

**Mentally Tough Teams in Professional Rugby Union: Important Factors,
Processes and Mechanisms**

By

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made. Published peer-reviewed papers and presentations have been acknowledged and due reference made. I can confirm that I have been the primary author for the following papers and presentations that contribute to this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to further enhance our understanding of the construct mental toughness in professional rugby union teams. While mental toughness is synonymous with sporting success, considerable ambiguity exists concerning what it actually is, how it is developed and, most pertinently in the demanding environment of professional rugby, how it can be elicited on a game-to-game basis. To achieve these aims, an initial semi-structured interview-based study with nine elite players and three elite coaches explored their understanding of mental toughness. The results highlight that mental toughness involves player-specific processes and coaching processes along with an emphasis upon group processes. Building on these results, a second interview-based study was conducted with five super-elite coaches. The results from this cohort reaffirm the importance of group identity in consistently eliciting mental toughness. The results highlight the integral role that the coach plays in challenging group standards and in fostering togetherness and respect. Moreover, the results identify processes that coaches may utilise in developing, integrating and harnessing mentally tough leaders, the alignment of formal leaders and, crucially, how coaches communicate mentally tough messages to their players via the media. In conclusion, in order to elicit mental toughness in rugby union the coach needs to manage the multiple messages within the team environment that enhances group identity and the motivation to act mentally tough. In this regard, in order to elicit mental toughness in a rugby team on a consistent basis, it is essential that the coach is aware of, and manages, individual processes, coaching processes and, most importantly, the wider environment and social milieu. This requires coaches to create

an aligned leadership and to manage the multiple messages that players receive, including those from the media, in order to create a mentally tough mindset.

Key words: mental toughness, coach leadership, environment, social milieu

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CA	Cultural architects
DP	Deliberate practice
EI	Emotional intelligence
IM	Impression management
MT	Mental toughness
PST	Psychological skills training
SBA	Strengths-based approach
SDT	Self-determination theory
SIT	Social identity theory
SI-T	Stress inoculation-training
WC	World Cup

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

The World Cup (WC) is the flagship of rugby. In 1987, it had a worldwide viewership of 230 million and attendance of 600,000. In 2007, 12 years after rugby union turned professional, a staggering 4.2 billion watched the WC. By 2015, game attendance had risen by 400 per cent to 2.47 million, with a TV viewership of 120 million for the final alone (*News 24*, 2008; World Rugby, 2018). It was also the largest TV viewership since the 2014 soccer World Cup and illustrates both the exponential growth in the popularity of rugby and its current status in comparison to world's most popular game. Commercially, the 2015 WC made £80 million surplus profit for World Rugby, which underlines the financial expectations/demands that are present in the contemporary game. This also demonstrates the serious “business-like environment of professional sport” and the need to optimise resources and, in doing so, to consistently deliver mentally tough performances (Golby & Sheard, 2004, p. 933; World Rugby, 2018). Indeed, a Google search for ‘mental toughness rugby’ returns over 200,000, which implies a strong anecdotal if not empirical relationship between rugby and MT along with its many references in media rugby reports (Telfer, 2011).

Accepting that MT is instrumental in peak performance and that its attributes allow athletes to perform at their very best (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2008; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007), my focus for this thesis is on MT in rugby – and, more

specifically, *how* it is promoted, managed and exploited in order to consistently optimise team performances in the elite game. This focus was driven by my professional and personal interests, as well as by the relative lack of rugby-specific evidence on which consultants can base their practice. It was also driven by the clear need for MT within the evolving game.

Whilst the popularity of rugby in the commercial sense has grown in the professional era, rugby has had a significant support base as far back as the 1920s where it was an Olympic sport. The associated expectations and pressures are evident within the world's oldest international competition (Six Nations) that dates back to 1883 and its record attendance of 104,000 taking place in the amateur days of 1975 (3rd largest attendance of all time – World Rugby, 2018). So whilst my thesis is focused in the professional era it is accepted that the amateur days also required and benefitted from having MT. Indeed, in light of the growth in rugby and the increased financial implications in the professional era, recent advances have possibly only placed further pressures and expectation upon professional coaches and players and a need for MT. Indeed, in light of the growing popularity of rugby and the increased financial implications among other factors, recent advances have placed heightened pressures and expectation upon professional coaches and players. However, while rugby unions are regularly developing coaching pathways, their focus has in the main been upon the technical, tactical and physical components of the game, with often only a brief overview of psychology or coaching pedagogy itself. To this extent, and in view of the increasing need to optimise resources/performances, there seems to be a corresponding gap in the sport's understanding of mentally tough performances and how these can be consistently delivered. For the reasons mentioned above, this gap is problematic. Due to the fractious nature of professional coaching, a vocation whose

proponents rely on the important win–loss ratio in order to stay employed, the gap is also ever more important for the coaches! Indeed, a recent example of the changes in rugby was the dismissal by France of their national coach mid-contract and less than six weeks before the Six Nations tournament, the showpiece of northern hemisphere rugby (BBC, 2017). To this end, this thesis is designed to look at the overall understanding of MT, its development and, most pertinently, its elicitation in professional rugby union. More broadly, my intention is primarily to add to and advance understanding in coaching and consultancy practice, but also to contribute to the body of empirical knowledge that is specific to rugby union and to allow for future research into MT.

1.2 My personal context

At the age of 12, I first stepped onto a rugby pitch and proceeded to dazzle and amaze those watching over the following year as to my total inability to catch a rugby ball! Tackling I could do, but passing was beyond me in the much lauded rugby school (academy) of Blackrock College. Indeed, it was an intense and demanding environment and, after learning to catch the odd ball, I soon realised that there was an immense amount of technical, tactical, physical and team coordination demands in rugby, which was heightened in a highly competitive environment of the Leinster Schools Cup or SCT. After leaving school, I joined UCD, and on a certain international rugby weekend during a ‘friendly’ game against Garryowen Football Club some of my ‘skills’ were noted! I then spent the following seven years in Garryowen, Limerick and Munster, where the seeds of my thesis were sown.

It was during this period that I became a member of the Munster and then the

Ireland rugby squad and, more notably, I was a member of the first group of players to transition from the days of amateur rugby union into the professional game. To this end, I think it is important to say that despite now being able to catch the odd ball, I was not the quickest, nor the most talented; this, combined with my ambition, meant that I needed to understand the game as best as possible. After retiring from the professional bubble, I coached professionally for ten years at club, provincial and international level across three countries, as well as tutoring coaches for the International Rugby Board (IRB, now World Rugby) across Europe and central Asia. During this time with the IRFU and IRB, as well as when attending Six Nations coach conferences, my emphasis was on delivering technical and tactical components, though I was always interested in (consumed with) the mental side of the game and coaching it. To develop my coaching skills outside of the technical and tactical, and to grow my management skills, I completed my Masters in sport psychology focusing on coach leadership and, in particular, on the multidimensional model of (coach) leadership (MML) (Chelladurai, 1990). I now operate as a sport psychology consultant and have worked with a range of teams and individual clients in a variety of different sports over the last ten years at national, international, World Championship, Olympic and Paralympic level.

While this constitutes an overview of the path that brought me to this point, the seeds for this study were sown during several ‘stand-out’ moments. First, as mentioned above, my limited talent and competitive curiosity led me to study the game intently from an early age, which developed an interest beyond the ‘what’ to do and into the ‘how’ and ‘why’. However, most probably the seminal moment was sitting in Mickey Martins bar in Limerick city on a wet dreary Wednesday, after bunking off my then banking job to watch Munster play (and beat) Australia, the then

reigning world champions. After barely a year living in Limerick arguing that Leinster players were as committed and as tough as Munster players, despite the fact that there were more skilled players in Leinster, I begrudgingly had to admit that Munster – on the surface level at least – did seem more committed, maximised their limited resources and were most likely more ‘mentally tough’. As a Blackrock boy educated in Leinster rugby, this was a bitter pill – but, in hindsight, the best of medicine.

I found that this apparent contradiction between Leinster and Munster challenged my logical thinking, as the perception (at least) was that Leinster were more skilled, as physiologically capable and possibly technically better. How, then, did Munster excel in comparison? A greater tactical awareness might account for some of these successes, though it also opened the question as to motivational levels or execution of these skills. Indeed, the Leinster captain Leo Cullen (currently Leinster coach) accepted the fact that Munster were flag bearers and indeed this factor – competitive rivalry – was seen as a motivation to Leinster in attaining their subsequent success and winning three European titles (Thornley, 2013). Following this, I found an article during my Masters that suggested that mentally tough athletes did not need as much social support and positive feedback but wanted more training and instruction (Crust & Azadi, 2009). This challenged and in fact exposed my naïve thinking that all players simply want training and instruction (‘Show me how to win’) and that social support and positive feedback were purely an incidental bonus. It opened the door to the myriad motivations and capacities that underlie sport and the construct of MT. As a consequence, my goal was to understand this broad, ambiguous concept better and investigate how Munster – with fewer players and possibly fewer skilled players – outperformed Leinster. Ironically, Leinster, as mentioned above,

now often outperform Munster and indeed outperform the French juggernaut teams with vastly superior monies – if not resources – and so my curiosity continues into this research.

1.3 Pragmatic research philosophy

As will be shown in Chapter 2 the construct of MT is still ambiguous with varying perspectives of it as a personality trait, a skill, and a mindset. The ambiguity as to its contextual, conceptual and even definition limits quantitative research methods such as using inventories or measurements as we are uncertain as to what entity or aspect we might be measuring. In addition, much research has been specific to various sports with one such significant research creating different inventories for different sports that highlights the contextual nature to MT (Gucciardi et al., 2009, 2009a). Indeed, with any new concept, it is useful to use an explorative approach as “complex effects need to be untangled” (Hardy et al., 2014, p 69). Despite the many years of research into MT, it is still tangled and consequently supports a constructivist approach. In line with my pragmatic research aims on what elicits MT in rugby I am looking for the interpretations of practitioners within rugby and how they see MT. This is best achieved through a qualitative and pragmatic research approach (Cresswell, 2009). Once criticised, the qualitative methodology has grown into an impactful and valuable tool in advancing sport psychology research (Kay, 2016) and allows for changes in the real world environment overtime and not a definitive reality but the perception of those involved within any environment (Giacobbi et al, 2005). As such, my findings will be contextual and relative to the changing dynamic of elite rugby and less concerned with any definitive truth and focused on the value that these

MT findings might provide in helping players excel (Rorty, 1990). Drawing on my own coaching practice and aiming to develop practically meaningful knowledge on an important applied matter, I have built this thesis on a pragmatic research philosophy (Giacobbi *et al.*, 2005; Schmidt-Felzmann, 2003). More specifically, I was driven by my applied research questions and subsequently adopted methods that would be suitable for answering these questions. Consequently this ambiguity supports this qualitative and explorative approach as used by other researchers (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015; Cruickshank *et al.*, 2014, 2015; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007) and whereby interpretations can be made with consideration of the sport, culture and environment that endorses this relative epistemology as used in previous research (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Tibbert *et al.*, 2015).

These contextual factors highlight the importance of the researchers expertise in understanding the potential differences and interpreting findings (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). As such, my approach is more interested in the views of those involved and shows that there are “multiple maps” or realities as experienced in any context and endorses the qualitative methodology and perspectives of the expertise (Stearn, 1998, p 344). This interpretivist approach considers the subject researched along with my own knowledge as an ex professional player, coach and now sport psychology consultant. This will lead to an inductive process considering the range of perspectives to finding new information within the guidelines of a semi-structured interview. In this way, the pragmatic slant does not demand that research is organised ‘top-down’, with a commitment to one particular world-view or belief system on how knowledge is established and shared. Importantly, however, my pragmatic position still informed the selection of my topic (i.e., a meaningful applied topic), encouraged me to focus on the *process* of how MT is elicited and propagated, led me to consider

myself as a co-constructor of knowledge (see sections on trustworthiness in later chapters) and provided me with a clear goal of generating tangible and *useful* applied knowledge (in contrast to knowledge that is felt to reflect universal truths or entirely individual or social constructions) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Giacobbi *et al.*, 2005). To this end, the applied foundations of this study were also reinforced by my experience of performing in and working with elite sports teams over a number of years both as a coach and a sport psychology consultant. By adopting a qualitative pragmatic approach I accept it can be less controlled and defined when compared to quantitative research but this is ideally suited to MT and my experiences. I have adopted several steps, such as my reflexivity and considering bias, that I discuss in the relevant chapters to enhance validity and reliability. Even within these steps I accept there is not one true reality.

In summary my research is in an area that is highly interpretative, subjective and demands an understanding of the context and a relativist approach. Despite these innate limitations to this construct and the challenges in qualitative research in cementing rigor and reliability, the results reflect an assiduous, detailed and appropriate methodology with checks and balances both in the collection of data on this ‘umbrella’ term and also the analysis of the interview data.

1.4 Objectives and structure of the thesis

Reflecting the title of my thesis and my role as a practitioner, the aim of this thesis was to generate an evidence-based model for the elicitation of MT in elite rugby on a game-to-game basis. More specifically, I aimed to achieve this overall aim through

the following chapter-based objectives (which evolved as the thesis progressed chapter by chapter):

- Chapter 2 Objective: To provide a critical overview of the MT literature, sorting the wheat from the chaff to identify and exemplify key points of knowledge and essential gaps for practice in professional rugby union.
- Chapter 3 Objective: To investigate coach and player perceptions of MT, its importance, its development and what leads to mentally tough performances on a consistent basis.
- Chapter 4 Objective: To investigate the role of coach leadership in eliciting MT through direct and indirect action on the team environment.
- Chapter 5 Objective: To investigate how coaches can influence within-team MT by working on the wider milieu through the media, as explored through three contrasting case study examples.
- Chapter 6 Objective: To consequently use the various data presented in Chapters 2 to 5 to generate a model for practice, situated within the context of elite rugby and relevant theory.

The thesis concludes with Chapter 7, which covers general discussion points, next steps for research and general implications for my practice.

CHAPTER 2

MENTAL TOUGHNESS: A SYNOPSIS OF THE LITERATURE AND SETTING A DIRECTION FOR PROFESSIONAL RUGBY UNION

2.1 Research to date

As suggested in Chapter 1, mental toughness (MT) and its development in individuals has become “a major focus for many teams and organizations around the World” (Gucciardi, 2012, p. 393) and is accepted as being instrumental to elite performance (Gould *et al.*, 1987; Gould *et al.*, 2002; Sheard, 2010). However, despite its popularity, it is still often a misunderstood term (Gordon, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2002). As such, within this chapter I am going to look at how MT has been conceptualised as

- a) an individual’s personality trait and/or skill-set; and
- b) a product of coaching, operational and sociocultural processes.

As Vince Lombardi has suggested that MT is “character in action” (Sheard, 2013, p. 28), I will explore how this ‘action’ comes about through both interpersonal and intrapersonal channels. Finally, and on the basis of the appraised literature, I will conclude with a series of research questions with respect to professional rugby, which will then drive the studies conducted within this thesis.

2.1.1 MT in individuals

As previously noted, MT has become ever more popular over the last 30 years, with much of the literature prior to 2002 being based upon “opinion, coaching, counseling experience, and anecdotal evidence rather than scientific research” (Connaughton *et al.*, 2011, p. 135). Since 2002, there have been two main approaches to understanding MT in individuals, the first involving the correlation of MT with other psychological constructs and the second focused upon interview-based studies using athletes and coaches viewed through the lens of personal construct theory (Kelly, 1991). Within the post-2002 literature, there are some studies that examine a variety of sports (Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007) and several that focus upon specific sports (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Thelwell *et al.*, 2005; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2008). Researchers have looked to define MT and then often to explain it through its attributes or component characteristics. In this subsection, I am going to consider MT as a personality trait and then as a skill, and finally reflect on how this much-sought-after concept can be developed in individuals.

2.1.1.1 MT as a personality trait

When talking about MT in sport, and as I have surmised in coach education, many coaches will often assert that an individual either has or does not have ‘it’ (MT), and that it is a natural and fixed phenomenon or a genetically embedded trait. Seemingly congruent with this assertion by many coaches is the frequently cited definition of MT by Jones *et al.* (2002, p. 209) that states that MT involves “having the natural ... psychological edge”. This promotes the idea that MT is somewhat innate (Jones *et al.*,

2002). Similar to this view is the more recent and adapted definition by Coulter *et al.* (2010, p. 715), which talks of the “inherent” aspect to MT – an inference within their definition that supports the idea that MT is, at least in part, something with which we are born.

Early research framed this ‘innate’ aspect of MT, with Clough *et al.* (2002), for example, developing their work from the personality trait of ‘hardiness’. More specifically, Clough *et al.* (2002) developed the ‘4 Cs’ of MT. The only difference from the concept of hardiness (which consisted of commitment, control and challenge) was the addition of the personality trait of confidence, as it was posited that this gives it more sport specificity (Clough *et al.*, 2002). Interestingly, within the original ‘3 Cs’ approach, the combination of commitment, control and challenge is deemed to elicit hardiness through a “growth-orientated” approach (Sheard, 2010, p. 59). This suggests a similarity to the ‘growth mindset’ and how individuals process setbacks or how they interpret situations in order to learn and grow (Dweck, 1986).

Returning to the trait basis of MT, however, studies have also pointed to the roots of MT in one’s inherent drive/motivation plus traits such as optimism (Coulter *et al.*, 2010; Gould *et al.*, 2002; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Nicholls *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, many researchers have sought to explain MT with reference to a number of different traits or characteristics (ranging from 10 to 32, depending upon the publication), which again underlines the complexity of, and confusion about, MT (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Thelwell *et al.*, 2005). For example, constructs such as self-belief, resilience, motivation, commitment, dedication and intelligence are seen as integral to MT, endorsing the view that there are combinations of personality dispositions and characteristics that affect MT.

Adding to this perspective of MT as a personality trait is the work in the field of genetics exploring how our genetic make-up can predispose individuals to certain personality traits that might pertain to MT (Horsburgh *et al.*, 2009). Despite some concerns about the use of the MTQ48 in this research by Horsburgh and colleagues (2009) (given that inventories were completed at home without appropriate vigilance), such work has provided some strong indications of a genetic influence in MT (Horsburgh *et al.*, 2009). An interesting study with some relevance to the purportedly genetic and innate component of MT investigated the composition of the frontal lobe and its grey matter (Clough *et al.*, 2010). Using the MTQ48, Clough *et al.* (2010) found that those with higher MT scores had a greater density of grey matter. This finding was considered significant as this area of the brain is associated with monitoring and strategic thinking (Crust & Clough, 2011). Hardy *et al.* (2014) researched MT through personality theory and using the rRST (revised Reinforcement sensitivity theory – Gray & McNaughton, 2000) along with an informant-rated inventory (similar to Bull *et al.*, 2005) to add validity by ruling out self-serving bias. These findings suggest elite cricket players that were considered more mentally tough were more sensitive to threat (punishment sensitivity) than to reward (sensitivity). Despite these personality correlations with MT this research conceptualised MT as a stable concept whilst using the unbiased perception of these 110 coaches it lacks the individual athletes goal-focused approach that is inherent in the behavioural activation system (BAS) and so limits the results. In addition, this study was based on cricket players and a sport that differs considerably to open invasion type sports like rugby. So, whilst based on the informant-rated questionnaire for bias it also used a broad range of participants and coaches (n =110) in respect to experience and level of sport. Regardless of these limitations this research does open up the idea of triangulating an

inventory (possibly player and coach rated), along with the rRST and brain imaging such as the fMRI

To summarise, MT is considered to have some of its roots in personality, largely due to the etymological similarities MT has had with many other traits, such as hardiness, resilience and tough-mindedness (Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Thelwell *et al.*, 2005). As an aside, this suggests that these other traits have possibly just been “repackaged or redressed” as MT, rather than MT having its own specific identity (Andersen, 2011, p. 69). Despite this, many researchers have presented MT, at least in part, as a unique dispositional construct that helps athletes to deal with pressure and adversity (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012; Hardy *et al.*, 2014; Jones *et al.*, 2002). However, it has also been recognised that the roots of MT do not lie in personality alone. Indeed, there is continuing debate on the extent to which MT has a basis in genetics and personality or whether it is predominantly a cognitively-based skill-set that is developed over time (Crust & Clough, 2011).

2.1.1.2 MT as a psychological skill-set

Despite the various findings on the ‘traitness’ of MT, Bull *et al.* (2005) placed ‘tough thinking’ at the pinnacle of their MT pyramid, emphasising that it is an individual’s thinking that immediately precedes the mentally tough action. This is similar to Lombardi’s view: “[MT] is many things and rather difficult to explain ... it’s a state of mind – you could call it character in action” (Sheard, 2013, p 28). In short, this assertion suggests that MT is as much about what one does with what one has as it is about what one has (Parkes & Mallett, 2011). Indeed, others have since stated that “[mentally tough] behavior is just that, a behavior” (Hardy *et al.*, 2014, p. 70),

essentially claiming that MT is manifested in action, with this action stemming from an athlete's 'thinking' and mindset (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Gibson, 1998).

Andersen (2011) questioned the assertion that MT can 'only' be present in the face of "pressures, challenges and adversities" (Andersen, 2011, p. 74), which implies that MT (if present) might then become absent. Andersen further pondered: "Can I not be mentally tough when I am competing against an opponent who poses no threat or challenge?" (p. 74). This seems a valid point and highlights the question of whether MT is an inherent disposition – one that should manifest itself consistently – or whether it is something that we need to consciously or selectively enact or display. For an analogy in terms of physiology, take a 1,500-metre runner who is exceptionally fit (with a VO₂ max of 80) but who comes up against a weak field in terms of comparable fitness: if this athlete cruises to an easy win and remains well within his/her physiological parameters, then does this imply that he/she is no longer exceptionally fit? While this is a simplistic perspective, it seems logical that an individual can be exceptionally fit but not always show it, and can therefore be mentally tough when there are no perceived challenges. Regardless of the validity of either premise, this does imply that MT might have an innate aspect to it, but that it is best seen or manifested in an athlete's actions. Thus, individuals might well have the traits or the inherent capacities to be mentally tough, but actually behaving in a mentally tough manner is more to do with how they utilise those traits or capacities; or, in other words, the skills to act mentally tough, and possibly even the volitional aspect of choosing to act mentally tough, seem pertinent.

In line with these arguments, and as early as 1986, Loehr defined MT as disciplined thinking, while a decade later Bull *et al.* (1996) described a mentally tough performer as one who has superior mental skills – both endorsing the view that

an individual's thinking is integral to being mentally tough. Similarly, Loehr (1982, p. 32) described MT as a "learned skill" and showed how athletes can develop skills such as imagery and goal-setting that enhance MT. Subsequent studies of MT have proposed many specific psychological skills as drivers of MT, such as focus, concentration, decision-making (D-M), emotional intelligence, coping and self-awareness (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009c; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Nicholls *et al.*, 2008; Thelwell *et al.*, 2005). For example, self-regulation is seen as giving greater independence (through responsibility and ownership), developing greater resourcefulness and improved problem-solving abilities that impact MT (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Cook *et al.*, 2014; Sheard, 2010). Additionally, how individuals interpret challenges or perceive critical incidents is considered important to developing MT (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008b; Connaughton *et al.*, 2010). For clarity, if the individual sees a challenge as an opportunity, then there is greater motivation to demonstrate MT (Clough *et al.*, 2002) – a perspective that reflects Epictetus' adage that "men are not disturbed by things, but by the views which they take of them" (quoted in Porter, 2014).

Reflecting on the range of skills considered to be important for MT, Andersen (2011) has reinforced the view of MT as an amalgam of positive performance abilities (skills) or, as previously stated, as a "constellation of mental skills" (Loehr, 1982, p. 11). Interestingly, these same skills are also recognised for their importance in 'peak performance' in sport, suggesting a correlation between MT and 'peak' or optimum performance (Orlick & Partington, 1988; Williams & Krane, 2001). Indeed, Gucciardi *et al.* (2009a) showed the similarity between MT and peak performance when they compared psychological skills training to MT training interventions and found similar

outcomes in terms of the developed levels of MT. As such, this again highlights the skill dimension of MT (Crust & Azadi, 2009; Sheard & Golby, 2006).

All in all, the studies focusing on behavioural attributes and skills mentioned above present a more varied, broad, complex and malleable view of MT than that suggested by trait-focused research – a view in which MT is largely a product of one’s psychological skills and, therefore, has the capacity to be developed. MT research also shows that it may have more variability to it and is not “as stable [i.e. trait] as previously hypothesized” by Clough *et al.* (2002); it may be “shaped by contextual or social factors” and is a more fluid quality than a fixed innate quality (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2015a, p. 41). Again, this suggests that MT is rooted in a host of psychological skills and, significantly, that it can therefore be developed.

2.1.1.3 MT as a target for development

Relevant to the conceptualisation of MT as a personality trait (such as tough-mindedness, hardiness or resilience) or a skill (such as concentration, focus or D-M) (Crust & Clough, 2011), an interesting finding in early research, and possibly rooted in the trait perspective, was that only 9 per cent of a group of coaches believed they could affect or develop MT (Gould *et al.*, 1987). Since then, however, a number of studies have considered the means by which MT can be enhanced in individuals. Indeed, it has more recently been proposed that MT is an acquired ability that can be ‘taught’ (Gordon *et al.*, 2007), and a Google search using the terms ‘mental toughness’ and ‘development’ in June 2017 returned over 660,000 results. In this section, I will discuss approaches used to develop MT.

As an early advocate of developing MT, Loehr (1982) put forward a full programme called Athletic Excellence Training (AET) to develop MT. More specifically, this programme was directed at creating what he termed the Ideal Performance State (IPS). The programme involved educating athletes in attention control, confidence, imagery, visual control, and attitude (or mindset) along with the ubiquitous aspect of motivation (Loehr, 1986). Indeed, education has been consistently identified as a precursor to changing MT levels (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Butt *et al.*, 2010; Connaughton *et al.*, 2010). Part of this education has commonly been to help athletes to understand the processes of MT and move away from any preconceptions and misunderstandings of its nebulous nature (Moran, 2004).

Over a decade after Loehr's AET, Goldberg (1998) proposed another similar programme focused on mental skills and techniques to promote MT. Like Loehr (1982, 1986), Goldberg focused on several factors such as confidence, concentration and challenge. While based more on anecdotal evidence than on empirical evidence, it was felt that such programmes provided ways that MT could indeed be developed, most especially through psychological skills training (PST; Connaughton *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, PST, whether standalone or integrated into a wider programme, has been seen as instrumentally important in assisting athletes to be mentally tough (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009b).

Of course, the development of MT skills is considered to take a significant period of time, especially on a career path from early sporting experiences into senior or elite levels (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008b, 2010; Gould *et al.*, 2002; Thelwell *et al.*, 2005). For example, Bull *et al.* (2005) highlighted that it takes time and also a level of consistency in one's performance for MT to develop fully and having "consistency over a period of time" is seen as important for MT (Graham, 1990; Weinberg *et al.*,

2011, p. 158). As an extension of this, it is accepted that MT is not a quick fix (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008; Sheard, 2010).

Building on this theme of time, other research has aligned the development of MT skills with the work of Bloom (1985), whereby MT has an early, a middle and a late stage (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Connaughton *et al.*, 2010). This temporal breakdown relates to when and how dispositions and skills might be developed (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008b). For example, Bull *et al.* (2005) have suggested that young cricketers will develop MT at the early stage with foreign playing experiences. However, rather than MT being something that can be infinitely improved, research has also reported that the development of MT in individuals has a cap whereby research has stated it as having a maintenance phase; in short, this implies that once athletes seem to have reached the upper limits of their potential, the focus needs to shift from developing MT to sustaining MT (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008).

More specifically, Connaughton *et al.* (2010) posited that, in addition to development phases, MT also has a maintenance phase. This suggests that MT could lessen or change over time (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008b). In their analysis, Connaughton *et al.* (2010) suggested that the maintenance of MT levels maybe facilitated by an appropriate reflective practice on critical incidents and supported by having a significant social network. The performers who participated in this study felt that their MT was “influenced by a variety of individuals” such as parents, family and friends in addition to coaches, in tandem with factors such as critical incidents (p. 28). It was by reflecting upon such critical incidents with an appropriate sport/life perspective, enabled by these significant others, that athletes were able to maintain MT. Indeed, the interpretation of events (critical incidents) was previously seen to influence MT levels (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008a). This suggests that MT is both a

‘taught’ and a ‘caught’ construct in its development phases but, more especially, a ‘caught’ construct when it needs to be maintained. Crucially, given the demands of consistency in professional rugby today, this idea that MT should be not only developed but also maintained seems particularly pertinent.

2.1.2 MT performances: other factors

Having explored how MT is developed, it is worth considering what else promotes this MT-related thinking and behaviour. Indeed, previous research has highlighted that MT is not only an intrapersonal construct but also an interpersonal construct. More specifically, in the following section I will look at how MT can also be a product of coaching and operational processes, as well as of the surrounding sociocultural environment.

2.1.2.1 MT as a product of coaching and operational processes

Within any environment, leadership is considered important; in regards to sporting environments, coach leadership “is one of the most significant factors for those performing and operating in sport” (Cruickshank & Collins, 2016, p. 1199). Coaches help to maintain the sporting attitude and competence of athletes, which impacts performance (Chelladurai, 2007; Horn, 2008), and “coaches are critical in developing athletes’ mental toughness” (Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Sheard, 2010, p. 112). Indeed, both athletes and coaches believe that a coach’s influence is significant for MT (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008a, 2010; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009a; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010). For example, coaches help to develop the psychological skills necessary for MT

(Connaughton & Hanton, 2009; Crust, 2008; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d). Indeed, it has been found that simply by endorsing goal-setting, imagery and PST, coaches add to their effectiveness and subsequently help to develop MT, thus reinforcing the significance of coach leadership to enhancing MT (Bell *et al.*, 2013; Bull *et al.*, 2005; Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011).

From a coaching content perspective, simulating playing scenarios has been shown to be useful in developing important skills for MT, such as decision making (hereafter D-M), through enhancing ‘game sense’, which enables elite athletes to perform better (Abernethy & Zawi, 2007; Den Duyn, 1997). Simulation training itself helps to embed roles and enhance perceptual-cognitive skills, including D-M, which is key to sporting success (Lorains *et al.*, 2011). Through a mastery approach within simulation training, coaches can also grow MT (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010). More specifically, simulation training assists athletes to “develop and master the skills they will need to maintain optimal focus” by replicating game demands and promoting reflective practice and experiential learning (Taylor & Wilson, 2005, p. 60). Replicating game scenarios can particularly improve situational awareness and self-monitoring processes, and leads to improved D-M skills; indeed, athletes’ confidence levels also improve via increased social interactions and the associated cognitions within team sports, along with the communication skills inherent in these game scenarios (Bandura, 1997). Similar to the ‘growth mindset’ (Dweck, 1986), how a coach values or emphasises pushing through and solving problems (D-M) in simulation training further helps athletes to become more resilient after making errors and increases athletes’ sense of control and subsequent confidence (Parkes & Mallett, 2011). While similar to rehearsing game strategy in normal practice, simulation training should be short in duration and more closely aligned to actual competition

challenges, however the difficulty is in maintaining the fidelity in these simulations (Lorains *et al.*, 2011).

