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What's so special about rugby? Volunteer coaches' perceptions of how the features unique to rugby union influence the development of life skills in players

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ABSTRACT

Community sports coaches have cited the development of players' life skills through sport as a primary motive for coaching. While coaches' respective methods of and approaches to developing players' life skills have been researched, factors such as the influence a specific sport's especial rules and customs might have on this process have been neglected. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the purpose of this study was to explore what features unique to the game of rugby do five regionally-based volunteer coaches consider important in developing players' life skills based on their lived experiences as players and coaches. Findings suggested that these coaches saw the heavy physical contact involved in rugby provided a high-risk environment which required players, individually and collectively, to develop life skills such as cooperation, resilience, empathy, supportiveness and self-control to overcome physical and emotional challenges presented by the nature of the game.

Introduction

Volunteer coaches are central to the provision of organized sport (Casey et al. 2023) and have been described as the 'lifeblood' of youth sport organizations (Bouchet and Lehe 2010, 1). As the most visible representatives of their sporting organization's quality and effectiveness (Cuskelly, Hoye, and Auld 2006), it has been suggested that they are the most important personnel in a community sports organization due to their frequent interactions with participants, parents and other stakeholders (Busser and Carruthers 2010). Establishing and retaining a pool of well-qualified, capable and, ideally, long-term volunteer coaches at the community level is a constant and essential challenge for sporting clubs and governing bodies (Griffiths and Armour 2013).

The coach's role often encompasses far more than teaching movement skills and tactics (Williams and Krane 2015). Acknowledging this, Côté and Gilbert (2009, 316) declare effective coaches as 'those who demonstrate the ability to apply and align their coaching expertise to particular athletes and situations in order to maximize athlete learning outcomes'. Consistent with this broader understanding of the role of the coach, Horn (2008) considers that effective coaching results in successful performance outcomes and also in positive mental and emotional responses from the players. To this effect, Kidman (2005, 2010) sees coaching as an athlete-centred humanistic endeavour. This broadens the coach's scope of responsibility from merely winning or providing quantifiable improvements in their players' performances to also enhancing harder-to-quantify outcomes such as their players' feelings of satisfaction, self-efficacy and enjoyment. Like Kidman, Bloom et al. (2014) also recognized the teaching of personal qualities such as leadership, teamwork and character-building as part of a coach's responsibilities.

This positioning of the coach's role as one more aligned with caregiver appears to be increasingly demanded by sport's stakeholders such as athletes, parents, clubs and the media (Brown et al. 2017; Mazzer and Rickwood 2014). It is one that appears to be appealing to coaches, too. A substantial amount

of research has been undertaken concerning the motives underpinning volunteer coaches' decisions to take on such a role in community sport. This body of research has identified key elements in retaining volunteer coaches include intrinsic motivational factors such as a love of the game, giving back to the sport, satisfaction from seeing players improve, developing their own learning and competence and enjoying the challenges associated with team-building and working with others (Bang and Ross 2009; McLean and Mallett 2012; Rundle-Thiele and Auld 2009; Stewart and Owens 2011). Volunteer coaches have also nominated contributing to their players' willingness to continue playing sport and developing players' personal skills and wellbeing as a significant motive underpinning their decisions to continue coaching (Anderson-Butcher, Bates, and Lo 2024; Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris 2012; Trottier and Robitaille 2014). Such attributes are often referred to as 'life skills' (Danish et al. 2004) and are defined as the positive mental, emotional, social attributes, traits and behaviours that players develop or refine through engaging in sport that have the potential to transfer beyond the sport environment (Gould et al. 2007). Examples of life skills are leadership, emotional regulation, empathy, responsibility, goal setting, conflict resolution and supportiveness (Bae, Lim, and O'Sullivan 2023).

The holistic development of players favoured by many volunteer coaches aligns with suggestions that sport has the potential to be a prime social setting to develop life skills in participants (Camire, Trudel, and Forneris 2012; Koh, Tarkington, and Newman 2024). However, different social and cultural environments can generate diverse learning experiences which can change from one activity to the next (Closs, Mahat, and Imms 2021). Therefore, different sports may have distinct social and cultural settings producing different learning environments and developmental experiences for participants stemming from the diverse people, behaviours, customs, values, playing spaces and rules which are attached to a given activity.

