Navigating Neurodiversity in Elite Sport: Lived Experiences of Neurodivergent Athletes

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Abstract

Most research in sport has typically focused on neurotypical individuals. Although insightful, this means the extant literature neglects the experiences of neurodivergent athletes in sport. The novelty of this work was the exploration of individual's experiences of training and competing in elite sport as a neurodivergent athlete. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 elite athletes (3 male, 3 female) who self-disclosed clinical diagnoses for autism (N=2), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (N=1), or a diagnosis for both (N=1). Two athletes self-identified as having traits of ADHD or Autism. Thematic analysis developed three themes: *lack of belonging*, *overwhelmed and overloaded*, and a *need for plans*. This original work advances our theoretical and conceptual understanding of experiences of neurodivergent athletes in elite sport and provides inclusive applied implications to support sport policy and practice.

Keywords: ADHD; Autism; Elite; Inclusion; Safeguard; Sport

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Neurodiversity, as a term, focuses on differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the population (Clouder et al. 2020). The term encompasses a wide range of ways the brain can process information, including variations in how people think, learn, communicate, and interact with others. A strength-based approach to understanding individual experiences, the term emerged in response to stigmatisation of medical diagnoses and the recognition for social models of disability[1] (Hoare et al. 2023). Of interest to this paper is the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity (ADHD) in the United Kingdom (U.K.), where ASD affects 1.1% of adults (NICE 2020) and ADHD affects 3-4% of adults (NICE 2024). More crucially, there is a staggering increase in diagnoses; a 47% increase (currently around 172,022) in individuals awaiting an ASD diagnosis in the last year, with 86% waiting longer than the recommended 13 weeks (National Autistic Society 2024) and a 400% increase in the number of adults seeking an ADHD diagnosis since 2020 (ADHD Foundation 2024).

Research in the sport context among neurotypical populations has focused widely on stress and coping. This work highlighted individual differences in stress and coping experiences (Kaiseler, Polman, and Nicholls 2012), and the numerous performance (e.g., inadequate preparation, risk of injury, self-presentation, rivalry, competition, or nutritional issues; Mellalieu et al. 2009) and organisational stressors (e.g., training environment, role conflict, cultural and political issues, relationships, and development issues; Fletcher, Hanton, and Mellalieu 2006) experienced by athletes. Less is known about neurodivergent athletes' experiences of stress and coping in sport, leaving ADHD and ASD athletes typically

[1] The social model of disability (Oliver 2018) identifies barriers that prevent people with impairments from participating in society. Within this view, people are disabled by barriers in society (physical, organisational, or attitudinal), not their impairment. Removing these barriers can create equality and more independence for disabled people.

overlooked in the broader context of elite athlete mental health (Larsen et al. 2021). Drawing on established findings in mainstream psychology, neurodivergent individuals consistently exhibit a heightened vulnerability to poorer mental health and wellbeing outcomes when compared to their neurotypical counterparts (Buckley et al. 2024; Botha and Frost 2020). These disparities are attributed both to intrinsic neurodevelopmental characteristics and to the broader social disadvantages associated with occupying a stigmatised minority status (Meyer 2003). From this perspective, neurodiversity constitutes an identity-based minority group subject to elevated levels of social stress, including experiences of everyday discrimination, internalised stigma, and the pressure to conceal one's neurodivergence (Botha and Frost 2020).

Of interest, ADHD is not included within the International Paralympic Committee's (n.d.) classification, and athletes with ASD are only considered eligible for parasport if their IQ is below 75 (where they would meet the requirements for intellectual impairment). Although some countries include ASD diagnosis in their eligibility criteria for parasport (e.g., Paralympics New Zealand, 2023), this is currently not a requirement across all countries. Therefore, it is likely that, in the U.K., athletes with high-functioning ASD and/or ADHD are exposed to the same competition and training environments as their neurotypical peers. Indeed, some traits (e.g., hyperfocus and high attention to detail) may be seen as valuable for sport (Russell et al. 2019) with some demands of elite sport (e.g., intense focus, structured training, high energy expenditure) perhaps appealing to the unique abilities of neurodivergent athletes. Yet neurodiversity can impact individuals (Ayres et al. 2018), with some traits (e.g., behavioural, cognitive, sensory, and social restrictions) presenting barriers to engaging in sport (Pan and Frey 2006). Moreover, these may be exacerbated when navigating elite sport environments. Although previous research suggests that ASD athletes may benefit from autonomy when selecting activities (Reid and O'Connor 2003), require time to orientate

themselves in new environments (Reid, O Connor, and Lloyd 2003), and maintain routine(s) (Menear and Smith 2008), there is limited consideration within the wider literature of neurodivergent athletes' needs and experiences.

