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## **The Birth of the Stars: A Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection Investigation into the Leadership and Development of a New Superleague Netball Club**

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### **Abstract**

This Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR) investigation illustrates a leader's first steps in a "values-to-action" journey. Drawing on the interface between transformational leadership and organizational culture, this study focused on the birth of the Severn Stars—a professional netball club in the United Kingdom. In particular, this PAAR investigation explored how the leader's values were operationalized through the club's inaugural year. Fourteen operational managers, coaches, and players were individually interviewed in order to gain an appreciative gaze and subsequently reframe their lived experience. Results demonstrated how transformational leadership was manifested through the pragmatic deployment of club values and how the organizational culture was, in part, characterized by individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspirational motivation. These behaviors and the organizational culture were shown to enhance prosocial relationships and social connections across the club, the influence of the Super Stars, and stakeholders' perceptions of autonomy.

**Keywords:** coaching, organizational culture, transformational leadership, values-to-action

This Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR; Ghaye et al., 2008) investigation concerns the first author's leadership of a new Superleague Netball club in the United Kingdom. Principally, this investigation aimed to report the initial steps through which the authorship team collaboratively supported the first author to better understand the process of putting her "values into action" (Ghaye et al., 2008, p. 363). Through this appreciative and reflective

process of inquiry, this investigation sought to understand the perspectives of key stakeholders within the club in order to better inform current, and particularly future, action. The theoretical and methodological frameworks underpinning this investigation were multifaceted. First, the values-into-action focus draws on PAAR as the epistemological and methodological foundation on which this study is based (see also James, Blomberg, & Kihlgren, 2014; James, Blomberg, Liljekvist, & Kihlgren, 2015). Second, the study draws on research concerning organizational culture in sport (e.g., Cole & Martin, 2018), and third, on the literature concerning the interface between sport and transformational leadership (TFL) (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In order to both situate and rationalize these underpinning theoretical disciplines, it is first crucial to outline the context of this study—the Severn Stars netball club, including the values which the first author sought to implement through the birth of the organization.

## **Context**

The Severn Stars is a professional netball club competing in the England Netball Superleague. It was formed in 2016 following a successful joint tender to England Netball from the University of Worcester and the University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom. At that time, the club featured a senior squad and an academy comprising U19 and U21 teams. Each team was supported by at least two coaches, and some members of the club fulfilled more than one role (e.g., playing for the senior squad and coaching within the academy). The coaches and senior squad receive some remuneration, but the academy players are not paid. This study principally concerned the playing-focused side of the club and considered the perspective of players and coaches, rather than the broader roles such as marketing, communications, and events management.

The first author's leadership role within the club was foundational both to the birth of the club, but also to the positioning of this PAAR investigation—a process to which she committed as a way of rigorously, and deeply, reflecting on the establishment of the club in its inaugural year. Central to both elements were the values she considered important to her own leadership practice, but also which she wished to see brought to life within the Severn Stars— with a particular initial emphasis on the playing-focused aspects of the club through holistic and athlete-centered action. The first author's values were developed through deliberate reflection throughout her professional career in both netball and Higher Education. These values were shared with the authorship team at the instigation of the project: (a) the development of people, (b) aiding the transition from elite athlete to future career, (c) mutual accountability, (d) investing in home-grown coaches, (e) avoiding micromanagement, and (f) ensuring values are evident “from boardroom to court.” These values were founded on the first author's experience of having previously witnessed netball environments

where she perceived a detrimental impact on sporting performance of failing to acknowledge the needs of the athlete beyond factors directly relating to their athletic capabilities. She perceived these deleterious environments were the result of short-termism, overly autocratic coaching approaches, and a lack of accountability throughout the leadership chain. Resultantly, the first author is committed to ensuring the long-term, empowered, holistic, and professional development of individuals, but held alongside an appropriate degree of accountability. The first author was also influenced by her lifelong commitment to the sport more generally and perceived a strong sense of responsibility to steward the development of the club for the betterment of the sport at the local, national, and international level.

Operationally, the first author is committed to deploying a leadership approach throughout the club founded on the principles of TFL (Bass & Riggio, 2006). TFL comprises behaviors enacted with the intention of empowering, inspiring, and motivating followers so that they might become the best version of themselves (Turnnidge & Côté, 2018). Her commitment has been developed through an extensive career in high-performance netball and based in her perceptions and reflections of both poor and exemplary practice she has witnessed through that time. Her belief in TFL emanates from her experience that it is those coaches who are inherently positive, inspirational, and committed deeply to a holistic approach, who optimally develop people in the longer term. She believes that TFL connects all of the associated behaviors connected to a positive organizational culture, growth mind set, and holistic coaching approaches. Having described the context of the investigation, it is important to outline the epistemological and methodological considerations underpinning the process through which the first author sought to action her values through the birth of the club.

## **Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection**

The PAAR represented an ideal fit for this project owing to the shared roles, values, and principles of the authorship team and members of the club. Before describing the particular features of PAAR which made the process so pertinent for this investigation, it is first important to position the authorship team. The first author is the Director of Netball of the club and is also a Head of Department within one of the two supporting universities. The first author's role as Director of Netball included being the primary decision maker surrounding the appointment of coaching and playing staff. The first author is an experienced academic leader and has also been involved in netball for over 35 years as a performer, coach, author, broadcaster, and coach educator. The Severn Stars is the second Superleague franchise in which she has held a senior leadership role. In terms of the broader authorship team, the second author, who designed the research study, is an

academic within one of the two universities, but has no netball-related responsibilities. The third author holds an academic role with one of the two universities and an administrative role with the netball club. The fourth and fifth authors were recruited as relative “outsiders” with expertise in coaching and leadership research. In order to address the aims of the project, it was clear, therefore, that this investigation required some form of Action Research (AR) as we would be principally concerned with furthering our understanding of how the first author’s “values-to-action” leadership influenced the life of the club across its first year of operation. While drawing on the positive histories of AR and Participatory Action Research, Ghaye et al. (2008) consider PAAR to be a “third generation” (p. 264) AR demanding a turn away from the preoccupation with fixing things that were broken and away from the spirals/cycles which AR normatively features.

