slipping into such behaviours is a progressive
580 process whereby some behaviours are gradually normalised because individuals refrain from ques-

581 tioning the dominant rationales for their conduct. The rationale *policing space* is similar to sug-
582 gestions made in King's (2012) review of British Cycling, in which staff were reported to be de-
583 fensive of their own position. In talent development research, Henriksen, Larsen and Christensen
584 (2014) found that airtight shutters between departments can have a detrimental effect on the holis-
585 tic development of young athletes. Research in architecture firms (Brown et al., 2010) provides
586 further evidence of "invisible walls" between departments. Considering these findings could be
587 critical for NGB staff, as increased separation could be an early warning sign of destructive fea-
588 tures within an organisation. Based on the findings and wider research, we suggest that a potential
589 remedy is to engage staff (e.g., coaches) in interdisciplinary collaboration where boundary cross-
590 ing becomes engrained in organisational practice (e.g., sharing knowledge, promoting organisa-
591 tion-wide activities).

592 The rationales *you have not spent enough time in the trenches and it has always been like*
593 *this* add to an important discussion on whether we are over-privileging leaders' and coaches' im-
594 portance in sport (Fransen et al., 2014, 2015). Being fairly competent within sport (e.g., winning
595 medals or developing youth athletes to the senior elite) suggests that some individuals and organ-
596 isations have mastered the recipe for success. Research on leadership in sport (Arnold et al., 2012)
597 suggests that accessing the recipe might include employing the most appropriate individual. How-
598 ever, our research suggests that focusing intensely on discovering the "right" person might put a
599 leader on a pedestal as an indispensable individual (i.e., with the promise of high performance and
600 thriving athletes if only they are put in charge). Sports management research (Maitland et al., 2015)
601 also suggests that many studies focus on a charismatic leader (e.g., Frontiera, 2010) who must
602 engender integration to underpin success in an organisation. Some research goes as far as to argue
603 that leaders must "exploit" fluctuations in power to "minimise dangerous swings in control"

604 (Cruickshank et al., 2013, p. 285). Such suggestions align with social dominance behaviours
605 (Judge et al., 2009) and masculine hegemony (i.e., legitimisation of a leader's authority to create
606 a system of control). Considering counterarguments to the importance of control in the wider lit-
607 erature (Krane & Waldron, 2020; Ray, 1986) could be an academic remedy to the research-based
608 suggestions that leaders should control power.

609 Another potential remedy might involve learning from contemporary critiques of leader-
610 ship within the management literature. Alvesson (2020) suggests that a lot of leadership research
611 assumes that “all good things tend to go hand in hand, and the not-so-good is marginalized and
612 demonized as ‘toxic’, destructive, inauthentic leadership, or not really leadership”, where true
613 leaders are good and alternatives therefore deviant (p. 3–4). One problematic approach to leader-
614 ship, he suggests, is transformational leadership. His critique builds on several others, including
615 those of Ashford and Sitkin (2019) and van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013), who state that “the
616 conceptualization of the construct is seriously flawed” and the lack of a definition beyond its ef-
617 fects is a significant weakness. It is entirely possible that transformational leadership exists in sport
618 (Turnnidge & Côté, 2018). However, we second calls from Alvesson (2020) for researchers to
619 examine neutral cases and consider whether good outcomes actually come from good leadership.
620 Both NGBs in the current study met their targets and might thereby be construed as examples of
621 successful leadership if we uncritically link success to successful leadership. As we have shown
622 in the current study, behaviours that challenge professional and ethical standards, such as bullying
623 and social dominance, can produce entirely functional outcomes (e.g., meeting targets or winning
624 medals).

625 We suggest that the practical antidote to the rationales *you have not spent enough time in*
626 *the trenches* and *it has always been like this* is to involve coaches and athletes in co-determination.

627 Co-determination, in this case, relates to athlete rights. It goes beyond participation, which refers
628 to the daily work that occurs in practice, where coaches and athletes negotiate training plans, ac-
629 tivities and structures. Here, co-determination refers to the relationship between athletes and fund-
630 ing organisations and athletes' organisation at the decision-making level (i.e., board of directors).
631 Denmark is an example of a country that recently sought to explicitly involve athletes at this level.
632 Recent changes to the elite sports organisation, Team Denmark, meant that the board of directors
633 (the governing entity consisting of eight appointed members) now has to have two representatives
634 for the active athletes. The two current representatives are a recently retired athlete and an active
635 athlete, and both have participated at the Olympic Summer Games. This move is an effort to make
636 athletes more autonomous; it gives them a voice and influence over decision-making that pertains
637 to their daily lives and activities (Haugli et al., 2020). An argument for this was that “[s]port cannot
638 think of itself as special or different and able to behave outside what are considered acceptable
639 behaviour patterns” (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 4). The findings from previous reports (e.g. King,
640 2012; Phelps et al., 2017) make it timely to consider duty of care in sports in its fullest sense.
641 Doing so would entail athlete representation at the board level of NGBs and funding organisations
642 such as Sport England and UK Sport. Neither Sport England, UK Sport nor the English Institute
643 of Sport have active athletes on their boards, and such provisions are not present in their terms of
644 reference for the board of directors (Sport England, 2021; UK Sport, 2021). Management
645 (Magotsch & Morgenroth, 2018; Staniok, 2017) and democracy research (Haugli et al., 2020)
646 widely recognises co-determination as a democratic right and a strategy to ensure more efficient
647 operation of organisations. Also, recent work on workers' councils in Britain (Augustin, 2020)
648 shows that bringing people into the decision-making process can have benefits. We suggest that it
649 is time that sports organisations follow suit.