Building on this line of enquiry, the present study explored the lived experiences of elite neurodivergent athletes in training and competition. Doing so, we place the voice of neurodivergent athletes at the centre of our work (see Hoare et al. 2025). Despite growing awareness of mental health in elite sport (Rice et al. 2016; Reardon et al. 2019), there remains limited understanding of how conditions such as ADHD and/or ASD impact performance and wellbeing (Barra et al. 2021; Mantzalas, Richdale, and Dissanayake 2022). All athletes have the right to participate in sport that is respectful, equitable, and free from maltreatment (Khomutova et al. 2025). Yet elite sport environments often amplify inequality and exclusion (Morris et al. 2022). Promoting diversity (i.e., the presence of socially meaningful differences amongst group members) and inclusion (i.e., acceptance and a sense of belonging) (Cunningham 2019) is essential in achieving social justice in sport. Yet current safeguarding measures (i.e., proactive measures to promote holistic approaches to athlete welfare; Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024) typically focus on protecting athletes who conform to normative expectations, overlooking underrepresented individuals (Bekker and Posbergh 2022). This oversight risks neglecting (i.e., failing to meet an individual's physical, emotional, medical or educational needs; Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024) neurodivergent athletes. As such, understanding the unique experiences of neurodivergent athletes is critical for developing inclusive, evidence-based safeguarding policies and psych-social education that prevent neglect and foster genuinely supportive environments (Grey-Thompson 2017; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Chown, and Stenning 2020). To this end, the current study makes both conceptual and practical contributions, offering novel insights and applied solutions to better include and safeguard neurodivergent athletes in elite sport.

Methodology

Design

This research was underpinned by social constructionism. Ontologically, we took a relativist position, where the focus was on *constructed*, more than *found*, worlds (Lather 2004). Here, reality was viewed as a product of how participants, individually and collectively, made sense of their experiences of training and competing in elite sport as neurodivergent athletes (Markula and Silk 2011; Smith 1989). Epistemologically, we viewed knowledge as the product of social interactions and negotiations (Lather 2004). Assuming this position, we respected the multiple realities of participants, rather than seeking an absolute truth (Alvesson and Sckoldberg 2009; Markula and Silk 2011). The interpretative, qualitative methods reported in this study offer a representation of reality by revealing an interconnected, multi-dimensional narrative experienced by participants (Salla 1993).

Context

We explored the experiences of training and competing in elite sport as a neurodivergent athlete. Inspired by the first author's experiences within applied sport psychology consultancy (see Wood and Turner 2024), we focused on ASD and ADHD, which are briefly outlined below. Given this consultancy role, one athlete recruited had been in contact with first author outside of this study. While some literature employs person-first language (i.e., person with autism), many individuals within the neurodivergent community prefer identity-first language (i.e., autistic person) (Vivanti 2020). As such, we adopt identity-first language throughout this article.

ASD is typically characterised by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (ICD 2019). This insistence on sameness and a repertoire of fixed behaviours and routines can leave individuals with a propensity for anxiety as well as lower self-esteem than neurotypical

peers (Gillott and Standen 2007). This can contribute to a greater risk of long-term depression and anxiety (Hollocks et al. 2019) and lower quality of life (Mason et al. 2019). Individuals with ASD might employ maladaptive (e.g., escape, resignation, social withdrawal) and adaptive (e.g., minimisation, reaction control, positive self-instruction) coping strategies to manage their neurodiversity, especially in social contexts (Barra et al. 2021). Individuals with ASD have a poor ability to understand others' actions in social situations and experience difficulties integrating information being implicated (Gillott and Standen 2007) meaning they may struggle to manage stress effectively (Groden, Levasseur, and Baron 2002).

ADHD traits continue into adulthood in around 60-80% of diagnosed children (Sibley et al. 2012). ADHD is primarily characterised by two symptom clusters, inattention and hyperactivity-impulsivity (Combs et al. 2015). According to Barkley (1997), ADHD is based on reduced cognitive inhibition, which impedes attention to relevant cues while filtering irrelevant information. Potential over-stimulation may reduce executive functioning (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and behavioural control) and promote increased rates of perceived stress compared to neurotypical peers (Barra et al. 2021). Unsurprisingly, individuals with ADHD often suffer negative consequences in various areas of their lives (e.g., educational, occupational, and interpersonal interactions) (Mannuzza and Klein 2000).