Research has been conducted into the influence the type of sport can have on youth development. Hansen, Skorupski, and Arrington (2010) found youth participating in team sports reported higher levels of identity development (such as exploration of personal abilities and interests), initiative, emotional regulation, teamwork and social skills, interpersonal relationships, and adult networks than youth participating in individual sports. A study by Li et al. (2024) with student athletes found competitive sports developed mental toughness and stress management in participants through structured coping mechanisms and robust social support while participants in non-competitive sports experienced greater general well-being connected to greater use of informal social support. Bruner, Hall, and Côté (2011) found basketball players reported greater rates of developmental experiences that promoted teamwork and social skills than middle-distance runners. However, research has also suggested that participants in contact sports are more at risk of demonstrating higher levels of anti-social behaviour such as off-field physical and verbal aggression and violence than participants in non-contact sports (Conway et al. 2024; Kavussanu and Boardley 2009). Maume and Parrish (2020) found adolescents in their early teens who participate in heavy contact sports such as ice hockey, wrestling and American football are more destructive and violent.

Research has been conducted exploring coaches' perceptions and practices regarding their methods for developing life skills in their athletes (Gould et al. 2007; Gould and Carson 2008; Newman et al. 2021) and Steinfeldt et al.'s (2011) study found that American high school football coaches had a direct influence on players' on- and off-field moral decisions. However, there has been little research examining coaches' perceptions about the contribution the elements they believe are unique to their particular sport have on the development of players' life skills from participation in that sport.

To address this gap in the literature, this study explored what features specific to the game of rugby do five regionally-based volunteer coaches perceive as important in developing players' life skills based on their lived experiences as players and coaches.

Methods

This study was part of a larger research project conducted by Author 1 involving an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The data was collected and analyzed consistent with an IPA, but for the study that is the focus of this manuscript, the qualitative data was approached post-hoc interpretatively.

Epistemologically, or 'how we come to know that which we believe we know' (Hiller 2016, 100), this larger research project adopted a contextual constructionist approach. This posits that people are actively engaged in constructing their understandings (Jaeger and Rosnow 1988) and all knowledge is dependent on context

with several elements contributing to an individual's experience of a given situation which is localized, provisional, and relative (King and Horrocks 2010). Linked to epistemology, ontology is specifically concerned with the nature of existence and what is considered reality. This research adopted a relativist ontology proposing that humans construct reality in their minds based on their thoughts, experiences and interpretations (Hiller 2016).

Underpinned by the philosophical foundations of phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography, IPA seeks to explore in depth how the participants make sense of their unique personal and social worlds through the meanings they ascribe to experiences and events and how their socio-cultural roles impact on these experiences (Smith and Osborn 2015). The use of IPA allows for a focused and deep analysis of the personal lived experiences of the participants (Smith and Osborn 2015). Consistent with IPA research methodology, this research sought to obtain an insider's perspective of the phenomenon under study by listening to the participants' recounting of lived experiences during their interviews, including their concerns and reflections about the meanings they ascribed to these experiences. In this study this meant the researchers interpret the accounts of the participants to gain an understanding of what it means for the participants to express these specific concerns and reflections in relation to the phenomenon under investigation (in this case, voluntarily coaching rugby in a regional context) (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton 2006). This fulfils a double hermeneutic process through the researcher describing, analyzing and interpreting the participants' interpretations of events and experiences (Smith 2004). Procedurally, the use of IPA in this study was also idiographic as it involved a thorough analysis of the individual cases, encouraging in-depth understanding of the experiences of a single participant before moving on to another (Smith 2004).

It is also recognized that the research participants' interpretations of their lived experiences were not only cognitively and socially constructed but were also deeply embodied, with the body being the primary site through which meaning is communicated and interpreted in the dynamic context of the rugby coaching environment (Harrelson 2024; Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Participants

Consistent with IPA guidelines (Smith and Osborn 2015) the five participants were purposively selected for this study. Using Author 1's contacts in school sport, these participants were selected based on their extensive practical experience and expertise in the phenomenon to be explored (each one had at least seven years' coaching experience in regional communities). Another important factor in their selection was the participants' willingness to share their experiences (Reid, Flowers, and Larkin 2005). The sample group was homogenous in that the participants were all volunteer rugby coaches with experience of coaching in regional areas, however, age, coaching experience and formal qualifications, locale-types and work occupations varied across the group. All had previously played the sport for several years. An overview of the participants' demographic details is presented in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been used for the participants to protect their identity.

