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## Compassion matters in elite sports environments: Insights from high-performance coaches

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### ABSTRACT

It is an open question to which degree compassion—noticing, engaging with, and acting to alleviate suffering in self and others—is (considered) advantageous in elite sports. Addressing this question, we herein provide insights into high-performance coaches' perceptions on the role of compassion in elite sports environments. Specifically, 12 coaches working at the highest level of their respective sport (in Denmark) partook in semi-structured interviews focusing on the utilization, implications, as well as barriers for implementing compassion in elite sports environments. Following a thematic analysis, three themes comprising various subthemes were identified and discussed. The first theme – *Benefits of compassion* – focuses on coaches' perception of the use and implications of compassion and comprises four subthemes: *Compassion is important when times are tough*; *Compassion stimulates human connection*; *Compassion fosters unity in competitive environments*; and *Compassion promotes performance*. The second theme – *Increasing compassionate competence* – focuses on how a compassionate approach can flourish and comprises three subthemes: *Reflection*; *Awareness and knowledge*; and *Keeping up with the times*. The third theme – *Barriers to compassion* – focuses on barriers to implementing and enhancing compassion in elite sports environments and comprises four subthemes: *Compassion is soft*; *Power dynamics can stand in the way*; *Requires prioritization*; and *Performance outcome orientation*. We conclude that while compassion (beyond self-compassion) can be beneficial in elite sports, coaches still perceive barriers for successful implementation, and that research should further investigate the outcomes and consequences of compassion in the elite sport context.

In elite sport, athletes, coaches, and sports professionals aim to push the boundaries of athletes' performance. Given that adversity, failure, and setbacks are common aspects of this competitive context, it is crucial for athletes to have skills and competencies to deal with challenging situations (Christensen & Smith, 2018; Sarkar & Page, 2022). In the past decade, an increasing amount of research has suggested that athlete self-compassion is advantageous for dealing with the demands of competitive sport (for a recent review, see Cormier et al., 2023). The role of athlete self-compassion notwithstanding, the role of compassion on an interpersonal and environmental level in elite sports has been largely unexplored. This gap of knowledge is surprising considering the large impact that coaches and sport environments have on athlete outcomes (Nichol et al., 2019). For example, autonomy-supportive coaching can improve athlete engagement and motivation (Reynders et al., 2019), and reduce the risk of athlete burnout (Woods, Dunne, Gallagher, & McNicholl, 2022). Furthermore, research outside the sport context has begun to show the importance of leaders' compassion on performance

(Rego et al., 2024). Following recent calls for a stronger research focus on the environments in which athletes live, train, and compete (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2023; Purcell et al., 2022), we herein explore the role of compassion in elite sports environments from the perspective of high-performance coaches.

While different conceptualizations of compassion have been introduced, there is an agreement that compassion includes affective, behavioral, and cognitive processes (Strauss et al., 2016), and that there are three flows of compassion: Compassion can be directed towards the self (i.e. self-compassion), towards others, and it can be received from others (Gilbert, 2017). Gilbert (2014) defines compassion as “a sensitivity to suffering in self and others, with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it” (p.19), thus conveying two distinct functional processes: compassionate engagement and action. Skills and competencies related to compassionate engagement include a motivation to engage with suffering; attentional sensitivity to distress; being emotionally moved (sympathy); being able to tolerate distress; being

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able to reflect (cognitive empathy and perspective taking); and being non-judgmental. Skills and competencies related to compassionate action include learning to pay attention to things that are helpful (e.g. via imagery, reflection, or reasoning), engaging in behaviors that address distress, and acknowledging related emotions and feelings (Gilbert et al., 2017).

From the three flows of compassion, research in sports has predominantly concentrated on exploring the role of athlete (for reviews, see Cormier et al., 2023; Röthlin et al., 2019) and coach self-compassion (Hägglund et al., 2023). However, research on the role of compassion in sports beyond self-compassion is rare. To name the most prominent exception of this, Oliveira and colleagues have investigated perceived coach compassion (as reported by athletes). While coach compassion has not explicitly been defined, it includes being motivated to confront and deal with moments of suffering and distress in athletes and showing feelings of encouragement, help, and support during difficult moments (Oliveira et al., 2022a). Among other results, athletes who perceived their coach as having higher levels of compassionate qualities (engagement and action) reported higher levels of feelings of belonging to the team (i.e. athlete-related social safeness) and psychological quality of life (Oliveira et al., 2022c) and this was mediated through lower levels of shame and self-criticism (Oliveira et al., 2022b). Importantly, though, little is known about interpersonal compassion (i.e. giving and receiving compassion from others) in sports environments, and research within the (elite) sport domain has yet to investigate coach perceptions of utilizing compassion. This is surprising given that existing research on (self-)compassion points at advantageous effects thereof, both in the context of sport (Cormier et al., 2023; Hägglund et al., 2023) and in other areas; e.g. in mental health professions (Crego et al., 2022), the workplace (Lefebvre et al., 2020), or schools (Matos et al., 2022).

Shedding light on the role of coaches and other factors in the athletes' environment in relation to compassion seems to benefit from utilizing a holistic ecological approach (HEA; Henriksen et al., 2017). A HEA accounts for athletes' environments more broadly—e.g. it has been used for investigating talent development environments (Henriksen et al., 2017)—and argues that four aspects need to be considered to create optimal environments: Immediate surroundings in which athletes engage in their daily activities (i.e. micro level); social settings, including the values and customs of the cultures to which the athletes belong (i.e. macro level); aspects of the athletes' environment directly related to sport (i.e. athletic domain); and all other facets of an athlete's life (i.e. non-athletic domain). Using a HEA to study compassion in elite sport aims to move away from the sole focus on athletes' personal characteristics (i.e. self-compassion) towards a more holistic view including individual, interpersonal, and organizational components related to compassion within and beyond the sport environment. Specifically, the HEA allows looking beyond individual athlete's self-compassion and rather studying compassion in elite sport as something that is interpersonal and is stimulated (or not) by the sport environment. This approach recognizes that compassion is not an isolated trait or behavior (Mascaro et al., 2020) but is intertwined within the life of the organization.

