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A Qualitative Exploration of Thriving in Elite Sport

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1 Abstract

2 Athletes are often described as *thriving* in sport; however, extant research on this construct in
3 sport has been divergent. This study aimed to provide the first dedicated exploration of
4 thriving in elite sport performers by considering its characteristics, outcomes, and facilitators.
5 Semi-structured interviews ($n = 15$) were conducted with athletes, coaches, and sport
6 psychology practitioners, and were analyzed using applied thematic analysis. Thriving was
7 perceived to comprise a sustained high-level of performance and dimensions of well-being.
8 Furthermore, predominantly positive outcomes of thriving were described and participants
9 identified a network of personal and contextual enablers that could facilitate thriving.

10 *Keywords:* athlete, performance, thrive, triangulation, well-being

ACCEPTED VERSION

1 A Qualitative Exploration of Thriving in Elite Sport

2 *Thriving* is a description frequently ascribed to athletes to portray connotations of
3 achievement, control, enjoyment, positivity, and success (see, e.g., BBC, 2016; BT Sport,
4 2016; Macpherson, 2016; Mairs, 2016; Shalin, 2016; Sky Sports, 2016). These desirable
5 characteristics have long driven interest in the construct from researchers investigating
6 humans across a variety of domains (e.g., work, youth development), but it is only within the
7 past decade that thriving has received attention from scholars in sport psychology (see, e.g.,
8 Gucciardi, Jackson, Hodge, Anthony, & Brooke, 2015; Gucciardi & Jones, 2012; Jones &
9 Lavallee, 2009; Mahoney, Ntoumanis, Mallett, & Gucciardi, 2014). Within these thriving
10 related enquiries in sport, researchers have utilized various conceptualizations of the
11 construct. To illustrate, conceptualizations have been applied from positive youth
12 development literature where thriving tends to be defined as a process (see, e.g., Lerner,
13 Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011), and performance settings where it tends to
14 be defined as a state (see, e.g., Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). The
15 use of these different perspectives means that extant work offers little clarity for the construct
16 in sport. Furthermore, within these studies in the sports context, thriving often represents
17 only a subsidiary focus where the main emphasis of investigations centers on other constructs
18 (e.g., life skills, mental toughness). As a result, no coherent or systematic line of research
19 into this desired outcome in sport exists and many substantive issues remain unaddressed
20 (e.g., What are the characteristics of thriving in sport performers? What are the outcomes
21 from thriving in sport? How can thriving in sport performers be facilitated?)

22 The lack of conceptual clarity on thriving in sport is symptomatic of the confusion
23 apparent in the broader literature where perspectives on what characterizes thriving in
24 humans typically depends on a researcher's domain of study. For example, within the
25 context of positive youth development, Lerner, Dowling, and Anderson (2003) suggested that

1 adolescents are thriving when they display elevated contribution as a result of experiencing
2 high levels of competence, character, connection, confidence, and compassion. Alternatively,
3 Spreitzer et al. (2005) define thriving at work as the joint experience of vitality and learning.
4 In addition to the ambiguity arising from the domain of inquiry (e.g., developmental,
5 performance), confusion has also resulted from temporal variance in the construct with
6 different thriving indicators forwarded for youth (e.g., school success) and adult (e.g.,
7 community engagement) populations (see, Benson & Saito, 2001). These and other apparent
8 inconsistencies (e.g., whether thriving is a state, a process, or both a state and a process;
9 whether thriving is a distinct construct) have recently been consolidated and discussed in a
10 review of human thriving literature (see, Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, & Standage, in press). In
11 addition to providing a resource upon which future thriving research can be built, the authors
12 offer a definition of human thriving developed from the literature in their review; namely,
13 human thriving is broadly defined as “the joint experience of development and success”
14 (Brown et al., in press, p. 6). This definition recognizes the multifaceted nature of thriving
15 previously described by scholars (see, e.g., Spreitzer et al., 2005), and adopts a holistic
16 perspective of positive functioning with both development (e.g., establishing a friendship
17 group) and success (e.g., school attainment scores) experienced in concert rather than in
18 isolation (Brown et al., in press; see also, Su, Tay, & Diener, 2014). It is further suggested
19 that, when thriving occurs in response to a situation, this could be observed through the
20 experience of a high-level of well-being and a perceived high-level of performance (Brown et
21 al., in press). It is argued that this definition advances previous age (e.g., Benson & Scales,
22 2009; Lerner et al., 2003) and context-specific (e.g., Park, 1998; Spreitzer et al., 2005)
23 conceptualizations, by describing thriving for all populations and settings; although future
24 work is needed to examine the applicability and utility of this conceptualization.

25 Encompassed within each previous conceptualization of thriving are characteristics

1 suggested to be thriving indicators (see, e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009; Brown et al., in press;
2 Lerner et al., 2003; Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).
3 When considering thriving in adolescence, for example, Benson and Scales (2009) forward
4 markers such as spark identification, positive emotionality, purpose, and hopeful future. In
5 contrast, Porath et al. (2012) devised a measure for assessing thriving at work focusing on the
6 dimensions of vitality and learning. Many of these age and context specific indicators have
7 intuitive relevance to sport, and recent attempts have been made to apply the thriving at work
8 scale to athletes (see, Gucciardi et al., 2015; Gucciardi, Stamatis, & Ntoumanis, 2017).
9 However, the conceptual foundations of this scale have received criticism from other scholars
10 who argued that the dimensions of vitality and learning do not encompass all aspects of the
11 construct (see Brown et al., in press). As such, and without any dedicated explorations of
12 thriving within the sport context, it is impossible to elicit whether any of the previous
13 definitions of thriving transfer to reported characteristics in sport performers.

14 Previously, researchers (Carver, 1998; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) have suggested that
15 thriving represents the most adaptive response to stressful situations and it may be the case
16 that responding to a scenario in this way will have positive implications in both the short- and
17 long-term. Thriving in the context of sport, for example, may result in changes to life
18 philosophy (e.g., enhanced appreciation), one's self (e.g., better sport functioning), and
19 interpersonal relationships (e.g., increased closeness; Galli & Reel, 2012). Furthermore,
20 thriving in response to one scenario may impact an individual's response to a subsequent
21 scenario (Carver, 1998; Lerner et al., 2011). For instance, Carver (1998) posited that thriving
22 may result in desensitization to the negative effects of subsequent stressors, reduced recovery
23 time when exposed to future stressors, or a higher level of functioning to respond to new
24 challenges. In addition to the potential facilitative outcomes resulting from thriving,
25 researchers have identified various 'enablers' that may lead to its occurrence (see, for a

1 review, Brown et al., in press). Within a sporting context, these variables may include
2 personal factors such as mental toughness and resilience (Gucciardi et al., 2015; Sarkar &
3 Fletcher, 2014), and contextual factors such as coach and social support (Feeney & Collins,
4 2015; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Potential process variables impacting the effect of the
5 enablers on thriving have also been forwarded. For example, previous research has suggested
6 that thriving in sport may be underpinned by the experience of basic psychological needs
7 satisfaction (Mahoney et al., 2014; see also Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). However, the lack of
8 a robust understanding of what constitutes thriving in sport performers means that, at this
9 time, these suggestions remain speculative.