Underpinning the PAAR methodology is a belief in the process of deliberative democracy, a considerable advantage for this project given the club’s equally balanced, jointly constructed, board membership from two supporting universities. Furthermore, establishing a new club from scratch, in a very short timescale, and immediately having to compete at the highest domestic level in the United Kingdom (Sport England, 2016) was bound to be challenging and feature imperfect solutions to problems which arose. Therefore, the PAAR principle to which the research team were most committed was that of positivity; for example, some of the questions posed within this investigation were drawn from Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), an approach to organizational change on which PAAR draws explicitly. Ghaye et al. (2008, p. 362) stated “deficit phrased questions lead to deficitbased conversations. These in turn lead to deficit-based actions”— PAAR does not ignore deficiencies or problems, but asks collaborators to critically reframe those issues through a more positive lens, which has been shown to lead to strength-based enhancements (e.g., James et al., 2015; McKeown, Fortune, & Dupuis, 2016). Additionally, it is evident that PAAR investigations and effective leadership styles, such as TFL, share several characteristics including placing an emphasis on collaboration, translating values into action, and focusing on strengths (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Therefore, this study focused on our deployment of the first two PAAR processes—(a) developing an appreciative gaze and (b) reframing the lived experience of different members of a newly established netball program. Developing an appreciative gaze involves an indepth analysis of the setting through a positive lens. Reframing lived experience involves an analysis of the appreciative gaze through which to understand the strengths on which individuals’ experiences have been founded and which could form the foundation for future developments. The findings from these first two processes will inform subsequent phases—(c) building practical wisdom and (d) demonstrating achievement and moving forward, which will be deployed as the club moves into its second year of operation. The scope of the first author’s role encompassed not only the leadership

behaviors of herself and others but also a concern for the broader organizational culture of the club. Therefore, the premise of this investigation is commensurate with Schein's (2017) belief that leadership and culture are "two sides of the same coin." While first, and principally, founded on PAAR, organizational culture represented a supporting theoretical discipline that informed this investigation.

## **Organizational Culture in Sport**

In recent years, there has been extensive research concerning organizational culture and sport (e.g., Champ, Nesti, Ronkainen, Tod, & Littlewood, 2020; Donoso-Morales, Bloom, & Caron, 2017; Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015). This work has largely affirmed the interdependent relationship between leadership and culture from a wide range of perspectives, including facilitating high-performing teams (Cole & Martin, 2018; Johnson, Martin, Palmer, Watson, & Ramsey, 2012), enhancing motivational climate (Hodge, Henry, & Smith, 2014), and enriching talent development environments (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010, 2011). Results from a systematic review of organizational culture in sport (Maitland et al., 2015) indicated that among the multitude of definitions and approaches to exploring this topic, the work of Schein (1985, 2017) was the most commonly adopted perspective. Schein (1985, 2017) views organizational culture as a pattern of shared assumptions that guide behaviors, and this conception will inform the entirety of this PAAR investigation.

The values espoused by the first author align with several areas of contemporary research. For example, Hulme et al.'s (2019) cognitive work analysis within an elite netball environment found that a strong club ethos (i.e., values), shared responsibility for performance, and a focus on holistic player well-being were important for the success of the organization. While limited organizational culture research exists specifically within netball, other research featuring some similarities to the context of the Severn Stars also supports the kinds of values discussed earlier. For example, both Kuettel, Christensen, Zysko, and Hansen (2018) and Pink, Saunders, and Stynes (2015) examined dual-career athletes (i.e., elite performers, but not full-time professionals), finding that a holistic concern for the development of the athlete and a culturally sensitive balance between sporting and "other" identity was important. Similarly, Champ et al. (2020) argued that it was important that athletes were provided with access to identity-related resources throughout their time with the organization and not be purely defined by their athletic ability. In developing a holistic ecological approach, Henriksen et al. (Henriksen et al., 2010, 2011) argued that athletes should be assisted to be autonomous and responsible for developing their own culture. Contrastingly, Cruickshank, Collins, and Minten (2015) considered that manager-led cultural change required constant re-

construction in order to be effective and to avoid the common tendency toward transactional leadership. Overall, this research suggests the prosocial values espoused by the first author appear well founded. Nevertheless, none of this cited research has considered the implementation of “values-to-action” from the perspective of the leader.

Extensive research concerning organizational culture in some world-leading sports teams has been conducted. Hodge et al. (2014, p. 60) identified eight factors influencing the motivational climate of the New Zealand All Blacks including “Better People Make Better All Blacks,” responsibility and an expectation of excellence. In their qualitative examination of the All Blacks, Johnson et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of strong senior leadership and the commitment to total honesty. Consistent with the belief that “one size does not fit all” and that organizational culture is not something that can “copy and pasted” from one setting to another (Schein, 2017), other research has identified different characteristics of successful organizational cultures. For example, Cole and Martin (2018) advocated that a much flatter organizational structure was appropriate for the professional rugby club they studied than Johnson et al. (2012) had depicted within the All Blacks. Schroeder (2010) found that in the National Collegiate Athletic Association, coaches gained success by recruiting those athletes they knew would embrace the values of the organization. Nevertheless, Donoso-Morales et al. (2017) argued that cultivating successful organizational culture was not a static process postrecruitment, and thus daily attention to detail, effective emotional management of all key stakeholders, and continuous self-assessment were required.

Some research approaches within the field of organizational culture share some of the methodological characteristics of this investigation. For example, Feddersen, Morris, Littlewood, and Richardson (2019) deployed a (partial) AR study into elite sport culture in the United Kingdom, finding that the denial of responsibility led to antagonism, which was deleterious to organizational culture. Nevertheless, Maitland et al. (2015) argued that methodological approaches in this field should be extended and that doing so might facilitate an enhanced understanding of coaching practice. Additionally, to date, the research focused on leadership and/or organizational culture in sport has not considered how a leader’s values might be actioned through the development of a new high-performance club such as the Severn Stars. In considering the evolution of organizational culture through the lens of TFL, Cole and Martin (2018) argued that in the early stages of change more formal, manager-led, intervention might be required, while more informal structures would evolve in time. Research concerning both TFL and organizational culture has certainly highlighted the appropriate fit between these two concepts.