Participants

Following institutional ethics approval, six athletes (3 female, 3 male) aged 18-44 (M=32.66) were recruited from a range of sports (rowing, aikido, cricket, triathlon, figure skating, equestrian) to voluntarily participate in the research. Purposive sampling focused on athletes with international experience (i.e., had competed representing their country). This included the Olympic Games, World Championships, and World Governing Body sanctioned events. All participants discussed training and competing in neurotypical contexts. Four participants had retired from competitive sport within the last four years. Two participants

self-disclosed a clinical diagnosis for autism, one a diagnosis for ADHD, and one a diagnosis for both Autism and ADHD. Two self-identified as having traits of autism or ADHD.

Data Generation

Semi-structured interviews (N=6) totalled 322 minutes (ranging from 44.33-81:58 minutes; M=53.58; SD=14.19) and focused on participants experiences of training and competing at an elite level as a neurodivergent athlete. The first author conducted the interviews, disclosing their role as a sport psychology consultant and their experience of working with neurodivergent athletes. The interview guide was developed in line with Castillo-Montoya (2016) (i.e., aligning interview questions with research questions; constructing an inquiry-based conversation; receiving feedback on interview protocols; and piloting the interview protocol). Interviews broadly focused on participants' experiences of training and competing in sport as a neurodivergent elite athlete. To allow participants to feel prepared about the nature of topics to be discussed, interview guides were available to participants ahead of interviews (Whetzel 2014). However, no participants requested this. Interviews were socially constructed, where the first author and participants played an equal role in creating the narrative (Brinkman and Kvale 2015; Rubin and Rubin 2011), ensuring multiple voices contributed to making sense of specific events and experiences, reflecting participants' narrative, rather than an objective truth (Roberts 2020). To increase integrity, participants' points were clarified during interviews.

Interviews were conducted via video call, using Microsoft Teams, with transcripts auto transcribed, producing 62959 words across 217 pages of single-spaced text. Although conducting interviews via video call is increasingly common for qualitative research (Archibald et al. 2019), certain considerations were made given the increased challenges autistic individuals might face when engaging in this method of communication (e.g., managing sensory inputs, anxiety around "small talk", and the additional cognitive load of

social interactions; Zolyomi et al. 2019). Following guidance from Zolyomi et al. (2019), and in a change to a typical interview, the first author limited the small talk at the start of the interview. The first author ensured a clear and consistent voice channel and avoided ambiguity or long, open-ended questions that could become difficult to answer if the participant became distracted. This also helped pace the flow of the conversation, maintaining its efficiency. Rather positively, video calls allowed participants to make reasonable adjustments to their environment (e.g., lighting) which would not have been possible meeting in a neutral location, in-person. Equally, we felt video calls allowed some participants to mask eye contact by looking into the web camera, more than the eyes of the interviewer. To ease sensory and cognitive load further, participants were asked if they were happy with audio and visual channels, or if they preferred audio only. Participants were also offered the opportunity for regular breaks to limit sensory and cognitive overload.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis complemented the constructionist positioning of the research, and was used to conceptualise patterns of shared meaning across the data in relation to the central meaning that themes captured, enabling conceptual coherence (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2021). Semantic coding, rather than the application of a codebook (Braun and Clarke 2021), focused on the content of data as communicated by participants (Trainor and Bundon 2021). Codes were actively created (Byrne 2022) paying attention to contradictions, tensions, and inconsistencies with meaning. An Excel spreadsheet was used to track the grouping, refining, separation, and discarding of codes (Byrne 2022; Trainor and Bundon 2021). This process developed tentative themes captured as a ‘thematic map’, which allowed insight to the significance of individual themes (Braun, Clarke, and Weaste 2016). The relevance of themes was considered in relation to the research question, and then the internal consistency of themes was considered, ensuring themes fitted the overall story of the data in

relation to the study's context and participants (Braun and Clarke 2021). Theme titles were further refined during the write up of the study's findings.

The analysis was 'grounded in the data' and 'inescapably informed' by the philosophical assumptions of the study (Braun and Clarke 2021, 331). Here, the first author was an analytic resource, situated between the data and their contextual, theoretically embedded, interpretative practices. Despite the data being rich and purposeful, leaving multiple opportunities for new understandings and insights (Low 2019), coding quality came from the depth of engagement through the reflexive, interpretation (Ho, Chiang, and Leung 2017). The analysis process was largely conducted by the first author, with the third author acting as a critical friend. The ontological relativism of the study clashed with the ontological assumptions of member checking, so this was also avoided (Motulsky 2021).