10 When developing an understanding of thriving in sport, an important consideration is
11 the need to garner the perspectives of individuals who experience or witness it. This
12 approach is particularly important for thriving research as previous attempts to apply
13 theoretical conceptualizations have, at times, been inconsistent with the perspectives of those
14 individuals who actually experience or observe thriving in certain populations. For example,
15 King et al. (2005) interviewed practitioners, parents, and adolescents to elicit their
16 interpretations of thriving in youth populations, and found no significant commonality
17 between the terms used in the academic literature and those used by the participants. To
18 avoid similar discrepancies arising in the knowledge and understanding of thriving in sport
19 performers, it therefore appears necessary to explore whether the perspectives of stakeholders
20 in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches, practitioners) support previous conceptualizations of the
21 construct. In so doing, this may help to ensure that scholarly work in this area is grounded in
22 the actual experiences of the individuals being studied (cf. Bickman & Rog, 2009).
23 Furthermore, should thriving be perceived by participants to represent an adaptive and
24 holistic experience as suggested by researchers, this may stimulate the creation of
25 interventions to enhance thriving; drawing on the perspectives of stakeholders will ensure

1 that any new techniques are informed by individuals with the greatest experience of the
2 construct in sport (cf. American Psychological Association, 2002).

3 In light of the inconsistencies apparent in the extant research on thriving in sport, the
4 aim of the current study was to provide the first dedicated exploration of thriving in sport
5 performers couched in the perspectives of athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists
6 operating in elite sport. To achieve this aim, three research questions were asked: What are
7 the characteristics of thriving in sport performers? What are the perceived outcomes of
8 thriving in sport performers? What are the psychosocial factors that may facilitate thriving in
9 sport performers?

10 Method

11 Research Philosophy, Design, and Sampling

12 The present study was underpinned by a pragmatic research philosophy (Giacobbi,
13 Poczwardowski, & Hager, 2005); that is, it was principally motivated by the authors desire to
14 generate practically meaningful knowledge. Specifically, with general and scholarly interest
15 in the notion of thriving in sport performers increasing, this study was designed to assist
16 stakeholders (e.g., athletes, coaches, practitioners) in their understanding of the construct and
17 its occurrence in sport. Unlike other research philosophies (e.g., constructivism, positivism),
18 pragmatism is not committed to specific epistemological and ontological beliefs, but instead
19 espouses that the nature of the research question and the particular point in the research
20 process determine the extent to which the researcher adopts an objective or subjective
21 epistemological view (Giacobbi et al., 2005). Furthermore, pragmatism suggests that
22 knowledge construction is influenced by the cultural, political, and historical conditions at
23 any point in time (Giacobbi et al., 2005) and, thus, agreement between communities who are
24 aware of the specific context created by those conditions is considered to allow a practical
25 level of truth to exist (cf. James, 1907). In recognition of this need for community

1 agreement, data in the current study were collected from three stakeholder groups (viz.
2 athletes, coaches, sport psychology practitioners) who were anticipated to have been exposed
3 to thriving in sport. Indeed, although the participant groups held differing roles as “actors” or
4 “observers” of the thriving experience, we deemed they would be sufficiently familiar with a
5 thriving experience to reflect on its characteristics, outcomes, and facilitators. Furthermore,
6 in light of the little knowledge that exists on thriving across sporting levels and, hence, the
7 possibility of different manifestations of the thriving experience existing across these,
8 participants were recruited based on their current involvement in junior elite (junior national
9 to junior international level) or elite sport (i.e., senior international level; cf. Rees et al.,
10 2016)¹. The homogeneity of sporting level across and within the stakeholder groups meant
11 that a small sample was deemed sufficient for the current exploratory study (cf. Holloway,
12 1997). To provide an equal representation of the views emanating from each of the three
13 groups, an equivalent number of participants were recruited from each. In addition,
14 individual interviews were conducted with all of the participants to allow ideas to be fully
15 understood (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008), before these accounts were then triangulated using a
16 concurrent design with analysis conducted on each source simultaneously and findings
17 integrated in the Results sections (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

18 **Participants**

19 The sample comprised five athletes (three male, two female), five coaches (all male),
20 and five sport psychology practitioners (three male, two female) from a range of sports (e.g.,
21 Judo, Rugby Union, Swimming). Athletes ranged in age from 21 to 22 years ($M = 21.6$, $SD =$
22 0.6), coaches were aged between 33 and 62 years ($M = 45.0$, $SD = 12.9$), and practitioners'
23 ages ranged from 26 to 59 years ($M = 36.8$, $SD = 13.4$). Although some of the participants

¹ The authors recognise that this decision may limit the transferability of the findings and would encourage researchers to conduct explorations with sport performers across different levels in the future.

1 did work together, the purpose of the study was to explore thriving in athletes performing at
2 an elite level rather than constructing information on a particular case; therefore, participants
3 were not asked about specific individuals (e.g., coaches were not asked about specific
4 athletes).

5 **Procedure**

6 Following institutional ethical approval, potential participants were contacted via
7 email to inform them about the nature of the study and to invite them to participate in an
8 interview. For those willing to participate, a mutually convenient time and location was
9 arranged for a face-to-face, telephone, or Skype™ interview to take place between the
10 interviewer and participant. The method of interview was determined by the interviewees'
11 preferences and geographical locations, with 10 of the participants interviewed in person, two
12 interviewed via Skype™, and three interviews conducted via telephone. Each of these
13 methods has varying strengths (e.g., Skype™ may offer greater anonymity and increase
14 participants' willingness to share sensitive details) and weaknesses (e.g., telephone interviews
15 may lose some of the subtleties associated with physical interaction; Sparkes & Smith, 2014);
16 therefore, it was important to minimise any differences arising through the technique adopted.
17 In an attempt to achieve this, and to allow the participants to trust that their views would be
18 accurately heard and represented, substantial emphasis was placed on the interviewer
19 establishing rapport with the interviewees. Specifically, to reduce any initial apprehension
20 they may have been experiencing, interviewees were provided with a background to the
21 project, an introduction of the interviewer's own experiences, and the opportunity to ask any
22 questions (cf. DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Before the interview commenced,
23 participants were made aware of appropriate ethical considerations (e.g., anonymity, right of
24 withdrawal) and provided their informed consent. Interviews took a semi-structured format,
25 were digitally recorded in their entirety, and the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