It is important to acknowledge that elite sports is a specific context, characterized by competition and rapidly changing 'teams' due to deselection, de-funding, injury etc. The power dynamics within the coach-athlete relationship, and the constant evaluation and scrutiny (e.g. from peers, leaders, and the public) that athletes and coaches are subject to, may be perceived to be at odds with compassion. Previous research indeed suggests that athletes may fear that being self-compassionate can lead to complacency and can have a negative impact on performance (Ferguson et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2019). Some features of the elite sports context may thus hinder the organic development of compassion, even though previous research suggests that athlete self-compassion is an adaptive coping resource and useful for managing challenging experiences related to sport (e.g. Casali et al., 2022; Reis et al., 2015). Research has hardly tackled this potential

contention, however, leaving a significant gap in knowledge about the role of compassion in the elite sports context. In addition, the perspective of coaches, which may significantly differ from athlete perspectives (Oliveira et al., 2022a), has been notably absent from this discourse. Given the significant role of the coaches in determining athletes' experiences and shaping their environment, it is important to gain insights into their perceptions on the role of compassion in elite sports.

## 1. The present study

This paper aims to elucidate how high-performance coaches perceive, utilize, and negotiate the dynamics of compassion (beyond self-compassion) in elite sport, addressing critical gaps in current sport psychology research. Given the exploratory nature of the research question, and the complex and nuanced nature of compassion in sports, semi-structured interviews were employed to capture the depth of experiences and perceptions from high-performance coaches. Qualitative inquiry allows for a detailed exploration of interpersonal dynamics, motivational and emotional factors, as well as contextual influences that are difficult to quantify but are essential for understanding the real-world applications and implications of compassion in elite sports environments.

## 2. Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with high-performance coaches working at the highest level of their respective sport in Denmark. This method was chosen for its ability to generate valuable insights and knowledge, while allowing for flexibility and in-depth discussion (Smith & Sparkes, 2017), fitting the exploratory nature of our research. The research was informed by a critical realist perspective which maintains that ontological realism (the world continues to pre-exist our knowledge of it) can co-exist with epistemological constructivism (knowledge is fallible, concept-dependent, and constructed; Bhaskar, 1978). Pilgrim (2014) argued that one of the main tenets of critical realism is that “generative mechanisms exist in the world leading to emergent properties, within, and at different levels of, reality. This causal emphasis implies that social scientists should be interested in how things come into being and change, not merely how they are ‘represented’ or are ‘constructed’ in knowledge claims” (p. 2). We aimed to gain insights into high-performance coaches' perceptions of the role of compassion in elite sports environments. Given the assumption that certain aspects of these environments can be enhanced to benefit individuals within them, we found the philosophical framework of critical realism to be a fitting and congruent choice.

### 2.1. Situating the authors

The research, partially funded by Team Denmark (the national institution responsible for elite sports in Denmark), was conducted within the Danish sports system. Our backgrounds, experiences, and positions have shaped the methodological choices, interpretations, and conclusions of this study (Danermark et al., 2019). The author team includes an experienced sport psychology practitioner and researcher providing practical insights and contextual understanding to the research; two early career researchers with an external positioning allowing them a critical lens, and a researcher experienced with individual characteristics and interpersonal behavior. The interviewer (second author) did not have any prior contacts or relationships with any of the interviewed coaches.

### 2.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 12 coaches (11 male), from 10 different sport federations in Denmark, representing team sports ( $n = 2$ ), individual sports ( $n = 5$ ), sports with mixed individual and team/pair

categories ( $n = 2$ ), and parasport ( $n = 1$ ). The coaches worked as either head coach for the national team ( $n = 9$ ), assistant coach for the national team ( $n = 1$ ), or head coach of an elite training center/club ( $n = 2$ ). The coaches were between 28 and 63 ( $M = 41.3$ ,  $SD = 9.41$ ) years old and had between 2 and 36 ( $M = 15.3$ ,  $SD = 11.7$ ) years of experience working as a coach on the elite level.

### 2.3. Procedure

After receiving approval from the institutional ethics committee at the University of Copenhagen (IP-EC-08112022), a pilot interview was conducted with an assistant coach of a professional club's youth team. After the pilot, minor adjustments were made to the interview guide to elicit more broad responses. Purposive sampling was utilized and Team Denmark supported the researchers in identifying high-performance coaches who could provide valuable insights regarding the research question. Acknowledging the small population of high-performance coaches in Denmark, and their busy schedules, we targeted coaches who had expressed keen interest in the social and psychological aspects of their profession. The interviewer received a list of 13 potential participants. After contacting the potential participants with information about the nature of the study, 12 agreed to participate, and dates were set for the interviews. At the onset of the interviews, after a brief introduction to the study, the participants provided informed consent. The interviews took place in the participants' native language ( $n = 11$  Danish,  $n = 1$  English; the interviewer is native in both) between December 2022 and February 2023, and lasted an average of 76 (ranging from 55 to 127) minutes.

### 2.4. Instruments

The interviews followed a general structure containing three sections. They began with a rapport building and introductory section, where the coaches were asked questions related to their journey to becoming a coach at the elite level, as well as some demographic and sports-related questions, including questions about the organizational structure and culture of both the federation they work for and the team or individual athletes they coach. The second section focused on the coaches' general approach to coaching (e.g. 'Can you describe your philosophy of coaching and how you like to meet your athletes in general?'). This section also included questions regarding their approach to supporting their athletes in emotionally difficult situations (e.g. 'How do you support your athletes when they experience setbacks that can be emotionally challenging?'). While the coaches knew the general purpose of the study was to investigate compassion, the first two sections of the interview guide did not explicitly use the term compassion. This was done to provide room for the coaches to focus on their sports environment and own coaching method without having to explicitly focus on the concept of compassion. Before the third section of the interview, the interviewer took a moment to tie together what they had discussed and how this related to compassion, followed by a short description of the concept based on Gilbert's (2017) definition of compassionate engagement and action. The final section then focused on the coaches' thoughts on the role of compassion in elite sports, including its conceptualization, use, barriers, implications, as well as future directions of compassionate elite sports environments (e.g. 'What does a compassionate elite sport environment look like to you?').