## TFL and Sport

There is growing support for the notion that TFL may offer a viable lens for exploring development in sport. Several lines of inquiry suggest that TFL may be associated with a myriad of positive athlete outcomes (Stenling & Tafvelin, 2014; Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2013a). Examples include research showing associations between coaches' TFL behaviors and intrinsic motivation (Charbonneau, Barling, & Kelloway, 2001) and the influence of peer leadership on social and task cohesion (Price & Weiss, 2013). Before delving into how TFL processes may be manifested within a specific program, it is important to first outline this framework. The TFL can be conceptualized as a constellation of active behaviors that are intended to empower, challenge, and inspire others and ultimately, enhance followers' development (Rowold, 2006). To achieve this goal, Bass and Riggio (2006) suggest that TFL consists of four dimensions, collectively referred to as the four "I"s: Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. First, idealized influence involves fostering perceptions of trust and respect by using behaviors such as modeling prosocial behaviors. The second dimension, inspirational motivation, relates to behaviors that create a shared understanding of the goals and vision for the organization, including connecting activities and roles to the bigger picture. Third, intellectual stimulation refers to behaviors through which leaders actively engage their followers. Lastly, individualized consideration involves leaders who display genuine care and concern for their followers.

Collectively, previous studies show that a TFL approach has the potential to be a valuable lens for investigating development in sport. Further examination of the leadership process in various sport organizations may be important for several reasons. First, researchers have advocated the need to gain a more contextualized understanding of the leadership process. For instance, Arthur, Bastardo, and Eklund (2017) highlighted that there is a paucity of research examining TFL within professional and elite settings and thus questions remain regarding how TFL may be implemented within a high-performance environment. Second, it has been suggested that it may be beneficial for researchers to expand their methodological repertoires and sources of data. More specifically, the majority of studies reviewed by Arthur et al. (2017) employed athlete questionnaires to assess both coaches' leadership behaviors and athletes' outcomes. A limitation of this approach is that athletes' reports of behaviors and outcomes are relatively superficial and fail to adequately provide insight into the underpinning rationale of leaders' approaches or a thorough understanding of the rich and complex interaction of program leaders, coaches, and athletes. Thus, the examination of leadership from a diverse range of perspectives may help to provide a more complete picture of leadership in sport (Jones, 2010). Third, the current knowledge base would greatly benefit from investigations of



the dynamic nature of leadership and the situational constraints that may influence the leadership process of new organizations. Overall, there is a need to better understand the dynamic and organizational nature of the leadership process within a sport program from both a behavioral (i.e., TFL) and cultural perspective. Furthermore, consideration of how a values-to-action PAAR investigation might meaningfully inform current and future leadership behaviors across the distinct cultural layers of a sport organization is also much needed.

## **Methodology and Methods**

### **Participants**

In total, 14 key stakeholders from the Severn Stars were recruited. First, these comprised four players from the senior squad and four players from the Severn Stars academy (U21 and U19). The purposeful recruitment ensured that at least one member of the captaincy team, a mixture of defensive/offensive players, and a range of experienced/inexperienced athletes were represented within the investigation. Additionally, the two coaches involved with the senior team, the two coaches attached to the academy, and the two operational managers (one senior-focused and one academy-focused) attached to the club from each university were also recruited. All participants were female and at least 18 years old. The position and prominence of the lead author means that it has not been possible to anonymize the name of club or the supporting universities, but care has been taken to ensure that every other individual who contributed to this investigation cannot be identified. For example, ages, nationalities, and qualifications are not reported. All names are pseudonyms.

### **Procedure**

Institutional ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Worcester. Potential participants were emailed an invitation to an individual interview complete with participant information sheet. All invitations were accepted; subsequently, written consent was gathered prior to each individual interview. An interview guide was constructed focusing on the participants' previous experiences of netball coaching and leadership as well as their perceptions of the leadership-related behaviors and environment relating to the Severn Stars. Commensurate with the historicity of PAAR, the interview guide included tailored versions of the four foundational questions underpinning Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), which were adapted to the Severn Stars context, namely: (a) What would describe as being the high-point of your netball career to date, a time when you were most in love with the sport? (b) Without being modest, what is it that you value most about yourself in the netball context—what you want others to know you for?

(c) What are the most important things that give life to the Severn Stars? and (d) If you could write a wish-list saying: "To be the best club, this is how the club should be. . . ." What sort of things would go on that list? A final question invited the participant to say anything about the leadership or organizational culture of the Severn Stars which had not been addressed by the previous questions. Each participant engaged in a semistructured interview which was conducted by the third author in a quiet side room at the training venue. Participants were informed that what they said would be read by the first author, although their anonymity was assured. The interviews took place at the end of the competitive season. The 14 interviews lasted between 24 and 67 ( $M = 46.42 \pm 14.24$ ) min. Subsequently, each interview was transcribed verbatim before being returned to each participant for them to check for accuracy and totaled 134, singlespaced, pages. Only minor amendments such as the misspelling of trivial details were made. Any material which might have jeopardized the anonymity of the participant to the first author was removed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis adhered to the five-stage thematic coding analysis model outlined by Robson and McCartan (2016). This approach draws on the general principles established by Braun and Clarke (2006) and is especially applicable for such pragmatic and applied inquiries as PAAR investigations. Following familiarization with the data, initial codes were generated based on the text units from the verbatim transcripts and were then grouped to represent prominent themes (Steps 1–3). Based on the nature of the relationships between them, these themes were then constructed into a broader network, which was subsequently integrated and interpreted so that the final thematic structure could form the basis of discussion for the empirical investigation (Steps 4–5). The second researcher completed the five steps independently at first and then engaged the third and fourth author in reflective discussion concerning the analysis process. Subsequently, the framework was presented to the first and fifth author; further reflective discussion ensured and resulted in an agreed final thematic structure. During these discussions, a small number of meaning units and themes were re-coded as their meaning was re-evaluated. All of these processes were central to the development of an appreciative gaze and reframing the lived experience of the organization from a leadership perspective.

