

Psychological Safety – What does it mean for athletes and coaches?

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Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the application of psychological safety for athletes and coaches in elite sport. This will be done by examining its characteristics and considering its transferability based on the evidence available and case studies. Overall, the interest in this topic is generated from self-reflection about the role a coach can play in designing or generating a psychologically safe environment that can lead to success for all.

What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is defined as a belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, such as asking for help, admitting one's errors, or seeking feedback from others (Edmondson, 1999). The concept of psychological safety originates in the field of organisational psychology with a focus on workplace effectiveness but it now finds itself defined and applied in sport (Walton et al, 2023).

The increase significance of this construct in elite sport, not just rugby union is demonstrated by research which suggests that approximately one third of currently competing elite athletes report experiencing mental ill health, at a rate that is comparable to the general population (Olive et al, 2022). The emergence of interest in psychologically safe environments for athletes is obvious but there is increasing evidence that suggests this needs to include coaches as well (Pilkington et al, 2022).

Characteristics

Across different levels of sport, recent research suggests that psychological safety can lead to positive outcomes such as increased trust, cooperation functioning in team environments (Taylor et al, 2025). It also notes that certain issues may still be considered unsafe in particularly when athletes wish to fit in or comply with group standards they don't subscribe to (Hoult et al, 2024). This confirms the view that psychological safety is fragile and fluid depending on the context or situations in a team environment (Taylor et al, 2025).

An analysis conducted across 67 studies identified that psychological safety in sport is conceptualised as a continuous, group level construct that is perceived (and reported) at an individual level (Vella et al, 2022); from this data the following key characteristics of a psychologically safe environment was identified:

- **Promotes Risk-Taking Behaviour**
- **Absence of Threat or Harm**

- **Positive Interpersonal Relationships**
- **Positive Emotional State**

It also noted the following antecedents for setting up a psychologically safe environment:

Appropriate Program Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structured and predictable • designed intentionally and underpinned by theory • clear rules and expectations for all involved in the program
Organisational Culture, Policies, and Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clarity of roles within the organisation • due diligence is performed by all stakeholders to ensure a positive environment • there is a positive organisational culture
Coaching Behaviours and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be accessible and communicative with athletes • have positive relationships with their athletes • refrain from adopting negative or maladaptive behaviours such as punishments
Leadership Behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fair and ethical leadership • supporting peer-to-peer connections • identity leadership (we vs me)
Parent Behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents were identified as both a potential facilitator, and barrier, for psychological safety of athletes
Culture and values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Within sporting settings, a number of cultural norms and shared values were suggested as antecedents to psychological safety.
Social interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interactions be characterised by: a sense of satisfaction with interpersonal relations
Absence of negative behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not violating relationships through behaviours such as insults, threats, and manipulation

Contemporary Application for Coaches and Athletes

Based on its origins, psychological safety is built on conceptions of the regular workforce, however the experience of the modern worker and coaches in elite sport have several key disparities. For example, in relation to job security, tenure and mobility; rugby coaching roles are scarce, highly competitive and scrutinised (Robbins, 2017), and for those that are fortunate to have a role, the average lifespan of a rugby coach according to European club data was 2.79 years (Heagney, 2018). In contrast, Australia's workforce is characterised by longer periods in roles, particularly as individuals age, but also experience significantly more mobility (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025).

At present, there is lack of high-quality research investigating the mental health of elite-level coaches (Frost et al, 2024). There is further evidence to suggest coaches should be considered as performers in their own right (Thewell et al, 2018). Coaches who experience performance and organisation stressors were found to be most likely to report mental ill health and or burnout (Frost et al, 2024). It was also found that a coaches negative responses to stress could be projected onto their athletes (Bencker et al, 2025).

Elite sport at its core is fundamentally unsafe and the existing concepts of psychological safety should not be considered universally applicable for elite athletes or coaches when there are clear performance expectations (Taylor, 2022). Further, while they are key tenets of a psychologically safe environment, there is a point where taking risks and making mistakes cannot be safe (Bstieler and Hemmert, 2010), particularly in elite sport environments.

Despite this sobering reality for elite coaches and athletes, it is an accepted reality that progress is preceded by growth (Eckstrom, 2022). Often this takes form where athletes need to make errors to learn even when their performance environments carry significant consequences.

Coaches can support this critical point by deliberately manipulating periods within an environment to focus on *performance safety* and encourage periods of exploratory behaviour which allow for mistakes (Taylor, 2024). This concept was broken into two states with key examples to support these periods:

High Performance Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploratory practice where error is encouraged to maximize expansive and exploratory learning behaviour Task constrained training to prevent consequence from errors Task constrained oppositional training Use of games/races/competition in training with scores being kept Use of pressure training to induce a level of anxiety
Lower Performance Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competitive training against selection rival Competition Highly consequential competition (e.g., Olympic/Paralympic final, penalty shoot-out)

Recognising and understanding when to operate these environments is crucial for coaches. It can help reduce the concern associated with concepts of psychological safety which promote unconditional promotion risk-taking behaviour; which can be wrought with risk for coaches, where results matter especially given how roles are extremely rare and highly competitive.

