Pressured coaches try to get sports psychologists to gossip

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Sports psychologists at Britain's top soccer clubs are being pressured to reveal confidential information about players in their academies, new research shows.

"Coaches often have almost complete access into practically all aspects

of the players' lives. They know how far and how fast the players can run, their fat percentage and in some cases their sleep habits and their behavior at home," says Niels Feddersen, a postdoctoral fellow at NTNU's Department of Sociology and Political Science.

"This setting creates intense pressure for total transparency, including when it comes to confidential conversations about a player's mental health. This is creating new challenges for sports psychologists and the players," says Feddersen.

Young soccer talents can further develop their skills in club academies. The very best ones either play for the club themselves or are sold to other clubs. The players are often under great pressure, and some need to talk with a sports psychologist. They often want the information to stay between them and the psychologist.

16 psychologists from top clubs interviewed

Feddersen heads the research project titled Modernizing Psychology Provisions in Men's English Soccer Clubs. The researchers spoke to 16 sports psychologists from ten Premier League academies, three Championship academies and three League 1 academies in England.

"The study has three parts. We look at behavior, contexts where various types of unwanted behavior are normalized, and solutions to the problems," says Feddersen.

Three ways trust is broken

The researchers found three typical patterns that can break the trust between the player, the sports psychologist and club management.

1. A player consents to the sports psychologist sharing confidential information with a coach. But then the [coach](#) shares the confidential information with more people, who are not covered by the player's consent.
2. Coaches may fish for information from the psychologist.
3. Managers in the clubs can demand that the sports psychologists share information that was given in confidence, and threaten to sack them if they refuse to share the information.

"These are three specific issues that sports psychologists have had to deal with," says Feddersen. Unfortunately, some players have been burnt and no longer trust the sports psychologists.

The mistrust occurs both due to the pressure on the psychologists from other employees and how psychologists handle the confidential relationship with the players they have spoken to.

"If the players start to believe that the sports psychologist is sharing all their confidential conversations, it naturally destroys the relationship between them," says Feddersen.

Coaches under a lot of pressure

The three patterns of unwanted behavior are normalized in the clubs, which perhaps comes as no surprise.

"We have to remember that the coaches are also under extreme pressure to develop players who can be sold to other clubs or go to the senior first team," says Feddersen. The coaches are very vulnerable due to short-term contracts and increasing demands. So they feel their position is threatened if they don't deliver."

Fortunately, it is rare for sports psychologists to receive threats of

dismissal, but the findings from this study indicate that it is completely normal for coaches to leak confidential information and fish for information in the clubs.

Stig Arve Sæther, an associate professor in sport science at NTNU, has been part of the research project. He has been studying talent development in Norwegian soccer for the past ten years. Sæther points out that the coaches in this development environment unfortunately work under extreme pressure for results.

"But while results in this context should be about the number of professional players they develop for the future, the results are instead often related to the match results," says Sæther. "This means that the coaches feel pressure to obtain information from all possible sources, including sports psychologists, in order to maximize the possibility of achieving victories in the short term."

Two solutions

However, sports psychologists have their ways to preserve their confidential relationship with the players.

"Sports psychologists can also work with the coaches as clients in confidential conversations. This lets coaches experience the value of confidentiality through their client relationship with the sports psychologist. We've observed that coaches who work with sports psychologists are more open to players also having the same right to confidentiality."

Sports psychologists can also use a method called "case formulation."

Case formulation is when the sports psychologist collaborates with other staff members, such as physiotherapists, strength trainers and coaches, to

support individual players. A confidential space is then created with a built-in consent process. Everyone is continually mindful of what kind of player information is confidential and what they can share with others.

Case-formulation formalizes channels for enabling information to be shared in correct ways with the consent of the players.

The paper is published in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*.

More information: Niels Boysen Feddersen et al, Confidentiality and surveillance challenges for psychologists working in men's football academies in England, *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* (2022). DOI: 10.1080/10413200.2022.2134506

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