1 The average duration of the interviews was 40.50 min ($SD = 12.21$).

2 **Interview Guide**

3 The development of the interview guide was primarily informed by the study's
4 research questions. After some introductory questions were asked to initiate conversation
5 and establish rapport between the researcher and the participant, interview questioning began
6 with a section on the characteristics of thriving. It was decided that the questions in this
7 section would be asked first in order to gauge participants' awareness and understanding of
8 the construct. Participants were first asked how they would define the construct. Once they
9 had the chance to reflect on the definition themselves, the researcher then provided an
10 example definition from the literature² to clarify understanding and check that the interviewer
11 and participant were reflecting on similar terms for the remainder of the interview. This
12 approach was deemed appropriate because it enabled the participants to express their level of
13 awareness of the construct and offer their understanding of it without any deductive
14 influence, before then ensuring that both the interviewer and interviewee were discussing the
15 same construct. Next, participants were asked whether they had ever experienced
16 thriving/witnessed a sport performer thriving and then to describe that experience.

17 In the subsequent part of interview questioning, participants were asked generally
18 about the consequences of thriving and about whether they experienced specific changes in
19 psychosocial (e.g., enhanced social relationships) and physical (e.g., decreased physiological
20 responses to future scenarios) characteristics³. Furthermore, they were questioned about
21 when they became aware that they (or the sport performers) were no longer thriving and what
22 impact that may have had. In relation to the research question on facilitators of thriving,
23 participants were first asked "What do you believe enables thriving to occur?" and then asked

² The example definition offered was that proposed by Sarkar and Fletcher (2014); that is, that they considered thriving to be a sustained high level of functioning and performance.

³ Examples are provided here to aid reader understanding and were not provided in the actual interviews.

1 specific questions based on their initial response such as “Who do you think can help thriving
2 to occur and what can they do?” The semi-structured nature of the interview guide allowed a
3 record of the questions asked across participants to be maintained, whilst also allowing
4 questioning to be flexible and to follow the flow of conversation to maximize the opportunity
5 for participants to express their experiences (Guest et al., 2012).

6 **Data Analysis**

7 Interview transcripts were analyzed using applied thematic analysis as described by
8 Guest et al. (2012). First, transcripts were read thoroughly by the first author and structurally
9 coded to identify sections of text that were applicable to each of the three research questions.
10 The structural codes were attributed a priori to each question included in the interview guide
11 (see, e.g., Figure 1), and these broad labels were then assigned to the exchanges between the
12 interviewer and the participant triggered by a pre-specified question, until the next structured
13 interview question was asked. These codes were used as a guide to direct subsequent trend
14 identification and content coding, rather than a definitive classification (i.e., some extracts
15 may have initially been included under multiple structural codes; cf. Namey, Guest, Thairu,
16 & Johnson, 2008)⁴. Next, the extracts collated under each of the structural codes were re-
17 read and initial trends were identified. These trends were then refined into content codes with
18 well-developed definitions including examples of what would meet the criteria for that code
19 (see Table 1). The first and fourth author then independently applied these content codes to a
20 sample of text and the results were compared (six times in total). Where necessary, codes
21 were edited and updated to provide greater clarity, merged or deleted to prevent overlap, and
22 additional codes generated to describe new themes within the data (see, e.g., Figure 1). All of
23 the participants’ experiences were analyzed concurrently and given equal credence to enable

⁴ The use of pre-specified structural codes to disaggregate sections of related text from the rest of the data set before generating initial codes is a distinction between applied thematic analysis and the procedures of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

1 an accurate triangulation of responses.

2 **Trustworthiness**

3 Scholars employing qualitative methods have often sought to ascertain
4 trustworthiness in their data and the conclusions drawn from them. In so doing, a variety of
5 research quality criteria (see, e.g., Holman Jones, 2005; Tracey, 2010) have been espoused,
6 with researchers encouraged to select and justify the use of criteria based on their
7 appropriateness to the study being conducted (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Within
8 the present investigation, a number of procedures were selected by the authors to enhance the
9 trustworthiness of the findings. First, throughout the analysis process, a detailed codebook
10 was maintained and updated, and an audit trail was kept of the changes made. This trail
11 effectively enabled the researchers to ensure that their decisions were logical and transparent.
12 Second, to reduce the effect of two of the authors' prior knowledge of the thriving literature
13 impacting the credibility of the results, a researcher unfamiliar with the topic area acted as an
14 independent, second coder. This process involved him reading and coding two of the
15 participants' responses under each of the three research questions and acting as a 'critical
16 friend' who challenged the decisions being made and encouraged reflection (Smith &
17 McGannon, 2017; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Third, to promote resonance in the work, the
18 Results are organized under each of the structural codes with content codes accompanied by
19 illustrative quotes, to enable readers to interpret the data in the most meaningful and
20 transferable way to them (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001).
21 Fourth, in line with the pragmatic research tradition underpinning this research (Giacobbi et
22 al., 2005), data were collected and analyzed to provide a substantive contribution to
23 knowledge and practice, and coherence was sought by collating the views of the three groups
24 of participants.

25 **Results**

1 The content codes presented in this section were constructed from the collective
2 experiences of athletes, coaches, and sport psychology practitioners operating in elite sport,
3 and are organized under three structural codes: characteristics of thriving, outcomes of
4 thriving, and facilitators of thriving. Characteristics of thriving were considered to be the
5 components of experience described by participants to occur during thriving. Outcomes of
6 thriving comprised the events, changes, or experiences described by participants that
7 occurred after they/their athletes had thrived. Facilitators of thriving were the personal or
8 contextual factors that participants perceived led to a thriving experience. Thus, allocation of
9 content codes to each of these structural codes was determined by the description provided by
10 the participants, which resulted in 8 content codes identified as characteristics of thriving in
11 elite sport performers, 5 codes elicited for the outcomes of thriving, and 16 codes forwarded
12 as either personal or contextual facilitators of thriving. The definitions generated for each of
13 the content codes are presented in Table 1. Table 2 displays the respective contributions of
14 each of the participants to the codes, and provides a snapshot of the areas of convergence and
15 divergence across the three research questions. Presented below is an introduction to each
16 code (codes are illustrated in italics) with accompanying extracts from the interviews to
17 provide clarity and context for the codes derived.

18 **Characteristics of Thriving**

19 Eight codes were identified as characteristics of thriving in elite sport performers (see
20 Figure 2). Thriving was considered to encompass *sustained high-level performance* and an
21 *optimistic* outlook, as illustrated in the following quote from an athlete describing their
22 experience of thriving:

23 That year I had done well in European cup events which are good level junior events.
24 I'd gone and won in those so I knew I'd done well ... and I was optimistic to say
25 'yeah I can do this'.

