

Please cite the Published Version

Wood, Sam , Marshall, Ben , Kaiseler, Mariana  and Wood, Greg  (2025) Navigating Neurodiversity in Elite Sport: Lived Experiences of Neurodivergent Athletes. Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health. ISSN 2159-676X

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2025.2534896>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Published Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/640945/>

Usage rights:  [Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0](#)

Additional Information: This is an open access article published in Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, by Taylor & Francis.

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)



Navigating neurodiversity in elite sport: lived experiences of neurodivergent athletes

Samuel Wood, Ben Marshall, Mariana Kaiseler & Greg Wood

To cite this article: Samuel Wood, Ben Marshall, Mariana Kaiseler & Greg Wood (16 Jul 2025): Navigating neurodiversity in elite sport: lived experiences of neurodivergent athletes, Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, DOI: [10.1080/2159676X.2025.2534896](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2025.2534896)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2025.2534896>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 16 Jul 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 384



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Navigating neurodiversity in elite sport: lived experiences of neurodivergent athletes

Samuel Wood , Ben Marshall , Mariana Kaiseler  and Greg Wood 

Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Manchester Metropolitan University Institute of Sport, Manchester, UK

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.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 August 2024
Accepted 12 July 2025

KEYWORDS

ADHD; Autism; elite; inclusion; safeguard; sport

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 disability¹ (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 (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'

CONTACT Samuel Wood  s.wood@mmu.ac.uk  Department of Sport and Exercise Science, Institute of Sport Building, Manchester Metropolitan University, 99 Oxford Road, Manchester M1 7EL, UK

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

experiences of stress and coping in sport, leaving ADHD and ASD athletes typically 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 (Botha and Frost 2020; Buckley et al. 2024). 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, 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 (Reardon et al. 2019; Rice et al. 2016), 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 psycho-social education that prevent neglect and foster genuinely supportive environments (Grey-Thompson 2017; Rosqvist, Hanna, 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 (Grodén, 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 overstimulation 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 62,959 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, Victoria, and Paul 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 the 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 12 km. But if I'm just over 12 km, 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 13 km 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 overstimulation 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 identities intersect with the psychological, social, and organisational demands of high-performance sport (see Larsen et al. 2021; Rosqvist, Hanna, and Stenning 2020). Whereas Rice et al. (2016) and Reardon et al. (2019) explored mental health and wellbeing 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 Kathryn (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 accommodation 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, 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 Dommert (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 mindfulness 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 accommodations) 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.

Note

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.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr. Samuel Wood is an Associate Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Sciences at Manchester Metropolitan University, a Chartered sport and exercise psychologist with the British Psychological Society, and a registered practitioner psychologist with the Health and Care Professions Council. His work supports athletes, coaches, and sport organisations to enhance performance while promoting psychological wellbeing. With applied experience across several different sports, he has supported national champions, international-level athletes, and high-performing teams - including at European and World Championship level. His academic research interests centre on qualitative exploration of work-based developments and problems, bridging academia and applied sport settings.

Dr. Ben Marshall is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University. Ben obtained his PhD from Manchester Metropolitan University in 2019 and has research publications in mental imagery, action observation, eye tracking, and motor skill learning. His recent work includes investigating the use of mental imagery for skills training