Ethical approval for this study was provided through the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee (USQ Approval No: H17REA188P4). All participants were contacted by email and opted to take part in the study by providing their informed written consent. Data collection commenced after this consent was received by the researcher.

Data collection procedure

Consistent with procedural suggestions from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022), data was collected via two semi-structured 90-min recorded interviews with each participant which were transcribed verbatim by the

Table 1. Overview of the participants.

Participant	Occupational Field	Regional Location distance to Brisbane	Years Coaching	Mainly Coached …
Chris	Medical	300 km	30	Club Juniors, Seniors and Representative Men
Harry	Education	620 km	30	High School Boys, Club Juniors, Seniors and Representative Men
Joel	Primary Industry	350 km	15	Club and Representative Men
Steve	Education	800 km	10	High School Boys, Representative Men
Brent	Community	1400 km	10	Club Juniors, Seniors and Representative Men

Author 1. A third interview was negotiable if the participants felt it was necessary to address any inconsistencies or to provide further information, but none occurred. Interviews were conducted face-to-face to establish relationships with the participants. Questions involved in the first interviews aimed to elicit information about the participants' childhoods, schooling, careers, families and sport experiences (playing and coaching). Essentially 'conversations with a purpose' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022, 54), the semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions which left scope for the author to follow up particular areas of interest. Questions which acted as conversational prompts included, 'What led you to coach rugby?', 'Why have kept you coaching?' and 'How is coaching in country areas different?'. This interview structure was considered the most effective way to collect the data for an IPA study (Smith and Osborn 2015) as expansive and reflective responses may not emerge from a more rigidly structured interview technique (Pringle et al. 2011). The first interview transcript was sent to the respective participant for confirmation of accuracy. The second interview acted as a 'clarifying' interview and was based on questions emerging from Author 1's analysis of the first interview to gain more detailed information and explanations.

The responses during the interviews frequently resulted in the author and the participants changing direction into other topic areas as per a normal conversation. This was intentional so that the author could actively engage in a mutual, natural conversation with the participants who would subsequently feel free to explore and recount the memories of their experiences in a relaxed atmosphere. Stone (2015, 13) suggested this style of interviewing lends itself to 'generating' data rather than 'collecting' it. Semi-structured 'conversational-style' interviewing is encouraged when using IPA to facilitate a more co-constructive process whereby the researcher and the participant together make meaning and share views and interpretations of experiences (Pringle et al. 2011; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022).

Data analysis

The researchers in this study attempted to understand individual viewpoints cognizant, however, that this understanding was always connected to the particular participant, during a particular context, at a particular time (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton 2006). Author 1 engaged in an 'interpretative relationship with the transcript' (Smith and Osborn 2003, 64), reading and re-reading to ensure the author's familiarity with each participant's account. Experiential notes, comments and questions were recorded on the transcript as they were identified, and interesting phrases and passages were highlighted in the transcript. The notes were developed into brief statements which reflected an understanding of the messages co-constructed during the interviews. This stage was where the initial interpretation of the author occurred and themes began to be developed, reflecting 'not only the participant's original words and thoughts but also the analyst's interpretations' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022, 87). Author 1 then searched for connections across the nascent themes, looking for commonalities. This process involved bringing similar themes together (abstraction), a developing theme becoming a personal experiential theme (subsumption), a theme becoming more frequent (numeration) and a theme serving a particular function. Personal experiential themes were then combined under the umbrella of a group experiential theme within the analysis of each participant's story (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2012). Finally, themes common across the participants became evident and then 'thicker' via a process of constant comparison (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022) through which were shaped the final group experiential themes. These group experiential themes 'reflect the experiences of the group of participants as a whole' and capture 'the quality of the participants' shared experience of the phenomenon under investigation' (Willig 2008, 61–62). An example of this process of moving from raw data to these themes may be found in Table 2.

Trustworthiness

Member checking involved participants reading through verbatim transcriptions of the interviews to ensure authenticity and accuracy. Author 1 also consistently engaged in a process of self-reflection to reduce the potential for assumptions and biases to affect the data collection and analysis. This involved consciously focusing on each interview transcript as its own entity, allowing themes to emerge organically and individually. As well, taking time to discuss and reflect on alternative interpretations of the data with other members of the research team sought to mitigate the dangers of jumping to connections and conclusions too quickly

Table 2. Example of the analytic process.