Adding varying pressures into simulation training results in stress inoculation training (SI-T) (Meichenbaum, 2001); and when delivered with the right processes (Mace & Carroll, 1985), SI-T can also significantly impact MT (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Mahoney *et al.*, 2014c). SI-T is a cognitive and behavioural process that reduces anxiety and improves functioning through three phases: first by conceptualising stressors, then by rehearsing coping skills, and finally by applying these skills to future events with adaptive results (Meichenbaum, 1985). By ‘affirming’ actions and growth (learning), SI-T presents clear steps to deal with challenges, and is seen as integral in building MT by enabling athletes to transfer these coping skills into performances (Szabo & Marian, 2012) through self-monitoring and reflective practice (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Connaughton *et al.*, 2008b; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). This cognitive behavioural process increases athletes’ perception of having the coping resources to deal with challenges, which can further reduce anxiety and facilitate cognitive processing (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Indeed, MT research has in a similar way shown how individuals appraise obstacles and interpret events, as mentioned earlier, and the belief that they have the necessary resources to overcome these challenges will build MT (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2015b). Through challenging athletes appropriately, SI-T can build MT by reducing stress through experiences and increasing a sense of control (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Smith, 2006a). In this process, coaches help athletes to use pressure and “channel anxiety” in order to perform better (Jones *et al.*, 2007, p. 256; Sheard, 2013). The idea of ‘choosing’ to control these emotions reasserts MT as a mindset whereby an individual manages these anxieties and pressures through their cognitions and

volitions (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Sheard, 2013). Indeed, it has been argued that athletes with MT have “an unshakeable perseverance and conviction towards some goal”, and actually utilise pressure (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d Mahoney *et al.*, 2014a; Middleton *et al.*, 2004; Sheard, 2013, p. 37). Adding rivalry into training further increases demands and builds MT (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Connaughton *et al.*, 2008b; Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Cook *et al.*, 2014; Driska *et al.*, 2012; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Sheard, 2013). Crucially, the level of challenge or stress needs to be delivered with athlete awareness and understanding and at the correct level in order to be successful (Mace & Carroll, 1986).

As another coaching process, deliberate practice (DP) draws further upon cognitive processes that are linked to MT by demanding that athletes are fully engaged and focused in training with precise goal objectives (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). DP requires intense effort and attention and can improve self-regulation, which is instrumental in expert performance development (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993). The effort applied within DP can be psychological, such as heightened concentration levels, as much as physical (Hodges & Starkes, 1996; Young & Salmela, 2010). The concentration in DP is tied to clearly defined tasks through athletes’ own awareness of their roles and this heightened focus is supplemented by coach feedback (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993). The key focus of DP, which is its relevance to performance improvement, encourages individuals to internalise training with greater purpose (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993), which enhances the commitment and control that underpin MT (Clough *et al.*, 2002). Crucially, the level of coach feedback further embeds adaptations and enables quicker progression (Côté *et al.*, 2013). The task focus in DP can make it an arduous process but it is recognised that there will be a monotonic benefit whereby it can enhance athlete identity with elite performer demands and subsequently increase self-

esteem (Baker & Young, 2014). How athletes commit to the demands in DP is often associated with their ability to self-regulate (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993), and the metacognitions whereby they take an active part in their development are crucial to optimising DP (Zimmerman, 1989).

Inherent in all of the above processes is the augmented feedback provided by coaches, which is crucial to effective learning (Schmidt & Lee, 2011) and the development of MT (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Connaughton *et al.*, 2010). It is crucial for coaches to provide feedback appropriately, in terms of how and when this feedback (verbal, non-verbal, visual) is delivered (Wulf & Shea, 2004). In part, this involves how coaches challenge their athletes: they need to know the appropriate level of challenge (moderately difficult), as any discrepancy between abilities and challenges will become demotivating for athletes (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). Therefore, coaches need to be aware of their athletes' capacities with regard to both skill level and emotional control so as to not overstress or 'flood' them, as can happen when using such processes as SI-T to develop MT (Leitenberg, 1990). Gauging athletes' capacities requires awareness (emotional intelligence) and can be facilitated by using a questioning approach that enhances coach and athlete awareness (Mahoney *et al.*, 2014c; Mitchell *et al.*, 2006). This questioning approach can promote reflective practice and increase self-regulation and ownership, as mentioned above (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Cook *et al.*, 2014; Sheard, 2010). It is also important how specific the feedback is and when coaches provide this feedback, because if it is concurrent or provided too soon after performance, it can reduce self-reflection and learning by athletes (Maslovat *et al.*, 2009). This self-reflection can be reinforced through the use of video analysis, which is consistently utilised in elite sport today and provides objective and quantitative feedback (through match statistics) that

significantly enhances performances (Lohse & Hodges, 2015). With the demands in open-field invasion sports, such as rugby, there is an increased need to provide feedback (video) for such things as ‘off-the-ball’ work and a subsequent need for coach feedback (Maslovat & Franks, 2015). The use of video feedback for open-field invasion sports can further support DP, mentioned earlier, and can also greatly add to D-M (Baker *et al.*, 2003). This video feedback allows for greater specificity along with measurables, creating a more accurate model to replicate.

There is also a multitude of research upon coach feedback regarding timing (concurrent or terminal) and nature (explicit or implicit) that warrants understanding but is too vast to elaborate in this thesis; needless to say, it is an inherent part of coaching and ‘coachability’ is an important aspect for MT (Driska *et al.*, 2012; Masters & Maxwell, 2008; Wulf, 2013). In brief, though, the use of multiple forms of feedback is recommended, whereby verbal and visual feedback (demonstration) improves reflection that assists in MT development (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010) and self-awareness that enables athletes to create accurate self-models will also add to MT (Mahoney *et al.*, 2014c); however, it is also important for coaches to consider the guidance hypothesis of feedback (Schmidt, 1991), whereby excessive feedback might impinge on self-reflection and reduce self-regulation in athletes (Winstein & Schmidt, 1990) that can reduce their independence and resourcefulness that develops MT (Cook *et al.*, 2014). Demonstration such as simulation training, augmented with verbal feedback that is success-affirming, has been proven most effective and will enhance the key attributes of focus and confidence within MT (Carroll & Bandura, 1985, 1990; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Lewthwaite & Wulf, 2012; Lohse & Hodges, 2015).

To summarise, coaches can develop MT in athletes through endorsing PST

and integrating these into programmes. Primarily though, it is through the use of training processes by coaches that define roles in simulating scenarios and team understanding that helps develop MT in players. This increases decision making and player focus and by adding challenge and rivalry, it further conditions teams to cope with stressors. Furthermore, by providing feedback coaches can help players appraise these stressors more positively, as well as increasing their self-regulation, self-monitoring and ownership by promoting more reflective practice. By using DP coaches will also promote reflection and increase player self-awareness and awareness of the sporting demands placed on them through experiential and social cognitive processes. Coaches have a critical role in these training processes by providing augmented feedback and knowing their athletes' capacities, which enables them to deliver training appropriately.

The feedback provided by coaches also adds to the environment that they create, which can further facilitate MT (Nicholls *et al.*, 2016). In the following section, I will review how this wider environment facilitates MT (Mahoney *et al.*, 2014a; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010).

2.1.2.2 MT as a product of the environment

“You are a product of your environment.” This quotation from W. Clement Stone (quoted in Hawley, 2017) states clearly how the environment has a major effect on us. I discussed in the last section how coaches impact MT and, within this, how they impact their environment in a MT-consistent manner. In this section, I will look at how the wider team environment impacts MT, and how it is seen as one of the four main components in developing MT (Anthony *et al.*, 2016; Bull *et al.*, 2005). Indeed,

and as highlighted earlier, MT can be ‘caught’ via one’s environment (Crust, 2008; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). Research pinpoints not only the influence of the environment in developing MT (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Gould *et al.*, 2002) but also, especially, its impact on many of the dispositional traits of MT, such as confidence (Crust & Clough, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007). This shows how the sociocultural environment is also important to MT, and I will review in particular the part played by parents, role models, group culture and relationships in this section (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011).

The environment in which MT is developed is of course partly shaped by parents and how they help athletes to deal with performance setbacks (Bull *et al.*, 2005). Parents or guardians are key to the long-term progression of athletes into elite sport and contribute, for example, by setting values such as work ethos that underpin training processes (Baker & Young, 2014). Parents can also represent the positive relationships that help to foster growth and confidence within athletes and may also have a greater impact on MT than any “particular interventions” alone (Andersen, 2011, p. 84). How significant others such as parents react to athletes’ performances can therefore significantly impact MT, and no doubt the perceptions of the athletes themselves (Bull *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, Weinberg *et al.* (2011) suggested that a parent education programme would greatly facilitate the development of MT. Parents could then support athletes after setbacks and enable growth after trauma that then builds MT (Calhoun *et al.*, 2010; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Parents, social networks and non-sport personnel provide crucial balance to athletes, and perspective from outside of their sport (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2008; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011).

Having role models from whom athletes can learn MT behaviours is also

instrumental in developing MT (Crust & Clough, 2011; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010), and Weinberg *et al.* (2011) suggested that bringing these mentally tough athletes into the environment to assist others is highly effective for the development of MT. With particular relevance to professional rugby, senior athletes can help to influence how other athletes cope with challenges (Crust & Clough, 2011), and these role models are often beneficial to teammates in the intermediate stages of MT development (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010), possibly due to the disciplined approach that they can bring to elite-level sport (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould *et al.*, 2002). This concept of athlete leadership is similar to Railo's idea of 'cultural architects', who are considered useful in inspiring high performance (Railo, 1986). Indeed, integral to team resilience (discussed below) are dynamic and personal interactions, such as those often engaged in by athlete leaders within a team, who can also reduce the emphasis on the head coach. More specifically, these leaders can have an important psychosocial impact (for example, by developing high levels of camaraderie) that can help with challenges such as restructuring athletes' mindsets towards setbacks (such as defeats) or stressors and maintain motivation (Morgan *et al.*, 2015, p. 95). Morgan *et al.* (2012) also stated how social capital "protects a group" from stressors, though this research was focused upon resilience rather than upon eliciting MT (p. 549). This social capital as discussed by Morgan and colleagues is when there is "the existence of high quality interactions and caring relationships within groups" and includes the groups identity and perceived social support that builds emotional bonds in the team (Morgan *et al.*, 2013, p 555). In addition to this, and by reducing dependence on the coach, self-regulation within team sports often stems from the modelling that occurs between athletes, which can build self-efficacy (Schunk, 1987).

As mentioned in relation to coaching and operational processes, it is acknowledged that a ‘challenging’ environment has an important impact upon athlete development (Collins & MacNamara, 2012) and preparing athletes for competition at the elite level (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Indeed, be it the ‘rocky road’ to success (Collins & MacNamara, 2012) or the idea that ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’ (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), there is a growing acceptance that tough environments can facilitate the experiences and subsequent coping strategies that can enhance an individual’s capacity to deal with challenges and to become mentally tough (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). As Clive Woodward, the former rugby union World Cup-winning coach, said, “how these [setbacks] are handled is the mark of a great team” (Morgan *et al.*, 2015, p. 99). In a rare and insightful longitudinal study within the Australian Football League (AFL), Tibbert *et al.* (2015) also found that, over the 14-month period of the study, a young athlete adopted a ‘no pain, no gain’ mindset through being ‘acculturated’ in the environment. The athlete within this study compromised his prior personal beliefs for those of the new group, which reinforces the notion that MT may be “more to do with sport cultures and environments than being housed within some constellation of personality traits” (Tibbert *et al.*, 2015, p. 77).

Similar to the cultures and environments that promote MT, Sarkar and Fletcher (2014) have suggested that greater psychological resilience will also result from the metacognitions and appraisal by athletes within a positive environment along with the alignment of staff and others in the wider group. Additionally, Morgan *et al.* (2013) found four crucial component parts to the process of developing team-level resilience that have similar aspects to MT research. The first of these was ‘group structure’, which refers to the defined roles and team norms that are constructed

through simulation, along when used with a ‘mastery approaches’ will help build MT (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Driska *et al.*, 2012). ‘Collective efficacy’ refers to the teams’ confidence in rugby and is inherent in MT research (Jones *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, the ‘social capital’ in this resilience research refers to the interpersonal connections and cohesion that gives the teams a protective ‘barrier’ to stressors and maintain motivation to perform (Morgan *et al.*, 2013). This cohesion is defined as a “dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency of a group to stick together and remain united in pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs” whereby they may be task or socially orientated (Carron *et al.*, 1998, 213). Overall, the existence of the many environmental factors reviewed above, such as parents, role models and group/team peer to peer influences, strongly endorses W. Clement Stone’s belief that “You are a product of your environment”.

2.2 What is needed for professional rugby union: questions from an applied and research perspective

‘They simply didn’t turn up’ is a phrase often used to describe poor performances on any given day, and shows the dynamic, fluid and often fragile nature of sport. It also demonstrates the constant vigilance needed in order to perform ‘consistently’ or that is MT (Graham, 1990). With the exponential growth and associated pressures in rugby coaching today it can be increasingly precarious and reinforces the need for teams to overcome adverse situations, achieve the important win-loss ratios and channeling MT is crucial as it is instrumental to success (Goldberg, 1998; Gould *et al.*, 1987). It is the consistency in these mentally tough performances that is most

pertinent or delivering these performances game to game, rather than the development of MT itself. As a consequence, it is important that we understand how to act in a mentally tough way and how the mindset to deliver MT on a consistent basis can be generated. Accepting the key role coach leadership has on the success of any team, it is therefore crucial to examine how coaches optimise resources, including players MT in order to deliver the greatest MT performances week in, week out, rather than simply how they develop MT alone.

Specifically, in this section, I will highlight the demands in elite rugby today, offer a brief overview of its structure and set out the various factors that make consistent displays of MT essential in order to be successful in the modern game.

Rugby union is a 15-a-side open-field invasion sport with a high degree of interdependence between players and requiring a lot of coordination and alignment. The essential aim is to maintain possession and score points. There are over 64 possible infringements at a breakdown (a form of continuity play in rugby), which exposes the stressors, distractions and adversity that players face and, consequently, the need for organisation and focus even before performance levels are considered (World Rugby, 2017). Even in their charter of play, World Rugby (2017) accept the game's apparent "mass of contradictions" in that it is "perfectly acceptable to be seen to be exerting extreme physical pressure on an opponent" but not "willfully or maliciously to inflict injury", further adding to D-M and MT demands. Organising the independent and interdependent aspects in rugby and defining roles and approaches within these is exceptionally demanding for any coach: the fact that the British Lions tour to New Zealand in 2017 had nine coaches for 41 players demonstrates the level of attention to detail and the extent of individual playing needs.

Added to the cognitive demands are the growing financial implications in elite rugby today. I was one of Ireland's first group of contracted rugby players at the dawn of the professional era in 1996, earning an annual salary of approximately €40,000; today, Dan Carter earns over €1.5 million a year for his French club side. This not only underlines the increased rewards in today's game but also the demands to perform year on year, and the increasing divide between club and country that sets further challenges for coaches. Pressures are further accentuated by success or failure within these professional entities, which determines players' own well-being. For instance, relegation from the English Premiership into the second tier of English rugby can mean a drop in annual salary from more than £100,000 to as little as £6,000 (Williams & Aloia, 2017). On top of this, wealthy owners investing vast sums of money put direct pressure on club sides, and the situation can be further complicated by win bonuses of as much as £115,000 at international level that test the commitment of players to club and country. All of these scenarios are played out in today's highly leveraged sport with an increased need for vigilance to maintain standards with an ever-growing fan base, highly expectant boards and wealthy invested owners, and all under an increased media scrutiny that both highlights and adds to expectations.

Jackman's (2017) comment that "Dance is a contact sport; rugby is a collision sport" articulates the intensity of rugby and the potential of sustaining injury while playing the game, and highlights the high level of MT required to operate successfully by gaining advantage in these collisions. The average weight of a Six Nations player has increased by approximately 23kg in the last 50 years, and in fact members of the 2014 England U18 team weighed on average 7kg heavier than those of England's 1980 Grand Slam-winning men's senior team. In addition, the modern game requires greater general fitness, with the ball now in play for more than 43 per cent of a game,

thus increasing the physical, skill and fitness demands made of today's rugby players (World Rugby, 2017). At the elite level, players need to be bigger, fitter and faster, which increasingly tests the commitment and MT of players individually and teams collectively. As George Orwell said sport is “war minus the shooting” (Beck, 2012, p. 73) or, as John Smit the South African World Cup-winning captain once said, “rugby is there to replicate warfare for some South Africans” (Cleary, 2012).

In researching MT specifically in relation to rugby union, I found few studies in my search. There are a handful of studies specifically on MT in rugby league, but, while the two codes are similar in some ways, rugby league's structure, team numbers and interdependence greatly differ from those of rugby union. Nevertheless, research by Sheard *et al.* (2009) found a correlation between MT and performance success and indeed suggested the potential for ameliorative cultural environments. Also based in Australia but examining the AFL, Tibbert *et al.* (2015) offered some relevant insights into MT with regard to cultural factors but they did not expand upon how these factors could in fact be proactively and productively shaped to optimize MT; in short, the applied angle that I am most interested in.

As regards studies specifically investigating rugby union, Parkes *et al.* (2011) reviewed the individual attributes and correlation to optimism in MT; while these attributes may be impacted by the environment, an applied understanding was also not the primary or encompassing focus of their research. More recent rugby union research focused on the closely related construct of resilience (Morgan *et al.*, 2015). However, as these findings were based on autobiographical data – written for popular rather than scientific consumption – there are still presumably still gaps in our knowledge of how resilient (or mentally tough) teams function.

To summarise, senior professional rugby is a complex and extremely demanding game but little research exists on how MT can be intentionally and effectively elicited and sustained in team members. As such, it is vital to better understand how players can be managed and supported to ‘turn up’ consistently and deliver mentally tough performances.

Overall, in this chapter I have critically reviewed the existing literature on MT, sorting the wheat from the chaff to identify and exemplify the key points of knowledge and essential gaps for practice from the perspective of professional rugby union. As evidenced in this chapter and stated in so much of the literature, MT is a broad construct; ambiguous and hard to tie down. Current definitions contain references to natural as well as developed skills, together with traits, behaviours and mindsets. Even within any one of these there are in turn many more factors that are employed to define or delineate MT such as confidence, resilience, focus, bounce-back-ability; as stated it can be a “constellation of mental skills” (Anderson, 2011; Loehr, 1982, p 11). On top of this, research asserts the relevance of both coach and environment upon MT. In order to help curtail this vagueness I will provide a working definition for my thesis focused on professional rugby and will adapt this as my thesis develops. Regardless, or possibly because of the many perspectives on MT, it has consistently been related to factors that optimize performance. Indeed, Gucciardi et al. (2009b) found no discernible difference between a specific MT building programme and a psychological skills training (PST) programme that is purposefully designed to optimise performances. In the seminal work by Bull et al. (2005) the term “winning mind” was used to provide participants with a focus for their study (p 214). Other studies and definitions talk of “the ability to achieve personal performance goals” (Gucciardi et al., 2008; Hardy et al., 2015, p 70), athletes “push[ing]

themselves to the limits of their capabilities” (Connaughton et al., 2010, p180), and indeed more explicitly by stating MT is “optimal performance” itself (Arthur et al., 2015, p 232). Consequently in line with these factors and the idea of thriving and excelling under pressure, I am using a working definition that places MT as: *“Outcome performances whereby the combination of individual and team factors within the environment and/or coach led that optimise the in situ resources towards optimal levels”*. In doing so I accept the broad nature of my definition though despite this it confirms the consistent optimising of performances that is in research, and along with my pragmatic approach it provides a frame of reference for the integral role of both coach and environment on MT.

Along with this working definition for MT that emphasises athletes or players being their “best” (Caddick & Ryall, 2012) it is also important to recognise that MT might be as much a phrase in sporting arenas as it is in academia. Indeed, whilst there was were over 200,000 searches in Google for MT and rugby” that showed all sources including research, there were over 100,000 for MT in the ‘News’ section of Google. This section of Google shows news items such as sporting articles that reference MT either by an athlete, coach or journalist, and highlights the topical and practical nature of MT where it is often described “in hindsight” (Caddick & Ryall, 2012, p 146). Furthermore, MT is seen as “a critical variable in the poplar media” that reinforces the idea that this is where it exists most prevalently and where it first came to prominence (Middleton et al, 2004, p 91). In line with this practical side, MT has increasingly gained “attention” in performance psychology that further suggests its standing in sporting practice and it’s ability to get athletes engaged in performance psychology (Gucciardi et al., 2012).

To make an important step forward in *practice-focused* research, in Chapter 3 I will investigate coach and player perceptions of *how* MT is elicited in professional rugby union.

CHAPTER 3

MENTALLY TOUGH PERFORMANCE FACTORS IN SENIOR PROFESSIONAL RUGBY

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I introduced mental toughness and considered its significance in sport (Connaughton & Hanton, 2009; Gould *et al.*, 1987; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2008). Despite widespread acceptance of its importance, however, MT is still an ambiguous construct and seen as a constellation of varying attributes (Gucciardi, 2012). It is “many things and rather difficult to explain” (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Sheard, 2013, p. 28). In Chapter 2, I then went on to review the make-up of mental toughness, be it a trait or skill, the pertinent aspects in its development and maintenance, and some important considerations for this nebulous construct in professional rugby union football.

More specifically, in Chapter 2 I highlighted that the demands of rugby union – such as the ability to deal with the stressors of extreme physical contact and potential injury, performance expectations, financial demands and an ever-increasing amount of stakeholders and media coverage – require significant levels of MT within professional teams. To date, however, MT research in rugby (both union and league) has been sparse. Of the work that has been done, some has focused on aspects such as personality traits related to MT or comparing nations’ MT levels (Golby & Sheard, 2004; Sheard, 2010), while more recent research has reviewed how MT could be developed in rugby through attaining a mentally tough ‘mindset’; however, despite uncovering some interesting processes, this research was conducted on a non-

professional sample and limited to an analysis of only three participants (Parkes & Mallett, 2011).

With regard to elite participants, as per the focus of my research, Morgan *et al.* (2015) did look at the importance of the environment and group dynamics on the linked construct of ‘resilience’ in England’s World Cup-winning team. However, this work was based on retrospective autobiographies rather than focused interviews and analysis of primary data, with obvious limitations such as self-serving bias or mnemonic neglect (Myers, 2015; Pinter *et al.*, 2011). In other elite-level work, Tibbert *et al.* (2015) looked more specifically at MT development and environmental factors and found that “the roots of MT may have more to do with sport cultures and environments than being housed within some constellation of personality traits” (p. 77). Indeed, within this study, Tibbert *et al.* (2015) found that players can become acculturated into an environment by adopting the values, behaviours and norms of the group, even when initially resistant to the demands of this subculture. While this longitudinal research reviewed several processes such as overtraining and stress recovery, the findings highlight the impact that the social environment can also have on an individual’s MT. Despite these insights, however, the research by Tibbert *et al.* (2015) was focused on only one individual and not within rugby union. Overall, therefore, the evidence base on MT in professional rugby, and especially on how this factor can be proactively optimised, is currently limited.

In light of these studies and the knowledge gaps identified in Chapter 2, the purpose of this research project was to explore perceptions on how MT can be elicited and propagated throughout professional rugby teams on a day-to-day/game-to-game basis. In doing so, I aimed to identify elements that were felt to elicit and propagate mentally tough performances in squads who need to chiefly sustain, exploit and

combine (rather than necessarily develop) their individual MT (given that professional teams invariably strive to perform and get results in every match they play). The results from this study would add to knowledge on how consistent mentally tough performances in professional rugby may be facilitated, offer a comparison and contrast with existing knowledge on MT development in younger performers/teams, and provide practitioners, coaches and team managers with further advice on the delivery of consistent high performance.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Design and methods

In contrast to recent research that has described how subcultures understand, perceive and construct MT (e.g., what being mentally tough means for a group: Tibbert *et al.*, 2015; Coulter *et al.*, 2016), the aim in this study was to identify factors perceived to help in eliciting and propagating MT within professional rugby (Denzel & Lincoln, 2008). As such, to untangle the ambiguity of MT and accepting its contextual nature within coach practice, I am adopting an explorative and constructivist approach that “disavow[s] objective claims about reality and embrace[s] time and context (Giacobbi *et al.*, 2005, p 22). Aligning with our pragmatic philosophy, qualitative research provides an opportunity to develop a useful map of the world rather than a correct one (Stearn, 1998). More specifically, this approach also allowed us to investigate the details of features perceived as important by each participant. While pragmatism has been used as a base for mixed methods research (Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012), my selection of a purely qualitative strategy in this study was considered appropriate

given my explorative aims and similar application by others previously (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015; Cruickshank *et al.*, 2014, 2015; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Kelly, 2011). In tandem with this and as mentioned in 1.3, MT is still not “untangled” and this confusion as to a definitive MT limits the use of inventories and a quantitative approach in research (Hardy *et al.*, 2014, p 69). As such, my focus was less concerned with what individuals felt ‘being mentally tough’ was and more on *how* they felt mentally tough performances were brought about in their current or prior environments. Reflecting this explorative aim, a qualitative research strategy that employed semi-structured interviews with informed participants was therefore chosen (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This interpretivist approach also acknowledges the researcher as an important instrument in understanding the context and time that will impact along with social and cultural aspects. Importantly, this can allow for confirmatory bias on my own part, which I will limit through processes discussed when addressing trustworthiness (Giacobbi *et al.*, 2005).

3.2.2 Participants

A purposeful sample of 12 professional rugby union head coaches ($n = 3$) and players ($n = 9$) were recruited via my personal contacts. Player participants were all male and aged between 22 and 35 years old ($M = 31.5$; $SD = 3.74$) with coach participants aged between 42 and 49 ($M = 45.3$; $SD = 2.86$). The head coaches had been employed in head coach roles for a total of 29 years ($M = 9.6$; $SD = 2.05$). Between them, the three head coaches had led seven club sides at professional level in four countries, both in the northern and southern hemispheres. Eight of the nine players had played international rugby, with six of them also captaining their country, one of five

international sides, including the British and Irish Lions, for a total international experience of 62 years ($M = 7.75$; $SD = 2.68$). As such, this group met the pragmatic principle that a sample should reflect a range of experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Giacobbi *et al.*, 2005). Participant details were kept deliberately brief to protect anonymity.

3.2.3 Procedure

An interview guide was created through review and amendment with my supervisors and ultimately centred on nine guiding questions. To initiate the discussion, the opening questions focused on the participant's understanding of what a mentally tough rugby player looks like and their associated actions (e.g., "How does a 'mentally tough' player behave in different circumstances in rugby?"). This then extended into the team-level questions (e.g., "Was this understanding of MT present in every team you were involved in?"). Finally, the latter questions focused upon what elicits MT and what limits it. This interview guide was piloted with one of my supervisors and, from this, amendments and additions were made to several probes in questions, such as "In your experience, are players taught the skills needed to be mentally tough?" and "What role does the captain play?" Probes such as these were used to explore the mechanisms that may have elicited and propagated MT in the teams in which the participants had been involved. After the pilot work, the interview guide was then further piloted with three professional rugby players, with no changes to the original content subsequently required.

In summary, the interview questions asked the interviewees to define MT and how it was fostered in professional rugby union teams. Within this, my questions

enquired as to how mentally tough actions led to optimum performances and what similarities and differences existed within these teams that promoted or depleted MT. In addition, my questions reviewed what, if any, training processes impacted upon MT and if teams had a shared understanding of how these might facilitate MT. Finally, I enquired as to the role of leadership and especially of the coach on MT.

Interviews in the formal data collection phase centred around the ten open-ended questions used in the pilot work. In line with my semi-structured approach, I retained a reflective discussion throughout the interviews – something that was important, as my natural rapport with the participants (due to prior connections) meant that I had to be careful not to influence responses stemming from these relationships. All interviews were conducted at locations agreed with the participants, were recorded with audio devices and lasted between 42 and 80 minutes. Ethical approval was granted by the university's ethics committee, confidentiality was assured and informed consent was given by all participants.

3.2.4 Data analysis

Before, during and after each interview memos were taken to reflect upon and consider the points made by the interviewees. At the end of each interview the participants were asked for their reflections on the interview and the key themes and points they felt most pertinent. Along with this, they were given the opportunity to expand or indeed mention any other factors they felt were important to eliciting MT (Smith & Mc Gannon, 2017). All interviews were recorded, transcribed in full and, on the basis of my explorative aim, subjected to an inductive content analysis (Côté *et al.*, 1993). I began the analysis by reading each transcript multiple times to optimise

familiarity and understanding of participant accounts. Specifically, data were transformed into raw data units and then progressively combined and constantly compared to develop distinct thematic hierarchies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Côté *et al.*, 1993). This process continued until higher-order categories were established in a framework that scrupulously accounted for all of the data but without sacrificing overall meaning.

3.2.5 Addressing trustworthiness

Having previously played professional rugby union and appreciating all participants' histories, achievements and challenges, I established an important level of trust and rapport before and during the interviews (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). This rapport was reflected in the high quality of the participants recruited, in tandem with a mean interview length of 52 minutes. Additionally, member reflections were conducted at the end of each interview to review the accuracy, balance and robustness of the main messages taken from the full conversation, with any additional insights from the participants (in response to this review) also recorded (Smith & McGannon, 2017). This summative confirmation of the interviews was preferred to using member checks that lack reliability (Smith & Mc Gannon, 2017). Member reflections will not guarantee true reality as such but they offer a more "meticulous, robust and intellectually enriched understanding" through the additional reflections of interviewees and is preferred to using member checking that is an "ineffective marker" on rigour, validity or trustworthiness (Smith & Mc Gannon, 2017, p 17). While my interpretation was consistently acknowledged as appropriate, this process also gave participants a chance to reinforce the factors they perceived as most

important for eliciting and propagating mentally tough performances in senior professional rugby union teams.

In terms of the analytical process, transparency was enabled by employing a constant comparison approach to continually evaluate, amend and reinforce the tags and categories that were being developed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The recording of conceptual memos and the use of a reflexive journal also provided a trail of the rationale throughout the analysis and, therefore, opportunities for me to consider and challenge my interpretation, including the interaction of personal experiences and biases (Davis & Meyer, 2009; Patton, 2002). Similarly, my supervisors acted as ‘critical friends’ to promote critical reflection on both the process and the outcomes of the analysis (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999). In tandem with this, my community of practice within the coaching environment as well as in academic circles added further discussion and debate on the key themes and limited any confirmation bias. Lastly, and through both the critical friends and community of practice, time was spent on reflecting on all the viewpoints in order to confirm my findings and key themes and to optimise my own experiences and expertise within the interpretivist and pragmatic research approach (Cresswell, 1994). This collaboration and introspection further helped balance any of my own assumptions and prejudices (Lynch, 2000).

3.3 Results

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions on MT and how it can be elicited and propagated throughout professional rugby teams. Specifically, I aimed to identify features that were perceived to elicit and propagate MT within squads that need to chiefly sustain, exploit and combine the MT of each individual - in essence,

gauging the ways that MT can be shown consistently in performances. The results from the data analysis process are presented in Table 3.1. As shown, views on how MT was elicited and propagated in professional rugby union teams were combined into three major themes: *player-specific processes*, *coaching and team processes* and *group identity and influence*. Each of these major themes will now be described via quotations that relate to the sub-themes listed in Table 3.1. Quotations from coaches are indicated by ‘C’ and performers by ‘P’.