1 For another athlete, this optimistic outlook was experienced alongside feelings of
2 being *focused and in control*. When responding to a question regarding how he felt when he
3 was thriving, the athlete responded, “All year I never really had a negative thought, in my
4 head I always knew what I was going to do and how I was going to do it”. In addition to
5 feeling in control, elite sport performers who were thriving possessed an *active awareness of*
6 *areas for improvement*, with one coach stating that rather than highlighting athletes’ areas for
7 improvement, “the ones who are thriving tend to actually pick that up and then go with that”.
8 Furthermore, elite sport performers who are thriving *possess high quality motivation*. For
9 instance, one practitioner described an athlete who was thriving as being “really on board and
10 engaged with the work that needs to be done”.

11 The experience of thriving was considered to involve sport performers *displaying*
12 *upward progression* in their sporting and/or non-sporting development. For example, the
13 extract below from an interview with a practitioner, details how this progression may include
14 *experiencing holistic development* and having a *sense of belonging*:

15 As a school kid he was doing ok, he was doing good enough to be selected, but he
16 hadn’t really quite shone yet. But when he came into the environment, he lifted his
17 game. And, within a reasonably short period of time, not only did his playing
18 performances improve, but he acquired a girlfriend, he acquired the capacity to speak,
19 and to hold a conversation! Often their friendships within the squad are flourishing, as
20 is their sense of belonging, they feel that they deserve to be there. That’s how I would
21 describe someone who is thriving.

22 **Outcomes of Thriving**

23 The experience of thriving was perceived to have a positive effect on elite sport
24 performers in relation to both *personal development benefits* and *performance benefits*. The
25 following practitioner suggested that “they had performance benefits, but also I think quite a

1 lot of personal development benefits. I know they and their coach commented on their
2 maturity increasing this year, and being able to rationalize a lot better”. One of the coaches
3 interviewed also noted performance benefits, as well as athletes having *increased self-*
4 *confidence* following thriving. He suggested that “The outcome [of thriving] is [athletes’]
5 confidence of their level, and certainly their ranking went up, they improved, and they went
6 to a different place to when they arrived.” An athlete reported how thriving increased his
7 self-confidence and provided a *platform for momentum*:

8 I think if you get to that level, then it opens your eyes to your own ability ... it allows
9 you to believe you can do it. I’d say it’s like a snowball effect where you do well and
10 then you keep going and keep going... Then you use that as momentum.

11 However, alongside these adaptive outcomes, one athlete experienced *decreased*
12 *mood/motivation* after realizing he was no longer thriving:

13 I don’t think it [realizing I was no longer thriving] was negative, because I knew I did
14 really well in the season. I think more like I couldn’t be bothered, I was like ‘oh what
15 have I got actually to aim for in the next few months?’ So it was more motivation
16 [that decreased].

17 **Facilitators of Thriving**

18 Participants identified a variety of facilitators of thriving that can be broadly separated
19 into two groups: contextual enablers and personal enablers. Contextual enablers included the
20 support received by sport performers from agents within the environment, as well as features
21 of the environment itself. Personal enablers were the psychosocial characteristics of the
22 performers that created engagement in tasks, maintained hard work, and enabled them to
23 manage the stressors experienced.

24 The participants identified multiple sources of support within the environment that the
25 elite sport performers thrived in, and the following extract highlights one athlete’s

1 perceptions on the role of *coach, family, and teammate support*:

2 I think everyone [helps]. I think your teammates, your coach, and your family I think
3 they're the three . . . your teammates give you a bit [of support], I didn't really train
4 with many people that year, but every time I did they were positive around me. I think
5 the coach and yourself are the main ones [responsible for enabling thriving], and then
6 if you've got the backing of your family and you have a good team around you, that's
7 a good recipe.

8 Furthermore, another participant highlighted the importance of *support staff support*
9 and of the *training environment* for thriving:

10 For judo, I'd say you need to be in the right environment, so that would be being at
11 the right training center. You need a very good training partner which we have here.
12 I'd say you need a good team behind you. I'm responsible for the performance, but
13 you need a team behind you. The coach I'd say is top of the tree. Then your strength
14 and conditioning coach, and the physio as well.

15 Although the existence of sources of support were important for thriving, participants
16 also recognized the need for the bonds between the athlete and these supports to reflect *high*
17 *quality relationships*, as the following extract from a practitioner illustrates:

18 The role of the head coach cannot be underestimated. A strong head coach is
19 completely crucial to a thriving squad. And when I say a strong head coach, I mean
20 someone who has good, effective relationships with each member of the squad.

21 When describing their own role in supporting elite sport performers to thrive, coaches
22 recognized how they may have aided thriving but that the athletes had to drive this
23 experience through their own personal *desire and motivation*, and achieve it through their
24 *appreciation, trust, and commitment to the process of development*. These interactions
25 between contextual and personal enablers are illustrated in the extract below:

1 My philosophy is that I shouldn't have to provide motivation. They've got their own
2 motivation to achieve what they want to. I set out what they need to do to achieve
3 that, some are willing to do it and some aren't. The ones that are willing to do it will
4 step up and thrive. The ones that aren't don't fall by the wayside and don't get any
5 less support, but I help them realize the difference in what they're doing. It's not that I
6 don't try and motivate or want to motivate, it's just that I believe that by the time they
7 get to 18, they've got to be motivated in what they want to do.

8 The need to appreciate and be committed to the process of development was also
9 recognized by a practitioner, who went onto describe how this mindset, combined with an
10 athlete's *understanding of personal/sporting demands/requirements* and his or her *ability to*
11 *control and manage potentially stressful situations*, could result in thriving:

12 I'd say it's about commitment, it's about saying to the athlete 'do you understand
13 what it's going to take to be the Olympic champion in four years' time?' And then
14 I'm going to outline what it is ... So now all of a sudden, this guy knows where he's
15 going, he knows what he's got to do, he knows how he's going to manage all the
16 things that are going to throw him off, the probability is this guy will thrive.

17 *Concentration* was also described as being important for facilitating thriving in elite
18 sport performers. The following extract from an interview with a practitioner details how
19 concentration can allow a performer to progress towards being a champion:

20 How you concentrate and what you concentrate on [is important]. And the quality and
21 depth of your concentration. People get distracted very easily by things and fail to be
22 in the moment. Life slips through their fingers, because they're too busy on games
23 consoles, or social media. But to concentrate on being champion, your mind has got to
24 be developed to such an extent that you can really stay very tuned in to what you're
25 doing.