Quote	Brief interpretative statement	Personal experiential theme	Group experiential theme
'I like the chess game of it. I like seeing two or three plays ahead.' (Brent)	Indicates an enjoyment of the tactical and intellectual elements.	Rugby is an intellectual sport	Rugby is a unique sport.
'I've enjoyed thinking about the game, making decisions on the run of which players we should attack in the opposition. What was the strength of the opposition? The sort of chess thinking … ' (Chris)	Enjoys the intellectual challenge of perceiving what is happening on the field and adapting quickly to make effective decisions.	Rugby is a dynamic and demanding sport – tactically and intellectually	
'It's very, very technical. A set play relies on at least 15 people doing their job otherwise your team's not going to be very good. A lot of other sports don't have that, and it really drives the value of teamwork.' (Steve)	Appreciates the demands associated with the technical skills and collaborative aspects of the game.	Rugby is technically demanding and relies on teamwork more than other sports	

(Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nyström 2008). Assisting this process, a useful tool involved writing a brief interpretive summary of each subject's transcript (Love, Vetere, and Davis 2020). Author 1 found that this helped 'close off' a transcript to allow demarcated focus on the next. Other members of the research team provided external review and interrogation of the analysis of the data to continually monitor Author 1's awareness of this risk (Unluer 2012). However, some (Callary, Rathwell, and Young 2015) argue that IPA's interpretative element does not require researchers to necessarily suspend their biases but to be vigilant of their potential negative and positive influence.

Consistent with the usual practice in contemporary IPA, an extended narrative presenting the collective themes and illustrating a range of responses contributing to this particular theme from different participants was generated (Smith, personal communication, 7 September 2020). Each of the two superordinate themes are described below, evidenced by data and then discussed with reference to pertinent literature.

Results

Based on the data collected and analyzed concerning the features of rugby that the participants identified as especially appealing to them as coaches, two superordinate themes were developed concerning rugby's uniqueness as a sport:

1) **on the field**, via the specific laws of the game, its subsequent technical and tactical features and physical and psychological demands of players and
2) **off the field**, in the culture and traditions surrounding the game like the post-match rituals such as tunnelling opponents off the field and socializing with them after the game.

Theme 1: on the field

For Steve, the physicality of rugby was a significant part of its appeal. Initially a soccer player, he acknowledged he was a physical player who tested the boundaries of legitimate contact during the game and 'was pretty ruthless on the field … a lot of yellow and red cards'. Steve felt that rugby provided him, and other young men, with an outlet for frustrations – 'just that testosterone for 17, 18-year-old young males' – and enjoyed the greater physical contact and aggression that was encouraged on the rugby field, but for which he was penalized in soccer.

When coaching, Joel considered the physically combative aspects of rugby to be the sport's essence as well as the laws of the game which promote a constant contest for possession in both set piece (such as scrums, lineouts and kick offs) and general play.

> One of the main things in (rugby) is toughness and resilience, never backing out of a confrontation. And we're not talking fighting … But every single thing in a rugby game is a confrontation. So, for the tackle, one on one, you don't back out, you win it. If someone is trying to get the ball, you win it. Jumping in a line out … So that's a big thing we talk about a lot; well, I certainly do. I play it up. (Joel)

All the participating coaches saw the laws of the game and associated techniques and tactics as essential to rugby's uniqueness. The type of strategic cooperation required to perform successfully on the field in both general and set play appealed to the coaches:

> It's very, very technical. A set play relies on at least 15 people doing their job otherwise your team's not going to be very good. A lot of other sports don't have that, and it really drives the value of teamwork. (Steve)

> I like the chess game of it. I like seeing two or three plays ahead. (Brent)

> I've enjoyed thinking about the game, making decisions on the run of which players we should attack in the opposition. What was the strength of the opposition? The sort of chess thinking; I enjoyed that as a player and as a captain. (Chris)

Coming from a predominantly rural background where there were rarely enough children his own age with whom to play team sports, Harry quickly appreciated the values of support and cooperation required by rugby:

> I think rugby just gave me an opportunity to be part of that team. I think sometimes with rugby league teams, you probably have to be more of an individual player. I think rugby allowed me to be part of the team - not necessarily the best in the team - but I think I liked that sort of thing.