Table 3.1 Emergent higher-order themes and sub-themes from the data

Higher-order themes	Sub-themes
Player-specific processes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Role clarity</i> 2. <i>Supporting individual needs</i> 3. <i>Optimising individual strengths and confidence</i>
Coaching and team processes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Providing physical and mental challenge</i> 2. <i>Shared mental models</i> 3. <i>MT-consistent review and reinforcement processes</i>
Group identity and influence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Clear team vision, identity, values and behaviours</i> 2. <i>Selection, appointment and recruitment of mentally tough role models</i> 3. <i>Social and task cohesion</i> 4. <i>MT-facilitating language</i> 5. <i>Player ownership and influence</i>

3.3.1 Player-specific processes

Central to the participants’ understanding of how to elicit MT was *role clarity*. More explicitly, role clarity helped players to focus on the performance factors that were

most fundamental to them (and limit the volume and perceived relevance of more peripheral information). This was particularly important for specific plays and set pieces that relied on the smooth combination of different elements:

You don't want or need 15 guys to be worrying at the line-out "What are we going to do?" or "What we should be doing?" I want my hooker to [only] be worried about throwing the ball in, I want my line-out jumpers to [only] be worried about that [i.e., jumping and receiving] and I want my backs to be [only] worrying about what their jobs are to be in the move that I've called, and they have just got to trust that we make the right decisions [along the way] ... The clarity is a big thing ... because there will be times when it's under the pump and generally the team will be like, "What's going to go on?" (P-5)

Indeed, another participant indicated how these clearly defined roles help in supporting an optimum level of emotion:

Being able to perform those skills in a pressured environment is [mental] toughness because there are a thousand things that are going on in a game that can distract you and it's having that ability to actually focus on what's important. So I don't focus on ranting or raving or "We need to do this or that". [Instead] it's like this is what we are doing at this specific part in the game and does everyone know what we are doing? (P-4)

Additionally, *supporting individual needs* of players through man-management was stressed as a particularly valuable process by which players' MT could be effectively elicited and propagated:

There are some guys who react to “John, like incredible mate, you're doing so well” and he thinks “I want to go out there and train harder”. But there are other guys who need to be told, even if they are doing well, that “You are just not reaching your full potential – are you sure you're really trying?” And they would be thinking, “Fucking hell, I go out there and I really go crazy ... I'm really trying and if he doesn't see that, well, fuck him”. To understand that [man-management process] as a coach is to know how to make him better, mentally. (P-8)

As conveyed by this quotation, it is interesting to note that for this interviewee MT was not facilitated solely via inherently positive or socially desirable channels (such as transformational and servant styles of interaction). Indeed, this particular view highlights the Machiavellian aspect of management for eliciting and propagating MT in senior performers. In this vein, a number of participants also described the role of ruthless feedback in driving individual players to deliver on their responsibilities in a mentally tough manner:

He came up to me and he goes, “Listen kid, if you look like you did last week before the game, then these fuckers [i.e., the forwards] aren't going to do anything you say. You were like a little fucking girl in the dressing room. I don't give a fuck if you feel like a little girl, but when they walk into this

dressing room you've got to let them know that you've got your shit under control ... I don't want to see anything else." (P-7)

As suggested by this participant, such directives from the coach could support and explicitly 'educate' the player as to the required mentally tough behaviours but also allow the coach to impact his teammates indirectly through this player's change in behaviour (a factor that will be picked up again in the *group identity and influence* theme). Indeed, supporting players to manage their duties, standards, expectations and responses in demanding situations was a central theme for eliciting and propagating mentally tough performances:

I remember coming in here after one of the first losses when we first came together as a staff ... and [Coach X] and a few of the boys dragged themselves in and they looked a bit down ... And [Head Coach X], in fairness to him, said ... "That's only your ego that is hurt – what do you feel so down about?" So, in a way he really called them pathetic [for being down] – "That's only your ego that is hurt" ... and [Key Player X] went "Right enough" and ... we went and did a weight session together. We did the weight session, chatted about rugby during the weight session, and came back and it was done and dusted and on to the next thing. (C-1)

With regard to 'supporting individual needs', the awareness and insight of the head coach allowed him to support his staff and, in turn, impact his team's mindset after a crucial loss. Reflecting the high levels of commitment and intensity required to

perform consistently in professional rugby, participants also described the impact of holistic or more personal support on their MT in performance contexts:

We've got a guy who is employed full time ... to make sure that everybody is doing something outside of [the club] ... We actually worked out that they are here 7 per cent of their time in a 24 hour day ... So when you're here, make sure you get stuck in and all that sort of stuff, and when you're not here, we have gotta find something more for you to do with the other 93 per cent. (C-1)

As suggested here, providing players with a different and positive focus outside of rugby was felt to enhance MT factors (i.e., commitment) when in the training/performance environment, presumably through the strategic periodisation of both physical and mental resources.

Finally of note in this section, and building on the benefits of role clarity and supporting individual needs, participants also discussed how MT could be elicited and propagated by coaches' *optimising individual strengths and confidence*. For example, one coach described his approach to helping a particular player to display greater MT by basing his expectations and evaluations on what he *could* deliver:

We want him to play like [Player X] but he can't do it – he's unbelievably powerful and he is unbelievably quick and he can make something out of nothing now and again but for us to keep on criticising him [because he's not exactly like Player X], he doesn't feel it. So just support him and make his game simple: make his feet good, make him strong generally, make him a

good defender instead of complicating his life and trying to make him like somebody else. (C-1)

Interestingly, the value of such support was also echoed by the players in the sample: “If you’re mentally tough, you will know it’s not worth doing it [i.e., throwing a 20-metre pass] because it’s not in your skill set” (P-9). More specifically, this player’s awareness of his strengths/limitations provides knowledge of what to do, what not to do and a greater confidence in being able to then execute specific roles. His intentions seem aligned to the role demands, as also determined by the coaches in the penultimate quotation.

3.3.2 Coaching and team processes

Moving on to the second major theme of *coaching and team processes*, participants highlighted the role and impact of *providing physical and mental challenge*. Indeed, all participants acknowledged that mentally tough performances could be elicited and propagated by “training the way you want to play” (P-5). As such, training sessions that closely reflected the nature of competition were perceived to deliver particular benefits for mentally tough performances:

[Training sessions] are full on; they are not long, but they are tough – a lot of skills under the pressure of being tired, you know – because we believe we should be fitter than every other team. We have trained that our minds are thinking that maybe one or two per cent clearer than the opposition’s under the fatigue. (P-5)

Continuing with this thread of facilitating control, composure and effective decision making in demanding situations, pressure training was regularly used to hone players' collective response under stress:

We would practice scenarios, we would put ourselves in horrible scenarios ... and we would say "Jeepers, we're two points down – we need to manufacture an opportunity for a penalty or a drop goal and how are we going to do that?" ... And then [Head Coach X] would do things like get a professional referee, a guy that we knew well and a good referee, and put out the B team and tell the referee to cheat. And we wouldn't know that and this referee would just give us nothing and guys would be losing their temper at first and going crazy and "We can't train like this" and then you would be able to learn that reacting like that doesn't help you. (P-8)

As suggested by this quotation, such pressure training had an inherently 'edgy' feel; indeed, the same participant described how he would adopt such an approach when he takes up coaching and would intentionally "make some days horrible for them ... and make them hate me for moments" (P-8). Another participant also reflected on his time with a previous club, where such intensity and managed conflict was a cornerstone of eliciting and propagating MT:

When I got older and chatted to the players, I found out that the idea was that if you could get through that in training, and if you could handle the rubbish

that was thrown at you, and if you could handle the horrible situations ... then you would be tough enough. It was like a test. (P-1)

As well as approaches specific to the training ground, a number of participants also described how mental challenge was regularly extended to other elements of preparation. For example, one player recounted a carefully planned learning episode delivered by a previous coach:

A coach took us to a pre-season game in France ... in August and it was boiling. We set off from the training ground at about 6:30am to then travel to the airport, and to then wait a couple of hours at the airport as you do, to then travel a couple of hours on the plane, to then get off the plane, wait for your bags, jump on the bus for a couple of hours, to arrive at the hotel and just have enough time to grab a shower, freshen up and grab some food to eat and then a team meeting before you go to the game [that same evening]. And when the coach addressed us [at the team meeting] and asked “Why on earth do you think I have dragged you all down here to France, after a shocking day’s travel, a terrible preparation?” ... And straight away the group realised that the answer was: to still perform, to be able to put up with all of that stuff and still know we have to perform. (P-1)

Beyond the merits of these mental and physical challenges, participants also described the role that *shared mental models* played in eliciting and propagating mentally tough performances (Cannon-Bowers *et al.*, 1993). For example, one player

discussed how shared understanding, perception and action allowed them to make more mentally tough choices during matches:

I do like a bit more structure ... When I'm playing in a structured team, I can take a little bit more of a risk. I can go blind and I can try to make the big hit ... [because] the structure is so good that you won't get punished. (P-3)

As well as this individual- and technical-level impact, the value of shared mental models for MT-supporting perceptions, decision making and actions in tactical aspects was described:

[The players] know if we defend really well we can put a lot more pressure on the ball-carrying team, so [they] don't stress about it if the opposition put six phases together. The outcome is they will make a mistake and we will get the ball back as long as we don't do anything silly in the interim. (C-3)

In a similar vein, another participant described the value of an organised, collective expectation and response for the anticipated challenges of a referee, indicative of the common "what if?" approach to priming match-specific MT:

The first kick-off comes in and I've got [Player X] at full stretch; the most beautiful take comes down [from Player X] and as he comes down an [opposing player] comes in and takes him. Whistle, penalty, [teammate] blocking; like the most ridiculous call ever and it was amazing. I looked around and [Player X] smirked at me and I smirked at [Player Y]; like, five of

us smiled and we all got into a huddle and said “That’s the way it’s going to be. We called it [before the game] and ... if it’s got to be 16 [against us, by including the referee] then it’s got to be 16”, and that’s where we won the test match, in the first minute. He almost vindicated our entire preparation and from then on we were squeaky clean, we didn’t say one word to him. I literally kissed his arse for 80 minutes and it was a hard test match and we won it. (P-8)

To consistently elicit and propagate mentally tough perceptions and behaviours, participants also described the impact of *MT-consistent review and reinforcement processes*. Typically, these processes were designed and deployed in a manner that limited the problematic interaction of emotions and promoted a measured, future-focused, process-based approach. For example, a number of participants reported how they used or were measured against different types of errors, allowing coaches to better isolate and target MT-linked behaviours:

[Coach X] and [Coach Y] ... gave this idea to us that you’re going to make mistakes – it’s just that there are skill errors and effort errors. If you make a skill error, that is fine: you are going to make mistakes, you’re going to knock on a ball, you’re going to miss a tackle. But if you’re too lazy to get on the line or if you’re too lazy to stick out a hand, then that stuff is just a different thing. That’s an effort error and that is in your head, so they have got a massive problem with that. (P-3)

The reinforcement of mentally tough behaviour was also achieved through video analysis review and in planning sessions that further cemented what was expected, as the following quotation shows:

[The defensive coach will] highlight people who are sprinting back to maybe give us counter attack, or someone who's created what we call a cradle, where someone like a second row who is busting his hole to make sure their [opposition] centre doesn't get a clear run. So we try and highlight all those things all of the time. (C-1)

These processes of reinforcing mentally tough behaviours through video feedback were also used in tandem with simulating the desired actions in training sessions to further ensure player understanding:

Then we went out on the grass and did some modified games and stuff, emulating and simulating what would be in an actual scenario [in a game], and then we would have some small conversations on how we could tweak this and tweak that and then a bit more video, and we can see the rationale behind that. (C-3)

3.3.3 Group identity and influence

Representing the third major theme discovered through the data analysis procedure, *group identity and influence* was perceived to play a significant role in eliciting and propagating MT in senior professional rugby. At the heart of this process lay a *clear team vision, identity, values and behaviours* that spawned all higher-level or day-to-

day perceptions and actions. For example, one player described how a compelling vision could provide a solid foundation for MT by setting player expectations over and above what they were ultimately trying to achieve (and therefore the level and nature of MT that would be required):

If I wanted to coach and I wanted to create a mental toughness to my team, then this is how I would do it. [Head Coach X] came in the first day ... [after] we had just been embarrassed [in our last game]. We were horrendous, a disgrace to our nation. First meeting, he opens up – we were playing [Team X] on the Saturday and our first test with him as coach – and he said “Guys, we are going to win [major event] in [YYYY]”. (P-8)

In terms of the more tangible foundations of team culture, another participant asserted:

If an environment is created where behaviours that are ... not mentally tough ... are accepted and considered the norm and are certainly not addressed, then they will become self-perpetuating. (P-1)

Moving beyond the vision of the coach and associated behaviours, a number of team management processes were felt to play a role in eliciting and propagating mentally tough performances. First, many participants described the role of *selection, appointment and recruitment of mentally tough role models*: “[MT for players comes from] a number of things. It’s the example of players around them first and foremost. You need a coach and a staff that are picking guys only with that mental capacity” (P-

6). Additionally, the choice of team captain was clearly important for the ability to role model MT-associated perceptions and actions in others:

[Our captain's] not on either [Facebook or Twitter]. That might sound like a ridiculous leadership thing but we have got people who are all over Facebook and Twitter. Now, and this is a tiny thing, but you take [Player X] out of that [captaincy role] and you make the captain someone that is all over that stuff, then what's going to happen to all those young fellas coming up? They think to be captain ... that's what I need to be [i.e., all over Facebook and Twitter]. But at the moment they're looking up [and thinking] "To be captain of [Team X], I need to be like [Captain X]"; they see "I need to be understated, work hard, [be] humble, relentless". (P-7)

Undoubtedly, another major factor related to group identity and influence was a *MT-facilitating language*:

We talk a lot ... Like, we will be in a circle and people will say, like, "Are we there yet? Are you there yet? Can you feel it?" And I think that's the sort of thing where players feed off each other, you know ... Especially for younger players ... these [senior] players bring calmness, and this calmness brings a kind of confidence whereby you know that that guy has got your back ... So now this is it: "Clear your head of everything – we are going out now into the coliseum, straight into battle." (P-2)

Interestingly, some of the more experienced participants described how the precise nature and pervasiveness of this shared language appeared to be linked to the levels of success ultimately achieved. One player reflected on the type of language used by a particularly mentally tough and high-achieving group:

[At Club X] when I got there, it was literally like “You’re the best, we’re the best, we are better than anyone, we are going to kill everyone ... We work harder than everyone else. We absolutely are the fittest team – no one can match us.” (P-7)

Continuing with the theme of committing to the shared cause through group identity and influence, all participants also described the role of *social and task cohesion*:

All of a sudden, you would have to talk in front of a group and say what something means to you or, you know ... it sounds ... very soft but [Head Coach X] was doing it specifically so that when we were under stress that we knew each other at a completely different level. Emotionally, we had opened up to each other and made each other vulnerable through how we had spoken, so in our actions, we trusted each other more ... That’s how [Head Coach X] created a mental toughness for us as a group. (P-8)

Indeed, such close bonds were deemed an important feature of the environment, supporting a level of shared understanding, desire and togetherness that elicited and propagated MT in the face of increased pressure: “I remember [Player X] ringing me

the night before a [major game] and saying, like, ‘My friend, you know [that] you and I have not won [the major game] yet – we must add to this legacy’” (P-7). Two of the coaches stressed the importance of these connections in MT, and significantly looked to purposefully embed these in pre-season. One commented: “We got them in, having some fun, enjoying each other’s company. Getting some stories that would be poignant to this group that would be useful in one, two, three months’ time [in games]” (C-3). The other coach stated that the pre-season was about “making memories so our pre-season camps aren’t camps – they’re social” (C-1), which again builds the team connections.

Another aspect of this third major theme was *player ownership and influence*, with participants reporting how mentally tough performances relied on consistently peer-shaped perceptions and behaviours:

Guys are not good at giving compliments that lightly so ... to know that you’ve been accepted by your peers is a big part of feeling confident ... and that drives it and you know that they will back you in any situation and they know you will back them too, and that helps in making the team become more mentally tough and ... have that mutual understanding. (P-9)

More specifically, participants perceived that this interpersonal support in both training and challenging settings facilitated an increase in work and intensity, as exemplified by the following two quotations:

People look up to guys. Like, if you and I were going up a mountain and I’m thinking “Oh my goodness, I can’t go anymore”, and you and I are looking,

you know your eyes are up straight and you look back at me and smile and I'm thinking "This guy is a psycho, he's still going" and I feel like I'm dying, but I want to follow that guy. (P-8)

He comes up to you and he says "Wow, you were amazing today". And also to say the opposite when you weren't great today. At the same time criticising him positively... I would try and be open with guys and let them know where I stand. Because there is nothing worse than guessing "Where am I? What do I need to do?" (P-3)

These quotations demonstrate the role and influence of both players and coaches in eliciting MT in others.

Given the levels of individual commitment and sacrifice required to support optimal performance and success in senior professional rugby, participants also provided further support for the role that player ownership had in eliciting and propagating MT. For example, one head coach noted:

The more you desire something and believe in something and think that you can contribute to it, then the more you will give; so your intensity of effort and your persistence to achieve that outcome will be greater. (C-3)

Tied to ideas on peer influencing, it was also recognised that MT benefited from a critical mass of leaders that increased team ownership, and so such teams were not too reliant solely on the coach, as highlighted in the quotation below:

It takes a critical mass of good bastards and all of a sudden the road opens up and we fall into line. And, yeah, I think there's a critical mass of good bastards [at my current team]. So it becomes internally driven, not by me. (C-3)

Having this critical mass was seen to sustain change through the sheer number of peer examples and further endorses the selection of mentally tough role models, as mentioned above. It is then seen to be incumbent on any member of a team to also lead or take responsibility to set an example and to support others: "As soon as you are in a team, you have a responsibility to be a leader. I think you have a responsibility ... You can't be a wallflower ... Absolutely, leadership is critical" (C-3).

An interesting observation proffered by many participants was how the media played a role in players' MT:

There's so much media and I am going to [the players]: "Well, don't read stuff, ignore the media ... because you are actually letting other people actually drive what you are about." (C-2)

Indeed, participants stated how the media affects a player's mindset: "[after] getting criticised in the media pretty regularly, and unfortunately after a while of being called something, people tend to believe it" (P-4). Similarly, another player also stated that it can actually impede playing behaviours:

[Player Y] went through a big adversity about his tackling, so everyone was getting in his ear and it was spread across the media at every international game and the first target [for the opposition] was “Let’s get [Player Y]”. (P-2)

Another player added that the media can also impact upon a coach’s capacity to lead, as it can influence players’ perceptions: “If a guy comes into [Club X] and he ain’t so sure about the coach and he opens the paper, then he will be sure about him afterwards” (P-7). In short, participants highlighted that the media can have a significant influence on those in the professional rugby environment, both players and coaches, when it comes to MT, and subsequently might even influence a coach’s tenure through influencing players’ perceptions.

3.4 Discussion

Based on the knowledge gaps identified in Chapter 2, the purpose of this research was to explore views on how MT may be elicited and propagated throughout professional rugby teams on a day-to-day/game-to-game level. Given that performers at this level need to chiefly sustain, exploit and combine (rather than develop) their individual MT (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008b, 2010), my results outline that mentally tough preparation and performance was elicited and propagated in three main ways with the first being *player-specific processes*. These processes included *role clarity*, *supporting individual needs* and *optimising player strengths and confidence*. The second major theme was *coaching and team processes*, which included *providing physical and mental challenge*, *creating shared mental models* and *MT-consistent review and reinforcement processes*. The third major theme in my research, and aligned to social

and cultural aspects, was *group identity and influence*, which included *clear team vision, identity, values and behaviours*, as well as *selection, appointment and recruitment of mentally tough role models, MT-facilitating language, social and task cohesion* and lastly *player ownership and influence*.

3.4.1 Consistencies with previous research

Reflecting on the messages from my study, it is notable that several of my findings are consistent with previous MT research. First, while the term *role clarity* is not specifically mentioned in previous MT research, it is inherent within simulation training used by coaches whereby players increase their role awareness through practice (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Driska *et al.*, 2012; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2008; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Thelwell *et al.*, 2005; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). Also corroborated by my findings is the view that coaches elicit MT by *supporting individual needs and optimising individual strengths and confidence* (Cook *et al.*, 2014; Crust & Clough, 2011; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d). Indeed, previous research has highlighted that coaches often adopt a strengths-based approach (SBA) to develop players' MT through challenges and positive feedback (Gordon, 2012; Mahoney *et al.*, 2014b; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011; Weinberg, 2013). More specifically, my participants stated that MT was elicited and propagated through coaches who established a positive, task-focused environment that targeted what players could do as well as what they could not (Nicholls *et al.*, 2016; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011; Weinberg, 2013).

As another area of overlap, my findings also state that MT can be optimised by *providing physical and mental challenge*. Indeed, MT research has frequently suggested that, by adding intensity in simulation training through more challenging

stress inoculation processes (SI-T), coaches can significantly impact MT (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Driska *et al.*, 2012; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Mace & Carroll, 1985; Mahoney *et al.*, 2014c). Creating adverse situations – such as the example of the team travelling to France, as mentioned above – can condition players to this ‘challenge’ and is in line with much of the MT development research (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2008; Weinberg *et al.*, 2016). In *providing physical and mental challenge*, it was suggested that coaches should do so at appropriate levels with the relevant awareness or emotional intelligence of the coach; this has also been previously associated with MT (Cowden, 2016; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Weinberg, 2013). Indeed, in addition, it is how players might interpret these challenges or appraise them as opportunities to develop that then impacts MT (Abbott *et al.*, 2005; Lin *et al.*, 2017). Coaches also used *MT-consistent review and reinforcement processes* in a similar manner to that observed in previous research on MT and MT development (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Crust & Clough, 2011; Weinberg, 2013).

The *selection, appointment and recruitment of mentally tough role models* (e.g., by bringing in players with the “right mental capacities” (P-7) or level of inherent MT) was also seen as crucial in eliciting MT by participants in this study; again, this is consistent with prior research on MT development (Crust & Clough, 2011; Mahoney *et al.*, 2014c; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). These role models were felt to provide examples for other players through their actions and, collectively, could provide a critical mass whereby mentally tough behaviours can be best demonstrated and sustained (Cook *et al.*, 2014; Crust & Clough, 2011; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2008; Nicholls *et al.*, 2008; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). Also consistent with prior research on MT was the role of *social and task cohesion* (Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). This social cohesion resembles “social capital” whereby members of a group have “high

quality interactions” and resonates with previous research on team resilience in rugby (Morgan *et al.*, 2015, p 92). Within this research, the idea of resilience was facilitated by - “social capital” and “group structure” – and within the ‘player’s social milieu’ these “deep emotional bonds” create a social identity that helps in developing resilience, specifically in rugby players, and, as is suggested in my results, in also eliciting MT (Morgan *et al.*, 2013, p. 549; Morgan *et al.*, 2015, p. 98). Interestingly, in my research social cohesion seemed as important as task cohesion, and similar to team-building processes as recommended previously by coaches (Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, it was reported that strong social connections within a team were facilitative of MT, which reflected the emphasis by the coaches in my study on the social aspects; this aligns with previous views that the “quality of relationships is critical for team resilience” (Morgan *et al.*, 2013, p. 557).

3.4.2 Notable emphases and additions to previous research

While demonstratively reinforcing many findings from prior research, there are also a number of interesting emphases and new features in my results. More specifically, this study has shown that MT in professional rugby union teams seems to be notably influenced by: (a) group identity and influence; (b) the coach’s ability to shape this identity and influence; and (c) the media.

Considering the role of *group identity and influence* first, it was notable that the participants appeared to talk about this area at greater length than they did about *player-specific processes* and *coaching and team processes*. In this respect, it seemed that MT is as much ‘socially derived’ as internal, and that socio-cultural influences such as role models/teammates significantly impact MT. For example, while the

demanding travel itinerary reported in my research is principally a coaching and team process, such situations also open up a multitude of peer-to-peer interactions and socialisation and role-modelling opportunities. Coulter *et al.* (2016) acknowledge the correlation with work by Tibbert *et al.* (2015) on acculturation and its significance when highlighting the contextual norms of MT, but they do not expand on how coaches promote these findings.

As a contributory factor to, if not a driving force of, a social milieu that fostered MT, participants suggested the role played by *MT-facilitative language*. This language seemed to underpin and build the social dimensions and team processes into a shared understanding or shared mental models (hereafter SMMs), as researched by Cannon-Bowers *et al.* (1993). These findings reinforce the definition of a SMM by how the “knowledge structures held by members of a team that enable them to form accurate explanations and expectations for the task, and, in turn, coordinate their actions and adapt their behavior to demands of the task and other team members” (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993, p 228). This is a new perspective on MT in the context of senior professional teams. As mentioned above there were standard terms such as “are we there yet” before games that looked to increase focus and reinforcement of the challenges ahead. On a day-to-day basis players in another club talked of how they train and how much more prepared they are than other teams – “we are fitter” - and so helping to increase their collective efficacy. More specifically, the congruent thinking or cognitive restructuring that seems to be embedded by this MT language seemed to offer a means to enhance a shared understanding of MT among players and coaches. Indeed, this MT-facilitative language seemed to both stem from and add to the team’s sense of cohesion in tasks and social interactions, and ultimately created SMMs of MT.

Intense training demands and the associated language endorse more ownership of performances and exert influence over them, as players recognise challenges as simply “tests” that work in a similar way to team resilience research by creating similar shared thinking. As such, “specific scenarios could be planned from individual items and peer leadership and self-regulation in these scenarios could empower the athletes to enhance their team’s functioning under pressure” and lead to mentally tough performances (Decroos *et al.*, 2017, p. 174). These interactions and the MT-facilitating language or ‘team talk’ (versus ‘self-talk’) create a common mindset and ensures this shared understanding. This is similar to team learning through challenging scenarios that “increase positive communication” that enhances team resilience (Decroos *et al.*, 2017, p. 173; Morgan *et al.*, 2015, and is consistent with research findings that suggest mental skills training (PST) are more influential when integrated into programmes than as stand-alone individual interventions (Thelwell *et al.*, 2010). Learning together and interpreting challenges as tests within a shared team learning increases awareness and collective efficacy that supports resilience with increased belief that will both help performances in and of themselves through increased collective efficacy, as well as subsequently helping to elicit mentally tough performances (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2007; Morgan *et al.*, 2015).

As well as emphasising the role of group identity and influence, my findings also point to the integral role that coaches take in shaping – proactively, at times – MT in their teams. Indeed, the coach, as evidenced in my findings, plays a significant role in eliciting mentally tough performances in a somewhat similar way to the role of the coach in MT development with younger performers (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2008; Weinberg, 2013). However, as well as adopting socially desirable approaches, such as those identified in much previous MT research,

participants in this study recognised how quite a Machiavellian – cunning/duplicious - and authoritarian type of approach could at times elicit MT in professional rugby players. This restructuring of player thinking endorses how cognitive inhibitions can underpin MT (Dewhurst *et al.*, 2012) and further exposes the influence that coaches can have in getting consistent mentally tough performances. Indeed, while changing player cognitions through this feedback, coaches also influence the social interactions that then allow peer influence to flourish via the selection, appointment and recruitment of mentally tough role models, as already mentioned (Tibbert *et al.*, 2015). By deploying these role models, coaches then impact performance factors such as work ethic (Bucci *et al.*, 2012; Dupuis *et al.*, 2006), which further elicit mentally tough behaviours.

These direct and indirect actions clearly demonstrate the significant role of coaches within the environment, outside of the accepted on-field training roles, and how their leadership can actively promote social capital within teams and acts as a crucial catalyst within the social milieu (Morgan *et al.*, 2015; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001). By recruiting and selecting those with the right mental capacities and then manipulating them in how to then behave (not like a “little girl”), coaches help to determine the social milieu. Indeed, coaches need to subtly and covertly manipulate the social milieu both directly and also through staff as well as player leaders (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013). In leveraging the interpersonal relations between team members along with staff members, coaches increase the crucial aspect of motivation within the group MT (Guenzi & Ruta, 2013). Within this leveraging and due to the many ‘shades of grey’ and the subsequent political aspects within coaching, there is often a need for both “bright” as well as “dark” actions in order to impact players and maintain peak performance (Abraham & Collins, 2011; Collins *et al.*, 2015, p. 1;

Cruickshank & Collins, 2015). By utilising these often Machiavellian strategies, coaches amend players' thinking within this social milieu and create the "social cognition" that then establishes the important culture required for elite performance (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012b, p. 341; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Given the demanding practice environment for developing MT, it may seem understandable that coaches need to manage the parameters of engagement by players in order to maintain application (Weinberg *et al.*, 2011).

As a final point, the role of the media in influencing MT was also notable in my results, as mentioned by several participants. The media not only seemed to impact the emotional states of players, but also their resultant behaviours. In tandem with this impact upon players, it was also claimed that coaches could be affected indirectly and have their position undermined through media messages that players receive when joining a team – or when already in the team, I would suggest. This warrants further investigation from a MT perspective, as well as for coaches to maintain their status.

3.4.3 Strengths and limitations

As with any research, it is important to evaluate the strengths and limitations of this exploratory study. There were three key strengths in my study. The first was the quality of the sample. More specifically, six of the nine players interviewed had captained their national teams, all of these six had an average of 10.5 years playing international rugby, and the experiences of the 12 players and coaches as a whole covered 35 different clubs or international sides that also had several management changes within these sides (thus further broadening their experiences of how MT can

be elicited and diminished). The second strength, integral to pragmatic research, was the practical experience that I brought from playing and coaching professionally over 15 years and now operating as a sport psychology consultant, as well as the practical experience of my supervisors with whom I used for critical discussion around my analysis. Indeed, this helped me to recognise nuances in the terminology used and processes and behaviours described by the participants. Third, I also took a number of steps to optimise the trustworthiness of my data collection and analytical procedures, as described in the methodology section.

In terms of limitations, the accuracy of the data may have been affected by poor recall by the participants, along with hindsight bias and self-preservation bias. While most of the players had accumulated a considerable number of years playing elite rugby ($M = 12$ years), another weakness within this study was that there were only three coaches interviewed and that, of those, the average head coach experience was 6.3 years. As found in this study, and evidenced in others, coaches are “critical in developing” MT (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Nicholls *et al.*, 2016; Sheard, 2010, p. 112). As such, this endorsed further investigation focusing on coach understanding and elicitation of mentally tough performances.

3.5 So what do we know and what do we need to know?

Reflecting on this chapter as a whole, and the 177 pages of raw data with this singular focus of MT, my study reaffirms that players and coaches consider MT to be of considerable importance in professional rugby union. It also shows that mentally tough performances in professional rugby teams are enabled by factors that can be categorised into three key themes: player-specific processes, coaching and team

processes, and group identity and influence. As covered in the discussion section, many of the sub-themes within these three core themes reinforce the findings of prior research. However, there were also some interesting emphases and new features in my results, which perhaps reflect the unique context of professional rugby union. Most broadly, this study has shown that MT in professional rugby union teams seems to be notably influenced by: (a) group identity and influence; (b) the coach's ability to shape this identity and influence; and (c) the media. In short, MT in professional rugby union seems to be a product of not only *nature* (i.e., the inherent qualities of individuals) and *nurture* (i.e., activities to develop the qualities of individuals), but also, to a significant extent, *normalisation* (i.e., socio-cultural factors that make mentally tough perceptions and behaviours common across a group). This reinforces the view that players and leaders do not act within a "social vacuum" and that the social milieu seems particularly crucial to eliciting MT (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016, p. 128).