1 For a number of participants, experiencing *previous success* was considered to initiate
2 thriving. Within the following extract, a coach describes how winning an Olympic gold
3 medal resulted in his athlete experiencing a sequence of success: “After winning the games,
4 whatever competition she entered, she won it. And in 8 months she won the Olympic title, the
5 European title, the World title, and other World cup competition, then she retired”. Previous
6 success was also suggested to enhance *self-belief* and this, combined with *goal setting and*
7 *creating challenge*, supported thriving. When describing how an athlete came to thrive, one
8 coach stated “They had their goal and they were high on being driven for that goal, but they
9 were also high on confidence from their previous lot of performances. Which just allowed
10 them to really thrive”. In addition to possessing self-belief, participants identified how
11 possessing a *positive mental state* facilitated thriving; as the following extract from an athlete
12 interview highlights:

13 I think being in a good mental state is really important ... if you're a happy athlete
14 and you're enjoying what you're doing, then you're generally going to do well. If
15 you're over thinking everything and stressing about stuff, then that's when it's going
16 to start going downhill.

17 Although participants recognized an athlete's ability to control and manage situations
18 was an important factor for thriving in sport with, for example, one practitioner describing
19 how an athlete needed to have “the mental wherewithal to be able to handle [the pressure of]
20 elite level performance sport, because without it I think it would be a long battle”, the
21 perceived benefit of the *experience of pressure* was equivocal. To elaborate, some
22 participants described how the role of pressure was dependent on the individual; one athlete
23 stated that “I think some people can [thrive without pressure], but if you as an athlete need
24 pressure in order to thrive more, then that just depends on who you are”. Alternatively,
25 others, including the following practitioner, perceived pressure as necessary for thriving

1 across all individuals: “I don’t think any athlete exists in the world were there isn’t some
2 level of pressure on them. I do think an athlete needs stress to some level to thrive.”

3 **Discussion**

4 Sport performers are often described as *thriving* during their sporting encounters;
5 however, to date, extant research investigating the construct in this setting has been divergent
6 and has placed thriving as only a subsidiary variable of interest. The current study sought to
7 overcome these shortcomings and provide a dedicated exploration of thriving in elite sport
8 performers. Three research questions were used to guide the study: What are the
9 characteristics of thriving in sport performers? What are the perceived outcomes of thriving
10 in sport performers? What are the psychosocial factors that may facilitate thriving in sport
11 performers? The results suggested that the experience of thriving was encapsulated by a
12 variety of characteristics such as sustained high-level performance, being focused and in
13 control, and experiencing holistic (non-sporting) development. Furthermore, experiencing
14 thriving was perceived to have a predominantly positive effect on sport performers, though
15 negative effects could also occur, and a variety of personal and contextual factors were
16 identified as facilitators of thriving.

17 The themes that emerged from the analysis pertaining to characteristics of thriving
18 depict the construct as multifaceted and desirable. Thriving was suggested to involve being
19 optimistic, focused and in control, having an active awareness of areas for improvement,
20 possessing high quality motivation, experiencing holistic development, displaying upward
21 progression, and having a sense of belonging. Demonstrating functioning across these areas
22 may be considered akin to the experience of eudaimonic well-being; that is, the extent to
23 which a person is fully functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008).
24 Eudaimonic well-being is achieved when an individual is living well, and the characteristics
25 of thriving in sport appear similar to the motivational concepts apparent in eudaimonic living

1 (Ryan et al., 2008). To illustrate, possessing high quality motivation involved elite sport
2 performers being engaged and intrinsically driven, this description is analogous to the
3 motivational concept of pursuing intrinsic goals and values. Thriving also appeared to relate
4 to an elite athlete's performance. More specifically, performance that was considered to be at
5 a high-level. The identification of high-level performance as a component of thriving in sport
6 is perhaps unsurprising given that the participants recruited would need to have experienced
7 sporting success to have been currently operating in elite sport, but it may also suggest that a
8 fundamental requirement for individuals to thrive in sport or any other performance domain
9 (e.g., emergency services, performing arts), is to execute their tasks to the highest level
10 (Brown et al., in press). The results from this study highlight well-being and performance as
11 characteristics of thriving. This finding therefore offers support to previous
12 conceptualizations of the construct, which have espoused thriving as a holistic and
13 multifaceted experience (see, e.g., Brown et al., in press; Lerner et al., 2003; Spreitzer et al.,
14 2005; Su et al., 2014). Furthermore, it suggests a deviation of research away from separate
15 assessments of performance and well-being outcomes, commonplace in extant literature, and
16 instead towards the novel and rigorous examination of one holistic thriving construct.

17 Previously, scholars have been mindful of the need to distinguish thriving from other
18 constructs (e.g., well-being, flourishing, resilience) that appear similar, but have distinct
19 differences (see, e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009; Brown et al., in press; Bundick et al., 2010),
20 and it is important to consider how the characteristics of thriving described in the current
21 study add to these suggestions. For example, the results suggest that functioning indicative of
22 eudaimonic well-being forms part of the thriving experience; however, they also indicate that
23 thriving is a broader term and encapsulates aspects of performance. This distinction similarly
24 differentiates general athlete thriving from flourishing. Keyes (2002, 2003) described
25 flourishing as a state of mental health in which an individual displays positive feeling and

1 functioning in life. Within a sporting context, flourishing has been suggested to be
2 characterized by internally-focused attributes, feelings and affective states, and by fulfilment
3 of areas of life perceived as important by the athlete (Ashfield, McKenna, & Backhouse,
4 2012). Significantly, Ashfield et al. (2012) recognized that “flourishing was achieved
5 through these ‘importance’ domains, irrespective of athletic performance” (p. 11), thus
6 further substantiating the uniqueness of the two constructs. The experience of thriving
7 described by participants in the current study also differs to those associated with resilience
8 (see, e.g., Bonanno, 2004; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Resilience is conceptualized as either an
9 individual’s ability to ‘bounce-back’ from an adversity or the process through which he or
10 she maintains functioning under pressure or adversity (see, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). In
11 contrast, thriving described herein did not necessarily include previous experience of
12 adversity, whilst also representing an enhancement rather than maintenance of functioning
13 (e.g., displaying upward progression).