### 2.5. Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the interviewer, resulting in 400 pages of transcripts (Times New Roman, 12 point, double-spaced). Nvivo was utilized to conduct a thematic analysis, following the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) Familiarizing oneself with the data, 2) Generating initial codes, 3) Generating themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5) Defining and naming

themes, and 6) Reporting the findings. Two researchers (the first and second authors) initially coded the transcriptions independently, after which they shared and discussed the codes continuously throughout the refinement process, together with the entire research group. After coding and initial theme generation, the research team agreed upon the final themes, with any discrepancies resolved during consensus meetings. While theories of compassion guided the analysis (i.e. deductive analysis), the researchers also utilized an exploratory approach (i.e. inductive analysis) in analyzing the data given that compassion has not previously been studied from the perspective of high-performance coaches in the context of elite sports environments. All data was anonymized by using pseudonyms and excluding any information related to each coach's specific sport.

## 3. Findings

Based on the interviews we developed three main themes that comprised how the coaches utilized compassion and view its benefits, how one can increase compassionate competence, and finally, potential barriers for compassion to flourish in elite sports environments (see Table 1).

### 3.1. Benefits of compassion

#### 3.1.1. Compassion is important when times are tough

Compassion is about recognizing suffering and taking steps to help. While all coaches described helping athletes develop and giving technical and tactical feedback, they also described feeling a responsibility for and need to provide emotional support. The coaches often implicitly and sometimes explicitly expressed utilizing a compassionate approach when discussing how they supported athletes during emotionally challenging times. This included relating to the athletes' experience and acting in ways to alleviate the experienced distress, e.g. by emphasizing the athlete's value as a human outside of their sport. All coaches acknowledged the importance of empathizing with the athlete's negative feelings and not dismissing them. Athletes are often their own hardest critic and while coaches have a responsibility to address failure and underperformance, sometimes it is more important to support athletes' emotional distress, so they can become more open to feedback.

The coaches recognized that failure is an inherent part of elite sport and they generally expressed that a stronger emphasis on the process over the outcome was beneficial for athletes when overcoming setbacks and disappointment (e.g. when not reaching performance goals). A compassionate approach can therefore help the athlete avoid over-identifying with the outcome, whether positive or negative, limiting any negative influence on future performance.

All coaches also mentioned having to make difficult decisions that can negatively affect athletes, and, thus, not only reacting to athletes' experienced setbacks, but sometimes being the reason for it. One of the most prominent examples in sport concerning selection. However, difficult news can be delivered with or without compassion towards the athlete. Factors such as being able to take the perspective of the athlete, consider team dynamics, as well as acknowledge the power they hold, was viewed as important by many of the coaches when making selection decisions, e.g. Kasper (team sport, male, 35 years):

But kindness is also in the way I give them a difficult message ... an example could be to tell a player that they will not be starting in a match. It could be extremely hard for them to sit in front of the others and receive that information. So, OK, kindness would be that I tell you beforehand, I spend my time on it, I've prepared properly, I make good arguments for it and I understand the situation you're in. That doesn't make the message nice, but I've chosen how to give it out of respect for your situation and your career and what you stand for.

Transparency and clear communication during selection decisions

**Table 1**  
Themes and sample quotes from thematic analysis.

Theme	Example quote
Benefits of compassion	
Compassion is important when times are tough	"I actually sometimes try to create a little distance, emphasize that what happens out there on the field is not about them as persons. I really try to give them a feeling that they still have value as human beings, even if they don't succeed on the field. That there are people who love them and that it happens to all of us. That seems to make it less dangerous not to have succeeded in something." (Kasper, team sport, male, 35 years)
Compassion stimulates human connection	"It's also about being good at apologizing or admitting mistakes and just saying, well, I'm only human, you know, and not being afraid of that. Not worrying that I'll lose my authority as a coach because of it; I don't think that's the case. I believe it's much better that they can feel my passion and that I want to make a difference for them and that I put a lot of effort into what I do. It's much better than them thinking I'm some sort of superhuman, which I'm not." (Rasmus, individual sport, male, 37 years)
Compassion fosters unity in competitive environments	"It's largely about ... having a good environment. There's really a need for knowledge sharing, because it's so complex ... that also means we put a lot of emphasis on, at least I do, that it's a great place to be, because you have to collaborate so much with your [teammates] and competitors." (Kenneth, mixed sport, male, 28 years)
Compassion promotes performance	"I think we [coaches] experienced that caring, empathy, and the soft values made the other things much easier. It was much easier to get them to jump higher, run faster, and, in general, be more motivated when we also showed empathy and made room for the soft stuff. It is not like we had a script, that we read about compassion and used it as an instrument. We had no clue about that concept. But I think we lowered our guard enough and made room for some of this ... and it turned out to be extremely effective in moving the environment because it just created a completely different trust between us and them [athletes]." (Erik, mixed sport, male, 41 years)
Increasing compassionate competence	
Coach reflection	"I often experience doubt about what is the right thing to do in a given situation. In the moment it can be distracting, but it's important because it stimulates my curiosity. I'm very much searching for what I believe the player needs right now. Sometimes, you try many different things because you discover that something doesn't work or, something makes it even worse, and sometimes, there's something that makes it better, but then it's short-lived ... So it's a constant navigation driven by both experience and curiosity." (Erik, mixed sport, male, 41 years)
Awareness and knowledge	"Well, I think [compassion] is always there. I mean, I can't really say that we're adding something new here. It's not something that hasn't been there before ... compassion is always there. I mean, it's like sports psychology, when people said that we should add that to our approach. It was always been there, but, of course, you can make it more explicit, focus more on it and talk more about it. So yes, let's focus on compassion more." (Pernille, individual sport, female, 52 years)
Keeping up with the times	"There needs to be an acceptance that things change. In [my sport] and when I talk to my colleagues in Denmark, it is clear that coaches learn through apprenticeship and reproduce how they were trained back in the day. It's key to dare to break out of that and be innovative. I mean to keep up with the times, a bit, right?" (Emil, individual sport, male, 38 years)
Barriers to compassion	
Compassion is soft	"I don't think that on an organizational level we are ... skilled at [compassion]. In that regard, we are somewhat more influenced by stereotypes within [the sport], where it's seen more as a sign of weakness than anything else." (Kasper, team sport, male, 35 years)
Power dynamics can stand in the way	"I think a barrier is the distance between people and the hierarchical systems of elite sport that many people have enormous respect for. I've felt that this was a barrier to seeing eye to eye, being honest, and daring to talk about what's really difficult." (Pernille, individual sport, female, 52 years)
Requires prioritization	"It's also a practical matter ... prioritizing it. Although I would really love to have more time to get to know them in all sorts of other ways, it becomes very specific and elite-oriented when I work with [athletes]. The whole tunnel vision on the sport. Our cohesion is just built on being efficient and always focusing on one thing at a time, which is fine. But it also means that there's no time to get to know each other, which could add something different." (Pernille, individual sport, female, 52 years)
Performance outcome orientation	"I mean, [the sports organization] is a little bit in conflict with themselves because they are so cold and cynical about medals and performance goals. It's just like, "if you don't deliver, *whistles* we'll take the money away". That's the situation every year and then at the same time, when we talk with sports psychologists etc. we hear, "ah but then there's ... well-being" right?" (Rasmus, individual sport, male, 37 years)