Brent saw supporting his teammates as the major principle underpinning his willingness as a player to get into a position to engage in confrontations at the breakdown, to better protect them and to ensure they got a positive outcome (maintaining possession) for their efforts (carrying the ball into contact):

> My wife would always say,' Why are you diving in there when the big guy's already there?' And I'm like, 'I'm going to help my mate.' You know, the mateship of it … he's on the ground, I need to get that ball back for my team. So, I'm going to go in harder than the other guy coming in and I know that if I go in hard enough, I'm going to come out with the ball.

As a coach, he espoused a similar motivation and valued the continuity of the game and the necessity for teammates to physically support each other to maintain momentum. He tells his players, 'Once you've passed the ball, your job's not over. You know, in (rugby) league, you get tackled and play the ball but in union you've got to go help your mate'.
Chris concurred when describing the importance of this facet of the game:

> So, if you're on the ball, on the ground, you need your team-mate to come over and protect you. And I think that was a really … I guess a valuable life skill and something that I think not many other sports have - that real dependence and that real team ethos that you need in rugby union more than probably any other sport.

Steve and Chris explained that players' recognition of the risks and dangers associated with the heavy physical contact and cooperative actions integral to the game imbued certain cultural practices on the field that provided them, as coaches, with the opportunity to teach valuable life skills.

> At the end of the day, we're playing rugby and you've got to be tough physically and mentally. A lot of lessons you can take off the pitch as well to help boys be stronger and tougher. The core values that it teaches you like thank the referee, shake each other's hands, thank your coach … those values of respect and camaraderie. With the other team, no matter what happens, you tunnel them off and shake their hand and talk to them after the game, not talking (as in criticising or complaining) to the ref on the field and obviously showing up to training and putting your hard work in, knowing your role within the team. (Steve)

> I think it's because it's a team game and it's a physical game that depends on everyone doing their job to protect each other in some ways. So, I've always thought that guys that played rugby together have a lot of respect for each other and a lot of respect for the guys you play against as well. So, yes, I think there's a lot of respect and a real closeness in that camaraderie that you have. (Chris)

In recounting an experience from his playing days, Brent revealed his attitude towards those players who did not display the appropriate respect to his team.

> We were playing a team and the biggest guy on the team was the captain - mouthing off. So, every time he got the ball, I made him my priority. So, first time I hit him, dropped him. Second time, I spear tackled him. Penalty. He ran at me again. Penalty. Run at me again. Penalty (laughs).

His response was revealing in terms of what he considered the worse transgression; hurting his opponent inside and outside the laws of the game was justified in retaliation for the opponent behaving disrespectfully. His joviality in recalling this incident suggested an acceptance and enjoyment of the violence demanded by the sport on the field.

Theme 2: off the field

Appreciation of the benefits attached to active participation in the rugby club was an important aspect of the sport's appeal as it became a focal point of the participants' social lives and the friendships they developed. Chris found this especially true in his regional rugby club where he felt that fewer players and the intensive nature of living in a smaller community meant that success on the field belonged to that team, that special small group and games had a more intimate atmosphere. 'You feel obviously close to the game in a small crowd and that makes it a bit more fun. You can have banter with everybody in the crowd'. The club embraced rugby's traditional culture of hosting travelling opponents and socializing with them after matches. Chris saw that the club's members focused on the social aspect of playing sport together and this was evidenced by the players' enthusiasm in attending training and supporting and reinforcing the club's identity. In Chris's opinion, the players and members felt that 'We're all in this club together'. This attitude seemed compatible with the tenets of rugby that Chris enjoyed, and the mutual support accorded to both the men's and women's teams in the club reflected the egalitarian and communal aspects of rugby club membership that Chris had also valued as a player. He felt that rugby, as a minor sport in regional Queensland and a difficult game to understand, attracted 'quirky' participants who enjoy a demanding physical contact sport, socializing with each other and contributing to their sport within their community.

Joel was unequivocal in his belief that community sport involvement was vitally important to the mental health of rural/regional towns. He sought to use rugby to build the social capital of his local community, Gerrivale.

> It's a big thing. When I was in Gerry, our junior club [demonstrated] what it means to the kids but also to the mental health of the parents - actually getting them away from the farm. We did this programme in Gerry where we'd make all the parents come in and help with a training session, even if they knew nothing. It actually brought them all closer together.