In conclusion, this study has shown that it is particularly critical to understand how group identity and influence can be proactively shaped to elicit MT in professional rugby teams. To this end, in the next chapter I assess the actions of coaches specifically to further explore *how* they manage and shape group identity and influence to propagate and elicit mentally tough performances in rugby.

CHAPTER 4

GENERATING A MENTALLY TOUGH ENVIRONMENT IN SENIOR

PROFESSIONAL RUGBY: THE ROLE OF THE COACH

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, factors perceived to support mentally tough performances in professional rugby union were presented – factors that were relevant to squads who need to chiefly sustain, exploit and combine (rather than necessarily develop) the MT of individuals. More specifically, three main sets of factors were found: *player-specific processes*, *coaching and team processes* and lastly *group identity and influence*. Within *player-specific processes*, MT was found to be derived from individuals having *role clarity* and coaches who focused on *supporting individual needs* plus *optimising individual strengths and confidence*. Within *coaching and team processes*, mentally tough performances required coaches *providing physical and mental challenge*, *shared mental models* (SMMs) and *MT-consistent review and reinforcement processes*. Finally, *group identity and influence* involved having a *clear team vision, identity, values and behaviours*, the *selection, appointment and recruitment of mentally tough role models*, *social and task cohesion*, *MT-facilitative language* and *player ownership and influence*. Overall, these findings corroborated much previous research on MT. However, there were also a number of insights that have received considerably less, or even no, apparent attention in prior MT research. For example, while stress inoculation training and simulation training are consistent with prior research, along with the inherent clarifying of roles within these training

processes, it was the defining of these roles by creating a group understanding through SMMs that represented a new avenue in MT research. Integral to both these training practices and managing the social dimensions was the role of the coach as a “climate engineer” within this social milieu in order to elicit MT (Gordon, 2012, p. 210). Through the reinforcing of these SMMs and crucially the social dimensions such as player connections, and leadership within the team, I found a MT-facilitative language that was instrumental, which again is new to MT research as a whole and specifically in eliciting MT. These factors facilitated the acculturation or alignment of a team into normalised behaviours. More broadly, and as indicated by MT-facilitative language, the findings in Chapter 3 highlighted that game-to-game MT in senior professional rugby was derived, in large part, via group identity and influence. In short, mentally tough performances appeared to be particularly associated with socio-cultural factors that could make MT a *normal* feature of group perception and action.

Importantly, however, while it was shown in Chapter 3 *what* factors are involved in generating mentally tough performances in professional rugby teams, relatively little insight was gained into *how* these factors are specifically targeted and acted upon to *optimise* the MT of a team. In this respect, and as stressed in the Discussion section in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4), it is important to consider the central and crucial role that the coach can play as a leader (or facilitator) of a team’s MT. Indeed, findings presented in Chapter 3 and those of previous research have stressed that he/she is integral in affecting the antecedents of MT (Crust & Clough, 2011; Nicholls *et al.*, 2016; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010). However, little work has actually explored the *ways* in which coaches go about doing this, especially in relation to group identity and influence. Instead, prior work has tended to focus on the identification and description of important factors without taking the next step

towards understanding their practical delivery. As such, the purpose of this chapter is to investigate how high-level and high-performing coaches have worked to elicit mentally tough performances through shaping group identity and influence.

4.2 Methodology

4.2.1 Design and method

Continuing from my findings in Chapter 3, the aim in this study was to explore how coaches shape group identity and influence to elicit and propagate mentally tough performances in professional rugby teams. Reflecting my explorative aims, a qualitative research strategy was again chosen to elicit in-depth perceptions on how MT is elicited and propagated by coaches in professional rugby teams (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Qualitative research is ideally suited to gathering and explaining data on individuals' self-reported actions (Cresswell, 1994; Merriam, 1988). As such, qualitative research allows interviewees to “describe life-worlds ‘from the inside out’, from the point of view of the people who participate” (Flick *et al.*, 2004, p. 3). Qualitative research undertaken with a pragmatic philosophy also acknowledges that the researcher can be an integral instrument in the collection and analysis of data – an approach that therefore helped me to again harness my own insights and experiences (Cresswell, 1994).

4.2.2 Participants

A purposeful sample of five professional rugby union head coaches ($n = 5$) were recruited via my personal contacts, none of whom were part of my study in Chapter 3. The participants were all male, aged between 48 and 68 years old ($M = 56.6$; $SD = 6.21$) and had been employed in head coach or assistant/consultant roles for a total of 85 years at the elite/professional level ($M = 17.0$; $SD = 2.89$). As head coaches, all participants had led countries and top-tier clubs in either or both the northern and southern hemispheres. In terms of successes, either as head coaches or assistants/consultants, these participants had also cumulatively won 16 international titles including two World Cups, five Six Nations, three Tri Nations and four Triple Crowns, along with 11 club titles including five European titles, four Super Rugby competitions and ten domestic competition titles in both the northern and southern hemispheres. This group met the pragmatic principle of interviewing participants who could reflect on a range of experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Giacobbi *et al.*, 2005). Although the total number of participants is at the lower end for typical interview-based studies, it is also important to note that my aim was to prioritise ‘high-quality’ rather than ‘high-quantity’ data in a novel area. Again aligning with my pragmatic foundation, this approach also reflected my goal to develop *practically meaningful* rather than definitive findings. It also reflected the fact that gaining access to such high-level participants is a notoriously difficult challenge.

4.2.3 Procedure

Each participant was contacted through my connections within the international rugby community. Following this each individual that agreed verbally to participate was sent an information sheet on the nature and purpose of the study on MT. Once they agreed to proceed a consent form outlining the processes was sent out for them to sign that reinforced the nature and content of the interview prior to it taking place. This assured that all participants had reflected on what they felt MT was and how MT was relevant within their rugby teams and environments. Interviews were conducted by myself using a semi-structured guide that was piloted with two professional coaches. From these pilots, no major changes were made to the structure or content of the developed interview guide. As such, interviews in the formal data collection phase centred around four open-ended questions with a further set of prompts and probes used to encourage participants to clarify and elaborate on their responses. To frame the conversation, the first question required participants to reflect on the key features within a rugby environment that lead to mentally tough performances. The two subsequent questions focused on how they, as coaches, directly and indirectly shaped group identity and influence to optimise mentally tough performances within their teams. Despite my integral role within the research I was conscious of any confirmatory bias and memos were taken before, during and after interviews in order to help limit this bias (Cresswell, 1994). Finally, participants were asked to reflect on their responses thus far and discuss any other factors that they perceived to impact mentally tough performances that had not already been discussed (a process that provided an opportunity for member reflections: Smith & McGannon, 2017). All interviews were conducted at locations convenient to the participant or over the

telephone at agreed times, recorded with audio devices and lasted between 46 and 95 minutes (M = 73.4 minutes). Ethical approval was granted by the university's ethics committee, confidentiality was assured and informed consent was provided by the participants.

4.2.4 Data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed in full and, on the basis of my explorative aim, subjected to the exact same analytical procedures detailed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2.4).

4.2.5 Addressing trustworthiness

As per Section 3.2.5 of Chapter 3, establishing trustworthiness is vital in qualitative research. Recognising that participants “respond differently on how they perceive” the individual asking the question (Denscombe, 1998, p. 116), I again brought my experiences of playing along with coaching professionally for over ten years to establish trust and rapport through the interview process (Sparkes & Smith, 2009), with the level of rapport demonstrated by a mean interview length of 73.4 minutes. In tandem with this and as utilised in Chapter 3, memos before, during and after were taken to maintain consistency. Along with this, the information sheet provided to each participant confirmed the nature and focus of my research so as to insure each interviewee was answering with the same understanding. However, despite my playing and coaching experiences, I also adopted measures to manage the impact of my own predispositions upon interviewee responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The objective of my research was not to give an index of transferability but to allow the reviewer to make transfer possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Time and consideration was taken in choosing the sample and as such they demonstrate through their successes the crucial traits of ‘talent or wisdom’ that endorses their selection (Simonten, 1999, p 442). Following this process, the interview guide was amended through discussions with both supervisors and then piloted with two professional coaches to confirm coherency in interviews through these critical friends and the use of reflexive journals and memos (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). After each interview, member reflections were taken that did not define reality but added better insights (Smith & Mc Gannon, 2017). Within the interviews I took an active listening approach that also encouraged participants to speak freely whilst staying within the interview guide (Hodge et al., 2014; Smith, 2010). This approach also allowed further elaboration through probing and more richness of data (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Interviews were then transcribed verbatim and familiarisation was enhanced through listening to the recordings several times (Edwards & Skinner, 2009).

The processes put forward by the coaches in order to elicit MT in professional rugby teams underwent constant comparison to challenge my interpretation and generate distinct themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Recordings of any conceptual memos were made and a reflexive journal was kept to log and assess my interpretations and the interaction of my personal experiences and biases (Davis & Meyer, 2009; Patton, 2002). My experiences as a professional player, coach and sport psychologist added to the interpretive nature of the pragmatic research approach (Giacobbi et al., 2005). In conjunction with this, my supervisors again acted as *critical friends* and stimulated critical reflection on my interpretation and the eventual findings themselves (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999). I also benefited from ongoing

discussion through my own ‘community of practice’ that worked to further manage the subjective biases that I brought to my study (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and any assumptions or prejudices I might have had (Lynch, 2000)..

4.3 Results

The study described in Chapter 3 identified factors that were perceived to be important for generating mentally tough performances generally in professional rugby. The purpose of this study, by contrast, was to explore *how* MT can be elicited by the *actions of the coach* on the *specific* area of group identity and influence. From the data analysis, five themes were subsequently identified as means by which ‘the coaches’ have proactively shaped group identity and influence: *challenging group standards, fostering togetherness and respect, developing and harnessing mentally tough leaders, aligning formal leaders and sending messages via the media*. The Results section will now describe each of these five themes with supporting quotations from the participants.

4.3.1 Challenging group standards

Similar in some respects to *providing physical and mental challenge* and *MT-consistent review and reinforcement processes* in Chapter 3, the coaches emphasised the importance of consistently *challenging group standards* to shape group identity and influence. For example, the coaches in this study reinforced the need to challenge players’ expectations: “You’ve got to make sure as a coach that you keep onto the behaviours that you want. Because it’s those little things that contribute to a team

[having] the most mentally tough behaviours” (C-2). Setting these expectations and maintaining standards required assiduous planning and feedback to players to avoid any “mucking around” (C-5) and to optimise time efficiency, as one coach concisely stated: “We talk about what we are going to do the night before; then, when we get on the pitch, we don’t have time to be mucking around too much, because we have a limited amount of time” (C-5). In this example, it was clear that there was little acceptance of time wasting when players did not know training plans in detail; as such, this challenge by the coach was perceived to encourage (or force) players to reflect and plan as well as reinforce their identity as a team that was mentally ready.

As a further example of challenging group standards, another coach reported on the need to shake up a team to optimise their MT. More specifically, this approach reflected the coach’s aim of building an identity around constantly raising the bar:

You don’t want the players to be comfortable. So, sometimes you have to create conflict situations that, again, leads to some sort of resolution that then helps the team grow and therefore becomes mentally tougher ... Such as the team might think it’s travelling really well but you know it’s not travelling that well, so you might go at a training session and after ten minutes cancel it and say “No, this isn’t good enough”. And give the players a mental shock on what they need to do to keep improving. (C-2)

To reiterate, this quotation shows how the coaches continuously challenged standards to shape the identity and influence of the group, even when results and performances were good.

4.3.2. Fostering togetherness and respect

As the second theme from my analysis, the coaches also described the need to *foster togetherness and respect* in the team in order for MT to be optimised. To facilitate this, the coaches put forward the importance of having player leadership within the squad for MT along with a cohesion and an equality among team members, be they leaders or not, as indicated below:

I have said to [the leaders within the squad], “Look I am going to criticise you one day in the team room and I am going to put the laser in the middle of your back and give out about you coming out of your line. And you are not immune to that – you can’t be and you’ve got to take it on the chin because it’s important for the group. And sometimes I might be harder on you than on the rookie that came in the door. Why? Because he’s a rookie. But I am harder on you because everyone in the room realises: ‘If he’s taking it and he’s one of our leaders, then I have to take it’.” (C-4)

In short, this quotation shows how the coaches utilised experienced players to reinforce an understanding that everyone has the same expectations placed upon them and, therefore, a feeling of collectiveness that contributes to mentally tough performances. As another example of fostering togetherness and respect, the coaches also talked about creating situations to build connections within the squad – situations that could initially make players uncomfortable but that would ultimately be of benefit to the team dynamic:

Sometimes you would put fellows in with who [those with whom] they are comfortable [i.e. rooming lists], but sometimes you might make it uncomfortable as well for the greater good. So there might be one or two uncomfortable nights, which is always a gamble because you are dealing with adults. It goes back to your earlier question: socially they don't have to get on ... [but] anything that puts a divide in the team [e.g., players not integrating on some level with all members of the squad] is not good. So you do everything you can do to make sure that the dynamic of the team works. (C-3)

The quotation above shows how this coach had a clear understanding and vision as to how he wanted to see his team operate and interact in order to deliver mentally tough performances. In addition, the interviewed coaches, when discussing socialising and the aspect of drinking as a team, also advocated informal socialising among the team members, with one coach stating that “I still believe in it” (C-2) when referring to drinking as a team. In fact, it was of such importance to this coach that it necessitated specific planning: “You periodise your physical preparation, you periodise your skill preparation, then you've got to periodise your social preparation” (C-2). Although this seems contradictory to the strict professionalism that is expected in elite sport today, it shows the value that the coaches placed on shaping a team's togetherness to ultimately optimise their MT.

4.3.3. Developing and harnessing mentally tough leaders

In addition to challenging group standards and fostering togetherness and respect, as mentioned above, the coaches also described how they shaped group identity and influence by *developing and harnessing mentally tough leaders*; as one coach stated:

“they are educators [of MT], if you like – they’re developing people [i.e., other players]” (C-1). It was clear that these leaders were perceived to directly increase MT levels within squads; as one coach stated, “That team was very mentally tough by the fourth year. And most of the leadership of that team was done by the players” (C-2). In this specific case, a crucial step in growing this leadership within the whole team was through early leaders acting as role models, setting examples and then normalising the mentally tough behaviours among the team, as shown below:

[Player X, a mentally tough leader] is a role model for them. You know when you have enough people with the same set of behaviours, and again when you go back to what you characterise as mental toughness; when you have enough players exhibiting those behaviours, you get a tipping point in the team. And that becomes the normal part, the normal way you behave in that team. (C-2)

So important was this idea of player-led MT standards that the coaches often went on to talk of how they developed and utilised these leaders operationally: “The mechanics are: you talk to the leaders, they agree, they buy in, ‘This is the [strategy]’. You then deliver [the strategy] to the whole group in the room and then they [the leaders] endorse it to the group in the room” (C-4). This proactive management approach was felt to provide a sense of increased responsibility for the player leaders, thus shaping their own identity and influence within the whole squad. Other steps in harnessing player leadership included establishing a more formal bond between players: “You buddy up a junior player in the team with the senior players of the team so there’s an [MT] example set and passed on” (C-1). Finally, and to maximise the impact of player leadership on group identity, the coaches believed that regular group

leaders' meetings were a "key thing for any team" (C-5). By holding player leadership meetings, the coaches reinforced how they developed individual leadership skills along with demonstrating their awareness of the sociological impact through team interactions such as role models in order to elicit MT. These meetings also provided opportunity to further develop the individual leadership skills, as one coach stated:

You start identifying them [potential leaders] when they come in, and you start listening to them, you start watching them and then you give them a little taste. You bring them to the odd meeting when it's right. A bigger meeting, 8 people instead of 5 discussing...the plan for the week [training plan]...and then suddenly they get it like, "oh this is what happens". (C-4)

Within these player meetings the coaches understood that each player was different and "you are dealing with a team of individuals, so mental toughness is like muscular strength in the sense that some guys are stronger than others" (C-4). Interestingly, the coaches also recognised that MT could be as much inhibited as elicited by player interactions. As such, careful management of these leaders within the social milieu was clearly important, as shown in the following quotation:

Sometimes, as a coach, you have to watch to make sure you are not holding [players] back. Because maybe the mental toughness that is there can be led from them. If you are too soft on the fellows around you, and if you're too soft on the rest of the group, then you can be holding them back by being too soft. Sometimes you need to let the fellow that's brutally honest say the things that

need to be said ... and then sometimes you have to rein in that player and say “Well, maybe [your teammate] knows where they stand but maybe for that one step forward you’re taking, he steps back now because either he’s afraid of you or second guessing himself by trying to play your game rather than his own game”. (C-3)

The quotation above shows the subtle understanding of, and management by, the coach in optimising MT within the group. Fundamentally, however, the positive influence of mentally tough leaders was recognised as something that should be harnessed by coaches. Indeed, these leaders provided direction to other players in how to maintain requisite standards to perform when under pressure, as one coach described:

Before the game ... [player leaders] would remind guys, “If we make a mistake, don’t go quiet”. Going quiet was the worst thing to happen because then everyone had bought into the error. It was over, it was gone and then the [our] defence would unravel spectacularly. (C-4)

In addition, the coaches spoke of how to develop and harness mentally tough leaders on the pitch as well as off it. By using such leaders in the game itself, the coach could enhance team performances by getting mentally tough players to support less mentally tough players in their decision making, role clarity and confidence, as shown in the two quotations below:

I would have used [Player X, a wing forward], for example, at [Team X]. “[Player X], look, you’re going to be on [Player Y, a prop forward], so be on him. Like, if we get a good scrum, keep pumping him, keep on him.” Because again, you’re not on the pitch [as the coach] but there’s a way to keep mental toughness for a guy [on the pitch by harnessing the influence of others]. I know I don’t have to worry about [Player X] but [Player Y] ... he questions himself a lot ... or distracts him[self], and then he’s running to the next ruck thinking “Did I have that shoulder too low? Was my arse too high? Was I in the 120 [physical scrum position]? Was I ...?” (C-5)

I would say to [Player X]: “You know that five-man line-out defense – lead that line today, lead that line-up”. And you know that is taken care of, you know [Player X] will organise other people around him. He’s got a good voice, he’s got good brains. He’ll shut that down, you know. I then only have to deliver two things or even maybe one thing ... to [Player Y] or [Player Z] or [Player W] or you know. I do think that [helps to get mentally tough performances out of the team] – that de-cluttering [for certain individuals], that clarity of thought, and the role definition but also that strategy. (C-5)

The above two quotations demonstrate the direct impact that player leaders can have on the performance of others and subsequently on that of the team as a whole. They also show the awareness and skill of the coaches in developing and harnessing these leaders to continually shape group identity and influence.

4.3.4 Alignment of formal leaders

As the fourth theme from my analysis, having a coherent and consistent message through the *alignment of formal leaders* was also strongly endorsed in order to shape group identity and influence and, ultimately, elicit MT:

You want consistency, not only in your players but also in your staff and how they behave. Like, if you have a coach after a game when you lose going around kicking cans and blaming other people for the loss, then that's not great examples of mental toughness. And therefore how do you expect to create a team that is mentally tough if you or one of your staff starts to behave in a mentally untough way? (C-2)

As well as seeking to ensure this consistency among all coaching staff, the interviewees also described the need for MT to be reflected in the operation of all departments and coordinated into training sessions for mentally tough behaviours to become normalised. For example, one coach stated: "The strength and conditioning and rugby has got to run as one. So the S&C has got to have a bit of mental toughness to it as well" (C-4).

Beyond the alignment of actions across formal leadership, the coaches further emphasised the importance of alignment in communication, as the following quotation demonstrates:

No matter what we say in this room, no matter what we agree or disagree on, when we walk out the door everybody says the same thing to everybody. So I

said: “If a player comes and asks the bagman, the doctor, the physio, me, the forwards coach a question, they get the same answer from everybody”. And I said: “If you deviate from that answer, I will come down on you like a ton of bricks. That is not an option. If you have a problem with that, then you come and speak with me. But you never deviate from the script.” And that was sacrosanct in the group ... We managed the staff as a group [and they were] a homogeneous group as far as the players were looking at it, it was homogeneous. Whereas in reality, it wasn't that homogeneous. We just put out a homogeneous message. (C-4)

Sitting in between the coach and his staff and the team (or even alongside the coach) was the team captain and the coaches saw this role as essential for alignment and vital to shaping group identity and influence:

I think the role of the captain and the coach is vital in creating the right environment for a team to be mentally tough. And those two have to work in absolute unison to create the sort of team you want. (C-2)

Due to the significance of this coach–captain alignment, the selection of a captain was considered extremely important. As the quotation below shows, the captain would impact the team's MT by their own behaviours:

In terms of the captaincy position, I have had many arguments with proposed captains as I always wanted to make sure they wanted it because ... they have to be unbelievably generous to do what they have to do in that captaincy role.

Because of the standards they expect of others, they have to live by example.

(C-3)

Furthermore, by having a captain who was generous and who could also maintain the ‘edginess’ as spoken of in challenging group standards, the coach could further and significantly impact MT through the psychological expectations that the captain then demanded:

[International Captain X] was always very good at creating tension at training. So if he felt things weren’t going well, he would sharpen things up considerably ... [he] didn’t do it through his physical violence, he just used mental violence. (C-2)

As shown by this example, it was clear that an effective route to shaping group identity and influence was perceived to be through the alignment of the captain with the coach and other aspects of the team’s leadership network. In this respect, such an approach allowed the coach to step back from the team and allow the captain to take increased responsibility, such as taking the final team run (before a game), and ultimately shape the levels of MT throughout the squad. This critical alignment with the captain was further promoted through regular and often informal communications between the coaches and their captains; as one stated, “We would always go and have a coffee at some stage and talk about the week”. Such interaction allowed this ‘mini-management team’ to remain on-message, which was vital for generating the clarity that underpinned MT throughout the squad: “We’d consider the approach we’d have with the media, the approach we’d have with the team. So we’d basically run the team

collectively” (C-2). The importance of sending messages to the squad through various channels (e.g., coach, captain, staff) leads into the last theme on how group identity and influence was shaped to elicit MT: sending messages via the media.

4.3.5 Sending messages via the media

Lastly, and in line with my findings in Chapter 3, the coaches in this study also saw the importance in the media and, more significantly, of *sending messages via the media* in order to shape group identity and elicit mentally tough performances. For example, the coaches spoke of the somewhat customary practice of sending positive feedback and “compliments” (C-4) via the media to players and the group, and clearly stated how it can “influence players” (C-5) with regards to MT. Indeed, one coach considered the media’s importance as a “weapon ... so every time a coach speaks to the media, I think you have to see yourself as speaking to your players” (C-2). This quotation clearly demonstrates the perceived opportunity and importance of sending proactive and positive messages via the media. This was further highlighted by the recognition that negative messages from others in the media could also directly impact upon performances, as shown below:

“If you underscore things with belief and someone says you’re playing shit [in the media] ... or if someone is saying you’re not off-loading enough then ... for me that will start to create a mental weakness because your processing is being interrupted by those distracting thoughts.” (C-5)

Returning to the idea of sending messages proactively, management of the media went as far as one coach providing an elaborate and calculating example of manipulating not only his own players' identity, but also the thinking of the opposition coach and their team, as detailed in the following quotation:

When [the coach of the opposing team] was asked by the press about us coming [on a previous tour], he was very disparaging about [our] rugby team. He said [the country I was coaching] had never won anything, had never achieved anything, and they really had no history in the game ... [At the time] I put it under the carpet because to engage with them ... in their back yard wouldn't be smart. [However, when they later travelled to play us], we planted a journalist at the first press conference and s/he asked the [following] question: "You said some things last spring against [the country I was coaching] that were quite disparaging. You are now in [Country X] with the tour". And sure enough [the opposing coach] said it word for word [i.e., previous disparaging remarks] ... If I gave him a script, I couldn't have written it better. It was exactly what [he] had said in the spring. And the journalist rang me and said "He's taken the bait". (C-4)

Notably, this public response by the visiting national coach, along with the moderate response from the home coach (as interviewed for this study), had the desired impact upon the fans. As the home coach had hoped for, "the fans were fucking inflamed" and "you could sense the anger in the crowd" (C-4). This had a clear impact on the players: "To me, I have never seen a team really throw themselves [into tackles like they did in the game] – guys were just never going to miss a tackle" (C-4). While

other factors may of course have impacted this significant performance (and win), this sagacious example demonstrates how coaches might manage or manipulate the media in order to shape or reinforce the identity of their own team, elicit MT and ultimately support performances.

4.4 Discussion

Based on my results in Chapter 3, the purpose of this study was to explore *how* coaches managed their team environment and most especially shaped group identity and influence in order to elicit MT on a day-to-day/game-to-game basis. From my findings, these processes included *challenging group standards, fostering togetherness and respect, developing and harnessing mentally tough leaders, aligning formal leaders* and finally *sending messages via the media*. The Discussion section will now be structured as follows: first, I compare and contrast my findings with previous literature; second, I provide a summary of the contribution of this chapter and highlight the next steps for the thesis.

4.4.1 Comparisons and contrasts with previous literature

First, in considering the role of group identity in eliciting MT, it is pertinent and pleasing to see recent research further advocating the importance of assessing MT within the context of the environment and cultural aspect, in order to understand MT (Eubank *et al.*, 2017). Within this context, while *challenging group standards* has similarities to my results in Chapter 3, such as providing physical and mental challenge that I discuss below, the distinct element that broadens this theme is the

collective nature and shared embedding of these challenges within the group dynamic. As advocated in previous research, the applied practitioner (sport psychologist) needs to evaluate team performances not only in individual player psychology but through a range of psychological perspectives, such as occupational and organisational as well as sport specific, in order to be effective (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015). Indeed, an organisational perspective on the team environment advocates the setting of “very high standards” for players or the subculture of teams (Coulter *et al.*, 2016, p. 104). As such, this challenging of players is consistent with other MT research that endorses a challenging environment (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008b), where coaches regularly challenge (Owusu-Sekyere & Gervis, 2016) and expose (rather than shield) players in a supportive environment (Crust & Clough, 2011; Weinberg *et al.*, 2016). In challenging group standards, coaches can also reinforce their own high expectations of their players, which “helps to instil accountability and responsibility” (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016, p. 141). While based on resilience, this research by Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) reinforces the view that if there is not enough challenge, then “the comfortable environment will not enhance performance” (p. 143), as per the way that the coaches in my study referred to the dangers of ‘comfort’. This constant challenging of standards or “desire for constant improvement” was also seen to build MT within an AFL team (Coulter *et al.*, 2016, p. 98). Indeed, the presence of a more ‘demanding coach’ has been argued to encourage players to engage with challenges rather than employ the avoidance strategies that can undermine MT (Nicholls *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, this challenge should be, or can be, both on and off the field, as endorsed by my findings (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d).

In addition to challenging standards of the group, the coaches in this study also shaped group identity and influence by *fostering togetherness and respect*. In

determining rooming lists, for example, this coach's encouragement of player interactions recognised the ultimate importance in increasing social cohesion, as previously endorsed in research on MT development (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). In particular, the idea of periodising the team's socialising as stated in my results has also previously been suggested as a means to impact a team's resilience in rugby union through their 'social capital' (Morgan *et al.*, 2015). In this respect, having good relationships among teammates and creating the 'we're in this together' reflects a previous suggestion that "social cohesion may be a more important component of successful performance environments than task cohesion" (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, p. 433). Indeed, previous work has suggested that interpersonal stressors can be 'alleviated' when there is strong social cohesion (Evans *et al.*, 2012). Others have also highlighted that having a cohesive group can reduce the propensity for 'social loafing', or the antithesis of the work ethos that is essential for MT (cf. Hoigaard *et al.*, 2006). On this vein, and while not a typical coaching term, one of the coaches interviewed in this study used 'social loafing' as a key focus in training. In fostering respect, the coaches also worked to establish the understanding that no player is above team standards and reinforced the importance of values that represent a culture (or sub-culture) that can directly impact the team's MT (cf. Coulter *et al.*, 2016). My interviewees' focus on fostering togetherness and respect is also consistent with the messages in Eubank *et al.* (2017), Weinberg *et al.* (2011) and Weinberg *et al.* (2016), which state that having a sense of togetherness (rather than isolation) in a team enhances MT by generating a sense of 'us' or, to use a military term, 'esprit de corps'. Indeed, it has been argued in MT research that such togetherness, or as 'esprit de corps' (Eubank *et al.*, 2017) is defined, a "mutual loyalty shared by the members of a group" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2018), helps to create a team-first mentality

whereby players “contribute fully to the team” (Coulter *et al.*, 2016, p. 107). Similar to the results in Chapter 3 whereby the social cohesion was seen to enhance MT, this sense of togetherness resonates with teams building a social identity and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1978). Social identity theory (hereafter SIT) explains how an individual's self-concept is derived from the group they identify with.

Another key finding of this study was that *developing and harnessing mentally tough leaders* by coaches was instrumental in shaping group identity and influence to elicit mentally tough performances. By utilising player leaders, the coaches in this study sought to shape their team's identity and increase their ownership in a similar way to cultural architects (Raiio, 1986). In other words, the coaches looked to shape group identity and influence by using certain individuals to change “the [mentally tough] mindset of [other players]” (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016, p. 119); logically through mechanisms such as teammates “providing rivalry and support” whereby these teammates “foster reappraisal of the meaning and relevance of experiences” (cf. Crust & Clough, 2011, p. 26, 28) and similar to significant others such as parents that help “rationalize their [players] thoughts” and “persevere” in challenges (Parkes & Mallett, 2011, p. 272). Indeed, the judicious selection of these cultural architects, combined with using them to educate others through processes, such as buddy systems, is consistent with previous work that has suggested that such steps can also lead to “empowering” players and enhanced performance levels (Allen *et al.*, 2004). In specific relation to MT, Crust and Clough (2011, p. 28) have also stated that these peers “can help to share experiences, alleviate concerns” that can help optimise the MT of groups, or indeed can act “as icons to be copied” by other players (Coulter *et al.*, 2016, p. 108). In addition to this, it was also interesting to note how, by setting agendas and influencing mentally tough leaders in one-to-ones prior to meetings with

the full squad, the interviewed coaches managed the team's identity and response through a form of manipulation that again reflects the darker side of coaching, as was evident in Chapter 3 and recently explored in other research (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015).