### **Methodological Rigor**

Smith and McGannon (2018) proposed the rigor of any investigation should be evaluated within the epistemological and methodological assumptions on which it is based. Ghaye et al. (2008) proposed the concepts of inclusivity, emotional engagement, understandability, mutualism, transformation, communicative freedom, and moral courage to represent suitable foundations on

which any PAAR investigation could be founded. We address the aspects of inclusivity and mutualism overtly here and invite the reader to consider the extent to which we have achieved emotional engagement and understandability as they explore the rest of this study. In terms of inclusivity, our sampling process ensures that we have representatives from all of the different levels of key stakeholders involved with the playing-focused side of the club and have already discussed how the analysis of the data was built on the collaborative reflective discussion of the entire authorship team; the latter element also speaks to the degree of mutualism evident within this PAAR investigation. We acknowledge that the overtly positive PAAR process and the inclusion of the first author within the research team may well have influenced what experiences participants reported. Despite assuring the participants that their data would be reported anonymously, it is possible they may have withheld some critical comment. Overall, we consider the benefits of including the first author within the research team to greatly outweigh the possibility of withheld critical comments. Her inclusion was crucial to the PAAR principle of “deliberate democracy” (Ghaye et al., 2008, p. 369) and so increases the likelihood of ensuring future actions are ultimately deployed. The PAAR investigations should not be considered as uncritical and are, epistemologically, concerned with an understanding, rather than capturing a “whole” truth. Such paradigmatic assumptions do not negate the possibility of critical thinking. Indeed, we invite readers to consider the extent to which we have been able to “exercise a critical spirit that enables us, at the same time, to be optimistic and hopeful” (Ghaye et al., 2008, p. 374). The aspects of transformation, communicative freedom, and moral courage can only be partly achieved within the current investigation as these will be realized through the evolution of the club and so will be ultimately fulfilled within future investigations. Nonetheless, we invite the reader to consider the extent to which we have established an emotionally aware, creative, and collaborative foundation on which we intend to base our future action. Additionally, we have sought to achieve naturalistic generalization by taking small snapshots of the environments and leadership practices and placing them within the broader frame of TFL and organizational culture (Tracy, 2010).

## **Results and Discussion**

The final thematic structure of the results was agreed through collaborative reflective discussion and features four major categories: (a) prosocial foundations, (b) influence of Super Stars, (c) initiative of coaches, and (d) connection between squads and with the community.

### **Prosocial Foundations**

The findings within this theme were associated with the coaches’ effort to build positive interpersonal relationships that promoted athletes’ personal growth and so aligns with the

overarching club values of (a) the development of people, (c) mutual accountability, and also (f) ensuring values were evident from boardroom to court. This theme strongly aligns with the individualized consideration component of TFL where the unique personal needs of the athletes are given high priority to promote growth and development (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Additionally, communicating a strong vision for the future has been reported as an important feature within a number of investigations exploring the interface between leadership and organizational culture (e.g., Cole & Martin, 2018; Hulme et al., 2019; Jones, 2010). An important component of this vision in Severn Stars' first year of operation required the consideration of the relationship between winning and development. Balancing expectations related to winning and development provided the platform from which the prosocial foundations were constructed. This relationship was explained by Millie (academy coach):

It was clear that losing wasn't accepted, but was okay, actually it was reinforced several times that this was a building year ... So, in terms of that it almost took the fear out if that makes sense and it enables us to coach in an environment that yes, we wanted to win, yes, you wanted to improve, yes, we create a friendly environment and establish positive coach-athlete relationships.

This, of course, resonates with the extensive body of research surrounding the development of positive coach-athlete relationships (see, e.g., Hulme et al., 2019; Jowett, 2007, 2017). Similar to Hodge et al.'s (2014) examination of the All Black's culture, the participants in the Severn Stars indicated that a range of prosocial behaviors were important foundations. Hodge et al. (2014) reported that the coaching team maintained positivity, focused upon individualized goal setting, and developed social support within the peer group. Commensurately, Severn Stars coaches constructed group tasks where squad members evaluated peers' performance and also facilitated social evenings focused on celebrating the cultural diversity within the squads. All of these elements contributed to the development of prosocial support, social competence, and the development of selfless behaviors which, in turn, established a broad perception of friendliness. These findings illustrate how the club enabled the players to access identity-related resources which were focused more broadly than merely on their athletic capabilities and also acknowledged their status as (mostly) dual-career athletes (Champ et al., 2020; Kuettel et al., 2018; Pink et al., 2015). Nevertheless, Penelope (operational manager) said "winning is a key thing for me; I wouldn't lie to you," a statement which illustrated an underlying tension where the relationship between winning and development was viewed inconsistently across the club, for example, Sue (senior coach) said,

I am very much about the team and you obviously have to develop individuals to have a good team but ultimately, they are serving the team by playing for it and so it should be that way around; and you might sometimes have conflict ... so it's getting the balance right.

The difference between Millie's and Sue's perspective here is clear and is partially explained by their respective roles working with the academy and senior teams. Nevertheless, the data revealed other areas of tension in this regard, which may have been influenced by the well-established connections between winning, building a spectator base, increasing revenue, and recruiting top players (see Dalakas, Madrigal, & Anderson, 2004); all of which were important factors throughout Severn Stars' inaugural year, particularly for the senior team. Findings indicated that the relationship between winning and development was not inherently mutually exclusive, but required careful balancing and was reflective of the club's overarching values concerning (a) the development of people and (c) mutual accountability.

A second key element of the prosocial foundations was evident through the behaviors of the coaching staff. Athlete ownership represented an important aspect of this—as Jane (senior player and academy coach) reflected:

She [a senior coach] enabled a lot of the players ... to drive what they wanted the club to be known for and how we wanted to look—she never really pushed her own agenda ... she wanted everyone to have their individual flare to still shine through a collective vision but, that was owned by the playing group.

Jane's testimony illustrates how coaches demonstrated individualized consideration, and also intellectual stimulation, through athlete ownership and provision of a degree of autonomy—an approach supported by Vallée and Bloom's (2005) and Henriksen et al.'s (2010, 2011) assertions that such factors provide the foundation for both holistic development and “successful” athletic programs. Additionally, Hulme et al. (2019) and Johnson et al. (2012) suggested that authenticity and total honesty were also vital components of leading successful programs, and it was evident that these prosocial characteristics were also perceived by some of the Severn Stars athletes. For example, Bella (senior player) said,

I think one of things that was really good about [a senior coach] was that she treated every player exactly the same. It didn't matter whether you were an England international or a youngster, she would still give you the same amount of time ... she'd still give you very practical and constructive feedback.