Harry appreciated rugby as a game people played for fun, regardless of their skill level or previous experience. Because many former elite players maintained their connections with their clubs at that time, Harry enjoyed playing with and against former elite international players in the lower grades. The fact that players who had represented Australia would still play for their clubs in the Third, Fourth and Fifth Grades impressed upon Harry the importance of continuing to commit to your club as well as the enjoyment of the game itself. After leaving school, Harry was exposed to the touring culture associated with rugby when he was selected in some regional representative teams, one of which toured New Zealand. He appreciated that rugby could provide social and travel opportunities further afield:

> I think that's when I started to think that rugby can give me those chances to go and spend a bit of time with a few blokes, having a few beers and playing a bit of rugby and seeing some places you wouldn't have seen otherwise. That's always impressed me with rugby. And that's why I enjoy doing it.

For Chris, a rugby tour provided a pivotal experience for him as a young player. He recalled a tour of the USA that his club undertook where those who could afford it travelled and played together as one group, regardless of their playing abilities.

> We had fifth graders and sixth graders mixing with Wallabies on this tour and we all had a great time and it was all good fun and I learned it doesn't matter about your [playing] ability. Your ability to mix makes for a successful group and a successful team. These 30 blokes just mixed and melded so well. We came back from that tour, and [a Wallaby player] went back to first grade and I went back to third grade but the whole club just went up the table! And I just had the feeling that it was something to do with that tour, that camaraderie, and I guess that stuck in my mind a lot … . It doesn't matter about your ability. Your ability to mix makes for a successful group and a successful team.

Joel, consistent with his belief that rugby could be used to benefit his community's mental health, sought to address a situation specific to many rural/regional communities by instigating an initiative that took advantage of rugby's touring ethos.

> When I was in Gerry as the president, I started the under 12s. But when you got to Grade 7, that was your last year of being in Gerrivale. Then you'd go to boarding school. So, we wouldn't see those kids again until they come back on the farm when they're 18 years old. So, we started a rugby tour with fathers and sons. We tried to thank fathers and sons for being involved in a community sport like rugby. It was all self-funded. That was part of it. They had to sell raffle tickets, so it was a really good thing. And I think that's been running now for over 12 years.

After finishing his science degree, Harry relocated to Brisbane to study for his teaching qualification and played for a strong local club. He enjoyed this experience although he mainly played Third Grade as the two players in front of him in his position were Queensland representatives. Still, he also recognized that he was partly responsible for his grading and learned an enduring lesson about loyalty to the team: 'I was playing third grade then I went home for a weekend and didn't tell anybody, and I came back to fifth grade (laughs). So, I did learn that if you don't turn up, don't expect to play where you want to play.' This was different to his country rugby experiences where smaller player numbers meant training attendance was not so critical to selection.

As regionally-based coaches, the participants developed and advocated a holistic approach to their players and were especially cognizant of the specific circumstances impacting their lives outside of rugby.

> You accept that there are difficulties. People can't be at places because they're either working or they haven't got money or they're drought stricken, and the cows are dying, or they've just spent two and half hours on a bus getting to school or coming home. Or they're off to boarding school and they only see their parents three times a year. (Harry)

Brent found rugby corresponded with his caring nature and his feelings of loyalty to his teammates. He saw the rugby club's more social training environment (compared to his experience in rugby league) as a communal time to check in with his other players:

> What I liked about rugby was 70 percent was off the field. When we went to training, we'd find out if something's gone wrong in someone's life. It was our time to bond and have a bit of a pass and a run around and to find where people were in their lives and things like that.

Interestingly, such compassion and caring would often disappear if one was facing a friend or former teammate as an opponent on the field. Harry changed clubs during his second year at university, primarily because many of his school friends played for his new club. As well, he had begun to take his rugby more seriously and wanted to be with a club whose players' enthusiasm matched his own levels of commitment. He laughingly recounted the on-field altercations he would have with his best friend who still played for the University team. 'My best mate played for University; my age, but he played five-eighth, A Grade, first year at university. So, we had a few good run-ins when I eventually got to play A Grade at some point against University'.

Similarly, both of Brent's older brothers were skilled rugby players. One of them went to play for a different club to his brothers for a season. This led to some friction between the brothers on the field which Brent laughingly accepts as normal in rugby circles but which his parents found difficult to cope with especially when it led to a violent on-field confrontation between the two brothers. 'My Mum and Dad used to watch us play every game until my two brothers (playing on opposing teams) had a punch-up on the field. And both got sin-binned (laughs). That was the last game they watched. Boys will be boys.' Similar to his earlier recount of repeatedly tackling a disrespectful opponent, Brent's dismissal of this incident is indicative of his tacit understanding that physical confrontations in rugby were an accepted and inevitable part of the game and, as demonstrated in Harry's contests against his friend, were not seen to be taken personally.