Rigour

Researcher reflexivity was provided through regular meetings with the wider research team, who challenged reflections and sense-making, acting as 'critical friends', through discussions about broader conceptual considerations (Levitt et al. 2017). The second and fourth authors, with experience conducting research with neurodivergent individuals, supported initial discussions when developing the research study and exploring potential participant recruitment opportunities. The third author, with research and consultancy experience in stress, coping, diversity, equality, and inclusion, supported discussions on research positionality and interpretations of the findings. With all members of the research team identifying as neurotypical, we engaged in critical discussions to develop a mutual understanding of the core issues in this study and to interpret the challenges that participants discussed as neurodivergent individuals. This work addresses a contemporary (i.e., timely, significant, and interesting) topic, offers a significant contribution (conceptually, practically, and morally) to the wider research in sport and performance psychology, and achieves

meaningful coherence through transparency of employed methods (Burke 2016; Tracy 2010). Practically, by exploring the experiences of neurodivergent athletes, this research addresses issues of diversity, equality and inclusion (see Grey-Thompson 2017) leading to the development of greater consideration and care for this population in sport.

Findings

Through reflexive thematic analysis, we generated three themes capturing participants' experiences of training and competing in elite sport as neurodivergent athletes: lack of belonging, overwhelmed and overloaded, and a need for plans. Throughout this section, we utilise pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants.

Lack of Belonging

Participants discussed how the challenges they experienced in their training environments made them feel like they did not belong. A recurring sentiment among participants was a lack of support, discussing a want for autonomy and coaches who accommodated their needs by letting them work in ways that worked for them. This was illustrated by Sophie who discussed the unfairness she experienced in training, where coaches appeared willing to make accommodations for others, based on their performance:

> In the gym, for instance, it was the culture that the boys would play the music and the music was so loud it would shake the floors. That's not me asking for any preferential treatment, it's literally just like I could quite easily go and do that at home. […] Once you kind of get invited onto the senior team, it's kind of like being at school and how regimented it is [...] There's one way of doing things. You'll have to follow the rules. Like anything different from the programme is seen as like preferential treatment. […] The first two years I was on the squad I was like one of The Golden Girls, so it didn't matter that I was different [...] It was like, "She's bold, she's blunt. She's brash. She's like that. That's what makes her good…" So as soon as you get ill or injured,

> you move down the hierarchy and it's not acceptable anymore. […] I'd ask a lot of questions. I like to express myself and get frustrated. And those things weren't proper (Sophie)

Importantly, Sophie noted that this was not about preferential treatment but rather accommodating the needs of neurodivergent athletes. Extending this idea of meeting individual's needs, participants discussed communication challenges and wanting information in different ways, as captured in the following comment from Sophie:

> I was just doing my training dealing with facts, but actually there was so much more in this environment, that kind of brought those emotions to surface. […] Keep it objective. Ask me closed questions. What do you want to know? If you ask me, "How are you?" How do I answer that? Like all of these things aren't fair. This happened last week. This happened last month. Can we talk about this? Are you asking me about this, this, or this? (Sophie)

This quote further underscores the unfairness participants experienced when interacting with elite sporting environments. Understandably, a lack of belonging made it difficult to connect with others, leading to feelings of isolation. Adam highlighted that this worsened when sharing his challenges with others, which was hindered by a lack of self-understanding:

> It's not like I can tell in my brain whether this comes from autism or this is a normal thing that I'm struggling with so I don't always know whether I've always been this way or whether it's the same for everyone else. [...] Your coach goes "Well, why can't you train this long? Everyone else is doing it" and you're thinking, "Well, maybe he's right. Maybe I am the same as everyone else and I'm just lazy or maybe everyone else is struggling the same as me, but they're just putting up with it." [...] There's a lot of decisions of do I push myself through this unpleasant situation or do I actually need to

> take a step back and either do something different or take a break and come back to it? [...] A lot of [coaches] will tell you you're making excuses or tell you that you're lazy and you're just trying to get out of training. […] You might just be really struggling that day. You might have had two hours of training in a row without a break, and you're sort of mentally exhausted, or the music might just be a bit too loud or something like that. Or there might be too many people [training] at that time. These are sort of problems that all affect me, and I have to be aware of, but coaches often forget. (Adam)