Here, Bella likens equality of treatment with fairness. Collectively, the results of this investigation demonstrate considerable evidence of such prosocial behaviors on the behalf of the coaches which helped to construct the overall perception of prosocial foundations. Bella's depiction of the equality of the environment was further facilitated through the use of the #starsfamily tag across multiple social media platforms. #starsfamily became a mechanism through which the club leadership sought to promote strong interpersonal relationships and communicate a sense of collective identity. This example represents one avenue through which leaders sought to pay attention to the daily construction of the club's identity (Cruickshank et al., 2015). Penelope (operational manager) articulated the connection to a quasi-familial, positive, welcoming, and trusting environment:

I think definitely we had that family feel; like if you talk to any of the players, any of the staff, like it was the Severn Stars family. I think that was definitely realized. The trust thing ... You're in an environment where you feel you're going to be nurtured and you're going to become the best player that you can be because of the coaching and because of the wraparound support.

A final contributor to the prosocial foundations concerns team captains and athletes' willingness to engage in additional roles. This was described by Lottie (operational manager):

I think in particular some of our older girls [in the academy] really took natural leadership in bringing younger girls under their wing ... and that benefited the whole team as they thought "oh god this other girl is doing that so that is what we should all be doing." ... It also benefited on court, because in the quarter breaks they would respond to each other and give each other feedback.

Lottie's description of how some of the senior players took younger members of the group "under their wing" is relatively common in sport-related research and is entirely in line with Lee, Kim, and Kang's (2013) investigation which found that TFL, and also the adoption of additional roles, led to greater team camaraderie. Furthermore, Fransen et al. (2015) and Cole and Martin (2018) demonstrated how shared leadership and flattened hierarchies respectively contributed to increased confidence and the development of a strong team culture.

Collectively, the results relating to this theme illustrate that the leadership values related to the prosocial foundations theme (i.e., the key values of (a) the development of people, (c) mutual accountability, and (f) ensuring values were evident from boardroom to court) were strongly evident across the club and reflected the individualized consideration component of TFL. While there were

also some reports of “bumps in the road,” the overwhelming sense from the key stakeholders was that the inaugural season of the Severn Stars was characterized by prosocial foundations comprising friendliness, fairness, honesty, and integrity. Central to constructing these prosocial foundations were the club’s staff, a number of whom held relatively “Super Star” status within the netball community— that is individuals with preexisting international reputations developed through sustained playing and/or coaching success on the world stage.

### **The Influence of Super Stars**

The influence of Super Stars was identified as a key theme and appeared especially important due to the club being in its inaugural season. Starting a club from scratch meant that, initially at least, there were no coaches or players in place and so the club faced numerous challenges in recruiting players and coaches for the senior team who were capable of competing in the U.K.’s top netball league. The findings related to this theme were identified as being most closely aligned with the idealized influence component of TFL (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and with the overarching club values of (a) the development of people, (b) aiding the transition from elite athlete to future career, and (d) investing in home-grown coaches. It quickly became evident that the appointment of a Head Coach was crucial to subsequently recruit high-quality athletes as it was apparent that potential players were not willing to commit to a new club without knowing who the coach would be and what vision and values they held. Ultimately, the appointment of the three staff members to be most closely associated with the senior team (Head Coach, assistant coach, and [senior-focused] operational manager) represented a pragmatic balance between the application of the club’s values, experience of the Superleague, and the “draw” of Super Stars. Between these three key personnel, two were well-known ex-international performers transitioning into their first nonplaying leadership role, two had extensive experience of the England Netball Superleague, and two were “home-grown”—but none hit all three criteria.

The appointment of the Head Coach emanated from a chance encounter to recruit an ex-international player transitioning into coaching who, following an initial conversation, appeared to share beliefs commensurate with club values in terms of being concerned with athlete-centeredness and empowerment. While also advocating development, she emphasized the importance of winning which seemed a good fit for the club. Bella (Senior player) identified empowerment as a strength of the Head Coach:

She had a natural authority about her; I think that she didn’t need to micro-manage, she didn’t need to control stuff necessarily. She could say something and let you run

with it to some extent and I think with the defence end she had that natural authority.

Bella's use of the term "natural authority" is likely to be drawn from the capital the athletes attributed to her as an ex-international player (see Blackett, Evans, & Piggott, 2017). Additionally, she was able to garner trust and respect and so strongly demonstrate an active form of idealized influence from multiple perspectives (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The Super Stars' influence transcended the senior team and was also highly pertinent within the academy. For example, Kylie (academy coach) stated,

I don't think many other franchises would get that presence or get that kind of motivation having someone like [operational manager] come and see before you go and court you know wishing you well giving you some tips and points of wisdom that's always special for the girls, because obviously a lot of them have looked up to her playing over the years and suddenly, she is there on the side of the court watching them play.

Here, Kylie emphasizes the importance of the technical advice provided by a Super Star and so further highlights that idealized influence was best garnered through active positive modeling. Collectively, Bella's and Kylie's testimonies highlight the importance of strong leadership from those with high playing-derived capital and thoughtful strategic recruitment decisions (Johnson et al., 2012; Schroeder, 2010).

The club was also able to sign three current, established, international players, one of whom took up a coaching role within the academy. In this way, the transcendence of the Super Star factor, and importance of active interpersonal idealized influences, was also directly evident to the academy players. For example, Katherine (academy player) said,

I think that she [the senior international player and academy coach] was definitely a big role model for quite a few of the girls, especially the defence. I think that is just the person that she is and the level that she has played, but it was just her approachability. Like I said before, that made her a better role model because if you have a player that has played at that level, but they're really strict with you and don't smile or have a laugh with anything, it can become quite a cold environment to be in, but I think again because of her approachability it definitely made her a big role model for us as defenders.