can aid in athletes' understanding and accepting these decisions. Coaches must therefore have skills in perspective taking to better comprehend the athletes' experience, caring for the athlete, and reflecting on the consequences of their actions. While the (at first glance) easier option for a coach might be to dehumanize the athlete and distance themselves when making difficult decisions, the coaches believed that a compassionate approach could avoid these decisions leading to prolonged suffering and unnecessary negative consequences.

### 3.1.2. Compassion stimulates human connection

All interviewed coaches emphasized that athletes are human, having their own needs, wants, and values (also outside of sport), and that being able to push them to the limits of their physical and mental capabilities requires athletes to function as a whole. While improving performance continues as the main purpose within elite sports environments, a more holistic focus on the individual athletes, where wellbeing of the individual is prioritized, was viewed as essential. Meeting the athletes with compassion and taking an interest in athletes' lives outside of sport can help the coaches connect with the athletes and build rapport. While the closeness of the coach-athlete relationship varied between and within (i. e. concerning different athletes of their group) coaches, they viewed personal connection, trust, and understanding as inherent for effective

communication, e.g. Erik (mixed sport, male, 41 years):

For me, at least, one of the things I believe in the most, is that if we have a strong relationship, and the fundamental trust in each other is there, and we're not holding hidden agendas, then there's a lot of room for open communication, whether it is being a bit assertive or whether it is delivering a good or a difficult message. For me this is one of the cornerstones of the way I coach and what has been most effective. A strong relationship that forms the basis for strong communication. Some coaches find that maintaining a distance makes it easier to deliver difficult messages. On my journey, I've actually found the opposite to be true for me, that, a closer relationship provides a much better foundation for handling the conflicts that are present in everyday life. The relationship allows me to work with motivated players who are also, to some extent, well ... comfortable in sharing where they are.

Connecting with the athletes on a human level is essential for compassion to thrive. Coaches can utilize compassionate skills and competencies, such as empathy, reflection and a non-judgmental attitude, to better understand their athletes. Some coaches mentioned this to be especially important during times where they felt frustrated towards their athletes (e.g. if athletes seemed disinterested or lacked

motivation). In a similar vein, a few coaches also discussed the importance of being aware and open of their own shortcomings and vulnerabilities, thus also allowing for the possibility of receiving compassion from others in their sport environment. In a competitive environment like elite sport, with its inherent uncertainty and power imbalances, strong relationships built on trust and transparency are important to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunication, thus preventing unnecessary suffering. While it may be tempting to keep a distance and detach emotionally and cognitively from the athletes' experience, a more compassionate approach can help coaches in meeting the athletes where they are and help them get to where they need to be.

### 3.1.3. Compassion fosters unity in competitive environments

In individual and team sports, athletes are both reliant on and in competition with each other. Athletes may be competing for the best performance results, to be selected for an important event, for gaining more playing time in a team sport etc., but they still need each other to succeed. All of the coaches felt that an essential task for them was to create an environment where everyone works together for a common goal, even when in direct or indirect competition with each other. In a team sport, athletes may be in competition for selection and playing time, but require high levels of cohesion to play together on the field. In individual sports, athletes may not be reliant on others during a competition, but one athlete's win can mean more funding for the sport, and sharing knowledge can mean everybody improves as exemplified by Thomas (individual sport, male, 35 years), who stated that "I want to see that they work together a lot, also on the field, and they stand together and support each other because, even though it's an individual sport, it's still us against the world."

Many coaches stated that trust, honesty, and open communication build the foundation needed to be able to push each other to perform better and they emphasized the need for a culture of cooperation, even when difficult. For example, some coaches mentioned the importance of spending quality time together also outside of sport. However, to be able to create an environment in which athletes can work together towards a common goal while also being in competition with each other, the coaches need to be aware and mindful of the athletes' position as competitors, as well as social dynamics within teams, e.g. Kasper (team sport, male, 35 years):

I'm mindful never to scold. I can address things in a direct or what might be perceived as a harsh manner, but it must not come across as scolding. This relates to the tone and language and also the context you're in. So, I think my athletes will find that if I'm sitting with them, as we are now, one-on-one, I can come across as tough or direct, but I wouldn't be that way if two others were present, because then you could be exposed in front of two others, and there would be a different social dynamic at play.