Beyond the *use* of mentally tough leaders throughout the team, my results also show that *aligning formal leaders* – for example, assistants, staff and captains – by coaches was instrumental, as also found in relevant research into other high-performance environments (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2015). This finding again suggests that effective leadership “is shared within the team” and should be considered from a “holistic” perspective (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016, p. 129). Indeed, either by explicit direction to staff on what was acceptable and “sacrosanct” (C-4), or indirectly through other means (e.g., messages in staff presentations), coaches in this study clearly highlighted the need for alignment within their staff (regardless of position). Interestingly, this type of consistent message from an aligned organisation helped to acculturate ‘Joe’ into mentally tough behaviours in a rare longitudinal study in AFL (Tibbert *et al.*, 2015). Thelwell *et al.* (2010) have also asserted that, when the sporting personnel in an organisation are aligned, it gives the best possibility of affecting the mindset of players. In studies on building mental fortitude (which has many conceptual similarities to MT), eminent researchers also suggest the importance of recognising the main decision makers and of the alignment of support staff to enhance resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

The final theme found in this study on how the coaches shaped group identity and influence was *sending messages via the media*, a finding that represents a new area in MT research, as mentioned in Chapter 3. As one coach in my study stated, if these media messages impact ‘confidence’ they will directly impact MT

(Connaughton *et al.*, 2008a; Coulter *et al.*, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2002), and so it is important for coaches to manage these or use them as a “weapon” (C-5) to impact MT. In addition to the growing amount of media today, research also shows that it can add stress and negatively impact players (Blanchard, 2013; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011) though despite this, coaches can indeed mitigate against these factors through their informational feedback and adding perspective to players (Kristiansen *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, within rugby union, media is seen to even contribute to burnout by adding stress to players through the perceived public expectations (Cresswell & Eklund, 2007). These processes of ‘using the media’ seem to resemble the “dark side” of coaching, where coaches seek to influence their players’ performance levels through more indirect channels (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015, p 249). As also discussed in Eubank *et al.* (2017), many ‘significant others’ in an environment can play a part in setting the culture of mentally tough behaviours and, in professional rugby union, it certainly seems that the media can represent one of these.

4.5 So what do we know and what do we need to know?

As stated above and throughout my thesis, the findings of this chapter again highlight that MT needs specific attention and leadership in professional rugby union. Additionally, it is clear that high-level coaches promote the importance of MT and, indeed, they recognise the instrumental position they hold as ‘engineers’ in effecting it. Following on from my results in Chapter 3, which highlighted how players and coaches broadly saw that MT was elicited in professional rugby, this chapter has further endorsed and elaborated upon the key role of coaches and how they shape the group identity and influence that underpins MT on a game-to-game basis. By having

an awareness of their players and the social milieu, these interviewed coaches reported ways in which they had been able to manage this integral factor to optimise MT in performances. More specifically, the coaches described how they shaped group identity and influence by challenging group standards, developing and harnessing mentally tough leaders, fostering togetherness and respect, aligning formal leaders and sending messages via the media.

These findings again reinforced that MT, when elicited game to game, is not purely an individual construct but, in large part, a socially constructed mindset that exists as part of the dynamic and fluid nature of professional rugby teams (cf. Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013). With this transient nature, it is also clear that MT requires constant vigilance and proactive management of the social milieu by the coach in order to help deliver these mentally tough performances. Moreover, as everyone involved in the team can contribute to building, eliciting or destroying MT within the team and at a group level, a notable feature of my findings was the need for coaches to align the drivers and educators of MT within their squads. In tandem, it was notable again that the media was recognised as a telling influence and, when proactively managed, an important *alignment tool*. However, the media has received scant attention in rugby and MT research to date. So, in Chapter 5 I will take the case study of an international rugby team with its intense media coverage and scrutiny and explore how high-profile coaches have engaged with and used the media to shape MT. More specifically, and to enable a comparison and contrast between coaches, I will focus on the messages presented by three successive head coaches of the English national side and the perceived impact of these messages on the MT and performances of the team.

CHAPTER 5

ONE TOOL FROM THE BOX: EXTERNAL MANIPULATION OF AND THROUGH THE MEDIA

5.1 What makes the media so powerful/impactful

The focus of this chapter is on one of the elite coach's most powerful tools: the media. The growing number of platforms along with an increasingly connected society makes the media an extremely powerful institution (Blanchard, 2013). Of course, all coaches know that sending messages through a variety of means is a useful tool in coaching. Manipulation through the coaching environment, the drills and the challenges set to individuals, feedback received through team-mate reactions and the use of significant others such as parents or family are all ways of shaping mentally tough behaviour (Coulter *et al.*, 2016; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010). In high-level situations, however, the media becomes an important and additional tool, providing the coach with opportunities to send messages to players both externally (e.g. what significant others think and say about the team) and internally (e.g. how the team members react to what is said).

The modern trend has been to focus on the all-powerful medium of television, plus a bit of radio, as the means to generate change. This ignores the power of the written word, however. The influence of the fourth estate or press (written media) and now social media in its many forms is increasing and becoming more pervasive in today's world. We tend to believe what we read in the papers, while criticism of one's performance can be read and re-read, generating a negative spiral of rumination and

anxiety. In similar fashion, trolling by unknown critics (note the recent pressure on Dylan Hartley to resign as England captain in favour of Maro Itoje (*Telegraph Sport*, 2017)) or just messages from loved ones and friends provide a powerful and frequent stimulus to the emotions.

Recognising that these messages can be both powerful and pervasive, while also operating through a variety of channels, the switched-on coach will often use the media, either directly or indirectly, to influence players and their social environments (cf. Cruickshank *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, of course, being a manager or coach in elite sport is not without its additional challenges. Thus, the astute coach will use the media to send messages upwards (to management, sponsors and Sports Councils) and outwards (to fans, peers, etc.) in an attempt to control his or her status.

Accordingly, in this chapter I consider the use of the media through the medium of two contrasting case studies: Stuart Lancaster and Eddie Jones (hereafter SL and EJ respectively), the previous and current head coach of England Rugby. My aim is to report and critically reflect on these two individuals' interactions with the media, what they appeared to be doing, what effects it had and what finally occurred. The two selected examples offer some rich contrasts in how to employ the media. SL led England for four quite successful years into the 2015 World Cup (hereafter WC), with EJ taking up the role of head coach after a disappointing tournament for the host nation.

In both cases, I will offer 'informed speculation' on what was going on when media announcements were made or 'generated', and on what strategies or tactics underpinned them. In doing so, I completely recognise the potential for error. However, given the recently initiated trend to use autobiography or even biography as a data source, including within recent MT research (cf. Howells & Fletcher, 2015;

Morgan *et al.*, 2015; Sparkes & Stewart, 2016), my use of these sources is justified, with this caveat, in tandem with a triangulation from results and other statements.

5.2 The case study scenario: the prelude

To set the scene, I will first provide an overview of what SL took over in 2011:

“Well, I got blind drunk, tossed a few dwarves, jumped off ferries, told whopping lies, snogged a few dodgy birds and we crashed out early in total disgrace.” (Morgan, 2011)

This somewhat facetious statement was proposed by a journalist as what a member of the England WC team might say to his grandchildren, 40 years hence, after his involvement in the 2011 competition. While derisory and somewhat sensationalist, it encapsulates the ignominious end to Martin Johnson’s tenure as England head coach and the team’s exit at the hands of France. It also damningly refers to many of the alleged incidents that were reported to have actually occurred. To many, this demise was seen as unsurprising because Johnson, at the time of his appointment, was the most inexperienced coach in international rugby, having not coached any senior men’s team at any level whatsoever. Once considered an option as head coach before the 2007 WC, EJ insightfully stated:

“Johnson would definitely not be a candidate. ... Off the field now, coaching is really intricate with all the time and man management and preparation, and

England itself is such a big job. You could even say it is the biggest job in world rugby.” (Turner & Jones, 2006)

The lack of discipline extended as far as the choice of mouth guard: Even after England returned home in disgrace, there was one last shock. Courtney Lawes, post-exit, was fined £5,000 for wearing an incorrectly branded mouth guard. He was the third member of the England squad to be so reprimanded, but the news barely made a ripple: “Disregard for authority and the rules was so commonplace by then it was not even headline news any more” (Dillon, 2011). These incidents contrast with my findings in Chapters 3 and 4, which suggest that normalising mentally tough behaviours through a common team understanding or shared mental model helps to elicit mentally tough performances. Such an alignment seemed absent during Johnson’s tenure. There was also a reported lack of alignment and vision within the management team itself and a suspicion that “Johnson and his coaching team did not have a long-term plan” (Dillon, 2011). This again contrasts directly with the findings in this thesis, which indicate that alignment and vision (“long-term plan”) help to underpin a rugby team’s mentally tough performance.

Examples of the inappropriate social activities of the players heaped more pressure on a team already struggling with expectations and, as a result, upon the head coach. One journalist at the time said that Johnson was “doomed to fail” as “a man without any management experience was left on his own” and that entering a fractious and bickering environment made it almost inevitable (Halliday, 2011).

England’s predicament became even more ignominious with the suspension of management Paul Stridgeon and Dave Alred from match days for their ball tampering (Mairs, 2011). As they were members of staff, this indicated ill discipline

within the management team as well as among the players’. Quite apart from setting a negative example or the morality of the situation, however, it sent a message to the players that the management believed that they needed to cheat in order to win, thus undermining confidence levels within the players.

My purpose in drawing attention to the above is twofold. First, it shows that despite having being one of the most decorated players and captains of his era, “the greatest captain England – and Leicester Tigers – have ever had” (Cockerill, 2017) and winning a WC, as a coach Johnson ultimately failed to elicit the same level of performance from his players. This was quite probably due to his serious lack of experience, as warned of by EJ, and possibly a lack of man management skills and the resultant poor player behaviour exposing this. Second, it highlights the high degree of media intrusion in elite rugby today. This can be seen in the media analysis of off-field aspects such as players’ social activities and the branding of mouth guards, let alone on-field match reports’. It also shows the unforgiving and precarious nature of sport, whereby people can rapidly go ‘from hero to zero’, and how important it is for coaches to be aware of the messages that are in the media and how these might impact their own positions, let alone the performances of their teams. In short, whatever his win–loss record on the field, and even if much of the reporting was hyperbolic (as he himself suggested), Johnson lost almost all of the games in this particularly crucial ‘contest’!

5.3 Stuart Lancaster: a tale of two cities

5.3.1 Salvation arrives

In disarray, the RFU considered their options and, in the interim, opted for one of their 'in-house' coaches who had come through their coaching pathway and achieved considerable success with England U20s and Saxons. In the manner often seen in political changes, SL offered a direct contrast with Johnson in terms of his playing profile, as he himself said in 2014: "I've had to work hard: I never played professional rugby, never coached at the highest level and came from being a PT teacher from a school in Wakefield" (Collins, 2014). After his playing days, SL moved into running the Leeds club academy before later becoming the director of rugby at the same club from 2005, leaving in 2007 to work within the RFU. Though he had never experienced international rugby, SL was seen to have an advantage with his focused if not extensive coaching experience: "Stuart is not only an experienced coach but his role as Head of Elite Player Development puts him at the forefront of producing international players" (Mudaly, 2011). As another contrast to his predecessor, it was noted that SL had attained the highest coaching badge in the RFU, when appointed to elite rugby director, although that is again within the RFU structures rather than the club system (Squires, 2012).

From the outset, SL demonstrated an awareness of the WC media fallout. This seemed to drive him to formulate a strong philosophy about the culture that he believed was necessary at that point in time: "I understood what had gone on and that gave me a tremendous insight into trying to put it right" (Collins, 2014). This media awareness was possibly facilitated by his experience as coach in Leeds, where he got his team promoted (though they were relegated the following year). Another factor was his oft-mentioned studying of leadership while witnessing the problems of Johnson's reign and coaching the Saxons team. At the time, it was reported that "England's reputation was in tatters" (James, 2014) and SL saw redeeming this

reputation in the eyes of the English public as critical’.

Accordingly, SL set about transforming the culture of the team, as he stated on his interim appointment: “‘It is absolutely crucial in terms of turning round and improving the culture’” (BBC, 2011). To put forward this ideology, he explicitly talked of the importance for his players “‘to be humble, not to be arrogant, to respect each other and everyone else, to accept the responsibility of being an England player’” (James, 2014). When asked whether he was a disciplinarian (a question that clearly implied a contrast with the previous regime), SL replied: “‘I am. I do believe that behaviour shapes performance and the environment. We want to make sure there are clear ground rules and clear non-negotiables’” (Eykyn, 2012). SL had only taken up the role temporarily but he went about shaping the expectations of his players based strongly on his assessment of the team’s predicament in the wake of the 2011 WC. In dealing with the fallout from the WC and Johnson’s regime, SL was well aware of and accepted the media-stated position: that there was a public view of English rugby internationals as “‘feckless drunkards’” (Cleary, 2012a).

SL’s media messages were then cemented by his initial actions, backing up his down-to-earth approach and embedding his philosophy. He omitted 13 players from the old regime, selecting 15 new players and sending out a clear message about his determination to not be influenced by prior playing reputations. He also moved his first training sessions from the usual luxurious Pennyhill Park site to the small local club of West Park in Yorkshire, where he had coached previously. He highlighted the need for change as much in the off-field aspects as on the field: “‘That’s why it’s important to change that and to reconnect with the grass-roots game. We’ve slightly lost that [connection with the fans]. That’s why we’re training up north, basing ourselves in England rather than abroad’” (Cleary, 2012a).

One of SL's first and strongest messages was ironically omitting a former West Park player of his: current international player Danny Care. Despite their previous connection, SL seized the opportunity presented by Care's mistake on New Year's Eve (a drink-driving offence) to send a very clear statement to his players by leaving him out of the squad for the entire Six Nations. It was a strong statement as Care was a key member within the previous regime, and still considered a valuable player. This message was then reiterated by the press, which further endorsed both SL and his no-nonsense approach:

Lancaster has met Care and spoken to him, so he's found out the background and the reasoning for why Care did what he did. But there are two drink-related issues in close proximity and Lancaster has made up his mind that he is not going to accept off the field behaviour that is unbecoming of an England international. Banning Care from the Six Nations is a massive statement, telling players to tidy up their act. Lancaster has been completely decisive. No one is going to say it's the wrong decision – it's hard but fair. (Eykyn, 2012)

This sent a clear message on discipline and the behaviour needed to be part of the England squad. It exemplified a hard but fair stance by SL, especially in how he communicated in a direct and considerate manner with Care. Furthering this was the fact that Care accepted his punishment and, in fact, endorsed the actions of SL: “Quins and Stuart have been very supportive and I totally accept their sanctions” (Eykyn, 2012). This was echoed by Care's club coach, Conor O'Shea, who further supported the actions taken by SL on BBC Radio 5 Live: “I think Stuart has done the right thing and I support the RFU completely and entirely” (Eykyn, 2012).

Dealing with the incident in this way may or may not be a mark of SL's personal morality – I have no way of knowing. It was, however, an excellent example of a well-choreographed and coordinated series of moves which, with the media coverage clearly a part of the strategy, was extremely effective in embedding the messages of SL and his approach. His strong actions which stood out even more impressively in light of the WC debacle over cultural and behavioural issues. These explicit media comments no doubt fed into the full squad's thinking and awareness.

I think it is important to stress that the media messaging appears to be only part – albeit a powerful part – of a well-conducted overall plan. In this interim period, and as attested by his one-to-one communication with Care, SL focused on reforming aspects of the culture surrounding the team and inherent in this was his accessing of the players' thinking and sharing his ideology through personal discussions. He was known for his many one-to-one meetings with players and, even at busy training camps, he was committed to having at least one one-to-one with every player. It seems that SL was aware of the impact in these individual chats regarding his “credibility scale” (Squires, 2015) with the players. Indeed, I would suggest that, as an interim coach starting out, he may have gone from a 2/10 to a 4/10 merely through these one-to-one chats (Squires, 2015). Interestingly, one biographer of SL, Neil Squires, suggests that he was always trying to gain credibility and that if he “criticised the team in public ... his score would quickly have plunged” (Squires, 2015). Squires states how SL valued communication as essential to coaching and suggests that this was possibly why he implemented so many one-to-ones. SL also sent direct messages to the players in his first tournament challenge through his selection of no fewer than eight uncapped players, along with the words ““This is a team for now and a team for

the future ... Now is their time” (Cleary, 2012b) – a clear and strong statement in his belief in this new team.

Once again reflecting an integrated strategy, SL also reduced the pressure on the players by assuring them that their positions were not vulnerable regardless of the outcome:

“Will there be wholesale changes win, lose or draw?” he mused. “No, there won’t. The framework of what we are trying to achieve and the way we are trying to play will remain the same throughout the Six Nations. We are committed to that. The players know that. We are giving some young players a chance to shine. To change after the weekend would be the wrong thing to do.” (Cleary, 2012b)

Again, this shows a clear direction, planning and strong commitment to where the team was going. It also fits nicely with the ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ approach that SL worked hard to establish, thereby modelling through behaviour and media communications his wish to build a strong team identity.

5.3.2 You ARE the One: SL appointed on a permanent basis

After the interim period, it was reported that SL’s permanent appointment came on the back of his focus on team culture rather than being based only on results: “Lancaster’s strict approach to discipline has created a new culture at the heart of the national squad and won many plaudits from sponsors and supporters alike” (Mairs, 2012). This change was quickly reflected in an evolution in SL’s media/behaviour

strategy. After bringing England from “the shambles of the World Cup” to “thrashing Ireland” (Holden, 2012) and to second place overall in the Six Nations in four months, SL took the opportunity to endorse his plan, his ambitions, his players and the ‘journey’ he has brought them on, through the media:

“Today was difficult but we were outstanding in every department. At the outset there’s a long-term plan, and that involves giving a load of young players some experience. ... They believe in the team, they believe in the direction they’re going, they believe in the coaches and it showed today.”
(ESPN, 2012a)

He also sought to connect with the public directly: ““If you said to me I’d be walking around Twickenham applauding 82,000 people with a group of lads I respect and a management group I respect, I would have taken it”” (ESPN, 2012a). Indeed, the Ireland game brought some in the media to consider that the “revolution is complete” (Holden, 2012) and that the match fully cemented an impressive initial phase of SL’s regime. Of relevance, and arguably based on SL’s focus on building relationships with them, the media played a significant role through the information that they accessed through ‘sources’ in the management and then disseminated in this phase: “Getting the parents, siblings, teachers and friends of each squad member to write what it meant to them to see that player represent his country and framing those comments was inspired” (Ackford, 2012). On 21 March, four days after the Six Nations finished, SL used the media to set out his intentions and qualities in order to advance his claim to be named as England coach on a permanent basis. No doubt buoyed by the immediate successes in the Six Nations, he stated:

“You want to see that the candidate is honest, that they’ve got integrity, that they’re forward-thinking and that they’ve got a broad skill set that matches the job spec. ... Those are things I look for. Clearly, I wouldn’t have put myself forward for the job if I didn’t think I had those qualities.” (Lowe, 2012)

Within this article, SL reinforced his ideology for the benefit of readers, but also players and, perhaps most pertinently, the bosses in the RFU.

After his appointment as permanent coach to beyond the 2015 WC, SL utilised the media to reinforce his messages to the players but also (I would suggest) to highlight to the public what a good job he had done and thereby further cement his value and surety of position:

As a means of pointing the way forward, the coach looked back. “I talked about the environment we created post-World Cup, and the reasons why we did that,” he said. “My starting point for the tour was to remind the players where we were six months ago. I showed them some of the headlines and said to them, ‘The reason we’ve got from where we were then to where we are now is because we’ve focused on the reason why we want to play for England and the responsibility that comes with that, and the scrutiny.’

“When you looked around the room there were quite a few players who have been involved in incidents in the past and all of them were nodding in agreement when I said we don’t want to have any off-field distractions that are going to affect our on-field performance.

“That was basically the line and I made it pretty clear that is the way

the bus is going, and we've all got to make a decision about whether we want to be on it." (*Yorkshire Post*, 2012)

SL's communication on a one-to-one basis was a feature throughout his tenure and he also travelled to meet players outside the squad, such as Steffon Armitage, who "met Lancaster in Toulon on Monday and was told that 'the door is not wholly closed' regarding his England future" (James, 2014). Having this information in the public domain endorsed him as a coach who left no stone unturned and no 'door closed' in the pursuit of success. Coincidentally, this player later found himself facing assault charges in France which presented SL with another opportunity to broadcast the expectations he had placed upon his players: "Clearly from my point of view, behaviour and standards on and off the field are critically important in any team. We'll wait and see, but ultimately you know my view on it" (SBS, 2015).

As the team's success grew, so too did the expectations upon the players – "Should they [England] keep winning and South Africa stutter on their European tour, hence the extra pressure being brought to bear on established players to raise their games" (Kitson, 2013b) – and so too upon the coach. With this pressure, the messages that SL sent through the media changed from "a chance to shine [for players]" before his first game to:

"We had a long chat about it. ... He's under a bit of pressure. ... He has a real point to prove coming into this game, no doubt about it. ... [Y]ou've got to be good in all other areas such as high-ball receipt, kick-chase and defensive alignment. It's the whole package for every player and that's what we spoke to him about." (Kitson, 2013b)

This message was directed towards Chris Ashton but, as the last line states, it was made equally applicable to all of the team. Furthermore, the messages were clearly received by the players for off-field as well as on-field behaviours, as then second row Courtney Lawes reported at the time: ““You certainly know your place as a player with England”” (Squires, 2015, p 334).

The importance of players being ‘in the tent’ was increasingly stressed in this phase of SL’s tenancy. When selecting his players, SL said: ““You only truly learn about players when you coach them yourself in your environment and you can work with them day to day”” (James, 2014). However, maintaining his older messages when selecting, he repeated that character was important: ““You’ve got to have character to be a great international rugby player. ... In a 50-50 selection decision I’ll always pick the player with the greater character.”” Reinforcing the messages on team tightness, and corroborating messages, the England captain Chris Robshaw echoed SL in talking about how they had focused on building team cohesion and a ““good team spirit”” (Cleary, 2012d) during SL’s first Six Nations. This cultural requirement was embedded through the many emails SL spoke of sending to the players, along with the continuous and formal one-to-ones he had – yet another example of sending messages to players both privately and publicly through the media. Indeed, SL’s initial success in his inaugural Six Nations (finishing in second place) was confirmed in the media as being based on instilling a positive culture and attitude within the squad and a constant focus upon culture. Even interim assistant coaches (such as WC-winning player Mike Catt) coming into the regime after the Six Nations further embedded (were briefed to – once again speculation but a reasonable supposition) these ideals, along with SL himself, in the media: ““Players love coming to England, they love

performing for England, so for me the whole attitude and culture that Stuart has developed, this no-excuse culture, is exactly [the same as] from a 2003 point of view” (Huguenin, 2013). SL clearly added to the performance levels and the MT of the team as the headline comment of another assistant coach, Graham Rowntree, made clear: “Lancaster ‘dragged England out of the gutter’” (ESPN, 2012b).

For an experienced coach focused upon getting to know his players, the cohesion and alignment within the staff identified in Chapter 4 were crucial to eliciting MT and were exemplified in his staff’s comments above. During this initial phase, SL also talked of the importance of leadership within the England set-up and that he was central to this: “The high-performance environments which have won consistently have all been driven by the head coach, rather than anyone else” (Kitson, 2013a). By getting family members to write to his players, SL “was tapping into the values of those that care about them” (James, 2014) and showing the connections and responsibilities that the players have as part of the England team.

SL looked to further engage with supporters by changing the players’ route to games at Twickenham via a longer walk through the crowds by the symbolic Lion Gate when they arrived, further connecting the players and grounding them. Again, this matches my findings in Chapter 4 whereby coaches looked to increase connections with fans through releasing these policies to the media. Understanding who England were as a team was also important for SL. He “conducted an educational evening in which the squad were talked through the history of English rugby. It was a history lesson for the players and for us as coaches, said Lancaster. I didn’t know a lot of it, either. The players were massively engaged in it” (James, 2014). Adding to the sense of inclusivity, “One of the players mentioned was James Peters, the first black player to represent England. Mako and Billy Vunipola were said

to be visibly emotional when told his story. Lancaster's team have now formed their own heritage committee" (James, 2014). At the end of 2014 and with less than a year to go to the WC, SL upped the 'family alignment':

"Stuart's attention to detail is second to none," one insider told *Sportmail*. "You look at the stuff the players have been given and it tells them when to go to bed, when to rest, the need for a three-week break at the end of this season; it's all designed to ensure they peak at the right time. ... But the wives and girlfriends and the agents were called in to make sure that everyone is on the same page; that everyone understands that trying to win the World Cup is what the next year is all about." (Lawton, 2014)

Another big emphasis in this phase of his stewardship was the well-publicised focus on learning. Note this from SL after a fact-finding mission to New Zealand: "I learnt a lot about the psychology of both countries. ... It's about leadership, based on the principles the All Blacks have used in their culture and their identity, and some of the values they live by" (James, 2014).

SL further set out his doctrine through the media by offering examples from other sports of the players he wanted in his team – players such as Tom Brady, the NFL player, who is not physically imposing but is described as having a lot of 'heart': "He epitomises the type of player I want" (James, 2014). Again, SL was giving clear directives as to what he expected of his players in terms of commitment, sending messages both internally and externally, but also setting out the guidelines for selection: humble, hardworking, disciplined and with great heart (James, 2014). In this way, SL was clearly using the media and reminding the players of the

expectations that he had of them. Cleverly, however, this was done without a public reference to anyone in the squad – an important consideration for minimising internal conflict.

Another feature of this phase were the messages about changes made at Twickenham, which included such nostalgic slogans as “Hundreds before you, thousands around you, millions behind you” along the players’ tunnel at “Fortress Twickenham” (Godwin, 2013). Similar to the shared team identity/culture discussed in Chapter 3, SL stated the need for players to conform to the group ideals: ““They have to fit into the team ethic and what the team’s all about. If a team isn’t strong enough culturally, then that can destroy a team.”” (James, 2014). SL was unequivocal in his message to his players with regards to discipline; soon after his permanent appointment, he stated that he would ““give the players the parameters”” (Foy, 2012). This was delivered through the media as well as in private, just after his first Six Nations and before the team toured South Africa, and highlighted both his awareness and the behaviours that he did not want repeated from the WC a year earlier in New Zealand. SL also showed his awareness in connecting with the supporters:

“There was a real sense in the crowd that day [England’s victory over New Zealand at Twickenham in 2012] of the crowd getting behind the team. It was a young team, we’d lost two, the captain Chris [Robshaw] was coming in for some criticism but the energy the crowd gave us was phenomenal on that day and it took the team past the New Zealanders.” (James, 2014)

SL was also highlighting to the players the need to establish this connection and channel this energy, especially with the pressures he foresaw in hosting the next WC.

As Dylan Hartley said:

“It is in your face. The history is there and it is pretty special. There’s everyone from the first England player’s name to my own. ... It makes you connect with the shirt. It brings you together as a group and you get an emotional connection with the players around you.” (Dawes, 2013)

To also endorse the history and tradition of playing for England, each seat in the dressing room had a list of the previous holders of that shirt number and further extolled the culture of the team. Emblematic of this culture and connected to playing behaviours was the team’s newly initiated Arthur Harrison Award, named after an ex-international who received the Victoria Cross and awarded to the best defender in the game, thereby representing the commitment advocated by SL:

“When all else is equal, team spirit and want is king,” Stuart Lancaster said. ...
“The coaching qualifications I did have massively helped my development. It was the level five course that gave me the confidence to kick on. ... It lit a fire really, gave me the understanding that rugby and getting the best out of teams is not just about the on-field stuff. ... It’s all the off-field stuff that makes it happen. The course ranged from tactical and technical to leadership. That was the start of it, where you tend to grow as a coach.” (Lowe, 2012)

5.3.3 June 2012 to August 2015: building the regime but facing challenges

Despite the bandwagon of positivity and comparative success, there were also criticisms from other quarters as to SL's selections, development of certain playing positions such as openside flanker and playing styles (James, 2014). SL seemed aware of these when he said:

“We want to play a style of rugby that excites the crowd and uses our talents. We've got some great footballers, some great ball carriers, some power, some good distributors and alongside that we'd like our defensive system to be aggressive and give us opportunities to score tries by its effectiveness. So it's all three things interlaced together really.” (James, 2014)

So in public, at least, SL was advocating a very comprehensive list of playing abilities and approaches. The reference to “a style of rugby that excites the crowd” shows how invested SL was in entertaining the supporters and also how this might be affecting his selections and training processes.

Significantly, SL stated around this time that 40 per cent of his role was occupied with dealing with the media, 40 per cent with management and the remaining 20 per cent with coaching (James, 2014). This clearly demonstrated his awareness of the importance of the media and may also possibly account for some of the criticisms as to how the team's style of rugby was developing and being perceived by the media. Spending only 20 per cent of his time coaching seems paltry in terms of the responsibility of a head 'coach', and contradicts SL's earlier edict as to seeing players train was essential to understanding them. However, for me, it suggests that

SL was moving towards more of a performance director role than that of a head coach. This interpretation is supported by the advert that ran at this time for a “Director of Player Development”. Questionably, this was presented as “reporting to the National Coach” – a strange decision, especially with an impending WC on home soil.

In the face of growing expectations from the initial successful period, SL struggled in the autumn of 2014 and, a year out from the WC, some comments reflected this heightened pressure: “I think the cycle of the team has reached a point where the development bit stops; it’s about the winning” (Kitson, 2015a). Such comments indicated a shift in focus from attitudinal aspects to outcome orientations, and, within process-driven coaching, to focus on the results is often a signal of pressure. Indeed, bringing Danny Cipriani – a player who had had his struggles off the field due to personal attributes (Schlink, 2011) - into the squad contrasted notably with the focus upon ‘character’ that SL had initially projected. Along with this, SL seemed to move away from his well-presented and (purportedly) well-established plan, almost ‘clutching at straws’ in bringing in Sam Burgess, a rugby league player who had not played rugby union to any significant level (Holt, 2015). Further to this, the strong messages about culture were now more qualified for his selections: “Myself and Graham Rowntree have talked long and hard about it. Nick [Easter] has convinced me he will buy into us as a group and I think he’ll add real value” (Kitson, 2015a). While a collaborative approach was shown here, it seemed to be an attempt to justify the selection and sent a less convincing and notably contradictory message. Furthermore, and contrasting with the initial non-selection of Care over drinking, SL now sent mixed messages: “Selection will ultimately come down not to reputation or what people have done in the past” (Kitson, 2015a).

5.3.4 WC 2015: the wheels come off the chariot

With the upcoming WC and a new contract awarded to stretch beyond the following WC of 2019, SL displayed some signs that he was feeling increased pressure, culminating on the eve of “the biggest game of his career”, the deciding pool qualifier of the WC against Australia on 3 October 2015 (Cleary, 2015). The messages he sent at this juncture displayed uncertainty but also acknowledgement of the potential for a lack of appropriate focus: “I think you’ve got to be careful not to make the game so big in their minds that they can’t function” (Foy, 2015a). On top of this, SL seemed to justify his selection of Owen Farrell rather than George Ford at fly-half: “There’s a black-and-white assumption that people make that if George Ford plays we play fantastic, creative, attacking rugby and when Farrell plays we don’t” (Foy, 2015a). This clearly reflected a defensive position in his selection and messages such as these reflected a change of philosophy and a possible reaction to the pressure he was feeling. As players would also review these media messages from the coach, then this could add confusion as to what strategy to commit to. It also contained assumptions about the behaviours he was expecting from his two fly-halves that may well have impacted both mindsets, suggesting that his chosen fly-half had a reputation for lacking skills in open play. There also seemed to be ambiguity in interviews, with somewhat contradictory messages about having clarity despite the bewildering complexity and unpredictability of rugby games: “We will talk through all sorts of scenarios as we did last week but there are so many permutations. We just need to make sure that the players are clear in their own minds” (Cleary, 2015).