Katherine believed senior players contributed to a positive organizational culture by serving as strong role models while offering an abundance of support for the developing player. She also places considerable emphasis on approachability—that is that academy players found it easy to raise issues and ask questions. Katherine’s testimony resonates strongly with research from Vella, Oades, and Crowe (2013b) who reported that, when seeking athlete development, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and appropriate role modeling were the most important determinants in TFL approaches. Despite this, Bella (senior player) highlighted that the role of the Super Stars could have been enhanced:

Sometimes, particularly in the defence end with [Jane, senior international player] who was a natural leader and obviously came with a huge amount of experience. Quite a bit of it was obviously dominated by her. ...I think there was sometimes a lot of talking from her, whereas, if the coach had had her way, I think sometimes it would have been more each person working it out or not just talking for 10 minutes, it would be “actually, let’s just learn by doing.”

The player in question was aware of the situation, stating,

I took over a lot of sessions even when they had other things planned, but I think it was being able to prove over that time that I kind of knew what I was talking about and that I was helping the girls to make an impact.

These findings highlight how values between stakeholders may be different or conflict with ideal TFL principles insofar as Jane’s Super Star status appears to have led to her considering her ideas superior to other coaches within the club—a clear violation of the collaborative heart of TFL (Bass & Riggio, 2006), the value of (c) “mutual accountability” and the shared responsibility of exceptional organizational cultures (Hulme et al., 2019). Similar findings relating to Jane’s practice were evident with both the senior team and academy settings; this jars markedly with research from Fransen et al. (2015). Fransen et al. (2015) demonstrated that shared leadership was an important consideration for sports teams, finding that the most motivational environments were created with effective balancing of formal and informal leaders. It is possible that Jane was given too much latitude to the overall detriment of the club.

Shared leadership within the senior squad of the Severn Stars was established through the formation of an athlete leadership group with each member often holding a clear and distinctive role. The group comprised both Super Stars and less experienced members of the senior team in an

attempt to balance task, motivational, and social leadership. Elspeth (senior player) stated that she had found this approach to collaborative leadership particularly helpful:

I think the leadership team have really helped me this year ... Lucy (leadership group member) will always ring me on the way home and she will try and explain stuff and make it positive ... I think Lucy's input into my mental side of things has really helped.

All elite sporting environments represent mentally challenging situations. The Severn Stars found this to be especially true in their inaugural season, winning just five of the 18 league game and finishing eighth out of 10 in the Superleague. Despite this, Elspeth demonstrates how the leadership group helped her to maintain the positivity throughout the season. These findings support Donoso-Morales et al. (2017) research insofar as daily attention to detail, effective emotional management and continuous self-assessment were key features of a successful organizational culture. These findings also affirm that leadership by athletes positively impacts cohesion, confidence, and overall satisfaction (Price & Weiss, 2013). Nevertheless, Sue (senior coach) suggested ways in which the leadership group could function more effectively in the future:

I think I would have liked more reflection from the leadership group and all the players on performances and that would be something that I would be looking to improve on; and that is reflection on whether we have won or lost and to be a bit more analytical about those performances take forwards.

A number of TFL-focused investigations have demonstrated that such leadership approaches are not static and can be learned (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Vella et al., 2013a). Here, Sue demonstrates a commitment to enhancing the practice of the leadership group in terms of their depth of reflection of task and performance outcomes and so enhance the intellectual stimulation of that particular group.

Collectively, the findings related to this theme strongly reflected the overarching club values of (a) the development of people, (b) aiding the transition from elite athlete to future career, and (d) investing in home-grown coaches. However, leadership decisions relating to these elements were flavored with the pragmatism of a club in its inaugural season quickly needing to recruit high-quality personnel and to win games to build a fan base. While the influence of the club's Super Stars was largely positive, especially when accompanied by meaningful interactions and the building of quality relationships, it is possible that these pragmatic compromises in recruitment may have contributed to the slight deviances from the rollout of the intended TFL approach. Nevertheless, it is clear that

Super Stars within the club did largely represent idealized influences and had a strong bearing on the operation of both senior and academy teams throughout the Severn Star's inaugural year.

### **Connection Between Squads and the Community**

This theme illustrates the nature and depth of perceptions related to intersquad relationships and also to connections to the local community. The most closely related overarching club values that were identified were (d) investing in home-grown coaches and (f) ensuring the values were shared from “boardroom to court.” For example, all of the academy coaches with the exception of the one Super Star who was also a player within the senior team were “home-grown.” Additionally, the inspirational motivation component of TFL was also most closely related to key aspects of this main theme. Some of these key aspects were somewhat removed from the “playing” focus of this investigation, but nonetheless affected the extent to which the culture of the club was evident to all staff and players because of their impact on the meaning and purpose they derived from certain aspects. Bass and Riggio (2006) proposed that meaning and purpose represented some of the underpinnings of TFL-related leadership behaviors connected to inspirational motivation. Furthermore, Stenling and Tafvelin (2014) found that leaders facilitating a clear meaning or purpose enabled an enhanced sense of relatedness among followers. Meaning, purpose, and relatedness were evident in several aspects of the life of the Severn Stars. One such aspect was the importance participants placed on the local “feel.” Millie (academy coach) said,

Having come from Worcester and having been through the netball ranks it has always been frustrating that if you wanted to get anywhere you had to switch ::: it was almost like “no Worcester player is ever going to make the Superleague—it is just not achievable,” whereas now you’re looking at [names three local senior players] so it is almost I think for the first time ever Worcester has a pathway—Worcester has something that these players can aspire to.

Millie's testimony supports Turnnidge, Vierimaa, and Côté's (2012) observations conducted within a successful youth swimming program that high, but realistic, expectations help followers to see new possibilities and potentially inspire them to higher levels of achievement than they previously thought possible. Several members of the Severn Stars felt that the local feel of the club had been enhanced by the open trials which were deployed to kick-start recruitment, and this appeared to have a beneficial effect on the sense of some players' relatedness:

I think that having open trials really makes everyone feel like you can have an opportunity ... It is not just closed trials that players have been previously in. It is an amazing opportunity. (Bryony, academy player)

The connection between meaning, purpose, and relatedness furthers Stenling and Tafvelin's (2014) findings that coaches who demonstrate TFL behaviors can enhance their athletes' perceptions of need satisfaction, in this case through the bond of locality. While the local feel of the club and the concomitant sense of relatedness were apparent across numerous participants, it was also evident how this connection had been facilitated by the club's leaders. Sue (senior coach) articulated how much good work she felt had been done, but also outlined some ideas for enhancing the connection with the community:

We've already done a lot of community things; I know a lot of our players have done a lot of coaching in the community ... [also] I know that the people that come on the VIP packages always come up to us and say what a fantastic evening they have had and I think that is really good. I think that part of the match day experience has been very good, but I think it can be improved massively and I think that will have a really positive impact on the community and on the schools, the young people that live in around where we play ... We have moved into an era where people expect not just to come and watch a game ... it is like a whole experience—almost like netball is secondary.