14 In this study, thriving was found to have a predominantly positive effect on sport
15 performers through personal development and performance benefits, by providing
16 momentum, and initiating change (e.g., improvements in performers’ confidence, decrements
17 in mood/motivation). These developmental outcomes are consistent with previous research
18 examining thriving (e.g., Paterson, Luthans, & Jeung, 2014; Porath et al., 2012), and may
19 provide performers with new or enhanced resources for thriving in subsequent scenarios
20 (Carver, 1998; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Although thriving has previously been shown to
21 positively predict performance (Gerbasi, Porath, Parker, Spreitzer, & Cross, 2015; Paterson et
22 al., 2014; Porath et al., 2012), the suggestion that thriving can result in a jump to a new
23 performance level is a novel finding in this area. This finding may be particularly pertinent
24 to the sports domain, given the readily observable progression of performers from one level
25 of competition (e.g., regional) to another (e.g., international). Moreover, this observation

1 may be important for other performance domains such as music and dance where an outcome
2 of thriving could be observed as individuals progressing through grading levels. An
3 additional unique finding of the current study was that, after thriving had ceased, one
4 participant described experiencing a lack of drive and vigor. Depending on the timing of
5 thriving, this may have transient or more substantial effects. For example, if this depletion
6 was to occur within the regular season the performer may rebound through subsequent
7 fixtures; however, should it occur after a major final or competition that is followed by a
8 period of rest (e.g., off-season), the performer may experience prolonged lethargy and may
9 struggle to regain their performance standards. To mitigate these periods of potential apathy
10 and stagnation, coaches and practitioners could implement techniques traditionally applied to
11 prevent or overcome career plateaus such as providing critical performance feedback,
12 suggesting performers proactively experiment with new roles within the team, and
13 encouraging performers to mentor other individuals (Feldman & Weitz, 1988; Wang, Hu,
14 Hurst, & Yang, 2014). Exploring a new role or event, for example, would bring variety to
15 training and challenge athletes to develop new skills that could benefit their progression as
16 performers and, ultimately, their experience of thriving.

17 Participants identified a variety of personal and contextual factors that were perceived
18 to facilitate/enable thriving. Examples of personal enablers included desire and motivation,
19 positive mental state, and previous success. Contextual enablers comprised social agents in
20 the sport performers' environments such as parents and coaches, and the characteristics of the
21 environment itself (e.g., facilities). Many of these enablers have been identified in thriving
22 research previously conducted in other populations. To illustrate, having a positive
23 perspective has been suggested to facilitate thriving in high achievers (Sarkar & Fletcher,
24 2014), teachers (Sumsion, 2004), and young people (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998).
25 In relation to contextual factors, support from parents has been highlighted as a facilitator for

1 adolescent thriving (see, e.g., Theokas et al., 2005; Weine et al., 2013), and previous research
2 has discussed the roles that colleagues and employers play in thriving at work (see, e.g.,
3 Paterson et al., 2014; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014; Sumsion, 2004). However, some of the
4 enablers (e.g., appreciation, trust, and commitment to the process of development, support
5 staff) appear as novel findings in the thriving literature. Appreciation, trust, and commitment
6 was considered to elicit perseverance through difficult periods, prevent over self-inflation
7 following successes, and stave off an athlete's sense of entitlement. This personal enabler
8 may, therefore, help to facilitate thriving by protecting the athlete from the practices in talent
9 identification and development, alongside broader societal change, which have been found to
10 result in athletes' misperceptions of personal status and act as barriers to progression in sport
11 (see, e.g., Brown et al., 2015). The identification of support staff as an additional source of
12 support highlights the abundance of potentially influential social agents for thriving, as is
13 perhaps best exemplified by one participant who stated that "everybody that can have a
14 positive influence on that athlete can help them thrive".

15 **Applied Implications**

16 The findings from this qualitative inquiry offer a number of implications for applied
17 practice. First, this study suggests that experiencing thriving was a largely positive
18 occurrence and that it may provide a platform for both performance and personal
19 development (e.g., communication enhancements, increased confidence). Practitioners can,
20 therefore, exploit these as opportunities to foster desirable change within the athlete with the
21 view of, ultimately, repeating thriving in the future. For example, practitioners and coaches
22 could look to solidify performers' perceptions of increased confidence and recognition of
23 personal ability through verbal reinforcement (see, e.g., Jones & Spooner, 2006). The
24 utilization of critical events to evoke positive change has previously been suggested
25 following the experience of trauma or adversity (see, e.g., Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015;

1 Tedeschi & McNally, 2011); however, the current findings suggest that changes can also
2 occur following successful events. To elicit these successful thriving experiences, the second
3 recommendation is for practitioners to utilize the wide variety of enablers identified in the
4 current study suggested to facilitate thriving. For example, in addition to practitioners
5 working with athletes on their concentration (e.g., Haddad & Tremayne, 2009), relaxation
6 and control (e.g., Laaksonen, Ainegren, & Lisspers, 2011), and confidence (Hays, Thomas,
7 Maynard, & Bawden, 2009), they should also look to work alongside other stakeholders to
8 ensure optimal support is provided (cf. Dijkstra, Pollock, Chakraverty, & Alonso, 2014), and
9 that performers are exposed to various sporting encounters so they can build relevant
10 knowledge and experience success (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

11 Third, this study highlighted the presence of both well-being and performance when
12 elite sport performers thrived. Practitioners should therefore consider developing and
13 evaluating interventions that effectively facilitate both of these outcomes to elicit thriving and
14 its positive consequences. In support of this venture, they may consider drawing lessons
15 from techniques previously found to impact performance and well-being outcomes
16 independently, such as basic psychological needs supportive interventions (see, e.g., Cheon,
17 Reeve, Lee, & Lee, 2015; Kinnafick, Thøgersen-Ntoumani, Duda, & Taylor, 2014). Focus
18 on motivational constructs such as basic psychological needs also appear to be particularly
19 salient given the emergence of motivation-based content codes as facilitators (e.g., desire and
20 motivation), characteristics (e.g., possess high quality motivation), and outcomes (e.g.,
21 decreased mood/motivation) of thriving. Fourth, it may be important for practitioners to be
22 aware of, and mitigate against, the potential perceived negative effects of thriving; strategies
23 for this were described in the previous section.

24 **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

25 Notwithstanding the possible practical implications of these findings, there also exists

1 a need for future research to further knowledge and understanding on this topic, and to
2 overcome the limitations of the present inquiry. One such limitation is that the results do not
3 highlight any potential barriers that may preclude a performer from thriving in competition.
4 To overcome this limitation, future research would do well to consider both individuals who
5 thrive and those who do not to confirm where the differences exist (cf. Wang, Biddle, Liu, &
6 Lim, 2012). A second limitation of the current study was the initial lack of understanding
7 that some participants had on the construct of interest. More specifically, two of the coaches
8 were non-native English speakers and they were unable to define thriving. However, as
9 detailed in the Methods, after being asked how they would define the construct, all
10 participants were provided with an example definition from the literature to clarify
11 understanding and check that the interviewer and participant were reflecting on a similar
12 experience for the remainder of the interview. Adopting this approach enabled the data
13 collected from these two participants to be included alongside that collected from the other
14 participants in the analysis. Third, the results from this study describe a number of potential
15 interactions and processes through which enablers came to facilitate thriving (e.g., coach
16 support and athletes' desire and motivation) that require examination in future cross-sectional
17 and longitudinal research designs. This line of future inquiry can provide important insight
18 into the temporal precedence of enabler variables which may help inform the development of
19 interventions designed to facilitate thriving and for theory attempting to explain these
20 relationships. A further consideration for future research is the existence of separate, but
21 related, contexts for thriving. Although the Results and Discussion of the current study
22 described participants' experiences of general athlete thriving, researchers are encouraged to
23 examine thriving in other contexts (e.g., specific match/race thriving), as well as the
24 relationships between thriving in each context (e.g., how can thriving in a specific match/race
25 result in entire competition or general athlete thriving?).