Notably though, it was the other messages that SL sent out, possibly not with the fullest intent or planning, which characterised his carefully planned strategy in

earlier phases, that might have further undermined the team's belief. After a critical moment in the WC game against Wales that impacted the result, SL needed to galvanise his team before the crucial fixture with Australia, but commented: "It's tough being head coach. ... [I]t's tough being involved in the international team when you've lost a game of rugby – a game of that size" (Herbert, 2015a). In contrast to earlier statements, this was not a strong positive message to send and one that could be perceived as implying a desire not to be involved in international rugby or to have such a high-pressure, high-demand role. I suggest that this would not have instilled in his players the greatest amount of fight or the belief that their coach saw a positive outcome. This then possibly diminished and negatively impacted the players collective efficacy and as a result, the teams MT. Quite possibly, the pressure and analysis was also getting to SL himself, with one ex-England captain claiming that the team had any ability to think "coached out of them by a schoolmaster's regime" (Samuel, 2015). Given these personal slights and regardless of his six-year contract extension, SL was no doubt aware that his position was under scrutiny during the WC after the initial loss to Wales and this crucial game against Australia: "Stuart is going into the game that will make or break England's World Cup campaign and shape his own future with his eyes wide open" (Foy, 2015). This pressure again showed itself in the tetchiness in comments that SL made when asked if he had had discussions with his immediate boss regarding the implications of the Australian match: "We're obviously aware what is at stake – you don't have to be a rocket scientist to work it out" (Cleary, 2015). Regardless of the clichéd question, the response did not embolden or show his fortitude to his players. The fact that SL felt it necessary to justify his coaching style also indicates a lack of self-confidence at the time:

“Twenty-five years in coaching and teaching ... [I]f anyone wants to get in a debate over this spectrum of coaching and teaching styles – I understand what different environments and methods of teaching look like. It’s not in one category. You wouldn’t just say ‘Right, you are doing this’ as if it’s a classroom-based environment. It’s rubbish.” (Herbert, 2015b)

In simple terms, the message machine was faltering at just the time when optimum and consistent communication was most needed.

Added to the increasingly critical reviews and opinions, the stats did not help. As for “Fortress Twickenham”, SL lost eight times there versus the four of Clive Woodward and only achieved second place in the Six Nations during his four-year tenure. It was seen that, while SL “tried to build a team of giants able to take responsibility and honour the shirt, on and off the field ... [i]nstead, some have made themselves look quite small” (Hayward, 2015a). After the debacle of the 2011 WC, there suddenly seemed to be too many similarities for the decision makers not to make a change:

Telegraph Sport reports that sources within the camp suggested there had been frustration in the squad that Sam Burgess had been selected ahead of Luther Burrell, and unrest over a training ground spat between Danny Cipriani and Mike Catt and that restrictions on social events were too strict. Billy Vunipola also denies claiming in a question and answer session that Andy Farrell had too big an influence in the coaching set-up or that he had questioned Burgess’ selection ahead of Burrell. (Gibson, 2015)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, with the media sharks circling, leaks became the order of the day. For example, it was said that “the presence of Farrell is felt in particular. ... [He] is much more than simply a backs coach in the England set-up. He is the energy pulse of the team” (Squires, 2015, p 342). So, despite the careful impression management of SL in his initial days, it meant little at the end. Added to this, and similar to the problems in management at the end of Johnson’s reign, was the ‘share-tipping’ controversy regarding Dave Tennison, the England kit manager (Mairs, 2015c). It is hard to place any responsibility for this on SL but such issues only detracted from the carefully designed and hard-won positive image of the team and its surrounding culture. The actual incident itself (Tennison advising players on investing in an oil-drilling firm) certainly added distractions. A *Daily Mail* article outlining SL’s plan on talking with players’ partners and agents a year out from the WC displayed several photos of players ‘celebrity’ beach poses with partners (Lawton, 2014). The opportunity presented by the coach’s messaging to partners, as part of the team, allowed the press to present a less ‘rugby-hard’ and a more ‘celeb’-focused image. Once again, there were signs that the previously firm hand on the tiller was starting to make too many changes in direction – all at the worst possible time with regard to the challenge (a home WC) and the attitude of the media, who are notorious for building up and then tearing down!

In response to the ultimate failure in the 2015 WC, Ian Ritchie, the CEO of the RFU, announced that they were seeking a new coach with ““proven international experience”” – a move in direct opposition to the last appointment (perhaps once again a sign of the common pendulum swing between extremes). There was a clear feeling of failure in the process reviews as well, with one journalist speculating that the new coach would be a “a leader with a dagger between his teeth” (Hayward,

2015a). Certainly, SL's "prevarication turned to a lack of clarity and consistency in the pool itself, with the rewriting of England's game plan against Wales being the worst example" (Hayward, 2015a).

As per usual, the media post-mortems stressed a number of failings that had supposedly been 'there for all to see' for at least a year in advance but that were not considered until afterwards. England's identity – the way the team actually played - seemed to get lost in the WC; as one team member, Nick Easter, said: "We scored a high number of tries in the Six Nations and the way we played should have been the blueprint for the World Cup, tactically and in selection. But as we saw, it didn't go that way. Because we'd lost our identity" (Bech, 2015). Easter argued that the all-encompassing approach as advocated by SL was not a route to success: "You've got to know your strength and become very good at it. Make sure other areas are strong, but don't try to cover all bases" (Bech, 2015). This suggests a lack of clarity as to how England should play, and this uncertainty may well have permeated through the team, as Easter implies above.

Beyond the 'identity' aspect, SL was seen to fall prey to other distracting incidents that didn't help. While the Danny Care situation provided an ideal opportunity for SL to initially evoke his ideology, Manu Tuilagi committing similar misdemeanours only undermined what he was trying to build. When Tuilagi accepted his culpability for an assault charge by echoing almost exactly the words of Danny Care three years earlier, they sounded hollow: "The club and Stuart have been very supportive, and I understand their sanctions, too" (Mairs, 2015a). Things seemed to be getting rather formulaic! So, despite the long and carefully managed rhetoric about culture, the situation seemed to regress and to start to resemble the 2011 WC, even before the tournament began. Notably, the early strong tone in SL's first Six Nations

affirming “Now is their time” (Cleary, 2012b) was not as prevalent in the run-up to the WC.

As SL stated, he ended up only spending about 20 per cent of his time actually coaching and it is quite possible that the perception of him as a leader was actually as “the head of corporate energy and corporate confidence” (Squires, 2015, p. 341). Criticised by Mike Ford, Burgess’ club coach at Bath, and Gordon D’arcy, the Burgess situation led to the claim that the “England hierarchy have lost credibility” and exposed a division in the team management (Foy, 2015b). As highlighted earlier, there was “talk about the prominent role of Andy Farrell in this and other key decisions”(Foy, 2015b). So, while SL stated that he had the final say over selection, “Farrell was seen as an increasingly influential figure, with the squad divided over his input” (*Daily mail*, 2015). This exposed serious cracks in the team structure and possibly led to a somewhat dysfunctional set-up.

5.3.5 In memoriam

In the review that took place after the 2015 WC, much was made of the team’s suddenly poor cohesion, with Billy Vunipola “claiming England could have benefited from bonding exercises such as going to the pub to break down barriers” (Mairs, 2015b). Indeed, one successful coach at the WC also criticised the RFU for their selection of SL in the first place. “Every Union that’s successful, every national team that’s successful, has a guy that’s experienced, has a guy that understands rugby”, said EJ, who oversaw three wins for Japan at the WC, including a historic triumph over South Africa. “And unless you have that, they’re non-negotiables.

“The non-negotiables are simple and the Unions that falter are the Unions that don’t follow those non-negotiables like England ... You know, England pick a rookie coach to coach a home team at a World Cup. When you’re a home team, the pressure on that coach is enormous. You need a guy that’s got experience, has been through the loop, understands how to manage his team in that quite hostile environment” (Mairs, 2015b)

The pressure seemed palpable in the statements to the media delivered by SL during the WC. Gone was the freedom to play and now, when asked if that day’s incarnation of fearless rugby was to be encouraged, a much different response was offered:

“Yes. ... But alongside that ... we want that to a point. But what you don’t want to do is to tell the players to tap and go when you’ve got three points you could easily take and build your score. Because international rugby is about small margins and you’ve got to take the points on offer. You don’t want to tap the ball from your own 22 and run from anywhere because it’s suicidal. ... This is a big moment for them. For all of us.” (Herbert, 2015b)

The provider of the criticism above regarding the RFU’s mistake then happened to become SL’s successor. Not only did this reveal the pressure that SL was feeling but it also sent an ambiguous directive to players when any indecision will be heightened with the increased expectation. The day on which this article was published, England were playing in the decisive WC game against a strong Wales team and as the host nation.

SL may have left with dignity, but he also did so with his major focus on culture being at the very least questioned and even cited as a partial cause of his failure. Interestingly, SL returned to his touchstone in his parting comments:

“But most of all, I would like to thank the England rugby fans, who have always backed us and given us amazing support. The team feels a close connection with everyone across the grassroots game, which has been important to us all.” (*Guardian*, 2015)

5.4 Eddie Jones: enter the dragon

5.4.1 All change: the first month

Unlike SL, EJ – the coach in waiting – had a highly successful WC with his team Japan, who he had coached for the previous three years. He took them from sixteenth in the world rankings to tenth and reached a pinnacle in gaining victory over South Africa in the 2015 WC. This exalted victory only added to EJ’s reputation, having led Australia to the 2003 WC final and been an assistant in the 2007 WC victory by South Africa. The circumstances of his recruitment and appointment were also notably different. While there was uncertainty over the appointment of SL to the extent that he had to undergo a probationary period, EJ’s appointment was actively (and semi-publicly) pursued and met with enthusiasm. Despite being England’s first non-English coach, an online poll had his approval rating at 80 per cent (Mairs, 2015d). As one squad member stated, ““When a well-respected coach comes in like that, it gives English players a little bit of extra motivation”” (Press Association, 2015).

Importantly, regardless of how much impression management and ‘personal investment’ underpins this quote, it clearly shows the advantage that EJ had over SL and the players’ anticipatory enthusiasm to receiving direction.

EJ set his stall out early, using a subtle combination of public, private and semi-public (solicited or leaked) statements to introduce his new regime. As an ex-Australian international said, “‘You work hard and you don’t want to be late’” (Kitson, 2015c). EJ also gave both hope and a warning by announcing, “‘at least 70 per cent’ of the 2015 squad can feature in four years’ time in Japan” (Mole, 2015). EJ set out a no-nonsense, almost brutal, business-like approach to the coaching staff by simply saying: “‘If they can offer what I want, then they can have the job; if they don’t, then I’ll look at other options’” (Mole, 2015). The functional and contractual nature of this statement leaves little ambiguity as to the direct approach he expects and, while directed to the potential coaches, it clearly also shows the players (and fans) the strength of his convictions.

Following his early communications, one of EJ’s most questioned decisions, and a real ‘statement’ per se, was his selection of captain. This sent clear messages (both overt and covert for the media to ‘interpret’) about what England were to be about, endorsing what was perceived as a core strengths of English rugby in their physicality. By choosing the abrasive and controversial but “‘nice lunatic’” Dylan Hartley as captain, EJ courted immense criticism (Tanner, 2017). One prominent rugby school reputedly talking of leaving rugby at the news of his appointment (Sale, 2017). Even now, despite Jamie George making the Lions test team, EJ is still backing the “firebrand” Hartley as someone in contention to lead England, which again shows a direct challenge to both players without favouritism or reputation (Sale, 2017). As an eminent journalist noted, “Hartley reflects Jones’s own outlook: fiery,

confrontational, grafting. It will set the tone” and as such, it will reinforce what attitude EJ is looking for in his team (Cleary, 2016).

5.4.2 Additional messaging through staff appointments

EJ kept staff from the SL reign waiting while pursuing alternatives. For example, the RFU asked Bristol to release Steve Borthwick to help with the forwards. In adopting this more covert approach, EJ was seen as diametrically opposite to SL (Hayward, 2015) and quite probably gained some additional messaging benefit from this through demonstrating his ‘no stone unturned’ approach. Upsetting Bristol, Saracens and Northampton by pursuing their coaches, EJ showed he “is nothing if not clear about what he wants” (Mole, 2015). In a further show of conviction, EJ then travelled to Northampton and Bath, where he came into direct contact with the clubs whose coaches he was pursuing. Other reports showed EJ to be comfortable with his awareness and ability to adapt – “‘You can be a devil one minute and an angel the next,’ Jones grinned” (Hayward, 2015) – and that “[h]e does not suffer fools and he does not care for stuffing up. Whatever it takes” (Cleary, 2016). All of this against press, whilst presumably unsolicited (but still possibly useful to his desired impression), was seen as “unprofessional” and riding “roughshod” over clubs though it seemed EJ was less bothered about this as it reinforced his unequivocal attitude as to what was needed (Peters, 2015). Another comparison drawn between the two coaches was that SL “was the ‘PE teacher’”, but EJ “could just be the demon headmaster needed to shake up the sleeping giants” (Fordham, 2015). Almost incidental to EJ’s attitude but crucial to his developing coherent messages through staff, Borthwick was the epitome of what EJ required to drive his standards: “Stories

of team-mates interrupting Borthwick during a spot of late-night video analysis are manifold. Attempts to drag him away were invariably unsuccessful. Only Jonny Wilkinson could match both his professionalism and dedication, which at times became all consuming” (Schofield, 2015).

5.4.3 Embedding the new regime

At the start of the 2016 Six Nations, only a few months after being appointed, EJ seemed to have established just what he wanted as a reputation, embedding a no-nonsense, get-on-with-it attitude described as; “Those who have worked with him would attest that the new England coach is uncompromising, doesn’t suffer small talk and demands total commitment from his players. It’s a style that can backfire, but more often than not it brings success” (Herbert, 2016).

In terms of the actual rugby training, EJ showed in his initial training press releases a clear expectation as to what he wanted to see within his squad. EJ seemed to have simplified matters with a more simple and direct approach:

“We’ve taken a lot out. ... We have just simplified things here a bit. We’ve made it less science-orientated and more functional. We’re going to build a few other things outside, like stairs to run up. We’ve brought in a wrestling area – part of the game we need to improve is our breakdown work.” (James, 2016)

EJ continued with this unambiguous approach into the 2017 Six Nations and, instead of resting on prior successes, demonstrated a public and conscious awareness

of the physicality needed to deal with France in the first game of the tournament. He increased both the volume and consistency of this message by having coaching staff reiterate it:

Defence coach Paul Gustard primed his men for battle at a defence session on Tuesday by listing all the skirmishes that have taken place on various fields down through the centuries, stressing the notion that France never cede ground easily. (Cleary, 2017a)

EJ then reminded the players with certainty of his expectations while also subtly suggesting that they were well aware of these expectations. Through these means, he was seen to support them but was clearly leaving no ambiguity:

“If you need to talk to them about physicality, then they are in the wrong sport. And our boys are not in the wrong sport. If they don’t want contact, then they should be playing volleyball. It’s like going down the coalmines every day. You go out and do the job. And our boys will do the business.” (Cleary, 2017a)

This clearly affirmed his support for the players, something that continued into the arduous task of team selection in his statement that they had the ““strongest bench in world rugby”” (Cleary, 2017a). In a rich talent pool such as England’s, it is always difficult to make the right choice in some tight calls, but here in the first game of the tournament he was sending out his endorsement of these non-selected players and

also setting an expectation. It also initiated some mind games with anyone susceptible in the upcoming opposition!

The messages above endorsed his players but also removed any room for complacency by clearly stating that the highest standards of physicality would be needed. In fact, EJ was readily aware of the dangers of complacency; the following quote was a key insight into his mindset:

“Complacency is not like a fungus that you can get rid of with a spray. ... It is always there. Look at Arsenal the other night, second in the table against a side that had not won for seven matches and they concede goals. If we start like that against France, we are in real trouble.” (Cleary, 2017a)

Once again, EJ was sending messages through the media but with a rather different tone to SL. He also kept the pressure on by rebuking a player who somewhat overestimated the ease in winning an upcoming game (England would become the most successful England team in terms of unbeaten matches if they won their next game): “Jones is constantly on the guard against complacency and was quick to jump on someone in a team meeting during the week when a player piped up that they knew that particular detail” (Cleary, 2017a). He also stated:

“In England, there’s definitely a fear of not doing what everyone else is doing. Players like to get comfortable, have a nice house, drive a Range Rover, like to do the same thing every day in training. ... To get them to have the courage to try to be different is the biggest trick. Don’t be comfortable, be uncomfortable.” (McDonnell, 2017)

In *his* one-to-one dealings with players, EJ was unequivocal in his feedback, telling Tom Wood that he was “distinctly average” (Godwin, 2016); Wood himself said that EJ “was pretty blunt”. Whether SL was as blunt is uncertain, but there seemed to be a very clear understanding and message from EJ when dealing with players or the media.

5.4.4 Wider communications

Once his regime was established, EJ turned his attention to external factors – somewhat the opposite of SL’s emphasis, although this was in no small part associated with the circumstances of their arrival and inheritance.

For example, in order to deflect pressures and to place a distinct expectation on the opposition, EJ would often refer to his next opponents: “France are the biggest off-loaders of any team but there is a pressure now for them to play with French flair, to play in that certain way and when you are expected to do something it can be difficult to do” (Cleary, 2017a).

In a similar fashion to SL (and in contrast to the coaches before this point), EJ showed a savviness in how he worked with the fanbase, defending them from any criticisms’ made by other pundits. For example, in response to comments by ex-Scotland international player Jim Telfer accusing England of being arrogant, he said: “Jim can say what he likes about me but what he says about the Twickenham crowd is absolutely ridiculous. ... If he doesn’t like it there, don’t come” (Cleary, 2017a). Not only was he unashamedly standing up to any slurs and projecting a strong front, but he also engaged in supporting the supporters, which no doubt strengthened his

own position. Within this kind of communication, EJ also cemented the ‘us-against-the-world’ attitude and ‘siege mentality’, such as when he said of his experiencing the Six Nations crowds as ““a bit of us against them”” (Cleary, 2017a).

Of course, this type of messaging was particularly important for EJ as a foreign national. He usually responded in kind to any external criticism and was readily available to answer his critics. In an interview with EJ, for example, ex-Australia captain Stephen Hoiles asked some demeaning, puerile questions about Englands win over Australia and referencing EJ to Donald Trump, along with salacious inferences regarding EJ and his assistant coach. EJ clearly showed that he was unimpressed and that he would be taking advantage of this slur: ““You’ve seen the promotions Fox Sports have been running this week and the kind of questions we get – it is quite demeaning, disrespectful to the team, so we’re not going to let this opportunity pass”” (Decent, 2016).

5.4.5 The story so far

At the time of writing, EJ had just completed his second Six Nations during which he lost his first game in charge after equalling the world record of 18 games unbeaten. His simple one-line response to his players ““Be proud of yourselves, boys”” (De Menezes, 2017) was cleverly built on his previous ‘tough’ stance: without the first, he would have been unlikely to get away with the second. In these circumstances, ones that EJ had certainly engineered for himself, the response was seen as magnanimity and was positively received. EJ added: ““We weren’t good enough today. And we have to accept we weren’t good enough today. Next time we get together as the full squad will be in November and we’ll look to right what happened today”” (O’Connor,

2017). On the one hand, EJ Clearly commending the players – but on the other, he showed that the responsibility for the defeat lay with the team as a whole and implied that they can be better and indeed could have won if they had delivered as they had on ‘other’ days. EJ also took the opportunity to send more direct instruction, commenting “‘We have still got a lot to do’” and “‘We will learn from it’” (Rees, 2017). Finally, using circumstances and questions like a politician, as an opportunity to send information rather than to give answers, EJ also reminded both the players and the public how well the team had progressed since the debacle of the 2015 WC. By association, he also aligned England with the peerless benchmark of New Zealand: “‘We are going to have more setbacks as we go to the World Cup. How many teams have a 90 per cent winning record at Test level – there are not too many, the All Blacks are the only ones and we have been doing that since the last World Cup’” (Cary, 2017). So, having missed out on a second Grand Slam and the world record of back-to-back wins, he restructured mindsets to maintain motivation, and belief, again showing conviction, meticulous planning and a resilient future focus: “‘We’re better off having that experience today than we are in Yokohama Stadium on November 2 at 8pm [in 2019]. ... It is not the end of the world’” (Cary, 2017). Within this, EJ showed his experience in also managing impressions by further embedding their successes to date.

The evolution of EJ’s coaching provided opportunities for his own adaptation and growth, according to one of his main mentors Bob Dwyer. One of EJ’s attributes was his identification of the inherent characteristics of an England team – namely, in their physicality and strength– as he was seen to have done with Japan in his last couple of years there, during which his teams played exceptional rugby by anyone’s standards. There was a demand for absolute accuracy and fulfilling their specific

duties/roles but not at the expense of the players' instinctive abilities. As a career coach, EJ was always going to develop and has researched coaching since his days coaching the reserves in Randwick (1994). By his own admission (and once again sending a message and managing his impression), EJ has developed via a circuitous route: "From the wrong side of the Sydney tracks, to national hero in Japan and now England's first foreign head coach via two World Cup finals and club rugby on three continents" (Henson, 2016). During the course of this journey, EJ has learned from Graham Mourie and Bob Dwyer right through to today with excellent coaches in other fields. For example, he recently observed Pep Guardiola with Manchester City:

"I watched him taking a training session and it made me embarrassed by my coaching – he was so bloody brilliant. ... He has got some of the best players in the world and he just worked them so hard. It was -3C and they came off the field dripping with sweat, they had worked that hard. And they play like 45 games a year. That really reinforced for me how much there is in players." (Fitzgerald, 2016)

This work ethic seems to be ingrained in his philosophy as is his belief in player discipline, as Glen Ella noted:

"Discipline has always been a key focus for Eddie. ... Even though we threw the ball around a fair bit at Randwick we still had to have discipline. That has always remained the same in any team I have been involved with him." (Schofield, 2017)

Despite these deeply held philosophies, however, EJ has been seen to adapt to what is required in changing environments:

“He got to that point where he was prepared to question his own beliefs and thoughts... and is probably the biggest step you can take as a coach when you stop confusing control for authority.” (Schofield, 2017)

5.5 The chronology of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in the media game

Despite the multitude of factors impacting performance outcomes, the focus of this chapter has been to assess the media interactions of two successive England coaches. It just so happened that the level of performance success seems to have mirrored the level of media interaction, if not the level of successful management of the media by SL and EJ, in direct opposition to their predecessor Martin Johnson.

With any change in coach, there is often a reaction in performances, with players looking to secure their position within the team and the regime of the new coach of the team. No doubt this occurred after Johnson and assisted SL. Notably, though, it was also apparent that SL was acutely aware of Johnson’s mistakes and even more so of the media and public perception of the fallout from the 2011 WC. Bearing these two factors in mind, SL managed the media messages in terms of changing behavioural standards with initial success. More pertinently, and crucially for his long-term employment, he also satisfied the powers that be that he was the man to lead and optimised his early successes through his messages to the media. While success continued after this point to a certain degree, how much the story changed from the original ‘culture’ focus or to dealing with more pragmatic performance issues is questionable. At critical moments when certainty was most

needed, the ambiguity of SL's message and leadership resulted in a lack of conviction, some team selections that were contradictory to previously stated values and some misalignment of messages. On top of this, the player endorsement and enthusiasm of SL in the early days had waned, if not gone entirely. This raises the questions whether hubris syndrome set in, whereby individuals get an exaggerated self-confidence that can result in a lack of adaption and failure to understand the changing demands and to plan accordingly. Certainly, there seems to have been a disconnect shown above between players and coaches in terms of playing philosophy and leadership after the WC.

The ignominy at the end of the previous regime and the bounce effect that SL seized were replicated for EJ as he took up his tenure, though to a significantly higher level. In a similar manner, EJ seemed aware of the progress under SL but also the limitations, and demonstrated a keen rugby focus more than a focus on 'culture' alone. Winning a first Grand Slam since 2003 in his initial Six Nations and going unbeaten in a world-record-equalling 18 consecutive victories far outweighed the successes of SL. Nevertheless, EJ has remained consistent in his challenges to players. This also seems to transmit into any media, where EJ seems to revel. Unlike the crucial period during which SL showed uncertainty, any 'failings' by EJ have been shown to be natural outcomes and almost useful steps in his plan to win the 2019 WC in Japan. However, the differences are subtle and, while EJ has spoken of similar expected behaviours of his players as SL did, it is with a more pragmatic rugby approach. Bringing it back to basics for SL was going back to his Yorkshire club for training – a grounding and cultural back-to-basics message – whereas EJ spoke of running stairs, of coaches who must deliver what is needed regardless of contractual

obligations and of constantly challenging players more directly in terms of rugby, both physically and mentally.

5.6 Lessons learned

Today, engaging with the media is a prerequisite of professional sport due to the many TV rights and sponsorship deals that provide financial support, as mentioned previously. As such, the principal lesson learned from the above is that coaches are becoming increasingly aware of the media and will proactively or reactively manage it (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012b). By sending out messages to fans and players alike through the media, SL showed his astuteness and seized opportunities to influence the RFU at a time that was critical to securing his personal appointment to the role of the head coach. In continuing these initially effective messages, SL focused in on the group dynamic, values and highly topical 'culture'. It is apparent from EJ's missives considered above that he too is undoubtedly aware of his media impact, indeed he has consistently utilised the media throughout his career. In fact, he seems to enjoy playing with the media reactions.

In terms of MT, the difference seemed to be that SL focused mostly on the culture, while EJ has brought both the environmental as well as the pragmatic playing demands into his media messages. What is evident from the reign of SL – but has not yet been shown during the two years under EJ – is that SL did not significantly change his messages and that, while he was consistent, this was possibly a negative factor, because it may have betrayed a failure or even an unwillingness to adapt to the changing dynamic of the group. Once the desired off-field player behaviours were

embedded within the team culture, then SL's focus should have switched to the necessary on-field adaptations and strategies.

Recognising the needs of his/her team, either psychologically or in terms of expectations, it is important for coaches to assess and proactively make the most of the situation and, as evidenced in Chapter 4, to manipulate either the opposition coach, team or supporters or their own team and supporters in order to boost player drive or reduce the level of expectation by heaping pressure on the opposition. As evidenced above, SL and even more so EJ have shown a political awareness that is needed in sport today (Jones *et al.*, 1993) in order to both manage performances and maintain approval from the many stakeholders, such as the players themselves, the management team, boards/owners and, in these cases in particular, the supporters or fans who reinforce this approval or disapproval (Jones *et al.*, 1993; Potrac & Jones, 2009). As evidenced in any organisation, there is a need for political astuteness and acuity: "Wherever we live and work in groups ... relations of power are central to them. That is, we are constantly engaged in politics" (Leftwich, 2005, p. 112). This understanding and awareness leads into the impression management that can play a significant role in the development and maintenance of players' MT, either directly or indirectly in these environments (Goffman, 1959).

In Chapter 4, I presented the importance of coherent messages coming from management in reducing confusion or cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) and delivering mentally tough performances. Both SL and EJ seem to have achieved this coherence at least partially by enlisting (managing) the media to send messages to players and to also influence 'upwards' to management (the RFU). These media messages add to the confirmatory bias that players seek when combining the multiple messages (both verbal and non-verbal) from their coach, their management team and

their teammates in order to be certain of what they need to do. As alluded to in Chapter 3 (and further expanded upon in Chapter 4), players can also form their opinions of coaches through media messages and the conscious or unconscious process of regulating and controlling this by coaches or their ‘impression management’ can be instrumental in both their longevity in the job and their effectiveness. To exploit impression management, and as demonstrated by EJ above, there is a need for congruence of messages between management and preferably also “customer-facing employees” or in this case players (Brandon-Lai *et al.*, 2016, p. 492). Again, it is obvious that SL and EJ are aware of the importance of impression management.

While neither SL nor EJ played at the highest level, they both had earlier experiences in the classroom environment as teachers. This seemed to develop a similar focus in terms of building a culture – though one more explicitly than the other – through player discipline, commitment and gave them an understanding of the class environment that can exist to positive and negative effect (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010). Regardless of similarities between the two coaches, though, what is different and what was highlighted in an article on EJ was that they came from very different places:

Lancaster was a Rugby Football Union company man. The Cumbrian was promoted into one of the most coveted jobs in world rugby with an abundance of good intentions, but a glaring lack of club – never mind international – coaching experience. ... Jones has taken a route never travelled. From the wrong side of the Sydney tracks, to national hero in Japan and now England’s

first foreign head coach, via two World Cup finals and club rugby on three continents. (Henson, 2016)

So while SL and EJ shared a similar philosophy, there was a distinct difference in their level of experience in the onerous role of head coach. While a similar philosophy, awareness and understanding of impression management allowed SL to make an immediate impact in the initial stages of his reign, the heightened expectation and lack of real coaching leadership at the coalface subsequently led him to vacillate over selection and send out mixed messages going into the WC, culminating in defeat. Experience of ‘been there, done that’ seems very pertinent.

The more experienced and possibly consequently more pragmatic EJ has proven himself to be less concerned with public opinion, regardless of the fallout or criticism. He has not only managed but actively engaged in discussing contentious issues; for instance, he openly admitted: “‘One of the prominent public schools threatened to pull out of rugby, because they thought how can you put this lunatic in charge of the national team?’” (Tanner, 2017). EJ not only showed his self-belief and pragmatism in his decision in selecting Dylan Hartley as his captain, but also his experience. Regardless of public disapproval, EJ made the decision – one that I suggest SL might not have made – to choose Hartley and reinforced his conviction to both supporters (boards) and players. Also, within the same newspaper article, EJ reinforced this experience by elaborating on how this decision can be effective:

“[Hartley] knows the value of how hard he has to work and because he leads like that, it sets a great example for the rest of the team. ... Now there’s at least four or five players who mimic his behaviour and now we are starting to get a

tipping point in the team where if you don't come to the England team and give 100 per cent, give it all, then you aren't going to be part of the team.” (Tanner, 2017)

This also reinforces the findings in Chapter 4 regarding selecting mentally tough players as role models and the value of getting the “critical mass of good bastards” in Chapter 3. The apparent clarity in planning is evident in selecting his captain in the face of criticism suggests that EJ is more ‘tactical’ and is prepared to sacrifice any immediate returns for more useful dividends in the long term (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Either way, this role modelling has been further embedded by EJ after the highly successful first two years of his reign (one loss in 21 games). Whereas SL talked of the respect that the players had shown to him and the management team after his initial successes, EJ has talked of ‘raising the bar’ again and making “the next two years very uncomfortable for England players” (Squires, 2017). Stressing the important base principles of ‘hard work’ and ‘no excuses’ is part and parcel of EJ’s messaging and his clear understanding that, to be at its most mentally tough, any team needs to be challenged, another message echoed in Chapter 4 (cf. Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Collins *et al.*, 2016). This ‘hard work’ is reflected in many studies on MT that talk about “work ethic” (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009b, p 324; Lin *et al.*, 2017; Mahoney *et al.*, 2014; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011) or by having a “hard-work ethic” (Crust & Clough, 2011, p 30), and indeed, this effort is seen as a “behavioural signature of mental toughness” (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2016, p 81).