While this is a very different form of evidence from that reported by Morgan and Bush (2016) and Vierimaa, Turnnidge, Bruner, and Côté (2017), it does affirm the participants' belief that leadership behaviors can aid in enhancing interactions between the club and the community as discussed by Sue. However, it was also apparent that this work was not evident to all members of the club. Bella (senior player) said,

In all honesty I don't know how much happens in the local community, I think that's one thing that maybe could be improved because I guess if I don't know that much about it ... If it is happening, then we should be talking more about it so that we do know about it.

Bella's lack of awareness of the connections being developed in the community does not bring into question whether this positive work was actually occurring, rather, it is an illustration of one of the identified areas of development for the Severn Stars—that it was common for certain groups or teams within the club to need help to better understand the club's operation beyond their

immediate roles and responsibilities. These findings extend the work of Smith, Arthur, Hardy, Callow, and Williams (2013) suggesting that this better understanding would have enhanced the overall connection across the club, not just intrateam, and so also strengthen the nature of the relatedness perceived by club members. Kylie (academy coach) sought further guidance from senior leaders:

I think the only thing maybe what would have been good would be to have more of a directive coming from the powers that be, almost if they could implement or plant the seed of this is almost how you want things done but you can make it your own that could be quite helpful.

The need to enhance the shared nature of the vision that was reflected across the various teams was evident in numerous pockets of the club and is consistent with a considerable volume of sport-related research (Jones, 2010; Turnnidge & Côté, 2018). Indeed, the need to develop ways to share the club's vision across the teams represents one of the most substantive areas for development evident within our findings. Relatedly, Katherine (academy player) felt that the interteam connections could be stronger:

Having exposure to the Superleague girls [would help] because we had one training session with them and that changed a lot of people ... I think because we didn't really know the Superleague girls so I think having the Under-21s with the Superleague girls, not necessarily training, but on the court next to them, just so that they can look over and think "In a few years' time I'm going to be on that court"—it is a bit more motivational.

Again, by viewing the club as a "whole," Katherine's beliefs are consistent with the findings of Smith et al. (2013) who found that intrateam communication served as a mediating factor between TFL behaviors and team cohesion. Furthermore, Katherine believed that providing a stronger connection to the senior squad would enhance the inspirational motivation component of the leadership culture. Kylie (academy coach) agreed that the connection between the academy and the seniors could have been stronger and that this would have benefited the club:

I felt that there wasn't a very big link between the 21s and the seniors—they didn't seem too much of a crossover ... as a coaching team we talked about it and we kind of thought "what if they [seniors] came in [to our matches] with loads of energy and being vocal and being supportive."

Lottie (operational manager) identified growing the collective and shared culture of the club as what she considered to be the most important area for development; she felt this needed to be a topdown process:

It would be a culture that is established by the senior team and brought through the junior teams and that's what makes one Severn Stars culture rather than an under 19 culture, an under 21 culture, and the seniors' culture. And I think that is really important given that it is a new brand and maybe it is struggling for its identity; and I think team culture can contribute to identity, athlete recruitment and for athletes—giving them that clarity.

There is widespread research support for the establishment of shared values and mission (Cole & Martin, 2018; Turnnidge & Côté, 2018), and it is evident that the development of such collectively held beliefs should be a key feature of the Severn Stars' onward journey. A number of the participants had ideas relating to how this collective culture could be developed. For example, Lottie (operational manager) continued:

I think it is about valuing people's time and energy and effort and making sure that they know that they are valued and having those clear lines of communication ... I think the other aspect though with more of the leadership role is trying to make sure that there is cohesive messaging and, therefore, that you then get the buy-in from the group that you are leading whether that be your coaching or managing team or leading a group of players ... There needs to be more time taken at the start to discuss these elements. I don't think we ever had an [academy] team meeting that wasn't like just before a game!

Inevitably, the formation of the kind of mutually constructed culture described by Lottie requires a substantial investment of time and may take months, if not years, to become an established phenomena (see Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). The time pressures imposed on the establishment of the Severn Stars mitigated against the realization of the kind of mutually envisioned "boardroom to court" values desired by the club's senior leadership.

Together, these findings again demonstrate that the overarching club values of (d) investing in home-grown coaches and (f) ensuring the values were shared from "boardroom to court" were strongly reflected in the overall operation of the club and consistent with the TFL approach. The findings demonstrate the potentially powerful connection between the club and the local community which were only partially realized. The connections between the teams also

demonstrate an area for development and a mechanism through which the club's organizational culture could be powerfully cultivated.

### **Initiative of Coaches Across the Club**

One of the overarching values of the club was to ensure personnel felt they had a high degree of operational freedom but also knew they would be held accountable for their performance within their role. The intention of giving this freedom was commensurate with Bass and Riggio's (2006) assertion that TFL, and specifically intellectual stimulation, facilitates creativity and innovation which incontrovertibly requires a degree of autonomy and choice. There is also considerable evidence in the field of organizational culture to support the importance of follower empowerment and establishing collective responsibility (Henriksen et al., 2011; Hodge et al., 2014; Hulme et al., 2019). Findings from this investigation related to this theme corresponded strongly with the overarching values of (c) mutual accountability and (e) avoiding micromanagement. The high degree of operational freedom and avoidance of micromanagement were perceived largely positively by the coaches across the club although Kylie (academy coach) did note,

I think at certain times it did feel like a little bit like "you are the coaches, here are the players, you go get on with it."