in children with DCD and the use of virtual reality technology for training football heading skills. Ben is currently the Programme Lead for BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Dr. Mariana Kaiseler is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University's Institute of Sport and an HCPC registered Sport Psychologist. She has over 18 years of experience in research, teaching, and consultancy, with a focus on stress, coping, and wellbeing in high-performance environments. Her recent work explores these topics among underrepresented groups, including those defined by gender, race, culture, and neurodiversity, with the aim of promoting equity and inclusion in performance contexts. Mariana draws on lived experiences across the UK, Europe, and the USA, bringing a multicultural perspective to her research and applied practice. She is a Chartered Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society (BPS), and has worked across sport, military, and business sectors to support individuals and teams navigating performance demands and transitions. Her research has been published in leading peer-reviewed journals and was recognised with a prestigious Marie Curie Individual Fellowship from the European Commission. She currently serves as a Research and Innovation Advisor to the European Commission in the areas of Mental Health, Equity, and Inclusion, and is the Departmental Lead for Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) within the Department of Sport and Exercise Science at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Dr. Greg Wood is a Reader in Sport & Exercise Sciences at Manchester Metropolitan University. His research explores the neural and cognitive mechanisms underlying motor control and learning, with a focus on neurodivergent populations, including individuals with Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD). Using methods such as MRI, EEG, TMS, and eye-tracking, Dr. Wood investigates sensorimotor processing and designs evidence-based interventions—such as virtual reality and exergaming—to support movement and balance. He is also engaged in advancing inclusive approaches to neurodiversity, emphasizing the need to recognise and accommodate diverse cognitive and motor profiles. His work integrates neuroscience, movement science, and applied practice to challenge deficit-based models and promote equality in education, healthcare, and sport.

ORCID

Samuel Wood  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1281-870X>

Ben Marshall  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2557-5399>

Mariana Kaiseler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7931-4584>

Greg Wood  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0851-7090>

References

- ADHD, Foundation Accessed May 29th, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/xGBp6>.
- Alvesson, M., and K. Skoldberg. 2009. *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.
- Archibald, Mandy M., Rachel C. Ambagtsheer, Mavourneen G. Casey, and Michael Lawless. 2019. "Using Zoom Videoconferencing for Qualitative Data Collection: Perceptions and Experiences of Researchers and Participants." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18:1609406919874596. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919874596>.
- Ayres, Michael, Jeremy R Parr, Jacqui Rodgers, David Mason, Leah Avery, and Darren Flynn. 2018. "A Systematic Review of Quality of Life of Adults on the Autism Spectrum." *Autism* 22 (7): 774–783. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361317714988>.
- Baldwin, Susanna, and Debra Costley. 2016. "The Experiences and Needs of Female Adults with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Autism* 20 (4): 483–495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315590805>.
- Barkley, Russell A. 1997. "Behavioral inhibition, Sustained attention, and Executive Functions: Constructing a Unifying Theory of ADHD." *Psychological Bulletin* 121 (1): 65.
- Barra, Steffen, Andreas Grub, Michael Roesler, Petra Retz-Junginger, Florence Philipp, and Wolfgang Retz. 2021. "The Role of Stress Coping Strategies for Life Impairments in ADHD." *Journal of Neural Transmission* 128 (7): 981–992. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00702-021-02311-5>.
- Bekker, Sheree, and Anna Posbergh. 2022. "Safeguarding in Sports Settings: Unpacking a Conflicting Identity." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health* 14 (2): 181–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2021.1920456>.
- Black, Melissa H., Dana L. Greenwood, Jerome Choo Chen Hwa, Jacqueline Pivac, Jessica Tang, and Patrick J. F. Clarke. 2024. "What are You Worried About? Content and Extent of Worry in Autistic Adults." *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders* 54 (5): 2040–2054. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-023-05963-2>.
- Botha, Monique, and David M. Frost. 2020. "Extending the Minority Stress Model to Understand Mental Health Problems Experienced by the Autistic Population." *Society and Mental Health* 10 (1): 20–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869318804297>.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2019. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health* 11 (4): 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.

- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2021. "To Saturate or Not to Saturate? Questioning Data Saturation as a Useful Concept for Thematic Analysis and Sample-Size Rationales." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health* 13 (2): 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>.
- Braun, Virginia, Clarke Victoria, and Weaste. Paul. 2016. "Using Thematic Analysis in Sport and Exercise Research." In *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, edited by Brett Smith and Andrew C Sparkes, 191–205. London, UK: Routledge.
- Brinkman, S., and S. Kvale. 2015. *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Buckley, Eleanor, Vassilis Sideropoulos, Elizabeth Pellicano, and Anna Remington. 2024. "Higher Levels of Neurodivergent Traits Associated with Lower Levels of Self-Efficacy and Wellbeing for Performing Arts Students." *Neurodiversity* 2:27546330241245354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330241245354>.
- Burke, Shaunna. 2016. "Rethinking 'Validity' and 'Trustworthiness' in Qualitative Inquiry." In *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, edited by Brett Smith and Andrew C Sparkes, 330–339. London, UK: Routledge.
- Byrne, David. 2022. "A Worked Example of Braun and Clarke's Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Quality and Quantity* 56 (3): 1391–1412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>.
- Cage, Eilidh, and Zoe Troxell-Whitman. 2019. "Understanding the Reasons, Contexts and Costs of Camouflaging for Autistic Adults." *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders* 49 (5): 1899–1911. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-03878-x>.
- Castillo-Montoya, Milagros. 2016. "Preparing for Interview Research: The Interview Protocol Refinement Framework." *The Qualitative Report* 21 (5): 811–831.
- Clouder, Lynn, Mehmet Karakus, Alessia Cinotti, María Virginia Ferreyra, Genoveva Amador Fierros, and Patricia Rojo. 2020. "Neurodiversity in Higher Education: A Narrative Synthesis." *Higher Education* 80 (4): 757–778. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6>.
- Combs, Martha A., Will H. Canu, Joshua J. Broman-Fulks, Courtney A. Rocheleau, and David C. Nieman. 2015. "Perceived Stress and ADHD Symptoms in Adults." *Journal of Attention Disorders* 19 (5): 425–434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1087054712459558>.
- Crane, Laura, Richard Batty, Hanna Adeyinka, Lorna Goddard, Lucy A Henry, and Elisabeth L Hill. 2018. "Autism Diagnosis in the United Kingdom: Perspectives of Autistic Adults, Parents and Professionals." *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders* 48:3761–3772 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3639-1>.
- Cunningham, George B. 2019. *Diversity and Inclusion in Sport Organizations: A Multilevel Perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Duquesne, Valentine, Remi Richard, Bernard Andrieu, and Helene Joncheray. 2023. "Sports Experiences of Elite Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities and/or Autism Spectrum Disorders." *Sport in Society* 26 (5): 854–868. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2070480>.
- Fletcher, D., S. Hanton, and S. D. Mellalieu. 2006. "An Organizational Stress Review: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues in Competitive Sport." In *Literature Reviews in Sport Psychology*, edited by S. Hanton and S. D. Mellalieu, 321–374. New York, NY: Nova Science.
- Gillott, Alinda, and P. J. Standen. 2007. "Levels of Anxiety and Sources of Stress in Adults with Autism." *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* 11 (4): 359–370.
- Gotwals, John K., and John G. H. Dunn. 2009. "A Multi-Method Multi-Analytic Approach to Establishing Internal Construct Validity Evidence: The Sport Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale 2." *Measurement in Physical Education and Exercise Science* 13 (2): 71–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10913670902812663>.
- Grey-Thompson, T. 2017. "Duty of Care in Sport: Independent Report to Government." Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.
- Groden, J., P. Levasseur, and G. Baron. 2002. "Stress and Anxiety: Assessment and Coping Strategies." *Paper Presented at the Inaugural World Autism Congress*, Melbourne, Australia.
- Hewitt, Paul L., and Gordon L. Flett. 1991. "Dimensions of Perfectionism in Unipolar Depression." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 100 (1): 98–101. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.100.1.98>.
- Ho, K. H., V. C. Chiang, and D. Leung. 2017. "Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis: The 'Possibility' Beyond 'Actuality' in Thematic Analysis." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 73 (7): 1757–1766.
- Hoare, Erin, Lisa S Olive, Kristin L McGinty-Minister, Caragh McMurtry, Courtney C Walton, Kate Hall, Claudia L Reardon, Rosemary Purcell, and Michael Berk. 2025. "Neurodiversity and the Mental Health and Well-Being of Elite Athletes." *British Journal of Sports Medicine*:bjspports-2024-109325. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjspports-2024-109325>.
- Hoare, Erin, Jonathan Reyes, Lisa Olive, Catherine Willmott, Emma Steer, Michael Berk, and Kate Hall. 2023. "Neurodiversity in Elite Sport: A Systematic Scoping Review." *BMJ Open Sport and Exercise Medicine* 9 (2): e001575. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjsem-2023-001575>.
- Hollocks, Matthew J., Jian Wei Lerh, Iliana Magiati, Richard Meiser-Stedman, and Traolach S. Brugha. 2019. "Anxiety and Depression in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Psychological Medicine* 49 (4): 559–572. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291718002283>.