Most coaches recognized that how they communicate matters greatly. Compassionate communication involves being mindful of one's tone, language use, and the context when communicating with athletes. The coaches expressed that being skilled at seeing things from the athletes' perspectives and considering what is at stake for them in any given situation is extremely important. For example, some coaches mentioned taking extra care around selection decisions regarding social dynamics (weighing the costs and benefits of when and how to make selection decisions based on what is best for everyone involved), as these were moments that could cause strain among athletes and have negative consequences. They viewed honest and transparent communication with athletes as essential for alleviating some of the uncertainty involved, therefore, approaching these situations with compassion can help to ease tensions and prevent further strain on relationships.

### 3.1.4. Compassion promotes performance

The coaches' willingness to adopt a compassionate approach was accompanied by a belief that this was not only the right thing to do but

also beneficial for performance. The coaches perceived having a caring, empathetic and understanding relationship with the athletes as creating the trust needed to be able to push athletes to enhance performance. Even if not used explicitly, a compassionate approach can help coaches balance support and pressure, e.g. Peter (individual sport, male, 35 years):

"Other coaches are willing to push their athletes at all costs, for as long as they possibly can. And if these athletes break down, well ... then they just didn't have what it takes. We have to push our athletes as much as everyone else. They have to train just as hard. But we just have to do it in a proper way and it really is a balancing act, it presents a challenge once in a while. It certainly stimulates many considerations about how to handle it properly."

The coaches emphasized the focus on the athlete as an individual as not only the ethical thing to do but as essential for optimal performance, e.g. Oliver (mixed sport, male, 39 years) who stated "I'd like to try and see them as not robots, yeah? They're humans and they will make mistakes and know that mistakes are OK, but we go again." High-performance coaches are constantly pushing boundaries to stay competitive on an international level, and they may be competing against coaches with different approaches and values. Most of the coaches expressed that it is normal for some elite sports environments to be characterized as being tough and willing to utilize a 'win at all costs' mentality (lacking compassion). Denmark is a relatively small country so compassion may be especially relevant in this context, e.g. Emil (individual sport, male, 38 years):

What I think is interesting, in relation to compassion, is that I believe that if you do it the right way, then you will perform even better. Perhaps this is even something that allows us to compete against some of the nations that just bash their athletes, because we have a much smaller pool of athletes than the vast majority of other countries, right? So we have to be good to the ones we have, so that they will stay in sport for a long time.

## 3.2. Increasing compassionate competence

### 3.2.1. Reflection

The coaches described working with sports psychologists, learning with age and experience, and reflecting on both successes and failures as influencing the development of their methods over time. Most coaches mentioned engaging in reflective practices as allowing them to explore their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, thus developing a deeper understanding of their own vulnerabilities, challenges, and areas for growth. Reflection is crucial for learning and developing as a coach and provides the foundation for understanding one's own biases and assumptions based on prevalent norms. The coaches described the importance of "creating a greater awareness of why one does as one does" (Erik, mixed sport, male, 41 years). Reflection can also increase the coaches' ability to understand how they influence others, e.g. Axel (individual sport, male, 48 years) reflecting over why some relationships with athletes had ended poorly in the past:

In recent years, it's really dawned on me that there is a person behind the athlete. And that has changed me a lot, because there have been many athletes who have been through the process with a positive outcome, but there have also been some who have not had a positive outcome ... for some, it hasn't been the pressure I've put on them, but it's been my lack of understanding of their world that's been the reason why things ended abruptly. And I've realized "what if I treated people differently?" Without becoming friends with them, but getting, in a different way ... close. Understanding a bit about what you have been doing in your everyday life? Maybe knowing what their partner's name is ... how did that exam go?

Reflection is a key component of enhancing one's willingness and

ability to engage and act compassionately when faced with difficult situations. Perspective taking and having an understanding of “the athletes’ world” will help coaches meet the athletes where they are and best support them without passing judgement. Reflection cultivates cognitive empathy, informs actions, and contributes to a continuous cycle of learning and growth, reinforcing the connection between personal awareness and compassionate responses to others.

### 3.2.2. Awareness and knowledge

Some coaches had not been formally introduced to the concept of compassion prior to the interview, while others had been introduced via personal inquiry, a sport psychologist, or educational courses. While the coaches expressed varying degrees of knowledge about compassion, they were mainly unacquainted with its conceptualization. However, they all saw connections to their coaching practices and expressed a belief that compassion was prevalent in some way. The coaches generally expressed a lack of explicit focus on compassion leading to a limited understanding of what compassion is and what it is not. While compassion can be understood as an innate human response, utilizing a compassionate approach, especially in difficult situations, requires several skills and competencies that take time, effort, and resources to learn. Furthermore, compassion can come naturally to some, while requiring more conscious effort for others. The coaches all agreed that explicit focus on compassion would be beneficial, via coach education programs and discussions with sport psychologists. Furthermore, some mentioned the importance of having examples of successful implementation of compassion, whether from own experience or by viewing others, e.g. Frederik (team sport, male, 63 years):

You look a little at how [other internationally recognized coaches] do things, and while you can’t be like them, you can get an understanding that you can be listening and caring as a coach and still have to make tough decisions, right? It’s something you can learn.

While all the coaches believed compassion was beneficial for performance, they also expressed uncertainty on how and when to utilize compassion, indicating a need to find balance between support and challenge. The coaches expressed uncertainty in determining what individual athletes need during emotionally challenging times and what the best approach in terms of promoting performance is. Kenneth (mixed sport, male, 28 years) explained that “I think that’s the most difficult barrier, knowing in any given moment whether I should show empathy or be tough? Or maybe not tough, but should I be cold and objective?” He contrasts reacting in a way where the focus is on what he describes as objective (technical or tactical) factors, including performance results, with a reaction focusing supporting the athletes emotionally. This was mirrored in a response from William (mixed sport, male, 45 years) contrasting solution-oriented reactions to a more emotion-oriented reaction, saying, “So just understanding what I should do in different situations? Do I always have to be solution-oriented? No, maybe I shouldn’t always be. Sometimes, if they are sad, I should maybe just sit down and listen to them and understand.” Feeling secure in knowing the most beneficial approach requires coaches to be able to notice and react to distress and have a deep understanding of each individual athletes’ needs at any given time. This requires several skills related to compassionate competence that can be learned through increased awareness and knowledge.