650 Co-determination with active athletes and coaches could also make the new funding strat-
651 egy from UK Sport more democratic (i.e., 12-year planning approach). Our findings show that
652 there is a connection between funding and daily behaviours through the rationale *I am just doing*
653 *my job*. Under the previous funding strategy, McGrail (2018) suggested that some negative behav-
654 iours could have been rooted in a “boom or bust” approach to funding in Olympic sports. Not
655 reaching performance targets is often equated to “falling off a cliff” (McGrail, 2018, p. 16). Some
656 researchers (Gowthorp et al., 2016) argue that British NGBs are bound to the traditions or conven-
657 tions of UK Sport and Sport England as paymasters. The influence of this relationship might be
658 that NGBs prioritise a narrow set of targets and are less likely to learn from mistakes in following
659 their paymasters (Sam & Macris, 2014). Both case organisations engaged in compliance with fund-
660 ing restrictions guided by the internal logic of losing funding as an almost existential problem. The
661 frequency of funding-induced change in Olympic sports (e.g., often every 4 years) makes it critical
662 for organisations such as UK Sport and Sport England to consider our findings reporting that pe-
663 riods of significant change are high-risk for severe unethical and unprofessional behaviours.

664 **Concluding Thoughts and Obstacles to Studying Functional Stupidity**

665 The motivation for the current paper started at the British Psychological Society—Division
666 of Sport and Exercise Psychology conference in 2019. Here, the first author led a workshop asking
667 the question: is it worthwhile pursuing a line of functional stupidity research in sports? The positive
668 feedback from the session led to the current paper. There are several obstacles to studying func-
669 tional stupidity (Butler, 2016; Paulsen, 2017). One issue is that when you ask participants to reflect
670 on their own functional stupidity, it might be questionable whether individuals engage in un-re-
671 flected behaviours. Beyond that, while reflecting on and justifying everything may seem an anti-

672 dote to functionally stupid behaviours, it is conceivable that such unremitting questioning and sur-
673 veillance might cause productivity to grind to a halt. Reporting by the New York Times from the
674 company Amazon (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015), shows that Amazon employees are encouraged to
675 question everything and pick apart others' ideas, which they show has a significant negative impact
676 on wellbeing (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

677 Another significant obstacle is the glaring influence and tongue-in-cheek use of the word
678 "stupid". Paulsen (2017) criticises this point and states:

679 Take, for instance, a nurse who on a given signal hands the scalpel to the surgeon.
680 He or she probably does this without any critical reflection on the purpose, without
681 asking for justification, and without the self-conscious reflexivity to which Alves-
682 son and Spicer refer. (p. 189)

683 Most will argue, along with us, that not being reflexive can be positive in certain situations.
684 The everyday connotations of "stupidity" are somewhat akin to other management buzzwords,
685 such as transformational leadership or authentic leadership (Alvesson, 2020; Butler, 2016). Con-
686 tinuing this line of research would mean moving beyond terminology and considering the three
687 tell-tale signs. We also second Paulsen's (2017) suggestion to add an ethical dimension. In the
688 current paper, we adopted the perspective from Pfarrer et al. (2008) to explore whether behaviours
689 violate society's standards. Some may argue that the standards in elite sports are "special". How-
690 ever, that would go against the many reviews of destructive features in sport, including Mountjoy
691 (2019) and Grey-Thompson's (2017) assertions that sport should not think of itself as special, and
692 athlete mental health consensus and position statements from International Society of Sport Psy-
693 chology (Schinke et al., 2018) and European Federation of Sport Psychology (Moesch et al., 2018).
694 Findings from *blinded for review* suggests that the norms, values, and standards of conduct

695 changed in the decade from the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. Yet, sport stagnated and isolated
696 itself around a questionable set of norms. The increasing distance between accepted societal norms
697 and the norms in sport created the conditions for a shock to the system (By, 2005), whereby the
698 growing crisis in sports was exposed. Companies often state that they want people who think crit-
699 ically, but people who do are often marginalised (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Yet, people who point
700 out problems and suggest ways to mend them are often treated as troublemakers. Rather than find-
701 ing someone to blame, we believe there is a responsibility to involve athletes and coaches at the
702 board level and across organisational decision making to ensure athlete and staff wellbeing in elite
703 sport in the future.

704

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