The participants spoke of seeing this when coaching representative teams which required them to bring together players from various teams who usually competed against each other. While appreciating that representative players understood the impersonal nature of past physical confrontations in the context of the game, the coaches also saw the residual effect of such rivalries and past experiences of physically combatting each other. They enjoyed overcoming these to build a cohesive team unit.

The ability I seem to have is to be able to make players better people and make a team a better team. We're not coaching rugby; we're coaching life skills. So, they've been playing against each other, hating each other and we have to bring them together … Some of the best feedback I ever get is someone ringing me and saying, 'You know, I played against that bloke for 10 years and thought what a dickhead he was and then you brought us together in (the rep team) and, gee, he's a good fella … ' Yeah, that's pretty exciting to me. (Joel)

Chris believed that rugby provides unique opportunities to develop relationships and respect for others and spoke of the sport contributing to changing some people's lives. 'Some people here locally had pretty rough upbringings and yet they're still playing rugby to this day when they could have easily gone down another road. I think it changes people and can build character.' He recalled a local youth from a difficult background who started attending training at his club. Rugby appeared to provide him with an appropriate context to be physically aggressive but also a safe social environment in which to relax and relate to others. Unfortunately, he broke his jaw in the season's first game. However, he found his new teammates supported him while he was injured. He has since played for several seasons and, according to Chris, has become a leader within the club. Without the rugby club, Chris feels this player's path would have been quite different and a lot more destructive.

He's a rough character but a really good bloke deep down and if he'd never come to that game and he never came back after that broken jaw, we'd be reading about him in the papers, I reckon … I wonder if it was finally being accepted in a group. And even after he broke his jaw, the social group still looked after him. He's still, to this day, mates with all those guys that were around him when he played that day and that happened. So, maybe that was what helped him – having a bit more support and seeing that rugby could be a social game as well as a physical game.

Discussion

This study explored how volunteer regionally-based rugby coaches' perceived the game's unique features contributed to participants' development of life skills. They considered the game's blend of physicality, cognitive and collaborative demands and cultural mores as integral to this process. Giving consideration to this blend, we discuss the results of the study from an embodied perspective (Allen-Collinson 2009). The body is integral to participants' perceptions and relationships with others and to the challenges of their environment. The players' bodies are not detached from the world during the game and during training but tangled in it, constantly making sense of what is happening in this dynamic context and adapting to it (Harrelson 2024; Merleau-Ponty 1962). In this regard, rugby provides an environment where perceptions and meaning are shaped through individual and collective physical and social engagement (Branchu 2023). By engaging in rugby physically, emotionally, cognitively and communally, players assert their ties to their environment and to those in it as a tangible reality with its associated complexities, vulnerabilities and risks. For example, we argue the rituals associated with the game's culture which explicitly display respect for opponents and referees (Hough et al. 2019) are expressions of an ethical and cultural framework underpinning these embodied experiences.

As a sport involving heavy physical contact between players (Kerr 2015, 2019; Rubin 2013), rugby has been characterized by some as centring on violence, intimidation, physical dominance, the inflicting of pain on others and masculine hegemony (Maume and Parrish 2020; Pringle 2008). To these coaches, the risk of physical harm associated with the collisions essential in the playing of rugby appeared to add authenticity to players' on-field actions. They interpreted the act of deliberately putting oneself in a dangerous position and risking injury to be a genuine challenge for players to overcome, resulting in personal growth. The coaches' descriptions of physical confrontation, vulnerability and resilience reflect the notion that players' bodies are their cornerstones for experiencing the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and that physical risk presents an existential challenge to players' perceptions of their personal limitations.

This existential challenge concerns participants' interpretations of the value of participating in a high-risk of hurt/harm activity (Brymer and Schweitzer 2017). We argue that it is possible that the surmounting of risks associated with rugby can lead to positive personal development, resilience, increased self-efficacy and feelings of mastery and satisfaction (Buckley and Westaway 2020; Houge Mackenzie and Brymer 2018). Moreover, that coping with challenging physical environments such as the game of rugby may enable people to more effectively deal with difficult situations in their daily lives (Pomfret and Varley 2019; Reid and Kampman 2020).