1 **Conclusion**

2 In conclusion, the present study has explored thriving in elite sport performers
3 through the perspectives of athletes, coaches, and sport psychology practitioners working
4 within this setting. Thriving was found to include various desirable components (e.g.,
5 sustained high-level performance, sense of belonging). These results highlight the presence
6 of both performance and well-being in athlete thriving and offer support for a
7 multidimensional conceptualization of the construct in athletes. The experience of thriving
8 was suggested to result in predominantly positive outcomes (e.g., increased self-confidence);
9 however, some initial evidence was also found to suggest that thriving might also have
10 perceived negative consequences (e.g., decreased mood/motivation). Finally, participants
11 identified various personal (e.g., desire and motivation, goal setting and creating challenge)
12 and contextual (e.g., coach support, training environment) enablers that were suggested to
13 interact to facilitate thriving in sport performers. Although the mechanisms underpinning the
14 relationships between enablers, thriving, and outcomes require further investigation, this
15 original exploration into thriving offers a variety of implications for athletes, coaches, and
16 practitioners attempting to better understand and facilitate thriving in sport.

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- 1 Table 1
- 2 *Content Code Definitions*

Code	Definition (Use this code ...)
Characteristics of Thriving	
Sustained high-level performance	... for descriptions of training or competition performance that was at a good/high level consistently/over a sustained period.
Optimistic	... for descriptions of or the presence of positive/optimistic thought and the absence of negative thought.
Focussed and in control	... for descriptions of being focussed and demonstrating control of the situation
Active awareness of areas for improvement	... for descriptions of athletes being aware and having an understanding of areas where they need to improve.
Possess high quality motivation	... for descriptions of motivation that have a high intrinsic component.
Display upward progression	... for descriptions of upward progression or growth.
Experiencing holistic development	... for descriptions of simultaneous non-sporting development.
Has a sense of belonging	... for descriptions of athlete's feeling that they deserve to be in their environment.
Outcomes of Thriving	
Personal development benefits	... for descriptions of personal development resulting from thriving.
Performance benefits	... for descriptions of sporting success/benefits resulting from thriving.
Increased self-confidence	... for descriptions of elevated confidence/self-belief following thriving.
Platform for momentum	... for descriptions of thriving providing momentum for future experiences.
Decreased mood/motivation	... for descriptions of decreased mood and motivation following thriving.
Facilitators of Thriving	
<i>Contextual</i>	
High quality relationships	... for descriptions of athletes' interpersonal relationships where they highlight trust, significance, and alignment.
Coach support	... for statements or descriptions of support from the athlete's coach.
Family support	... for statements or descriptions of support from family members.
Teammates	... for statements or descriptions of support from teammates.
Support staff support	... for statements or descriptions of support from the support staff (e.g., physio, psychologist).

Code	Definition (Use this code ...)
Training environment	... if a performer's training environment, or characteristics of that training environment (e.g., level of challenge, training partners), was described as supporting thriving.
Experience of pressure	... if pressure was perceived to facilitate thriving. This may include accounts of where pressure was high or low.
<i>Personal</i>	
Desire and motivation	... for descriptions of athletes' hunger, desire, and motivation supporting thriving.
Appreciation, trust, and commitment to the process of development	... for descriptions of an athlete's appreciation, trust, and commitment in the development process supporting thriving.
Understanding of personal/sporting demands/requirements	... for descriptions of understanding and having and awareness of personal/sporting demands/requirements supporting thriving.
Ability to control and manage potentially stressful situations	... for descriptions of an individual's perceived ability to deal with pressure/stress supporting thriving.
Concentration	... for descriptions of concentration supporting thriving.
Previous success	... for descriptions of previous successful performances supporting thriving.
Self-belief	... for descriptions of self-belief/self-confidence supporting thriving.
Goal setting and creating challenge	... for descriptions of goal setting and ensuring challenge exists for supporting thriving.
Positive mental state	... for descriptions of happiness and enjoyment supporting thriving.

1 Table 2

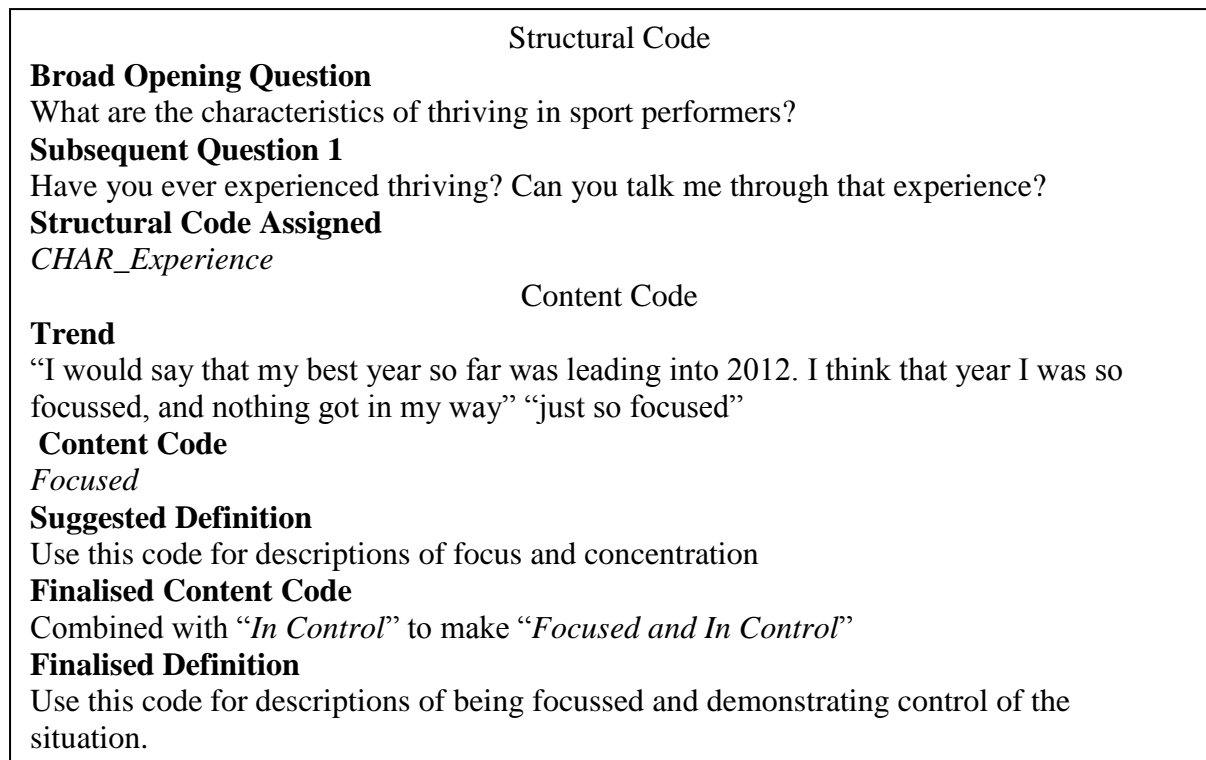
2 *Athletes', Coaches', and Sport Psychology Practitioners' Contributions to Codes on General Athlete Thriving in Elite Sport Performers*