### 3.2.3. Keeping up with the times

The coaches recognized that focus on “soft values” or “soft skills” such as compassion, caring, empathy and athlete mental well-being had become more prominent in recent years. There was a shared sentiment among the coaches that there had been a shift in the culture and in prominent leadership styles within their respective sports. While there may be multiple reasons for a shift in culture, norms, and practices within elite sport, many coaches expressed a need to align their coaching practices with the needs of their athletes, which may differ with athletes

from a different generation. Many coaches were athletes themselves before beginning to coach and they expressed having experienced a lack of interest and focus on individual athletes and their well-being, e.g. Emil (individual sport, male, 38 years):

How should I describe it ... It was just ... It was very much every man for himself. The coaching approach back then was also very much like, “Now you just need to pull yourselves together, and if you don’t win this, then everything is pointless ... we’ve spent so much money, now you also have to win.” I mean, in terms of performance anxiety the approach was very much like, “either you can do it or you can’t”. There wasn’t much ... compassion for anything at all. So, in that sense, a lot has changed.

The coaches discussed availability and access to information, shifting cultural norms, and changing generational needs as influencing the potential need, use, and implementation of compassion. Coaches expressed that to avoid burnout, dropout, and unnecessary suffering there needed to be an increased interest in athlete’s individual needs and the implementation of more compassionate approaches in elite sport.

## 3.3. Barriers to compassion

### 3.3.1. Compassion is soft

In the competitive environment of elite sport, barriers to compassion can stem from a lack of knowledge, personal views and beliefs, culture, or systemic issues. Among the coaches, there was a prominence of viewing compassion as a soft value and equating it with words like empathy, caring, and love. Furthermore, the coaches often associated these soft values with a prioritization and focus on the emotional aspects of coaching. There was a contradiction between the coaches believing compassion was beneficial for performance but some also questioning whether too much compassion would lead to complacency. In addition, there was a prevalence of the idea that the cold and tough nature of elite sport was in some way in opposition to compassion and a balance needed to be found. Coaches have to make difficult decisions that are not always beneficial for all athletes and therefore a compassionate approach may come with contradictions to the coaches’ job. This can lead the coaches to question its compatibility with elite sport, e.g. Erik (mixed sport, male, 41 years):

I am probably very concerned with treating people properly, and, in reality, one of the big questions I ask myself in relation to my practice, is whether I am tough enough for this world. Can I be so concerned about this and at the same time be [a good coach]?

Even if the individual coaches saw the benefits of compassion, there was a belief that this was not always the case on an organizational level or within the sport culture more generally, and that compassion could be viewed by some even as a weakness.

### 3.3.2. Power dynamics can stand in the way

The culture, systems, and organizations on the elite level are inherently hierarchical and there is a distinct power imbalance within the coach-athlete relationship. Athletes are dependent on sports organizations for support and opportunities, and the coaches are the gatekeepers. This may present challenges for compassion. While both coaches and athletes are performers in their own right, it may be difficult for the coaches to fully understand the athletes’ experience. The distance between athletes and coaches (both physically and psychologically) can act as a barrier for compassion to flourish naturally, for example in cases when national team coaches only see their athletes sporadically, and often in situations where the athletes are explicitly being evaluated for selection. However, compassion may be especially relevant to ensure coaches do not act as an unnecessary stressor for athletes. Some coaches emphasized the importance of reaching out to athletes outside of regular meetings to develop a relationship where the coach can aid in the

athlete's development. While leading with a compassionate approach can help to be better equipped to understand the unique challenges and needs of each athlete, some inherent aspects of elite sport may make the natural flourishing of compassion less likely.

### 3.3.3. Requires prioritization

In elite sports environments, coaches constantly have to make decisions on resource allocation. While federations have varying amounts of resources, most coaches mentioned having to take both time and financial restraints into consideration when determining what to prioritize in a job in which one could always do more. Busy schedules may lead to coaches being restricted in their willingness and ability to reflect on their methods as well as to learn about implementing new skills. Compassion requires taking time to reflect and learning to be mindful. If something does not seem to be working or having the intended benefits, it may be easier to revert to known methods. The number of athletes that a coach is responsible for also affects their ability to develop a connection and deep understanding of the athletes' individual needs, e.g. Peter (individual sport, male, 35 years):

Because we're such a small team right now it's really easy for me to be very close to all the athletes, and I actually have the time and capacity to talk to all of them every day and just touch base and see where they're at. Of course, as soon as the team gets bigger, it becomes more challenging ... and I understand that for many club teams with 30 athletes, it's a more challenging task ...

A fast-paced and high-stakes environment combined with a lack of time and resources can lead to less compassionate responses in coaches when faced with emotionally difficult situations. Therefore, sports organizations should hold responsibility for ensuring that all athletes have the needed support during challenging times (e.g. during career transitions, injuries, selection decisions).

### 3.3.4. Performance outcome orientation

Most coaches mentioned having a high level of autonomy in their work. However, they emphasized that for compassion to be prioritized on a more general level there would need to be top-down changes. The implications of suboptimal performance for funding and job security, next to disappointment from self and others, are real for high-performance coaches. There was a shared perception that "more sustainable practices", while communicated as being important, did not yield any tangible benefits from the organizational level unless it is accompanied by immediate performance results. For example, Kenneth (mixed sport, male, 45 years) stated that, "We all talk about the idea of putting people before medals, but they [sports organization] just want results ... you can't come up with some soft values and say, 'Well, this is where we've improved', nothing will come of that."

The coaches perceived a clear contradiction between what sports organizations communicate as being valued and important, and what they reward in practice. While focus on performance and winning is central to high-performance sport, the coaches discussed a need for more balance between performance outcome orientation and the human aspect of sport, e.g. Thomas (individual sport, male, 35 years):

I think it's just about finding a balance ... at the end of the day, we are measured in medals. That's it; you have the human aspect, and then you have the gold medal ... that's the balance, as I see it. We all know it's about winning, but can we perhaps avoid putting too much emphasis or pressure on it? Because if it's only about the gold medals and things don't work out, the price is steep on the other side.