A recurrent finding within this study is that experience is key for impact – a point that was stressed by EJ himself upon SL’s appointment. Interestingly, RFU CEO Ian Ritchie’s announcement of SL’s appointment as the permanent coach in

2012 led to one journalist to make a cynical observation: “‘Stuart has unparalleled experience in coaching,’ says Ian Ritchie, the RFU’s chief executive. Mmm” (Fanning, 2012). This reporter obviously questioned the validity of Ritchie’s statement in view of the fact that SL had only coached one professional club (full-time) and worked with the Saxons to date. His clear suggestion, and one with which I agree, was that “unparalleled” did seem to be an unjustified choice of word. Coincidentally, Ritchie then subsequently described EJ, SL’s successor, as “‘a world-class coach, with extensive experience at the highest level with Australia, South Africa and Japan’” (BBC, 2015). Given that EJ had coached in three WCs (winning one, in addition to Super Rugby titles) and over four continents, this could be considered quite an understatement in comparison to Ritchie’s statement three years previously. Regardless of this, however, the crucial inference is the utility of having experience, which begs the question of whether EJ’s experience developed his ability or whether his innate ability enabled his experience. This conundrum notwithstanding, very few coaches will have EJ’s level of experience, and the value of ‘been there, done that’ and the accompanying experience does seem to matter.

I suggest that, with this experience and his impression management skills, EJ is actively pursuing “touch points” through the media in order to create the impression that he wants, via either specific messages or messages simply to cause distraction (Brandon-Lai *et al.*, 2016, p. 492). I also suggest that the experience and successes of EJ in relation to those of SL and the possible resultant higher confidence levels provide EJ with more of a self-confident approach rather than the self-protective stance that SL seemed to adopt in the latter stages of his tenure (Tice, 1991). This could have impacted or account for SL’s increased hesitation in selection in the WC with players such as Burgess (Josephs *et al.*, 1992). Most crucial to this is how the

players viewed these two slightly different approaches and how that impacted their confidence in either coach.

In concluding this chapter, the key message is about how coaches utilise one of their weapons – the media – to send messages in order to adapt players' behaviours in order to promote consistent MT. EJ epitomises how these messages can be managed to impact behaviours: ““Players hear that, their father, mother hears it, their girlfriend hears it. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. ... What they've got to do is try to break that in some way, get some other messages out there, change it”” (Rumsby, 2017). While delivering these messages, EJ has shown a keen awareness of how to manage impressions with vital others, which then gives him more time to act and also kudos/power within these actions (Goffman, 1959). EJ's awareness seems all the more acute when compared to the hindsight later shown by Johnson, the least experienced coach considered in this case study. Almost three years to the month after the end of his tenure as coach, Johnson held his first press conference regarding his WC and provided great insight as to the challenges for today's coach:

“In 2003 once you've won the World Cup, everything is portrayed as being great and a perfect working machine. But of course it wasn't – we were all human beings, we all made mistakes, had our frailties and did similar things that the boys did in 2011. ... People start telling me what it was like when I was there. ... That's the battle you have to win. ... That was my mistake, you have to win that battle as well. It's almost like a sales job.” (*Telegraph Sport*, 2014)

In between these two poles, I suggest, sits the media management style of SL. As

evidenced above, SL showed a keen awareness, unlike his predecessor, of the impact of the media and duly delivered the required culture change with some insightful and useful messages to players about accepted behaviours.

The differences between SL and EJ are subtle, and both coaches show awareness of and focus upon both the environment (media impacts) and performance demands. This suggests that EJ had a distinct advantage through his extensive experience – corroborated by his own statement above about the need for international coaches to be experienced – and a subsequent awareness of the importance of the “sales job” achieved through the media, both outwardly to fans, boards and inwardly to players. As sport psychologists work with coaches as well as players, they have a key role in advising coaches about consistency in messages (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012a, 2012b; McCann, 2008), this would seem to be crucial in light of the performances issues demonstrated above. While MT studies have not previously considered coaches’ awareness of, focus on and use of media to enhance MT, the evidence of this chapter, along with Chapters 3 and 4, clearly demonstrates value of research into the media as a tool for delivering MT.

CHAPTER 6

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: A SITUATED MODEL OF COACH PRACTICE IN GENERATING A MT ENVIRONMENT

6.1 Review of findings

After initially reviewing the MT literature in Chapter 2, my study moved on to focus on the understanding of MT by key stakeholders and how mentally tough performances are delivered on a consistent basis in professional rugby. This provided several factors, related to both the individual and the team, together with an insight into how group identity and influence affect the mentally tough mindset within elite rugby teams. In Chapter 4, I then took these critical group components and investigated them further through interviewing five super-elite coaches about how they manage these environmental factors. One of these factors was the media, and in Chapter 5 I assessed the media interactions of three coaches of the England national team and how they managed this important tool to elicit mentally tough performances. In this chapter, I will relate my findings in Chapters 3 to 5 with significant theories that demonstrate the motivational and leadership processes that consistently facilitate mentally tough performances in rugby. Finally, I will present a model highlighting the essential need to achieve consistency in messages across the environment in order to elicit optimal MT.

6.1.1 The role of managing individuals' MT

In reviewing my research and in particular how an individual's MT is shaped, it is important to accept the interdependence that exists in sport between the individual, the coach/coaching practice and the surrounding social milieu. Indeed, while I am reviewing the role of managing individuals' MT first, it is important to note throughout the concomitant impact of the latter two sections of coaching practice and group identity on MT and the difficulty of separating all three aspects. Despite this interdependence, however, much of the early research focused upon individuals' MT, especially prior to 2002 (Connaughton *et al.*, 2011; Crust & Keegan, 2010, p. 164). This individual focus might have added to the ambiguity of the term MT; nevertheless, researchers connected several attributes in expanding the understanding of MT and several of these are consistent with my results.

For example, integral to my results in Chapter 3 is how coaches define and provide individual role clarity for players as a consistent performance adjunct. Indeed, among the super-elite coaches in Chapter 4, this is reinforced through the 'de-cluttering' of an individual's thinking or the 'habitualising' of behaviours through extremely specific and demanding roles. This facilitates one of the key attributes in MT by increasing the 'focus' of players (Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Thelwell *et al.*, 2005). With the high interdependence between players in rugby, role clarity is even more essential, so having a clear awareness of their role allows players to stay fully focused and subsequently be confident of what they need to do. Additionally, in Chapter 4 coaches talked of having academy players coming into the elite squad requiring roles to be 'nailed on' so they can adapt as readily as possible to demands and again avoid any lack of focus.

Players knowing their roles will also enhance confidence, a consistent attribute in MT, while using a strengths-based approach (SBA), as evidenced in Chapter 3, through optimising individual strengths further builds confidence, with coaches emphasising what players can do rather than what they cannot (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Clough *et al.*, 2002; Jones *et al.*, 2007). These one-to-one conversations provide important player feedback and support players' confidence levels by telling them how well they are doing along with focusing on effort versus skill (errors) or on the more controllable factors versus 'uncontrollables'. These conversations also help to elicit MT by cementing positive coach-athlete relations that enhance MT development (Driska *et al.*, 2012; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d). My results further endorse the importance of coaches supporting individual needs, often outside playing performances, by supporting individuals' personal development by getting players to take on external education/work experience, for example, was seen to ultimately elicit MT (Butt *et al.*, 2010).

Lastly, in Chapters 3 and 4 the coaches and players recognised how the media impacts players in terms of their playing behaviours or confidence levels, as their thinking becomes 'coloured' by the media. Indeed, in Chapter 4 the coaches talked of using the media as a weapon or to lift confidence levels even though, conversely it can often erode MT. In Chapter 5, SL and EJ reinforced these approaches by providing clear expectations for their players through the media such as the feedback on Tom Wood or Dylan Hartley, along with talk of their culture.

6.1.2 The role of coaching and operational processes

Integral and inherent throughout this thesis is the role of the coach in MT and their understanding of what elicits this broad term in rugby performances. The participants both in Chapters 3 and 4, - players and coaches – consistently reinforce the actions of coaches to be critical in eliciting MT, a result that correlates with much of the research into developing MT through training and instructional feedback (Driska *et al.*, 2012; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Rodahl *et al.*, 2015; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). In tandem with this, my participants endorsed how coaches target the motivational concomitants of MT through their coaching processes (Jowett *et al.*, 2017). More specifically, my findings in Chapter 3 showed that mentally tough performances were underpinned by coaching and operational processes that provided physical and mental challenge, developed shared mental models (SMMs), and supported review and reinforcement processes that were consistent with MT. Taking physical and mental challenge first, by adding challenge, ‘edge’ or ‘discomfort’ as mentioned, it was felt that coaches were able to increase both players’ performance capacities and their *perception* of those capacities in being able to perform. Through these physical and mental challenges, coaches set explicit and unequivocal on-field expectations. These training approaches, forms and styles – and their intensity – all stretched players’ capacities and, when delivered appropriately (often using an SBA), helped to build self-belief in players and the team.

Coaches further challenged players and then reinforced MT by creating various ‘scenarios’ that could get ‘horrible’. This finding resonates with previous research into stress inoculation and challenging training processes that develop MT (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Driska *et al.*, 2012; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011).

Such scenarios helped to embed the SMMs that provided greater understanding within the team's playing dynamic. These SMMs enabled players' to adjust and adapt to challenges such as refereeing decisions, maintaining focus and remaining positive as a collective. By using video feedback and discussion and emphasising controllable factors such as effort, the coaches reinforced what they saw as requisite for consistent mentally tough performances.

As it does with regard to the individuals' MT, the media was also seen to play a role in coaching processes by manipulating the thinking of fans and opposition coaches, in addition to players' thinking and MT. When first introduced in Chapter 3, one coach talked of not wanting to get influenced by the media by avoiding reading the papers. This points to the considerable and accepted part that the media plays and reinforces the findings of other research in rugby union (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013). It also exposes how conscious coaches are of what they are saying to players via the media. In summary, my findings in Chapter 3 underlined the importance of the coach in establishing roles, reinforcing desired mentally tough behaviours and manipulating his/her team into SMMs while remaining continually cognisant of how he/she manages the media.

6.1.3 The role of group identity and influence

While coaching processes are hugely important, coach leadership does not operate in a social vacuum and its role goes beyond the on-field coaching. This shows coaches' instrumental role as 'climate engineers' or "architects" in manipulating the social milieu in a socio-cultural and motivational capacity (Mallett & Coulter, 2011, p. 196). It is then evident that, in addition to the contribution of managing individuals' MT

and the coaching/operational processes, MT can also be elicited (and affected) by the group identity and environment in professional rugby.

By challenging group standards along with physical and mental challenges, coaches also reduce social loafing – as mentioned in interview – and reinforce both a challenge mindset and the SMMs via these group challenges. In tandem with this, coaches enhance social (and task) cohesion (cf. Chapter 3), foster togetherness (cf. Chapter 4) and build the ‘social capital’ found in rugby teams with increased team resilience that is reinforced in the group structure by the alignment of informal and formal leaders (Morgan *et al.*, 2015). This cohesion, created through such means as ‘periodising’ of social events, and the use of shared MT-facilitative language in the on-field as well as off-field group dynamics embed an ‘us’ mentality rather than an ‘I’ mentality. Integral and indeed catalytic to these interactions are the informal player leaders or role models whom the coach selects. These bring increased cohesion as well as ‘mental shock’ that keep players on ‘edge’. Keeping this ‘edge’, such as ‘dying on the line together’, prepares the players to be ‘uncomfortable’, to deal with the considerable demands in rugby with a shared understanding that is reinforced with the MT-facilitative language. By being ‘comfortable being uncomfortable’, players embrace adversity and challenge (Tracey & Elcombe, 2015), which develop and boost players’ capacities (Collins & MacNamara, 2012). Furthermore, these informal player leaders can be as effective as captains, and when the coach, captain, and informal leaders are aligned and united it adds to the overall effectiveness and holistic leadership within teams (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016).

In order to recruit, develop and challenge these players, and reinforce the required mentally tough actions or indeed facilitate the shared MT-facilitative language, it is important that the coach has the vision – the starting point – to

recognise these requisite mentally tough behaviours. This underpins the vision and values by who they recruit with the ‘right mentality’, and how they then develop and harness these players in order to take more ownership and influence within the group. Having the ‘sacrosanct’ alignment of the formal leaders – assistant coaches, captain, the leadership group – brings further coherence and consonance to players’ mindsets by creating a shared way of thinking, or a ‘culture’ whereby culture is defined as “a dynamic process characterised by the shared values, beliefs, expectations and practices across the members and generations of a defined group”, (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012b, p. 340; Cruickshank *et al.*, 2015; Eubank *et al.*, 2017).

In Chapter 3, this ‘culture’ was seen to be augmented coaches via the external messages delivered through the media; this was further illustrated in Chapters 4 and 5, and coaches were even shown to sometimes operate in Machiavellian ways. Part of this process is impression management – ‘arse covering’ – which allows coaches time to create the desired culture/social milieu, as mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4. The media was seen throughout as a powerful tool by which coaches can expound and endorse their own philosophies, influence players’ confidence, thinking and behaviours, and ‘inflare’ fans in a way that then impacts players’ MT’.

All of these factors, combined with the complex nature of MT, require a coordinated approach to individual development within coaching processes, with attuned support structures to elicit the important consistency in mentally tough performances (Graham, 1990), similar to the acculturation of ‘Joe’ presented by Tibbert *et al.* (2015). Instrumental in this is the management/manipulation of social capital and group structure by the coach (Gordon, 2012; Morgan *et al.*, 2013), and the reinforcement of team identity. Indeed, my participants emphasised in detail not only how to harness mentally tough leaders but to develop and then exploit in a myriad of

ways. This reinforces the idea that MT is not purely an individual construct but is socially derived and impacted by external environmental factors such as media on the mentally tough mindset.

6.2 Integrating relevant theory and research constructs

In the previous section, I provided a summary of my findings from Chapters 3 to 5. Clearly these findings are not exhaustive and further research will uncover other sub-themes that play a role in enabling mentally tough performances in professional rugby teams. Overall, however, these findings do reinforce the idea that mentally tough performances in professional rugby are shaped by: (a) the management of individuals' MT; (b) coaching and operational processes; and (c) group identity and influence (cf. Eubank *et al.*, 2017). In short, an optimally mentally 'tough' team performance is derived from much more than just the amalgamation of mentally tough players. Before considering what this multi-level perspective means, however, it is useful to briefly contextualise my findings with respect to some relevant theories. More specifically, why might the themes that I have uncovered help to optimise MT in professional rugby teams? In the following section, I draw comparisons to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), along with theories on elite team leadership and culture (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013).

6.2.1 Self-determination theory

According to self-determination theory (SDT) or basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), an individual's well-being should be fully and meaningfully engaged and functioning optimally in the performance of a chosen task (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jowett *et al.*, 2017). In order to achieve this optimal functioning the SDT requires the basic psychological needs of 'competence', 'autonomy' and 'relatedness' to be satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The mechanisms of the SDT are that individuals will be more positive towards tasks (well-being) when they attain a sense of autonomy in their environments, feel competent to meet the demands within these, and to feel related or connected to the other individuals within their environment (team). This 'well-being' is seen to correlate with MT (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010); indeed, it contributes to developing MT (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Crust & Clough, 2011) and is a "sound basis for understanding the motivational antecedents of mental toughness" (Mahoney *et al.*, 2014b, 2014c, p. 184). This also reinforces the ubiquitous emphasis upon 'motivation' – insatiable desire – found within MT research (Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Jones & Moorehouse, 2007; Williams, 1998). Additionally, and crucially with respect to MT, "consistently higher levels of performance" will be delivered when these basic psychological needs are satisfied due to players' increased "sense of personal control, self-efficacy, and self-value" (Mahoney *et al.*, 2014a, p. 290).

The coaching interactions – one-to-ones with athletes, player meetings – help to satisfy the sense of 'autonomy' in players by developing the informal player leaders and harnessing them to choose strategy and lead other players. These processes create an autonomy supportive environment as players see their opinions valued, have opportunities to share their thinking and feelings and are encouraged to

make choices (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These processes promote cognitions, self-reflection and metacognitions that underpin self-regulation that can increase player's responsibility and ownership (Mc Combs & Marzano, 1990). These communicative and democratic strategies enhance player ownership because these informal leaders (CA's) act as 'guardians' of the team and contribute to creating the SMMs as noted in Chapter 3. Giving responsibilities to players to lead further adds to this sense of autonomy and ownership, and likely assists in building 'relatedness' between senior and younger players (Bartholomew *et al.*, 2011; Mahoney *et al.*, 2014b). Studies have, however, questioned the relative importance of autonomy with respect to the other needs due to the collective nature of groups (Jowett *et al.*, 2017) and while certainly the de-cluttering of players thinking, as discussed in Chapter 4, helps them to know their roles – it is competence supportive – such strategies may reduce players' autonomy. This may be understandable given the complex level of interdependence in rugby and the multitude of options in open play. Indeed, this factor exposes the challenge for coaches to be autonomy supportive, as shown in Chapter 5, where SL implied that there was less freedom in play due to mounting pressures in the WC knock-out stages. This is a fact reinforced by Graham Henry when he admitted to struggling to shift from an authoritarian approach to a more autonomy-supportive one, despite it being seen as crucial to New Zealand's WC-winning success of 2011 (Hodge *et al.*, 2014).

Confidence is essential to MT and, as mentioned above, competence will be helped by players having role clarity and by coaches focusing on optimising individual strengths. Coach feedback on individual strengths or an SBA focusing on what players can do – effort – rather than on their weaknesses supports competence and resonates with prior research in elite rugby (Hodge *et al.*, 2014) that focuses upon

mastery and is endorsed across MT research (Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). This promotes integrated regulation among players and fulfills the need for ‘competence’ through the coach and peer feedback of the informal leaders (Ryan & Deci, 2002). By challenging players on ‘controllables’ and reinforcing their clearly defined roles, such an approach when combined with the 1-2-1s player meetings and leadership groups can increase reflective practice in players with a consequent increase in competence as the demands are within their ‘effort’. Tough physical training and challenging of group standards also provide vicarious feedback that will further enhance competence (and resilience) within the social capital (Morgan *et al.*, 2013). Despite this, delivering an excessive level of challenge (physical and mental) to player capacities or challenging group standards has the potential to thwart individuals (Bartholomew *et al.*, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Mahoney *et al.*, 2014b), and highlights the need for coaches to be aware of the need to challenge appropriately.

Chapters 3 and 4 show an emphasis on the social cohesion, togetherness and ‘periodised’ and planned social interactions that promote relatedness within teams. A strong coach–athlete relationship (Jowett *et al.*, 2017, p. 143; Ryan *et al.*, 2000) is developed by the coach investing in one-to-one communications along with positive feedback to the players. Furthermore, by manipulating the environment, such as through rooming lists or arduous team trips, the coach increases player familiarity and subsequent relatedness. The MT-facilitative language in Chapter 3 further adds to the sense of ‘us’ and, when reinforced by the informal leaders or “social agents” that the coaches develop, it adds to relatedness (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2017, p. 719). In rugby research, Hodge *et al.* (2014, p. 65) stressed that elite performances were all about the “connections you have with the people” around you and indeed cited a Spartan

philosophy as encapsulating the importance of relatedness in rugby: “Spartans were always looking for what the opposite of fear was so that they could develop that in their warriors. They found it wasn’t courage, and it wasn’t bravery, it was love” (Hodge *et al.*, 2014, p. 70). As shown in my results, having a ‘common purpose towards something’ – through SMMs and task cohesion – along with a sense of togetherness, as well as the relatedness, that is inherent in the SDT, helps create the group identity and influence that is epitomised in the Spartan philosophy the crucial to MT in rugby.

6.2.2 Social identity theory

Relatedness is fundamental to social identity theory (SIT), which concerns people’s identity or the image that they have of themselves based on the social group or team of which they are members (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). SIT explains how individuals identify and derive their self-concept based on the groups they belong to or associate with (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). They first self-categorise, by labeling themselves and then create an identification for themselves by these groups and finally they then compare themselves, within these social identities, with other groups. As such, “in sport, individuals derive a sense of who they are as a person from their psychological connection to groups, which in turn, positively contributes to their self-worth” (Rees *et al.*, 2015; Slater *et al.*, 2014, p. 673). SIT recognises the fundamental need for affiliation or belonging – relatedness in SDT – that individuals get by being members of teams (Baumeister *et al.*, 1995; Maslow, 1968). This social identity is built through social interactions and connections, and the coach managing these creates a positive sense of ‘us-ness’ (Haslam *et al.*, 2011; Reicher *et al.*, 2005).

Indeed, research into resilience in rugby union identified having an increased ‘social identity’ as beneficial where it also creates a ‘we’ identity versus an ‘I’ (Morgan *et al.*, 2015, p. 98). Considering this, along with the highly physical and combative demands of rugby, shows the benefit to teams of having a strong identity as they draw closer as a ‘marginalised/maligned’ group with a collective sense of ‘us’ and a sense of persecution or injustice that enhances a collective response (Krane *et al.*, 2002).

SIT is the “cognitive mechanism that makes group behavior possible” (Turner, 1982, p. 21) and this sense of ‘us’ is endorsed by the development of player leaders or the ‘we’ and ‘us’ in the MT-facilitative language mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4. Examples include group mantras such as “We are fitter” (Chapter 3) and “Let [us] not go quiet” (Chapter 4) (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016), which endorse the ‘us’ or ‘us-ness’ mentality (Rees *et al.*, 2015, p. 1091). The social milieu, along with a group identity or ‘us’ when combined with the player leaders who express high confidence, further boosts team confidence and adds to MT (Fransen, *et al.*, 2015a). Other examples, such as players calling each other before big competitions (as mentioned in Chapter 3), further expose how the secondary appraisal of challenges through the social group can build resolve in a team (Rees *et al.*, 2015). The periodising of social events with identity cues such as common and crucial narratives – a form of MT-facilitative language, as shown in Chapter 3 – also builds group identity and reflects some of the antecedents necessary for SMMs and the process of sensemaking (‘identity’, ‘narratives’, ‘shared stories’, ‘ongoing feedback loop’) (Weick, 1993) such as ‘creating memories’ in Chapter 3.

By having the clear vision, values and behaviours, a team creates norms, such as ‘respect’, which lead to a positive social categorisation that individuals want to be part of (Haslam *et al.*, 2011). When these “values are congruent” between team

leaders and members, the result is a stronger group identity with performance benefits (Slater *et al.*, 2014, p. 674). This social identification engenders comparisons between ingroups and outgroups, adding to the motivations to defend your ingroup (your own team) versus the outgroup (the opposition), and by having this sense of ‘us’, it builds collective self-esteem for group members and adds motivation (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). By increasingly fostering togetherness and by challenging group standards, such identification further increases the interconnectedness and creates a stronger social identity: “When individuals feel an allegiance to a group they are motivated to advance their group’s interests” (Slater *et al.*, 2014, p. 674). Additionally, building SMMs through tough training sessions and challenging off-field group scenarios helps less confident or possibly less motivated players to feel more connected to the team with positive adaptations because it reinforces mutually beneficial behaviours and a sharing of successes grows with the benefits of increased resilience through these group dynamics (Morgan *et al.*, 2013; Slater *et al.*, 2013; Slater *et al.*, 2014). As such, using rooming lists increases this “proximity among [players]” and further grows a “sense of togetherness” (Martin *et al.*, 2018, p. 331).

“Leadership is inextricably bound up in group processes” which reinforces the importance of the initial selection, development and harnessing of informal leaders in my results (Slater *et al.*, 2014, p. 682; Weinberg *et al.*, 2011). Coaches can enhance respect and loyalty by providing greater identity within teams through these increased interactions (Arnold *et al.*, 2015; Haslam *et al.*, 2014). Once developed by coaches, player leaders then act as prototypes to embed a stronger team identity and assist coaches to relate better with the team, which creates better alignment within these teams with positive results (Dupuis *et al.*, 2006; Slater *et al.*, 2014). As these player leaders are endorsed, they basically run the team, especially if they represent the

ideals of the team or the coach, as exemplified by EJ's choice of Dylan Hartley as England captain (Slater *et al.*, 2014). Building SMMs also highlights the importance of the team leaders to then create this shared identity (Rees *et al.*, 2015). These leaders help the coach to manage his/her directives and build a coherent message and identity within the team, which allows players to deal with stress better by appraising challenges – through the shared team identity – with more positive responses (Haslam *et al.*, 2004). Challenging, scenario-based training and challenging group standards facilitate these positive team appraisals through the inter-personal group identity (Rees *et al.*, 2015, p. 1089). Player leaders who endorse the team identity with teammates enhance self-esteem and resilience and also help to bring about crucial improvements in performance and MT (Fransen *et al.*, 2015a, 2018; Steffens *et al.*, 2014).

6.2.3 Elite team leadership/culture change theory

My results on group identity and influence also correlate with the findings of other studies on elite leadership and underline how mentally tough performance is related to culture change. Despite the “dearth of culture change research”, there is an increasing focus upon the decentred approach to understanding leadership and the importance of organisational alignment in culture change due the endogenous, “complex and continuous” nature of high performance (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013, p. 287). Leaders do not act in a vacuum and as such, within the context of changing cultures and a decentred approach, it is also important to consider the to-and-fro of power with all stakeholders, including the player leaders that fills this vacuum (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013; Railo, 1986). Organisations can unintentionally add stress and pull from

performances, increasing the need for coherent management throughout these stakeholders in order to function optimally (Wagstaff *et al.*, 2012, 2013). As a consequence, leadership in the often “politically-charged and highly contested settings” in performance sport requires multiple managing/messaging, including direct, indirect or socially undesirable (Machiavellian) and dark behaviours to elicit MT (Collins & Cruickshank, 2015, p. 78).

The environment in any sport organisation is a “complex and continuous process of interaction”, as demonstrated by the multiple interactions in my results such as one-to-ones and player meetings, and shows the need for coaches to adopt a 360° multi-directional approach to deal with boards, management teams and CEOs rather than the traditional top-down approach (Bevir & Richards, 2009, p. 7; Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013, 2015). Graham Henry referred to such a ‘dual-management’ approach and in Chapters 3 and 4 it was shown that formal leader alignment as well as player leadership groups or “nested decision making” were strongly endorsed (Collins & Cruickshank, 2015, p. 74; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Hodge *et al.*, 2014). In Chapter 3, my results reinforced the importance of this ‘nested’ approach or the alignment of formal leaders through management meetings. Indeed, in Chapter 4 it was unequivocal or ‘sacrosanct’ on the importance of having a multi-directional approach to managing the team (culture) – shared beliefs, cognitions and behaviours – so that the management are are a ‘homogenous group’ and that “everyone is connected on the same page”. This reduces dissonance or conflict (Collins *et al.*, 1999; Collins & Cruickshank, 2012; Moore & Collins, 1996) and allows the head coach to reinforce his/her vision to “engender group harmony and optimize organizational functioning” (Arnold *et al.*, 2015; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, p. 429). By coordinating with sport psychologists or “run(ning) interference” (C-5, Chapter 4)

with committees, the interviewed coaches initiated, managed and interacted with co-coaches, players and even boards or committees and ultimately managed the culture (Arnold *et al.*, 2015; Cruickshank *et al.*, 2015; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002). As such, my results reinforce the political needs in coaching and that it is the “social, [and] political” as much as the pedagogical that optimises resources through listening, empathy skills and building trust to build alignment (Abraham & Collins, 2011, p. 366; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002). In my study, these listening skills extended to eavesdropping at doors or the front of buses in order to assess the team’s mood (culture) so as to manage more judiciously. Additionally, ‘resetting’ management mindsets after losses or in discussions through giving presentations helps support positive appraisals and maintains a positive leadership. This also resonates with SDT, whereby managements’ own need for ‘relatedness’ is supported through these strategies and shows the head coaches’ ability to manage their teams with emotional intelligence and social awareness (Wagstaff *et al.*, 2012, 2013). The important bridge between the formal and informal leaders is the crucial weekly meeting with the captain or basically how the coach and captain “run(ning) the team together” (C-2). This adds to the consistency of messaging within the team and further checks any misaligned individual behaviours. This decentred and 360° approach to leadership occurs when the principle change agent (coach) considers all stakeholders in an organization – boards, committees, players, coaches, supporters and media – in order “to manage and proactively manipulate all corners of their social setting” so as to achieve the requisite culture they deem necessary (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2014, p 118). Within the complex social dynamics of elite rugby, this 360 approach further embeds the SMMs mentioned in Chapter 3 (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013; Hodge *et al.*, 2014). This coach

feedback and involvement of players also maintains player ownership and ‘I’m-part-of-this-group’ mentality and subsequently increases motivation to deliver MT performances (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013, p. 284).

By developing and harnessing player leaders, coaches increase alignment and through MT review and reinforcement, along with challenging the group standards and “peer coaching” embed the SMM’s (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013, p. 284; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). One-to-ones, talking about ‘lasers in the back’ as mentioned in Chapter 4, positive manipulation as to leadership skills were all means by which the coaches managed players. These interpersonal coaching styles (Gagne *et al.*, 2003) also covertly impacted the wider teams’ motivations through these players and understanding the social milieu (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013) and even listening at doors or on buses as mentioned shows the “host of different methods in a host of different ways” that maintain relationships but that might seem Machiavellian (‘dark’) or socially undesirable on the surface and are not often considered in coaching practice (Cruickshank & Collins, 2016, p. 1202). By insinuating a player was a little girl, one coach not only impacted the player but also the wider group and through the various strata of players – senior, rookies etc – and as another coach put a ‘laser on players’ as mentioned, he demonstrated a chameleon-like ability or having a ‘host’ of skills that are needed to elicit MT (Cruickshank & Collins, 2016; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, p. 428). Indeed, with the complexities and demands of rugby, it might be “somewhat simplistic” to think that all coach behaviours will be ‘bright’ or socially desirable in order to effect change rather than ‘dark’ behaviours in order to elicit MT (Collins & Cruickshank, 2015; Cruickshank & Collins, 2016; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011, p. 237). By managing the captain, as mentioned above, the coach can indirectly deliver ‘mental shock’ to the team and, when used in challenging group

standards or physical training, this will add to the coherent mindset in eliciting MT and rebalance the “skewed” viewpoint that coach leadership always needs to be socially desirable or ‘bright’ in approach (Cruickshank & Collins, 2016, p. 1202). Coaches directing on-field decisions in Chapter 3 or doing so indirectly through key players in Chapter 4 reinforces standards, role clarity and player ownership by ‘obliging’ players to lead and in effect makes them the guardians of the team or the CAs (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Railo, 1986).

Managing all stakeholders requires ensuring that everyone is aligned, from players right up to the board, and involves using the media “as an “important change agent” (as shown in Chapters 3, 4 and 5) and managing the power flows (Collins & Cruickshank, 2012, p. 464; Cruickshank *et al.*, 2015). In my research, both players and coaches showed an awareness of the media, and indeed in Chapter 5 this awareness (or lack of) was exposed through the three England head coach regimes and their degree of success or failure. Important in this regard is how the coaches ‘impress’ critical stakeholders – players, boards, CEOs – through fans and the media while chasing a favourable win–loss ratio in order to maintain tenure and be allowed time to change the culture (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2013, 2015). This was encapsulated in Chapter 5 in the way that SL readily availed of the media messages to cement his permanent position.