Here, Adam emphasises that by keeping their challenges to themselves, neurodivergent athletes risk further isolating themselves from others. Lastly, these feelings of not belonging in elite sporting environments was further emphasised by participants' tendency to compare themselves to neurotypical peers, especially at competitive events:

> I was envious of that ability to just completely shut off and, sort of, immerse myself in the world – or my own worlds – but I've never quite felt confident enough to shut myself off like that. […] I'd watch people before a fight and it's like, 'Are you not nervous?' […] They didn't look it. Whereas there's me, pacing up and down, trying to wrestle with my own self. […] I had a sort of obsession of getting it right. […] Whereas neurotypical people are just going, "Yeah, that'll do." [...] That would annoy me [...] To them they were doing it properly. (Liam)

This highlights how comparison to others further impacted participants' feelings of not belonging in elite sport environments. In summary, this theme captures how elite sport, built for neurotypical norms, can leave neurodivergent athletes feeling excluded.

Overwhelmed and Overloaded

This theme reflects the ways in which elite sporting environments left participants feeling overwhelmed. This was often the result of overly high self-expectation, overthinking

and over-analysing, sensory overload from environmental stimuli, and participants “masking” their neurodivergence. For example, Adam highlighted the sensory overload of travelling to competitive events, especially internationally:

> An airport is full of people, it's loud, there's bright lights. Like these are all things that can cause like pretty big difficulties, especially for autistic people. And so, like before you've even started competing, just getting there is exhausting because you're trying to stop all of these things from overwhelming you. (Adam)

Here, Adam highlights how these additional challenges can negatively impact his performance. Reinforcing the idea of experiencing additional challenges at competition, Oliver discussed the overwhelm of self-expectation: “I'll want to perform, and I'll want to hit a certain time and I'll be doing a million calculations in my head as to what I consider successful”. This idea of judging the outcome of an event was further explained by Emma:

> If you've performed well, you think one thing, and then if you've not performed well, you think one thing. So in our brains – or my brain – it gets very busy disregarding the outcome. […] You get stuck in this loop of like, "Oh, why didn't I compete as well as I could have done?" Or if they've managed to compete well, they're like, "Oh, what's everyone going to think like next time? There's going to be so much pressure." […] The win provides like a high and then a low. […] It's all a bit of a tangle. (Emma)

This quote emphasises the overthinking and self-imposed pressure experienced by participants in competition settings. Extending this point, Oliver also discussed overthinking as an additional challenge to navigate:

> I describe my brain as a 5-lane motorway and every lane is full with cars. Every car is nose to tail, and every car is moving at 100 mile an hour. I jump around all over the place between lanes and find it very, very hard to focus on one car or one lane at any time. It doesn't take a huge amount – whether it be pressure, whether it be negative

> thoughts, whether it be self-expectation, whatever – because there's so many thoughts it just becomes overwhelming. [...] a couple of negatives can become 100 negatives very, very quickly. […] My head was doing 1,000,000 miles an hour and it was kind of carnage inside (Oliver)

This quote reveals how participants experienced increased distractibility and challenges with concentration in the pressured environment of competition. Expanding on this idea of increased cognitive load, participants discussed the overwhelm and additional cognitive effort needed to "mask" their neurodiversity in sporting environments:

> Unconsciously I can just mask it. […] The benefit is nobody knows that you feel like you're going a bit crazy in your head and then that's also the challenge that nobody knows that you're going a bit crazy and your thoughts are like spiralling. […] Nine times out of ten, we've just gone somewhere really unhelpful in our head, running a story that is completely unhelpful but also not relevant and distracting from the performance and the 'normal' person would think, "Oh they're not focused" or "They're not ready" or "They're switched off", but actually we're just running 100 different things. […] I'm never going to compete as well if I'm having a day when I'm overwhelmed and masking all of that because that is then taking 10, 15, 20% more of my energy to get myself into a state that might be useful. (Emma)

Here, Emma highlights the additional challenge that this tendency to hide mental experiences in sporting environments can bring for neurodivergent athletes. Further, Sophie highlighted a tendency to be overwhelmed by the emotions of other competitors:

> My mantra was "to be more Teflon". Like, to let things slide off me because people's emotions would stick to me. What people said would stick to me. What's going on around me would stick to me. […] I'm like a sponge for other people's emotions. If I

> was with someone who was, like, immensely confident, like, I would be immensely confident. If I was with someone nervous, I'd be nervous. (Sophie)