Indeed, the club management was largely content to allow coaches across the club to operate in the way they thought best fit their context, secure in the belief that the appointment processes had successfully employed a range of competent professionals who were capable of making appropriate decisions. Millie (academy coach) provided an example of how this professional freedom enabled the academy coaching team to deploy a coaching intervention which was creative and developmentally appropriate for the players. The need for this intervention became apparent because the opposing teams which the academy squads faced were, initially, much stronger than their Severn Stars equivalent and this frequently led to one-sided games:

We started setting them [players] goals so that the score didn't really matter; for example, it was how many turnovers had we managed to convert to a goal. "We are going to work in five minutes segments in each of the 15 minutes and this will be your focus, and this is actually what we will judge you on and give you feedback on." So, we almost stripped the results back and had the support of the powers that be to do that ... The girls picked out the positives in every game, even though we lost.

Millie's example illustrates TFL in the academy in the sense that the coaching team was helping the players to reframe the problem at hand, did not publicly criticize the players, and

questioned the conventional wisdom that the score line was the most salient factor (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The modeling of goal setting as TFL coaching behavior has been identified in previous investigations and has similarly been used to illustrate processes aligned with intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation (e.g., Mills & Boardley, 2016; Vella et al., 2013a). Additionally, that the girls were asked to pick out positives from the performance provides one illustration of how followers within the Severn Stars were included in creative processes—there were many others. For example, there were numerous different examples which emphasized the importance placed by coaches and players on creativity on the court. Jane (senior player and academy coach) said,

I don't want to spoon-feed the girls; I don't want to puppet them into any behaviors that doesn't come naturally for them. Basically, it is teaching people guidelines and concepts and if they can have that as a bit of a structure,

The result of this (growth) mind set was that a number of players felt they were less passive in the coaching process compared with their previous experiences. They also perceived being more actively involved in their own, and others', learning. Elspeth (senior player) said,

In previous years everyone was telling me what to do, so I would literally just listen to the coach and to the players and be like "yes." I would just do that—I just didn't really answer. I never had my own opinion in what I wanted to do ... But now at Stars I feel like I have a leadership role in shooting and I've been able to try and help the other players in what they are doing.

Sharing responsibility for learning and performance appear to have enhanced Elspeth's inherent interest in the task at hand reflecting findings from Donoso-Morales et al. (2017) and Hulme et al. (2019). Furthermore, the importance Elspeth placed on contributing to the development of others in this way further supports the position of peer leadership within TFL environments and the importance of good intrateam communication (see Smith et al., 2013). Price and Weiss (2013) found that peer leadership was important in developing social cohesion and intrinsic motivation although it was not as powerful as coach TFL in enhancing collective efficacy. Perhaps owing to the lack of longitudinal data, while we did not find evidence of enhanced collective efficacy, there was evidence on an individual level. For example, Bella (senior player) felt empowered by the coaching approaches deployed within the club and attributed her enhanced on-court and off-court confidence to such practice:

The previous coaching I've had has slightly quashed that freedom of thought and creativity out and I think that the consequence of that is that you lose your



confidence in your own ability. So, I think it's certainly made me more confident on the court and it's probably also made me more confident off the court. By micro-managing and telling players what to do all the time and telling them what inch they should be in, means that when they come against something different, they don't know what to do and they fall apart.

Bella's testimony further strengthens the evidence to connect a coach's TFL behaviors, need satisfaction, and athlete well-being (see Beauchamp, Barling, & Morton, 2011; Hulme et al., 2019). In this case, Bella's self-efficacy (both sport-specific and more general) was enhanced when she was provided with greater autonomy than she had previously experienced. Furthermore, Elspeth's and Bella's perceptions of feeling included in the creative process are a core component of intellectual stimulation (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

The results in this section strongly support the beneficial components of leadership practice which enhanced intellectual stimulation through a degree of empowerment and involvement in problem solving. In this way, the overarching club values (c) mutual accountability and (e) avoiding micromanagement were both strongly evident and shown to be commensurate with TFL and a positive organizational culture. The flattening of traditional hierarchies throughout the club was evident and praised highly by coaches and athletes although there was also reference to ensuring the mutual accountability was applied through performance review.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This investigation has yielded unique insights into the birth and leadership perspective of an elite professional sports team through conducting a PAAR investigation and drawing on the theoretical lenses of TFL and organizational culture. Specifically, we have shown how the overarching club values of (a) the development of people, (b) aiding the transition from elite athlete to future career, (c) mutual accountability, (d) investing in home-grown coaches, (e) avoiding micromanagement, and (f) ensuring values are evident "from boardroom to court" were strongly reflected through the operation of the club. The TFL was an appropriate and salient framework to underpin the leadership approach that put into motion the values of the program and augment the more transactional, performance-focused, aspects of club operations. Consideration of TFL principles in light of the values of the program has also yielded some leadership practices which could be enhanced as the club moves forward. Specifically, the operational freedom afforded coaches and players was shown to be intellectually stimulating and also enhanced intrinsic motivation but potentially left these individuals uncertain as to how their contributions connected to the rest of the club both in terms of their relationship with other teams and also to the wider

community. The leadership should consider how to ensure the level of autonomy is retained while also helping the coaches and athletes to see their place within the broader vision of the Severn Stars.

The nature of this PAAR investigation has yielded a pragmatic deployment of how overarching values align with leadership behaviors and organizational culture within the inaugural year of an elite sports club. For example, we have established that a number of leadership decisions were based on a pragmatic balance between idealized deployment of the overarching values and the realities of such a speedy construction of an elite sports club with all of the inevitable performance-related pressures. In constructing this investigation, we invited readers to consider the extent to which we have met the criteria Ghaye et al. (2008) established for rigorous PAAR research and indicated that we would return to the areas of emotional engagement and understandability. Through this PAAR investigation, we have demonstrated considerable evidence of the emotional contribution from all key stakeholders in participating in the inaugural year of the Severn Stars and that such involvement concerns embracing the holistic persons of the athletes and coaches. In large part, we have affirmed the importance of a prosocial organizational culture which celebrates the holistic individual and connects them to a purposeful shared vision. Furthermore, the future actions suggested through discussion of the four major categories represent ethical and collaborative aims focused on ensuring better futures for all key stakeholders. Future studies should investigate the extent to which such pragmatic decisions remain evident as the club evolves and matures. Research should also investigate how the broader operations of clubs such as the Severn Stars (including consideration at board level and further investigation of the perspective of the local community) impact the extent to which the overarching values remain evident beyond the playing-focused elements of the club. Ultimately, it is through these future investigations, the realization of the values-to-action journey can be realized.

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