Code	Participant														
	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
Characteristics of Thriving															
Sustained high-level performance		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X		
Optimistic		X		X											
Focussed and in control				X		X				X					X
Active awareness of areas for improvement						X	X			X					X
Possess high quality motivation				X											X
Display upward progression		X			X					X	X		X	X	
Experience holistic development			X						X					X	
Has a sense of belonging			X											X	
Outcomes of Thriving															
Personal development benefit									X		X				
Performance benefits			X			X					X				
Increased self-confidence		X	X	X		X	X		X					X	
Platform for momentum		X								X					
Decreased mood/motivation				X											
Facilitators of Thriving															
<i>Contextual</i>															
High quality relationships		X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X			X	X
Coach support		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Family support		X	X	X				X			X				X
Teammates				X					X		X				
Support staff		X				X	X	X			X			X	X

Code	Participant															
	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	
Training environment		X			X		X		X		X			X		
Experience of pressure			X			X				X	X			X		
<i>Personal</i>																
Desire and motivation		X		X	X	X				X	X		X			
Appreciation, trust, and commitment to the process of development						X	X	X	X	X	X				X	
Understanding of personal/sporting demands/requirements					X	X	X						X		X	
Ability to control and manage potentially stressful situations					X							X	X	X	X	
Concentration													X			
Previous success			X						X		X		X			
Self-belief				X	X				X		X			X		
Goal setting and creating challenge		X	X	X			X			X	X			X		
Positive mental state	X		X											X		

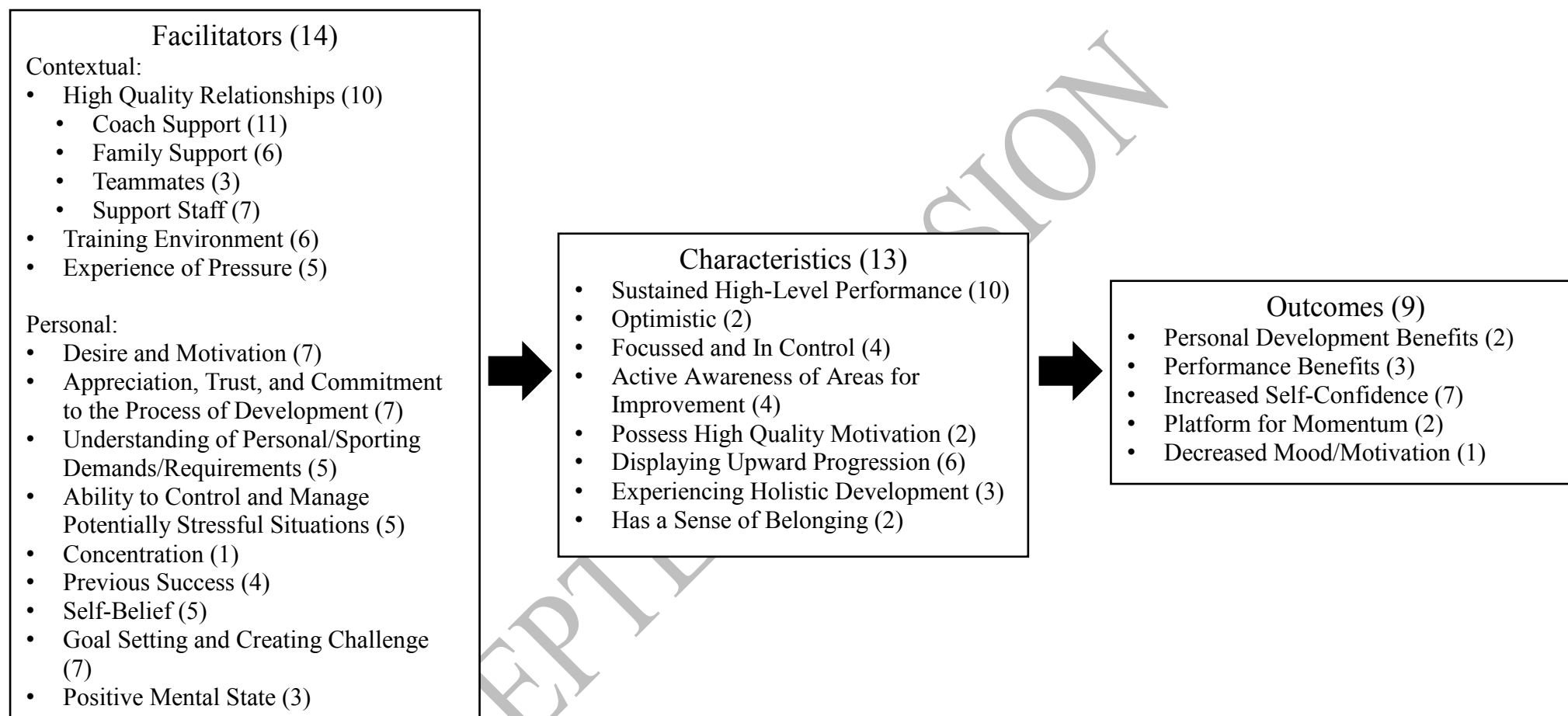
Note. A = athlete, C = coach, P = sport psychology practitioner, X = interview extract including code. Participants A1 and P2 characterized thriving as an experience occurring in a specific match/race; their responses have therefore been largely excluded from the results. It was not possible to identify any outcomes of thriving from A5, C3, P3 and P5's transcripts.

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1 *Figure 1.* Example of the code generation process.

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1

2 *Figure 2.* Content codes for thriving in elite sport performers. *Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of participants who mentioned
3 the code; it is important to highlight that the count is not an indication of the significance or meaningfulness of the code (Sparkes & Smith,
4 2014).