- Hull, Laura, William Mandy, Meng-Chuan Lai, Simon Baron-Cohen, Carrie Allison, Paula Smith, and K. V. Petrides. 2019. "Development and Validation of the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q)." *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders* 49:819–833 doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3792-6>.
- ICD. "Tenth Revision (ICD-10)." <https://icd.who.int/browse10/2019/en>.
- International Paralympic Committee n.d. "IPC Classification." Accessed February 11th, 2025. <https://shorturl.at/axdWL>.
- Kaiseler, Mariana, Remco C. J. Polman, and Adam R. Nicholls. 2012. "Effects of the Big Five Personality Dimensions on Appraisal Coping, and Coping Effectiveness in Sport." *European Journal of Sport Science* 12 (1): 62–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17461391.2010.551410>.
- Khomutova, Anastasiya, Stilian Anani Chironi, Emma Kavanagh, Alexis Ruffault, Andy Miles, Karin Moesch, Lilybet Fontanesi, Miguel Nery, and Tine Vertommen. 2025. "FEPSAC Position Statement on Safeguarding Athletes in Sport." *Psychology of Sport & Exercise* 80:102897. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2025.102897>.
- Klein, Jessica, Rachel Krahn, Stephanie Howe, Jessi Lewis, Carly McMorris, and Sarah Macoun. 2024. "A Systematic Review of Social Camouflaging in Autistic Adults and Youth: Implications and Theory." *Development & Psychopathology*: 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579424001159>.
- Larsen, Carsten Hvid, Andreas Küttel, Karin Moesch, Natalie Durand-Bush, and Kristoffer Henriksen. 2021. "Setting the Scene: Mental Health in Elite Sport." In *Mental Health in Elite Sport*, 1–21. London, UK: Routledge.
- Lather, P. 2004. "Critical Inquiry in Qualitative Research: Feminist and Poststructural Perspectives: Science "After Truth." In *Foundations for Research: Methods of Inquiry in Education and the Social Science*, edited by K. DeMarrais and S.D. Lapan, 203–215. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lazarus, R. S. 1999. *Stress & Emotion: A New Synthesis*. New York: Springer.
- Levitt, Heidi M, Sue L Motulsky, Fredrick J Wertz, Susan L Morrow, and Joseph G Ponterotto. 2017. "Recommendations for Designing and Reviewing Qualitative Research in Psychology: Promoting Methodological Integrity." *Qualitative Psychology* 4 (1): 2–22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000082>.
- Low, Jacqueline. 2019. "A Pragmatic Definition of the Concept of Theoretical Saturation." *Sociological Focus* 52 (2): 131–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2018.1544514>.
- Mallipeddi, Nathan V., and Rachel A. VanDaalen. 2021. "Intersectionality within Critical Autism Studies: A Narrative Review." *Autism in Adulthood* 4 (4): 281–289. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0014>.
- Mannuzza, Salvatore, and Rachel G. Klein. 2000. "Long-Term Prognosis in Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 9 (3): 711–726. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1056-4993\(18\)30114-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1056-4993(18)30114-7).
- Mantzas, Jane, Amanda L. Richdale, and Cheryl Dissanayake. 2022. "A Conceptual Model of Risk and Protective Factors for Autistic Burnout." *Autism Research* 15 (6): 976–987. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2722>.