The coaches did not consider the current system to fully support this balance, with only performance outcomes being financially rewarded. This contradiction led coaches to understand why some coaches may not prioritize compassionate practices, e.g. Emil (individual sport, male, 38 years):

Well, that's also the premise of elite sport, that you have to win. But how you do it ... and how you select people and how you work with people on a daily basis ... I can definitely understand what drives some coaches to just stand out there and shout at their athletes ... I mean, it's an enormous pressure, to know that if we don't perform here, then I'm fired ... so it's the system, right? It clashes a bit. You have to win a medal, but you also have to do it in this socially responsible way, right?

Individual coaches can make changes according to their beliefs in the positive outcomes of coaching with compassion; however, without systematic changes the coaches' perception was that its value was not rewarded in any real way from an organizational level. This inevitably affects how likely the development and implementation of compassionate elite sports environments are in general.

## 4. Discussion

This investigation provides comprehensive information on the role of compassion in elite sports, explicitly moving beyond athlete self-compassion. Following a thematic analysis of 12 semi-structured interviews with high-performance coaches working at the highest level of their respective sport, three overall themes were identified, focusing on the perceived benefits and barriers of compassion and what it takes for compassion to flourish in elite sports environments. While the interviewed coaches discussed the potential benefit of compassion in terms of dealing with difficult situations, promoting human connection, fostering unity in competitive environments, and leading to enhanced performance, they simultaneously expressed several dilemmas and contradictions.

Firstly, while the coaches believed that a more holistic and compassionate approach is beneficial, they also expressed uncertainty over its application and consequences, and described how some aspects of their job (e.g. selection) felt incompatible with compassion. The coaches' stated that focusing on athlete's individual needs and building rapport would inevitably lead to better performance results, while also suggesting that too much compassion may lead to complacency. Furthermore, when approaching athletes during emotionally difficult situations, the coaches contrasted responses that were more objective, focusing on technical and tactical aspects, with ones that were viewed as more compassionate, focusing on emotional aspects. The coaches' understanding of these reactions as either compassionate or uncompassionate may indicate a narrow view of what a compassionate response can be. Depending on what is most beneficial for the athlete, sometimes the compassionate response may be more passive (sit, listen, and relate), and sometimes it may be more active (challenge the athlete to do better; Quaglia, 2023).

While some coaches had been introduced to the concept of compassion prior to the interview, the coaches' levels of theoretical knowledge about compassion was low. To efficiently incorporate compassion in elite sports environments, it is important for coaches to have clarity on what compassion is and is not in the context of elite sport. Utilizing both previous research by Oliveira et al. (2022a) on the skills and competencies related to coach compassion, as well as insights from the interviewed coaches, we aim to provide clarity on compassionate coaching in the elite sport context. Compassionate coaching means recognizing the challenges, pressures, and emotions that athletes face, and showing genuine empathy and understanding in a non-judgmental manner, while providing concrete steps to help. Compassionate coaching does not mean indulging poor performance or lowering standards, but supporting athletes to meet high standards. Furthermore, compassionate coaching does not mean avoiding tough conversations, it means having a foundation built on trust, allowing for honest and transparent conversations. Finally, compassion in elite sport does not mean diluting the competitive aspect; it means fostering a respectful and supportive competitive environment. Indeed, previous



research has shown beneficial aspects of compassion such that athletes' self-compassion is associated with more adaptive coping responses (Huysmans & Clement, 2017; Mosewich, Crocker, et al., 2019), more constructive reactions to emotionally difficult situations in sport (Ferguson et al., 2015), and faster recovery from mistakes (Doorley et al., 2022).

While the coaches did not often explicitly express utilizing compassion, their practice often reflected compassionate engagement and action. Trust, open and honest communication, empathy and emphasis on understanding athletes' individual needs are all essential components of engaging and acting compassionately. However, compassion theories have traditionally focused on enhancing well-being and rather less on performance directly (Gilbert, 2019). Thus, to further develop skills and competencies related to compassionate engagement and action in elite sports, coaches need context-dependent training. While athletes are extremely dedicated to their sport and aware that coaches aim to push them to their extremes, this can have detrimental effects if both physical and mental well-being are not emphasized. Some athletes may thrive in typically 'harsh' environments, for others it may lead to dropout, suffering, or burnout. Coaches thus need to find a balance between support and challenge that works for each individual athlete. Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) reflect this finding in their work on resilience in sport. They describe a facilitative environment as being high in both support and challenge. In a high-challenge, low-support (unrelenting) environment there may be good performance, but at the cost of well-being. On the other hand, a high-support, low-challenge (comfortable) environment would not enhance performance. They conclude that a facilitative environment needs to be created and maintained to ensure sustained success. Meeting athletes with compassion when they struggle, fail, or show emotional distress can help coaches balance support and challenge.

Previous research has also suggested caring coaching as a way to ensure a balance between performance, high pressure, and well-being (Dohsten et al., 2020). While caring and compassion are two distinct constructs, caring motives are a key component of compassion (Gilbert et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, there are many similarities between our findings and research focusing on caring coaching. For example, in a study utilizing the concept of caring, a sample of women's national team coaches all reported implementing a holistic approach to coaching, and balancing empathy and care for the well-being of the athletes with stringent performance demands (Lindgren & Barker-Ruchti, 2017). Furthermore, coaches have reported core values and philosophy aligned with caring, empathy and listening skills, as well as personal experiences as factors influencing their ability to exhibit caring coaching practices (Gano-Overway et al., 2023).