The ‘Learning Zone Model’ (Edmondson, 2019) explains how psychological safety and accountability for performance interact to shape behaviour and learning. The summary below demonstrates clearly how optimal performance can be created by combining psychological safety with clear and demanding expectations; where athletes can stretch, experiment and improve.

Learning Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High psychological safety / High motivation and accountability. People feel safe to take risks while being pushed to high standards.
Comfort Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High psychological safety / Low motivation and accountability. People feel safe but not challenged.
Anxiety Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low psychological safety / High motivation and accountability. Expectations are high but people fear making mistakes.
Apathy Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low psychological safety / Low motivation and accountability. People disengage, avoid effort, don’t feel connected to the work.

Case Studies

The following case studies of elite coaches across professional rugby union and league have been presented to demonstrate the difficulty of establishing and maintaining psychologically safe environments, but also the reviewing its impact on the outcomes.

Anthony Siebold, ex-Broncos coach (Low psychological safety, Low performance)

Anthony Siebold's tenure from 2019 to 2020 was marked by a lack of psychological safety. There were reports of a toxic environment, intense professional and person scrutiny predicated by poor on-field performances.

The impact of this period had a significant impact on Siebold and the players. For the players, there were reports they felt they could not approach Siebold about training and game tactics. For Siebold, this was highlighted in his reflections following his departure commenting on the isolation he experienced and the toll the experience had on him and his family at the time.

In addition to this, the example of his tenure also highlighted a key consideration for elite coaches – the role of the organisation to unite or protect their coach(es) and players.

John, ex-All Blacks coach (Low psychological safety, High performance)

John Mitchell's tenure from 2001-2003 achieved great success (83% win rate) but was also marked by friction with his players as a result of his coaching style at the time.

In recent times, Mitchell has reflected on his tenure noting that the high pressure and low empathy environment he created ultimately led to his departure. His engagement methods with his players and key stakeholders (media, organisation) led to the unique scenario of him being sacked despite some positive results and growth with the team he led.

Since then, he has transformed his coaching approach and is reportedly beloved by his players as demonstrated by the affection expressed by players in the England men and women's teams he has coached.

David Rennie, ex-Wallaby Coach (High Psychological Safety, Low Performance)

David Rennie is renowned for his ability to build and develop successful teams and culture. At the time of his removal, it was widely regarded that he had developed the team on and off the field and had the support of the playing group to continue.

Supporters cited Rennie's work to blood new players and reinvigorating the environment as evidence the decision had been made too soon. However, his winning record was 38% - which ultimately demonstrated the points made in the aforementioned section.

This scenario exposed the harsh truth that building foundational success can be a painful process and that organisations under pressure may be more inclined to make decisions like this that discount the benefit of building for long-term success to attain short term gains.

Rassie Erasmus (High psychological safety, High performance)

Erasmus' current tenure with the Springboks is marked by unprecedented success and playing and coaching innovation. While there have been periods of controversy on and off the field, the uniqueness and results he has been able to achieve from the turmoil he inherited is remarkable.

His time in charge has been typified by a number of key factors of note – his boldness to platform inclusivity as evidenced by his decision to appoint Siya Kolisi as his captain; Driving a message of playing for something bigger than rugby that has unite his team; and removing the fear of failure in his players but showing its ok to fail through his constant innovation, strategies and selection.

In addition to the environment and results he has been able to achieve, his tenure is a remarkable example of how the organisation has also assisted by removing unnecessary barriers (e.g. selection policy) him to focus on culture and psychological safety can yield extraordinary results.

From these case studies, it is evident that coaches play a pivotal role in shaping psychologically safe environment. But it also demonstrates that psychological safety cannot be considered in isolation as a key factor for success for athletes and coaches. When combined as one component of a well-functioning high-performance environment this is where sustainable and positive results occur.

Conclusion

Psychological safety is a vital component for athlete performance but it is also clear the simplification of the construct and application without considering the nuance of elite sport can lead to suboptimal results. The information provided above also demonstrates that psychological safety cannot is not a passive outcome in an elite sporting environment. It requires intentional effort from athletes, coaches and organisations to ensure the creation an environment where positive outcomes can be created. Elite coaching may always have inherent constraints to achieving psychological safety as a consequence of pressure to perform and ultimately win. Irrespective of this, more focused researched is vital to understanding this further.

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