- Markula, Pirkko, and Michael L Silk. 2011. *Qualitative Research for Physical Culture*. London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Mason, D., J. Mackintosh, H. McConachie, J. Rodgers, T. Finch, and J. R. Parr. 2019. "Quality of Life for Older Autistic People: The Impact of Mental Health Difficulties." *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 63:13–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2019.02.007>.
- Mayes, Susan Dickerson, and Hana Zickgraf. 2019. "Atypical Eating Behaviors in Children and Adolescents with Autism, ADHD, Other Disorders, and Typical Development." *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 64:76–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2019.04.002>.
- McMurtry, Caragh, Charles Freeman, Joanna Perkins, Gráinne M Donnelly, and Isabel S Moore. 2025. "Developing Inclusive Policy and Guidelines in Sport: A Call to Action for Sport Governing Bodies and Individuals to Support Neurodivergent Athletes." *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 59 (6): 355–357. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2024-108989>.
- Mellalieu, Stephen D., Richard Neil, Sheldon Hanton, and David Fletcher. 2009. "Competition Stress in Sport Performers: Stressors Experienced in the Competition Environment." *Journal of Sports Sciences* 27 (7): 729–744. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410902889834>.
- Menear, Kristi Sayers, and Shannon Smith. 2008. "Physical Education for Students with Autism: Teaching Tips and Strategies." *Teaching Exceptional Children* 40 (5): 32–37.
- Meyer, I. H. 2003. "Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence." *Psychological Bulletin* 129 (5): 674–697. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674>.
- Michiels, Marieke, Hanneke C. Comijs, Marja J. Aartsen, Evert J. Smeijns, Aartjan T. F. Beekman, Dorly J. H. Deeg, and J. J. Sandra Kooij. 2015. "The Relationships Between ADHD and Social Functioning and Participation in Older Adults in a population-Based Study." *Journal of Attention Disorders* 19 (5): 368–379. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1087054713515748>.
- Morris, R., E. M. Pattinson, M. Lafferty, D. J. Brown, L. Emeka, J. Williams, L. Byrne, V. Shanmuganathan-Felton, and L. R. Kiemle-Gabbay. 2022. "Understanding Inequality: The Experiences and Perceptions of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion of Those Working or Studying within Sport and Exercise Psychology." *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review* 17 (1): 4–15.
- Motulsky, S. L. 2021. "Is Member Checking the Gold Standard of Quality in Qualitative Research?" *Qualitative Psychology* 8 (3): 389–406. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000215>.
- National Autistic Society. "Autism Assessment Waiting Times" Accessed 9 August 2024. <https://shorturl.at/vcyaW>.
- NICE. "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: How Common is It?" <https://shorturl.at/5kDOM>.
- NICE. "Autism in Adults: How Common is It?" Accessed May 29th, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/D0nMh>.