Times change, and coaches need to adapt to the needs of newer generations of athletes. The interviewed coaches expressed a shift within elite sport towards an increased emphasis on what they described as "soft values" such as compassion. This mirrors broader cultural and societal changes towards an increase in understanding and acceptance of the importance of mental well-being (Henriksen et al., 2020). However, the coaches expressed a contradiction between what sports organizations communicated as being important (e.g. athlete mental health and sustainable practices) and what was rewarded in reality (e.g. medals). While coaches have a large degree of autonomy in their work, they are still constrained by various organizational, contextual, and cultural factors. The consequences of subpar performance in terms of funding, job security, as well as disappointment from self and others are real for high-performance coaches. In addition, resources are limited. Coaches are therefore constantly evaluating what is and is not beneficial for performance, leading the interviewed coaches to understand why some coaches might find it easier to neglect the (perceived) importance of compassion and athlete well-being.

Sport organizations are also driven to be successful and motivated to be profitable, or at least economically reasonable (Bauman, 2016) which may create resistance to break from the status quo and create an

organizational culture where compassionate practices are recognized and rewarded. It has been argued that, "in addition to the importance of dispelling the myth of individualism for sporting success, there is also a need to view sport organizations as more than systematized collectives aimed at promoting success, but as a workplace that must ensure the well-being of its employees" (Wagstaff, 2017, p. 4). While performance measures maintain at the center of elite sports organizations, there is also a responsibility to ensure the psychological and physical safety of the individuals within the organizations. This means considering a 'win at all costs' mentality more critically, to define what is and is not acceptable in terms of the costs of winning. This might include focusing not only on the outcome (e.g. winning medals) but also on the process. Furthermore, there needs to be a shift in the perception of elite athletes as invincible and thus placing unrealistic expectations and exhibiting harsh reactions to failure. More practically, sports organizations could implement compassion focused training in coach education programs, or consider compassionate skills and competencies during recruitment of coaches, e.g. the ability to reflect on and be aware of one's effect on individuals within their sporting environment, noticing athletes' distress and responding in ways that are helpful to the specific athlete in a specific moment, and having a benevolent emotional or affective response (i.e. empathetic, non-judgmental) when faced with difficult situations. Prioritizing coach training programs and utilizing qualified sport psychology professionals will allow coaches to effectively utilize the potential benefits of compassion in their sporting environments. Next to compassionate training for coaches, helping organizations to be more compassionate in their overall operations is essential. This involves setting policies that prioritize athlete well-being alongside performance metrics and creating an organizational culture where compassionate practices are recognized and rewarded. By integrating these strategies, compassion becomes a fundamental aspect of the sporting environment, benefiting coaches and athletes alike. Finally, potential resistance to compassion in a sport context should begin with a clear understanding of what compassion is and is not to help facilitate acceptance and integration of sport specific compassionate practices.

## 5. Limitations and future directions

While a qualitative inquiry was deemed suitable for our research questions, some limitations need to be discussed. Firstly, utilizing a single interview may not fully capture the depth and complexity of the participants' experiences and perspectives. While coaches are typically used to reflect on and discuss their coaching methods, the context of the interviews may have shaped participants' answers. Elite sports is a fast-paced, high-stakes environment, and observations of coaches in their actual practice could further elucidate the role compassion plays in their sports environments. To mitigate these limitations, we began each interview with a rapport-building section and ensured sufficient time to explore all topics comprehensively. Whether the coaches' perceptions are reflected in their coaching practices or whether they match the perceptions of athletes cannot be inferred based on this study; however, the researchers observed a level of candor in the coaches that led them to believe that the data is embedded in the coaches' own perceived realities.

The majority of the interviewed coaches were male. While this reflects the distribution of elite level coaches in Denmark (Council of Europe, 2019), it can be seen as a weakness, and future research should aim to achieve a more balanced representation of genders. All participants were working in Denmark, and it is important to be aware that the Danish sporting context may be different from sporting contexts in other countries. At the same time, the sample represented a wide range of (elite) sports. Another potential limitation is that the coaches were aware that the research was financially supported by Team Denmark, leading to potential reporting bias. Furthermore, coaches who agree to participate in a study about compassion might already be more inclined towards compassionate practices, and another group of coaches might

have revealed substantially different perceptions.

Concerning the interviews, theories of compassion guided both the interviews and the data analysis, but we decided to explicitly focus on compassion only in the last section of the interview. This allowed coaches to discuss their practices without being tied down to any theoretical definitions of compassion, or by their understanding of the concept. Due to the lack of available research investigating compassion on an interpersonal and environmental level within the elite sport context, we had to adapt definitions that had not been validated in this population. An abstract concept such as compassion has to be introduced in a meaningful way that is relevant to the specific context, while staying true to and accurately representing the construct (Mosewich, Ferguson, et al., 2019). To assess the validity of the conclusions made based on the data, one needs to assess the ontological plausibility of the research account (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2021). We argue that although coaches had differing and sometimes limited accounts of the concept of compassion, common themes referring to the theory of compassionate engagement and action (Gilbert, 2017) were present in their discussions.

Another way to assess validity of the research is to consider the practical utility of the research account (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2021). We argue that the conclusions of this research include both practical suggestions for coaches and individuals within sports organizations, as well as an attempt to discuss the possible outcomes of compassion in elite sports environments. While there is no prior research investigating compassion on an environmental level in high-performance environments, we argue that this is an important avenue for future research. Buy-in from coaches, athletes and other key stakeholders in the elite sport environment requires a belief that compassion is beneficial for both well-being and performance. Future research should therefore investigate the outcomes and consequences of compassion, for example by employing longitudinal methods to investigate the impact of compassionate coaching over time. Furthermore, research in more naturalistic settings, such as training and competitions, could elucidate the role of compassion on an interpersonal and environmental level within the elite sport context.

## 6. Conclusion

Compassion in elite sports has benefits beyond athlete self-compassion. Coaches perceived compassion to be a useful approach to dealing with some of the emotionally difficult and stressful situations present in elite sports; however, they expressed uncertainty with its use and implications. The current investigation underscores the need for compassion training for coaches in elite sports environments using context-specific methods and examples, taking into account possible cultural or structural barriers in elite sports environments that traditionally tend to promote a 'win at all costs' mentality.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Emilia Backman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Charlotte Hejl:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Kristoffer Henriksen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Ingo Zettler:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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