Such a response emphasises the additional challenges neurodivergent athletes may face when competing in elite sport. In contrast, Adam emphasised how this overwhelm would impact his ability to execute technical skills in training: “I could have made a mistake on a [technical skill] and then for the next 10 [attempts] I might mess up those [attempts] trying to fix that one mistake that I'm not even making anymore” (Adam). Similarly, Oliver discussed how a hyperfocus in training meant “going through every session and overanalysing it” ‘deciding “whether it was good or bad”, making coaches' feedback redundant. He also discussed a tendency to focus on the next goal, struggling to celebrate success:

> I've always moved the goal before I've actually completed it, so I've never ever celebrated a success. […] I wanted to be on the British team, I got there. But before I'd got there, I wanted to qualify for the European Championships. And before I got there, I wanted to go to the World Championships before I got there, I wanted to go to the Commonwealth Games. […] My coach might have put ‘run for an hour’, so I'd run for an hour. But that might get me – depending on my pace – to 12km. But if I'm just over 12km, I'll have to get to 13. And then if I haven't hit that heart rate, then I need to do that and then if I've run for 13km I can't finish on an uneven number [...] I can be on swift for an hour. But then I'll want a round number for the distance and then I want a round number for the altitude and then that affects the time and the distance [...] it's about focusing on one and not allowing one to be affected by the other. (Oliver)

This quote highlights how a tendency to overthink and consider too many aspects of training not only stimulated increased negative thoughts but also placed him at risk of overtraining and injury.

A Need for Plans

This theme reflects how participants discussed needing a plan to help them navigate elite sporting environments. For example, Adam discussed how a plan helped navigate the anxieties caused at competition when routine and familiar surroundings were removed:

> You might not even know the time you're [competing] until the day before, because they have to do a random draw. […] You're in a different country. You're staying in a strange hotel that you've never been to before. You're in [an arena] that you've never seen, surrounded by people that you don't know. And all that can be very challenging for me. (Adam)

This quote highlights how a loss of routine can create challenge when structuring event days. One aspect of this discussed by participants was the difficulty of planning food availability, as Emma succinctly put it:

> ADHD athletes, particularly, can end up finding certain foods work really well for them. But then when you're travelling it's not always available and often people don't like different textures [...] So it's knowing what isn't going to be in control. (Emma)

This captures the challenge of planning at competitive events. Extending this point, Liam shared how this often left him "hungry and running on adrenaline". Linking to the previous theme, participants explained how planning was further complicated because they were still figuring out for themselves what they needed during competition:

> When you're diagnosed with autism you don't get like a manual on how to deal with it because it's different for everyone. If I'm training with a new coach or with a temporary coach, I might go, "Right. Look, I've got these problems." And they go "Right. What do you need to deal with that?" I don't always know because you know, some of the problems are difficult to figure out. And sometimes new problems are specific to that environment. Like, I don't always have the answer, and a lot of people

> expect you just to know in advance what's going to cause you difficulties and what you need to fix that. Whereas a lot of the time, you don't know what's going to cause you problems until you're in the moment. [...] At that moment you're in distress and you're not in the best frame of mind to figure out what you need. […] You can't just say, “Right, this person's autistic. That means they have these problems and these solutions.” (Adam)

This quote highlights the need for personalised plans, which participants had largely developed through trial and error as they became experienced neurodivergent athletes. Yet Adam discussed how he facilitated performance using a clear, but flexible, plan:

> I can always like, no matter where I am, I can usually have the same warm up so I can just, you know, that routine of that still being the same is comforting. […] If I can keep some routines, then I can, you know, focus on those and sort of ground myself in those routines and, you know, find a lot of comfort in that. (Adam)

Here, plans were discussed as a way of navigating the uncertainty experienced at competitive events. Other strategies participants used to reduce the overwhelm of competition included listening to music, noise cancelling headphones and looper plugs (Sophie), or the distraction of audio books, which were ‘continual’ compared to music, which stops “every 3 minutes” between songs (Liam). Movement was also important, but this was a challenge when burnt out or tired, meaning mindfulness techniques, for example, breathing, crosswords, puzzles, and Rubik’s cubes provided “something to focus on” and mentally warm up (Adam). In addition, participants discussed a preference for a task-oriented focus, which helped establish a “flow state” in “really high” stress environments (Grace). Feeling relaxed and comfortable facilitated enjoyment of their sport. In the build up to events, participants discussed the use of training diaries to navigate negative thoughts when training

volume reduced. Lastly, Adam discussed the use of planned routines on competition days to navigate the negative thoughts he might experience:

> I will do a process that my psychologist taught me called S.O.D.A. So *stop* thinking and stop doing whatever you're doing. *Observe*. So I would observe how I was feeling. So am I feeling anxious? Am I feeling apprehensive? […] Then observe my surroundings and *decide* if that is a necessary response. Do I need to feel anxiety? The answer is almost always no. And then just try to give myself a small sort of comforting word – an *affirmation* – to bring myself back into that situation. [...] I just say “we've got this” because a lot of the time it can feel like half of my brain is attacking the other half. So saying "We have this" like that puts me on the same side as my brain and reminds me that it's not my enemy. (Adam)

This highlights how planned routines can facilitate performance in elite competition environments. Similarly, Sophie discussed the importance of planning suitable spaces to navigate possible over-stimulation at competitive events:

> We wanted to have a crew meeting and there's not really anywhere to go. And I remember we went downstairs into like the open area below the apartments, and I couldn't hear a thing and I said, "Can we not do it here?" But there was just such a lack of understanding and cohesiveness in the crew, and people were like, "Why you being so difficult?" [...] I was like, "I can hear that bus, I can hear that conversation. I hear that conversation" [...] That was really horrible. [...] The awareness should have been there before, so that wasn't even a problem to solve. [...] It caused a lot of tension and conflict. (Sophie)

This quote highlights the challenge neurodivergent athletes might face when interacting in competitive environments and the need for organisers to consider adapted spaces for neurodivergent athletes.

Discussion

This study critically examined the lived experiences of elite neurodivergent athletes; a significantly underrepresented area of sport research. Our work offers original insights into the ways in which neurodivergent indentities intersect with the psychological, social, and organsiational demands of high-performance sport (see Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Chown, and Stenning 2020; Larsen et al. 2021). Whereas Rice et al. (2016) and Reardon et al. (2019) explored mental health and wellbing in elite athletes more broadly, we centre on neurodivergence, offering both pragmatic and ethical implications for inclusion, wellbeing, and performance. This discussion highlights the challenges of existing practices and suggests pathways for reform.

Athletes in our study consistently described difficulties with both social communication and understanding others' behaviour. For example, the theme 'lack of belonging' captures participants' experiences of isolation as they struggled to connect with others. This highlights how social interaction norms in sport are implicitly designed for neurotypical functioning, echoing the work of Tomblin and Mueller (2012) in the broader psychology literature and Pan and Frey (2006) in physical activity literature. Yet, Sophie recalled wanting to receive information differently, frustrated at the unfairness of coaches making allowances for other athletes based on their performance. This lack of accomodation left participants feeling unsupported and isolated – which, although common experiences for neurodivergent individuals (Michielsen et al. 2015), were intensified in elite sport settings. Importantly, this highlights a deeper layer of vulnerability that has practical implications for athlete care and safeguarding. In line with editorials by Hoare et al. (2025) and McMurtry et al. (2025), we highlight that sport systems should meet the individual needs of neurodivergent athletes through targeted neuro-affirming principles, practices, and education,

to foster safer, inclusive environments that help neurodivergent athletes realise their full potential.

Within the theme ‘a need for plans’, we see how the dynamic nature of sporting environments misaligns with a desire for routine and predictability. Although Gillott and Standen (2007) highlight that this is common among neurodivergent individuals, this heightened the anxieties of participants in our study. For example, Adam discussed challenges with sensory sensitivities at competitive events and struggles with orienting to new environments, while Emma discussed the challenge of unfamiliar foods choices. Although this reflects findings in the broader psychology literature (Mayes and Zickgraf 2019; Reid, O Connor, and Lloyd 2003), this undue psychological strain exposes the structural inequalities that neurodivergent athletes face. Consequently, participants discussed how the burden of navigating elite sporting environments often falls entirely on the athlete, with limited formal guidance and self-understanding. At an individual level, this combination of high external demands and limited support may result in autistic burnout (Raymaker et al. 2020). Moreover, this may expose neurodivergent athletes to preventable harm or neglect, which sport systems have a duty to mitigate (Khomutova et al. 2025), and questions the adequacy of duty of care practices for neurodivergent athletes in elite sport within the U.K.