- Oliver, Michael. 2018. *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*. London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Pan, Chien-Yu, and Georgia C Frey. 2006. "Physical Activity Patterns in Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders." *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders* 36:597–606 doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-006-0101-6>.
- Paralympics New. "Classification Eligibility Guidance for Athletes with Intellectual Impairment or Autism." Accessed February 11th, 2025. <https://shorturl.at/M5jrT>.
- Ramji, Anusha V, Oliver R Runswick, and Eleanor J Dommett. 2024. "Exercise Dependency and Overuse Injuries in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder." *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease* 212 (3): 190–195.
- Raymaker, D. M., A. R. Teo, N. A. Steckler, B. Lentz, M. Scharer, A. D. Santos, S. K. Kapp, M. Hunter, A. Joyce, and C. Nicolaidis. 2020. "'Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew': Defining Autistic Burnout." *Autism in Adulthood* 2 (2): 132–143. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0079>.
- Reardon, Claudia L, Brian Hainline, Cindy Miller Aron, David Baron, Antonia L Baum, Abhinav Bindra, Richard Budgett, et al. 2019. "Mental Health in Elite Athletes: International Olympic Committee Consensus Statement (2019)." *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 53 (11): 667–699. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2019-100715>.
- Reid, G., J. O. Connor, and M. Lloyd. 2003. "The Autism Spectrum Disorders Physical Activity Instruction." *Palaestra* 19 (2): 20–26.
- Reid, G., and J. O'Connor. 2003. "The Autism Spectrum Disorders." *Palaestra* 19 (1): 20–26.
- Rice, Simon M., Rosemary Purcell, Stefanie De Silva, Daveena Mawren, Patrick D. McGorry, and Alexandra G. Parker. 2016. "The Mental Health of Elite Athletes: A Narrative Systematic Review." *Sports Medicine* 46 (9): 1333–1353. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-016-0492-2>.
- Roberts, Rosanne E. 2020. "Qualitative Interview Questions: Guidance for Novice Researchers." *The Qualitative Report* 25 (9): 3185–3203 doi:<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4640>.
- Rosqvist, Bertilsdotter, Nick Chown Hanna, and Anna Stenning. 2020. *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*. In: Taylor & Francis.
- Rubin, Herbert J, and Irene S Rubin. 2011. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Russell, Ginny, Steven K. Kapp, Daisy Elliott, Chris Elphick, Ruth Gwernan-Jones, and Christabel Owens. 2019. "Mapping the Autistic Advantage from the Accounts of Adults Diagnosed with Autism: A Qualitative Study." *Autism in Adulthood* 1 (2): 124–133. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2018.0035>.
- Salla, Michael. 1993. "There is No Nonviolent Future." *Social Alternatives* 15 (3): 41–43.
- Samuel, Wood, and Martin J. Turner. 2024. "Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Develop self-Confidence in a Neurodivergent Athlete." *Case Studies in Sport and Exercise Psychology* 8 (1). [10.1123/cssep.2023-0040](https://doi.org/10.1123/cssep.2023-0040).
- Sibley, Margaret H., E. William, Brooke S. G. Molina Pelham, Elizabeth M. Gnagy, James G. Waxmonsky, Daniel A. Waschbusch, Karen J. Derefinko, et al. 2012. "When Diagnosing ADHD in Young Adults Emphasize Informant Reports, DSM Items, and Impairment." *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology* 80 (6): 1052–1061. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029098>.
- Smith, J. 1989. *The Nature of Social and Educational Enquiry: Empiricism versus Interpretation*. Norwood, NJ: Albex Publishing Corporation.
- Stanger, Nicholas, Gareth E. Jowett, Mariana Kaiseler, and L. Toni Williams. 2024. "Linking Perfectionism with Moral Behaviors in Sport: The Mediating Role of Burnout and Moral Disengagement." *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 95 (3): 646–655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2023.2294096>.
- Tomblin, J. Bruce, and L. Mueller. Kathryn. 2012. "How Can Comorbidity With Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Aid Understanding of Language and Speech Disorders?" *Topics in Language Disorders* 32 (3): 198–206. <https://doi.org/10.1097/TLD.0b013e318261c264>.
- Tracy, Sarah J. 2010. "Qualitative Quality: Eight 'Big-Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 16 (10): 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>.
- Trainor, Lisa R., and Andrea Bundon. 2021. "Developing the Craft: Reflexive Accounts of Doing Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health* 13 (5): 705–726. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2020.1840423>.
- Tuakli-Wosornu, Yetsa A, Kirsty Burrows, Kari Fasting, Mike Hartill, Ken Hodge, Keith Kaufman, Emma Kavanagh, et al. 2024. "IOC Consensus Statement: Interpersonal Violence and Safeguarding in Sport." *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 58 (22): 1322–1344. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2024-108766>.
- Vivanti, Giacomo. 2020. "Ask the Editor: What is the Most Appropriate Way to Talk About Individuals with a Diagnosis of Autism?" *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders* 50 (2): 691–693. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04280-x>.
- Whetzel, Melanie. 2014. "Interviewing Tips for Applicants with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)." *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 40 (2): 155–159. <https://doi.org/10.3233/jvr-140668>.
- Zolyomi, Annuska, Andrew Begel, Jennifer Frances Waldern, John Tang, Michael Barnett, Edward Cutrell, Daniel McDuff, Sean Andrist, and Meredith Ringel Morris. 2019. "Managing Stress: The Needs of Autistic Adults in Video Calling." In *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.*, Vol. 3 (CSCW):Article 134. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3359236>.