In summary, elite leadership requires understanding the context and proactively managing – manipulating – the multiple influences in the environment. Be these approaches dark, bright, direct or indirect, such leadership is the ‘to and fro’ of communications and marshalling the social dynamic over a sufficient period of time to be able to exact change (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2015). As “nothing endures but change” (Ericletus) and there is a “continuous process of interaction” within sport,

then this culture change is a constant and needs managers to ‘bob and weave and stay off the ropes’ long enough to manage upwards, sideways and downwards, and in a variety of ways (both ‘bright’ and ‘dark’) including externally through the media to elicit MT.

6.3 A behavioural model of generating MT

6.3.1 The biopsychosocial nature of MT development

As evident in Section 6.1 above, there are many factors leading to the elicitation of MT other than the individual. Training processes that support both the physical and psychological responses of the individual are reinforced/supported through the coach within the social milieu and dynamics. This biopsychosocial model of MT reflects Engels’ (1980) work in health care and resonates with the use of a combination of physiological, psychological and social adaptations in order to elicit MT. Furthermore, providing role certainty within physical training reduces the dissonance within individuals, as well as adding to the group SMMs. In addition to these group dynamics, the interviewed coaches specifically mentioned that the ‘strength and conditioning’ (S&C) coaches also contributed to MT through their own training regimes – a finding that reinforces this holistic approach and recalls the benefits of toughening individuals through “stress inoculating lifestyles” that impact the psychological through the physiological (Dienstbier, 1989, p. 84).

How players interacted, the physical combativeness of team training and tough physical sessions were all used to impact players’ psychology, motivation and commitment levels. In tandem, periodised training and other social interactions all led

to increased cohesion and a shared understanding – an SMM – that brought the social dimension to eliciting MT. In Chapter 4, this interpersonal impact was noted in how players can inhibit MT in others or indeed elicit more MT. Consequently, it is important for the ‘climate engineer’ – the coach – to be aware of this in order to optimise benefits from both specific situations and the overall team environment. This process is furthered by using senior players in meetings or by allowing the captain to, on occasion, mentally shock the team. All of these interactions act as interventions on the part of the coach and impact the individual players both physically and psychologically while also enhancing the group dynamic.

Finally, the use of performance metrics such as tackle counts and rucking statistics exposes the social dimension. These metrics not only provide individual players with direction, goals and awareness but also allow comparison and rivalry to be enhanced, making yet another contribution to MT. In summary, the messages that players receive through physical training are reinforced through the environment that the coach engineers using a host of methods, including such weapons as the media.

6.3.2 The need for coherent leadership (sending messages/covering intentions)

Stable throughout my research is the need for consistency in how MT is elicited (Graham, 1990). By extension, and due to their instrumental and crucial role, coaches need to be coherent and consistent in their messaging. Sport leadership research posits the importance of coach–athlete congruency with the situational or contextual demands (Chelladurai, 1990) and this multi-dimensional model of leadership proposes that coaches need to adapt to meet the contextual demands and align with the preferences of players. In a simplistic rugby example, if the players do not like

contact but need to prepare for a very physical encounter, their immediate satisfaction and the requirements of performance will be at odds. Consequently, as Cruickshank and Collins (2016, p. 1201) elaborate, a “fragile group” may be ‘protected’ in the short term in order to improve performances in the longer term. To counter the need for this, and as found in my results, coaches can maintain a consistent message that will not only achieve congruency but also elicit MT. They ensure that their leadership influence is ‘trickled down’ by coordinating their own vision with the support staff and managing the players through the player leaders. The ability to maintain consistency across the varying challenges between – ‘dark’ and ‘bright’, short-term and long-term, individual and group - is exceptionally demanding and requires that coaches have a degree of clarity and vision. This ability is evidenced by the plethora of approaches outlined in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

If, as we note, players might be ‘fragile’, then hesitation due to questioning decisions – often a consequence of ambiguous or incoherent messages – will erode intent/commitment and MT. This dissonance will undermine MT and, as further evidenced in Chapter 5, when pressure comes to bear on coaches – in crucial WC games, for example – their messages can become inconsistent. Recognising this tendency, and ensuring that messages and expectations stay consistent, is important for a coach’s maintenance and enhancement of MT.

As evidenced and endorsed in Chapter 4, behaviours such as selecting or not selecting players need to be congruent with the messages sent in order not to undermine MT. Even how a coach walks into a meeting following a defeat sends an important message and must therefore be consistent. Choosing and prioritising messaging is also important, however. As one coach said in Chapter 4, it is important not to have too many messages as this then causes distractions and ‘clutters’ players’

thinking. It ultimately disturbs concentration and reduces any elicitation of MT. Notably, this same coach spoke of reducing any ambiguity by aligning the team management through getting them to present to each other on their approaches for the team.

This consistency can also be facilitated by coach factors that closely resemble emotional intelligence (EI) whereby coaches have the self-awareness (how they walk into rooms) and the understanding of players (whether they need an arm around them or more direct feedback). This also entails how they manage the environment (by setting rooming lists or ‘letting off’ certain players on others) as well as influencing the team dynamic through selecting the ‘appropriate’ player leaders in order to attain the team goals. Recent research into the environmental impacts on MT has also endorsed EI as a useful skill in MT development (Eubank *et al.*, 2017). While MT research shows that athletes benefit from EI (Lane *et al.*, 2009; Thelwell *et al.*, 2005), it is also clear that coaches need this emotional control and awareness (Cowden, 2016; Crust & Azadi, 2009; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010). In addition to building relationships with athletes to enhance MT (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d) and working with players individually to impact global MT through control and consistency (Rodahl *et al.*, 2015), coaches must also ensure that they provide feedback and challenge appropriately. Knowing their players and who they are coaching/leading seems crucial, as encapsulated in the phrase “I can’t coach you, I don’t know you” (Hennessy, 2016). In addition to challenging appropriately, coaches should be aware of how players construe ‘critical incidents’ so as to elicit MT (Connaughton *et al.*, 2008b, 2010; Mahoney *et al.*, 2014a; Parkes & Mallett, 2011). How an athlete construes situations will be greatly influenced by the feedback received, together with the relationship between coach and athlete. Once again, this reinforces the critical

position that coaches hold in eliciting MT (Gucciardi *et al.*, 2009d; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Indeed, the highly experienced cohort within my study evidenced a high degree of EI and leadership capacities due to their experience (Cavazotte *et al.*, 2012). Knowing their players and how they interpret instruction and feedback assists them in delivering feedback most appropriately. This, in turn, then develops a “challenge mindset” in players (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016, p 144). It is important to recognise that without this EI and a comprehensive understanding of MT development, the feedback, expectations and delivery of coaches will “wittingly or unwittingly” drift from motivational into abuse, with a counterproductive impact upon MT and well-being (Owusu-Sekyere & Gervis, 2016, p. 17). The increased awareness gained through reflective practice provides the coach with greater ability to manage more judiciously and effectively (Arnold *et al.*, 2015; Irwin *et al.*, 2004).

In tandem with coaches having the awareness or EI to know how to influence players through coherent messages, it helps when players listen and believe in the message. Trust gives coaches a performance advantage by creating “positive expectations” towards themselves, with consequent increased adherence to their coaching directives by players (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998, p. 395). By fostering togetherness through these group standards and placing a ‘laser on anyone’s back (regardless of positional status), coaches promote an environment perceived to be fair and just, which has a significant correlation with building trust (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987). Again, trust is seen as “the defining attribute of the relationship between management and teams” and is instrumental in enhancing performance (Dirks, 2000; Strycharczyk & Elvin, 2014, p. 134). Not only does trust enhance performance by “getting the best out of any team”, it can also enhance resilience (Strycharczyk & Elvin, 2014, p. 91). Showing consistency (reliability and

predictability) in player selection along with perceived justice confirms one of the key findings of my sample: “that trust is best viewed as a consequence of perceived justice” (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Holtz, 2013, p. 1891). An inability to build this trust, through such things as fairness in selection (as mentioned by one coach), directly impacts performances (Gould *et al.*, 2002b). As Jones and colleagues (2004, p. 28) stated, “It all comes back to the relationships that you have with your players and the trust that exists between you”. This trust also permeates within the team and is significantly correlated with the effectiveness of the player leadership within the team (Fransen *et al.*, 2015b). As shown in Chapter 4, if a coach contradicts himself/herself by saying ‘You’ve done really well, I am really impressed, but we’re not going to pick you’, it undermines any trust and, as this coach says, it will directly “erode mental toughness”.

6.3.3 The need for coherent support teams (SMMs and message sending)

Consistent throughout my research has been the concept of climate – culture, environment and social milieu – that impacts MT in rugby teams, along with the messages that players receive within these contexts that impact their mindset. These messages might emanate from a multitude of sources, such as parents, spouses, peers, teammates and even the media. Notably, my data suggest that the within-team coaching processes – along with their influencing of others, such as teammates – were the most significant in terms of direct and controllable messaging. This alignment of coach, assistant coaches, support staff and even captain was endorsed throughout Chapter 4, which demonstrated that having a harmonious climate within the multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary support groups helps the team to be more

effective (Collins *et al.*, 1999; Moore & Collins, 1996). It is accepted that organisational stress also impacts players' MT (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009), so less dissonance and increased coherence can only be positive. In tandem with this and counter-intuitively, at the core of the decentred approach mentioned earlier, and as reflected in my results, is the awareness or EI of the coach and his/her ability to be flexible in styles while building trust, along with listening skills and empathy – in short, the ability to employ “an array of complex managerial skills” (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, p. 430). Again, these factors resonate with my results, in that aligning formal leaders and having stringent or ‘sacrosanct’ terms within staff was seen as crucial by the coaches in Chapter 4 to eliciting MT. In terms of harmony and even well-being within this intragroup, one that builds its own resilience (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009), it was seen as important for the head coach to value and support the members of his/her team. Giving them space to operate supports their sense of competence – as suggested by SDT – and motivates staff to conform to the team norms. Having coaches ‘kick cans’ in frustration was seen as counter-productive, poor role modelling and definitely damaging the harmony. Be it the coach presenting to other staff members to embed the approach – his/her philosophy – or having weekly coffee meetings with the captain, the emphasis upon alignment and coherence within the support teams – including the captain – was significant. Both these examples – ‘kicking cans’ and valuing assistants found in Chapter 4 – endorse the importance of coaches managing emotions and having an awareness of “managing conflict, communicating emotion” and managing the emotional contagion that adds to a stronger performance team and organisational functioning with subsequently more coherent messaging to players (Fletcher *et al.*, 2009; Wagstaff *et al.*, 20129, p 26). Planning how messages are delivered to staff also pre-empts thinking and helps set

the philosophy. In a more negative or pathological sense, a lack of alignment not only adds to the dissonance – lessening commitment – but also, more insidiously, allows avenues of ‘avoidance’ (escape) that players can use to not conform and shirk the responsibility that is key to MT, consequently acting less mentally tough and with reduced player ownership (as suggested in Chapter 3).

As mentioned in Chapter 4, it is a key role of coaches to “keep onto the behaviours...because its those little things that contribute to a team being the most mentally tough” (C-2) or as such, to reinforce the requisite mentally tough behaviours. If these are questioned or countered by other staff or coaches, this obviously undermines the head coach. As such, and stressed by my sample, it is crucial that the message is aligned to the head coach – who should value and utilise the skills of the coaching team – and disseminated to the players’ as ‘one’ consistent and coherent message. As evidenced, this message is directly delivered from the head coach to assistant coaches and to the captain and then to player leaders, who then indirectly reinforce the head coach’s message.

As Fletcher and Wagstaff have stated, “all members of the sport organization will have an impact on its functioning and effectiveness” (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, p. 431) and this includes the CEO as well as the head coach, support staff and players. As found in previous research, a lack of alignment or agreement reduces harmony among support teams and, most likely, filters into and negatively impacts the whole team (Collins *et al.*, 1999; Moore & Collins, 1996).

Having rules of engagement about where the support staff operate with players, either above or below the ‘them and us’ line, impacts directly on the subsequent engagement and players’ dispositions towards these support coaches (Collins *et al.*, 1999). This is evident in my results in the ‘sacrosanct’ nature of

management meetings along with the alignment of coach and captain, and of coach co-coaches. The politics or micro-politics of proactive coaching can be difficult due to challenging circumstances that often bring conflict. Importantly, however, engaging through processes such as the ‘Zone of Uncomfortable Debate’ (ZOUD) (Collins *et al.*, 2011) may help to manage that conflict in ways that have “liberating effects” (Potrac & Jones, 2009, p. 233). The emotional responses of coaches in the ZOUD and the ways that they manage the micro-politics within these meetings through making sense of what is ‘most pertinent’ to their position (Kelchtermans, 2005) allow them to optimise any situation and offer time to effect change. This approach is in line with my results, according to which the staff might “agree or disagree”, so whether it was the bagman or the physio, the coach was unequivocal – “I will come down on you like a ton of bricks” – as to the messages going out. Proactively engaging with difficult or uncomfortable conversations also shows that coaches are comfortable in knowing where they stand and recalls EJ’s confidence in challenging players and in also selecting Hartley as captain.

6.3.4 The need for ‘arse covering’ and creating time

Regardless of the pragmatic and somewhat contentious approach taken by EJ, it is important for coaches to be politically astute. This astuteness in managing upwards and outwards to the media gives coaches more security and leverage in order to impact players, assistant coaches and even boards through coherent messages sent either directly or indirectly. Being aware of the motivational climate and culture allows coaches to create a clear team identity for players to buy into and commit to. They also need longevity in order to enact these changes and to be effective (Jones *et*

al., 1993; Potrac & Jones, 2009).

The need to ‘cover one’s arse’ through the skills or political astuteness mentioned above seems blatantly obvious and ties in with how the coach engages in management impression. Despite the eloquence and skill demonstrated by SL to initiate changes, cover his arse and astutely sell his initial impacts to the fans, board and CEO, his example is trumped by that of EJ. So while it is clear that coaches need to be aware, politically astute, possibly emotional intelligent and certainly build strong teams and relationships, this is only the basis or foundation on which the actual on-field performances sit.

In summary, my results reinforce the complex nature of MT, which is further complicated by the complexities of rugby and team sport. How players perceive their role, challenges and motivations to act are determined directly and indirectly by the coach’s leadership and also directly and indirectly through the environment. In Chapter 7, I expand further on these topics and offer suggestions for future research in the area of MT.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

7.1 General discussion

At the outset of this research project, it was my intention to understand the role of MT in how teams deliver optimum performances and thus, by virtue of this, how coaches elicit optimum MT from their charges. From my results, it is apparent that MT within rugby is not merely an individual construct, nor even a team construct, but one that is delivered in teams by a fluid team dynamic and a particular social milieu. Regardless of its origins, and often referred to only “in hindsight”, MT is a vague concept and “opaque theoretical construct” (Caddick & Ryall, 2012, p. 139, p. 137). My results reduce the ambiguity as to whether MT is a trait, skill or mindset and show how the multitude of messages that players receive from coaches, coaching staff, support staff, playing peers and even the media will impact their MT in rugby. Importantly, however, the results also demonstrate that MT is far from a simple construct. Added to the complexities in sending and receiving these messages, which includes both senders’ ability to send coherent messages and receivers’ ability to interpret them, this reinforces both the complexity of MT and the transient and highly malleable mindset of a rugby team.

The meanings that players derive from these messages within the social interactions of the team - fostering togetherness, group challenges, rooming lists, the social interactions and the social milieu - all determine the level and appropriateness of mentally tough actions. With reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978) operating

within the team, this highlights the need for coaches to manage these messages. Integral to this management/manipulation is the support/coercion from player leaders or CAs in order for them to act as enforcers for coaches and as guardians for the team. The language then used between players adds to the collective mind and sense making (Weick, 1993) that gives both structure and understanding, facilitating the SMMs that enable teams to perform with MT. Furthermore, the group identity that is so pertinent in my study is further supported in recent research that reinforces the importance of not assessing MT in a vacuum and to instead assess the culturally informed view to better understand MT and how it is developed and elicited (Eubank *et al.*, 2017).

My pragmatic approach focused upon how coaches elicit MT and whilst I acknowledge the individual's role in MT, and indeed, that coaches should recruit players with greater MT capacities (Weinberg *et al.*, 2011), my aim is to see how coaches can control these MT performances. Coaches are the critical engineers of the environment that can crucially enhance MT (Coulter & Mallett, 2011). As such, they need the awareness of these social interactions and the capacity for managing the necessary and often Machiavellian machinations, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, that are integral to eliciting MT. How coaches condition – physically and mentally – through challenging and creating the cohesive and coherent team is dependent on having consistent and coherent messaging with players, and knowing how each player will interpret these messages. The ‘derived meaning’ from these social interactions allows rugby teams to act mentally tough or be diminished by these coach feedbacks (Owusu-Sekyere & Gervis, 2016). To elicit MT on a consistent basis demands that coaches should be chameleon-like in their adaptations to each player's individual needs while also maintaining goal perspective, knowing what it means to be mentally tough but more so delivering MT and so exposing the to and fro that is so useful

between coaches and players. These machinations might, as shown, also include the manipulation of players, assistant coaches and the media to further project manage towards the end goal. Coaches should be master politicians in terms of manipulating their own image – IM – and mastering the micro-politics needed to succeed (Potrac & Jones, 2009). To do so, coaches need to know where they are going and the experience of the coach seems significant, as evidenced in Chapter 4 and more explicitly in Chapter 7 in the progression from Martin Johnson to SL and then to EJ (Hodgson *et al.*, 2017). Even within Chapter 4 there was an emphasis on the need for nuanced and careful approach to managing the team’s interactions and group dynamics in order to elicit MT. The ability to deliver consistent messages in the fluid sporting and social milieu while maintaining clarity of direction requires impressive communication skills: non-verbal skills (such as knowing how to enter a room and eavesdrop on the team bus) as well as verbal communication skills, EI and a coherent vision, in tandem with organisational, group dynamics and media skills. The highly experienced cohort within my study exhibited a high degree of emotional intelligence and leadership capacities due to their experience (Cavazotte *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, these coaches demonstrated experience in building player leadership; in showing how they developed as well as managed it, they also articulated the importance that they attached to this process. As mentioned by Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009, p. 433), there should be more research focus upon constructs such as EI that “advocate the importance of social and interpersonal skills” and self-regulation that “promote organizational functioning”.

Indeed, when all of these external messages are aligned, it adds to the clarity and reduces the dissonance within the team, allowing the players to focus upon more controllable factors such as effort. Furthermore, this emphasis on effort can also

reduce internal distractions and further enhance focus and confidence with an increase in the crucial MT component of motivation to act/play (Bull *et al.*, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Jones & Moorhouse, 2007; Williams, 1988). Indeed, when players know their roles and have an increased understanding of these within SMMs, it helps motivation. This, along with the SBA and controllable factors, will help to elicit MT. Embedding this focus and confidence can be achieved through the use of PST such as self-talk or visualisation (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Connaughton *et al.*, 2010; Driska *et al.*, 2012; Thelwell *et al.*, 2010).

In summary, my results show how MT is elicited in elite rugby teams. Whilst my journey started where I believe many others have in thinking of MT as an individual construct it quickly moved to the multitude of factors that feed into an individuals mindset, and reciprocally into a teams mindset, and which reflects optimal performance. Indeed, it is evident from my findings that coaches (and players) believe MT is the result of multiple factors that affect the individual and subsequent group mindset. These factors reflect the groups interpretation of situations into mentally tough or peak performance and further shows the complexity of MT. As such, MT is shown in our behaviors (Hardy *et al.*, 2014) and with the ever changing dynamic of teams, this leads into the many demands and skills that coaches need to develop in order to manage this global, ambiguous, and hard to pin down construct. To borrow the '4 Cs' from Clough and colleagues (2002), the clarity of the coach conditions the players, both physically and mentally, through coherent, consistent challenge in order to build a cohesive team. This coherence is achieved through SMMs exemplified by player leaders under an aligned coherent and consistent leadership that is reinforced and supported by coherent media messages. All of these contributing factors funnel through the multiple messaging players and teams receive into creating the MT

mindset that drives/supports players into delivering consistent mentally tough team performances. As such, MT is another term for peak performance or a hold-all for desirable factors which are then evidenced in a teams performance behaviours or as Lombardi suggested, a teams “character in action” (Sheard, 2013, p 28).

7.2 Recommendations for future study

The broad and opaque nature of MT and the numerous factors that impact both it and the malleable mindset mean that there are myriad possible avenues for future research to explore. One future direction for research would be to assess the success of these coach interventions in building MT within a team longitudinally, as Tibbert *et al.* (2015) did with an individual. This is important in order to see how coaches create the crucial SMMs within their teams and the resultant restructured player (team) cognitions/mindsets that elicit consistent mentally tough performances.

On the premise that experience helps coaches to build MT, as well as developing their EI (Goleman, 2001) it would be useful to see how coaches might accelerate this experiential learning over time through their own deliberate and reflective practice to more assiduously optimise each experience that might develop this key component.

The importance of alignment in messaging to athletes suggests that any extraneous messages should also be monitored, managed or directed in order to facilitate team goals and MT. As such, insights into how the messages from significant others such as spouses and parents can impact MT would be very useful in closing off the circle of critical feedbacks (Bull *et al.*, 2005).

One such significant influence, as mentioned, is how the media impacts players, coaches and the environment. This opens up a new area and, while my research acknowledges that players are affected by what they read, I would argue that any studies about the impact of the media on individuals should also consider team identity and how media messages create or add to that identity. For example, a team may become labelled 'the hardest-working team' or 'the most skilled team', so the coach's management of these labels might be another avenue to explore as regards the team's mindset and consistent delivery of MT.

In relation to SDT and the degree to which the development of MT is underpinned by social and environmental factors, it would be interesting to see if relatedness would be perceived as more or less relevant in different cultures, by (for example) comparing a rugby team from a collectivist country with one from an individualist country (see, for example, EJ talking about his Japan team having goals for the greater good of Japanese rugby as much as for themselves).

As an extension of this, it is apparent that MT could usefully be defined within the dynamic of specific sports, be they individual sports with surrounding support structures or team sports in which team spirit has a particular value. Consider football, rugby and hockey (especially the recent GB Women's team) as prime examples. Indeed, the social dynamic and interactions within *women's* rugby at the elite level warrant investigation; for example, how do coaches manage female players who might prefer more democratic versus autocratic behaviours (Weinberg & Gould, 2003)?

7.3 Summary of practical implications

There are several practical implications for coaches and also team support staff. All have been highlighted within the various chapters. For clarity, however, the most important are listed below.

First, it is important to review the alignment of MT to “be the best” or optimal performance within my working definition and that this association has added to its popularity in sport practice (Caddick & Ryall, 2012, p 138). As such, this has made it a very useful tool for sport psychologists in getting athlete engagement. Despite this important practical advantage, as a construct MT still represents a hold-all of skills and abilities for optimal performance rather than any one singular construct and so adds to its continuing ambiguity. Subsequently, and somewhat a reflection of this complexity, practical implications mean that rugby teams, require a multitude of factors to be aligned such as clarity in playing approaches that underpin the alignment in messaging from support teams. Furthermore, there is a need for coaches to reflect, plan and decide on such strategies and styles before disseminating these, which maybe less about the strategies themselves and more about the consistency, and total agreement with their support staff and wider team.

A second implication is the importance of consistent, coherent messaging to players. To achieve this, coaches need the awareness combined with strong communication skills – both in receiving and sending messages – to be able to know what level the players need to be at and how this can be achieved.

One of the attributes that players need to possess for the team to function coherently is the ability to take responsibility and make decisions. Clearly, this requires the leadership qualities developed within players and, while several

suggestions were made in Chapter 4, these should be expanded upon and implemented.

Sport psychology consultants need to up-skill and develop their expertise in other areas such as organisational psychology, cognitive psychology, sociology, group dynamics and leadership when auditing performance teams in order to support the development of/and leadership within teams (Arnold *et al.*, 2015; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009).

Finally, and inherent in the implications listed above, is the need to educate coaches that “coaching is not all about the technical and tactical and more about the relationships within the environment” (Hodge *et al.*, 2014, p. 65). Developing an understanding of the micro-politics of team management, along with impression management, should constitute part of this education in order to expand coaches’ awareness and ensure that they can survive in their roles long enough to effect the desired/necessary culture change.

In conclusion, coaches can influence – directly and indirectly, internally and externally – the thinking and resultant mindset of their players and subsequently their teams’ MT, game to game. The key is that coaches should have a clear vision and that they should communicate this coherently to their players, managing and influencing them within the social milieu with the aid of an aligned management team and through the use of media messages.

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: COACH



University of Central Lancashire

Mental Toughness and Its Development within Rugby: An Investigation of Coach and Player Perceptions

Participant Information Sheet: Coach

Please read the information below thoroughly before deciding whether or not to participate in this study.

Introduction

You have been chosen as one of the elite coaches within world rugby that has attained champion status in one of the major rugby tournaments of the world. This study is being undertaken in part fulfilment of the Professional Doctorate in Elite Performance.

Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to explore what mental toughness is in rugby, understanding mentally tough behaviours and how, in your experience, these behaviours are best developed. The results of the study will be used to inform mental toughness practices in rugby. The information collected will be used within the research degree and any publications or presentations generated from this work.

Procedure

The study will consist of an interview in which you will be asked a number of questions about mental toughness in rugby. The interview will take place on a face-to-face basis or over Skype at a time convenient to you (for example, before or after training, at your training venue). This interview will last approximately one hour. You do not have to answer any questions, you can stop the interview at any time and you can withdraw your data from the study at any point up to two weeks post-interview. If you wish to participate in this study, please contact the researchers within two weeks of receiving this information sheet.

If you provide consent, the interview will be recorded and later analysed. If you do not want to be recorded, we can take detailed notes during the interview as an alternative.

Your transcribed interview or detailed notes will be provided to you in order to clarify the information given. You will be asked to review these and provide any feedback or comments two weeks after receipt.

If you would like to receive data from the analysis that will follow the interviews, I will be happy to provide you with a copy of subsequent papers that result.

Confidentiality

Please rest assured that all information gathered in this study will remain completely anonymous and strictly confidential. Interviews will be identified using a code number that you will be assigned. Your name will not be recorded or used in any part of this study. At the first stage of the interview, we will agree a suitably anonymous description (e.g. Coach X, 20+ years' experience at national/international level) that will be used against any quotes used in papers or other outputs.

All collected data will be held on a password-protected computer and in a secure locked cupboard. Data will be stored for five years from the end of the project and then destroyed.

Withdrawing from the study

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study, your interview will be deleted and all information about your involvement will be discarded.

Risks and benefits

The information you provide will help us to understand more about mental toughness in rugby. There is a small possibility that you may experience some social or emotional distress when discussing your experiences of mental toughness in rugby. In these instances, the researcher will refer you for further debrief. As detailed above, steps have been taken to anonymise the data and therefore there is no risk that the results can be linked to any individual.

If you have any complaints or issues about the study, please contact Dave Collins, Director of Studies.

If you would like to take part in this study or if you require further information, please contact:

Stephen McIvor	Dave Collins (Principal Investigator)
DProf Research Student	Professor, University of Central Lancashire
Stephen@balancingexcellence.com	djcollins@uclan.ac.uk / +44 (0) 1772 895719

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: PLAYER



University of Central Lancashire

Mental Toughness and Its Development within Rugby: An Investigation of Coach and Player Perceptions

Participant Information Sheet: Player

Please read the information below thoroughly before deciding whether or not to participate in this study.

Introduction

You have been asked to participate in this study about mental toughness in rugby. This study is being undertaken in part fulfilment of the Professional Doctorate in Elite Performance.

Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to explore what mental toughness is in rugby, understanding mentally tough behaviours and how, in your experience, these behaviours are best developed. The results of the study will be used to inform mental toughness practices in rugby. The information collected will be used within the research degree and any publications or presentations generated from this work.

Procedure

The study will consist of an interview in which you will be asked a number of questions about mental toughness in rugby. The interview will take place on a face-to-face basis or over Skype at a time convenient to you (for example, before or after training, at your training venue). This interview will last approximately one hour. You do not have to answer any questions, you can stop the interview at any time and you can withdraw your data from the study at any point up to two weeks post-interview. If you wish to participate in this study, please contact the researchers within two weeks of receiving this information sheet.

If you provide consent, the interview will be recorded and later analysed. If you do not want to be recorded, we can take detailed notes during the interview as an alternative.

Your transcribed interview or detailed notes will be provided to you in order to clarify the information given. You will be asked to review these and provide any feedback or comments two weeks after receipt.

If you would like to receive data from the analysis that will follow the interviews, I will be happy to provide you with a copy of subsequent papers that result.

Confidentiality

Please rest assured that all information gathered in this study will remain completely anonymous and strictly confidential. Interviews will be identified using a code number that you will be assigned. Your name will not be recorded or used in any part of this study. At the first stage of the interview, we will agree a suitably anonymous description (e.g. Player X, 20 caps at club/international level) that will be used against any quotes used in papers or other outputs.

All collected data will be held on a password-protected computer and in a secure locked cupboard. Data will be stored for five years from the end of the project and then destroyed.

Withdrawing from the study

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study, your interview will be deleted and all information about your involvement will be discarded.

Risks and benefits

The information you provide will help us to understand more about mental toughness in rugby. There is a small possibility that you may experience some social or emotional distress when discussing your experiences of mental toughness in rugby. In these instances, the researcher will refer you for further debrief. As detailed above, steps have been taken to anonymise the data and therefore there is no risk that the results can be linked to any individual.

If you have any complaints or issues about the study, please contact Dave Collins, Director of Studies.

If you would like to take part in this study or if you require further information, please contact:

Stephen McIvor	Dave Collins (Principal Investigator)
DProf Research Student	Professor, University of Central Lancashire
Stephen@balancingexcellence.com	djcollins@uclan.ac.uk / +44 (0) 1772 895719

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM



University of Central Lancashire

Mental Toughness and Its Development within Rugby: An Investigation of Coach and Player Perceptions

Informed Consent Form

Investigation: **Mental Toughness and Its Development within Rugby: An Investigation of Coach and Player Perceptions**

Investigator: Stephen McIvor

Participant no.: _____

Name: _____

Please read and initial each statement.

- I have read and understand the participant information sheet. _____
- I understand what the project is about and what the results will be used for. _____
- I am fully aware of all procedures involving myself and of any risks and benefits associated with the study. _____
- I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason. _____
- I agree to the discussion being audio-recorded and transcribed at a later date. _____
- I agree to detailed notes being taken during the interview. _____

- I understand that anonymised quotes may be taken from the interview and used to illustrate general themes. _____
- I understand that the data [*field notes, interviews*] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but that any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed. _____
- I agree to anonymised quotes being used within any publications or presentations resulting from this work. _____
- I understand that the results will be anonymous and any quotations used will not be attributable to me. _____
- I would like to receive a copy of the results. _____

Participant's signature:

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature, purpose and possible risks associated with participation in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

Signature of investigator:

Date: _____

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE: STUDY 1