Data within the theme ‘overwhelmed and overloaded’ highlights how cognitively and emotionally taxing participants found navigating elite sport environments as neurodivergent athletes. Similar to domains outside of sport (see Crane et al. 2018), sensory and cognitive overload during competition were identified as critical stressors. For example, Oliver discussed feeling pressure to meet unrealistic standards, accompanied by intense negative reactions to imperfection and overly critical self-assessments. This highlights how neurodivergent athletes may be particularly vulnerable to high perfectionistic concerns in sport (see Barkley 1997; Black et al. 2024). Of note is the pursuit of socially prescribed

perfectionism (Hewitt and Flett 1991) and persistent self-doubt (Gotwals and Dunn 2009). Whereas Stanger et al. (2024) link perfectionistic concerns to maladaptive outcomes (e.g., burnout and antisocial behaviour), our findings highlight how participants' perfectionistic tendencies contributed to psychological distress with physical consequences (e.g., hyperfocus in training, and a relentless focus on achieving the next goal). Similar to findings from Ramji, Runswick, and Dommett (2024) in physical activity, this brought participants an increased risk of overuse injuries, as they pushed themselves in pursuit of unattainable ideals in elite sport. Consequently, we highlight that when perfectionistic standards become internalised in unsupportive environments, the resulting mental and physical harm underscores the need for safeguarding measure that explicitly account for neurodivergent profiles. This is an area worthy of further investigation.

Illustrating the hidden labour neurodivergent athletes might perform to fit into environments that rarely accommodate their needs, participants employed a range of coping strategies to manage the person-environment relationship (Lazarus 1999). For example, avoidance-focused strategies, such as, small breaks and quiet spaces to handle the overwhelm of busy environments, echo findings of Duquesne et al. (2023) with elite athletes. Further, examples of problem-focused strategies include planning ahead, using sensory management tools (e.g., noise-cancelling headphones), incorporating predictable routines, and using mindfulness activities (e.g., crosswords, puzzles, and breathing exercises). In line with Baldwin and Costley (2016), these strategies show how individuals construct personalised systems to reduce cognitive load and anxiety. Yet caution is needed with some strategies discussed. For example, the emotion-focused strategy of social camouflaging (i.e., efforts to mask neurodivergence to appear neurotypical; Hull et al. 2019) facilitated participants' inclusion in the short term. Yet, findings among neurodivergent individuals in the education context suggest long-term use of this strategy can increase mental fatigue and negative

mental health (Cage and Troxell-Whitman 2019; Klein et al. 2024). Our findings highlight how some strategies require system-level change beyond the individual's control. Importantly, this nuance underscores the qualitative richness of our data, revealing the tensions between adaptation and authenticity in the lives of neurodivergent athletes.

In summary, by amplifying neurodivergent voices in a system built around neurotypical norms, we identify both the performance and organisational stressors encountered by neurodivergent athletes (e.g., challenges with communication, loss of routine and familiar surroundings, comparisons to neurotypical peers, and sensory overwhelm), as well as the coping strategies they employ to navigate exclusionary spaces (e.g., masking and mindfullness activities). Similar to experiences observed in high-functioning autistic individuals more broadly (see Botha and Frost 2020), we illustrate how sport culture can perpetuate subtle forms of discrimination and stigmatisation, where systemic and environmental barriers within elite sport (e.g., limited support and accomodations) can marginalise neurodivergent athletes.

Conclusion

Despite increased efforts to diversify sport, neurodivergent athletes remain underrepresented and often neglected in elite sporting contexts. This study addresses a critical gap by exploring the lived experiences of neurodivergent athletes, revealing how elite sport environments, typically shaped around neurotypical norms, can be exclusionary. Findings highlight the challenges neurodivergent athletes face – from sensory overload and social misunderstandings to rigid organisational structures and high perfectionistic concerns – which seem to undermine their sense of belonging. While athletes discussed using a variety of effective coping strategies such as structured routines and sensory aids, they also seem to be using less effective ones such as social camouflaging. Further research is warranted to understand neurodivergent athletes' coping strategies, their effectiveness and long-term

impact on wellbeing and performance. We call on sport governing bodies, researchers, and practitioners to embed neurodiversity awareness into research, policy, and practice, co-creating personalised and predictable support plans that promote autonomy, wellbeing, and sustainable performance. Future research should explore the knowledge and experiences of coaches and sport psychologists who support neurodivergent athletes to understand current practices, consider the study of intersectionality in neurodivergent individuals in sport (see Mallipeddi and VanDaalen 2021), or the experiences of neurodivergent practitioners in sport. Ultimately, this work challenges sport to reimagine neuroinclusion to promote sport environments that are truly inclusive, safe, and empowering for all athletes.

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