The physical risks and subsequent heightened emotional intensity inherent in playing rugby were seen by the coaches as providing a daunting context through which players could demonstrate and develop life skills like emotional regulation and self-discipline. Proponents of rugby have espoused its unique attributes such as teaching players physical courage and self-discipline (Rasmussen 1997), cooperation, loyalty to team-mates, respect for opponents, and a willingness to put the team before oneself (Hickey 2011). The coaches assumed 'life skills', as desirable ways of behaving in rugby, were transferable beyond the rugby context and did not describe how transfer is scaffolded or enabled by rugby environments. For example, coaches spoke about subsuming one's instinct for self-preservation to the shared goals of the team (such as maintaining possession of the ball, carrying the ball forward into defenders, tackling opponents) that demanded players share what we suggest is an embodied experience involving the making of decisions based on others' presence and actions. This would involve effectively communicating with teammates, coordinating collective movements, problem-solving collaboratively and supporting one another.

Another example is the requirement for emotional regulation to extend to players' behaviours towards the referee who has the power to penalise on-field dissent, which will negatively impact the team. From an embodied perspective, in a combative and emotionally-charged environment such as a rugby game, players must maintain self-control despite concerns over the correctness of an official's call. Like the teachers in Pryor's (2003) research who praised rugby players' treatment of on-field officials, the participants identified rugby's traditional culture of respecting the referee by calmly accepting decisions without argument as an especially appealing and character-building feature of the game. Moreover, the coaches' opinions concerning the cognitive demands of the tactical and technical aspects of the game and its emphasis on teamwork echoed the contention that playing rugby 'integrates the needs of man as a thinker, as a worker and as a player' (Greenwood 1997, viii). From an embodied perspective, to be effective on-field decision-makers and communicators in the complex, variable and high-risk environment that rugby presents, players need to harness their emotions, often while under physical duress.

The coaches saw the development of team cohesion and unity as essential since achieving team goals in rugby are often reliant on players supporting and protecting teammates by committing to put themselves in physical danger (Griffin et al. 2019), Athletes who played team contact sports often experienced close and supportive relationships with their teammates and coaches which were built on honesty and trust (Branchu 2023). Senecal (2017) found that contact sport players (active and retired) felt a lack of trust in those who hadn't played contact sport and had not experienced the emotional and physical intensity of having 'put their bodies on the line' for a teammate or a team cause. Echoing Chris' sentiments concerning the trust that is placed in teammates by players on the field, former All Black and international rugby coach, Sir John Kirwan, observed that:

> I often say rugby's like life. You can have the ball in your hand and be running down the field feeling unstoppable. Then someone tackles you and you hit the deck and you're vulnerable; you're lying there exposed. Suddenly your team-mates are there, not just over the ball but over you, protecting you. They're prepared to put their bodies on the line for you. That's what happens in life: you fall over, and your mates come to your aid (Pagano Coaching 2018, 1).

Research by Kerr (2019) similarly found the significance of teammates' mutual dependency on each other on the field as an important motive for playing rugby and aligns with the view that meaning arises from inter-subjectivity – the sense of connection generated by shared embodied experiences with others (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Developing shared understandings through interaction, players must coordinate with each other, depending on others fulfilling specific roles, to protect each other and achieve individual and collective success. A scrum, for example, is a cooperative exercise demanding that props support their hooker, and that locks and flankers support their props. These players, in tight physical contact with each other must constantly adjust to the movements and forces involved to maintain this support. Each player relies not just on teammates but on their opponents to maintain the integrity of the entire scrum. To effectively achieve this, from an embodied perspective players must be attuned to the needs of their teammates and, in situations where the scrum collapses, their opponents as well.

For Brent, among the principles and techniques underpinning the game of rugby, it was the principle of support that resonated with his primary motive for coaching the game – that is, supporting friends and teammates. More than a time dedicated towards honing physical capacities, skills, techniques, and tactics

to compete more effectively, Brent saw rugby training as an opportunity to monitor his players' life situations. Anderson and McGuire (2010) found rugby players considered teammates and coaches to be valuable supporters when they expressed emotions linked to personal matters. Brent's attitude towards training, and the other coaches' stated preferences for viewing their players holistically as people, not just athletes, contradicts the image traditionally ascribed to males in competitive team sport environments, particularly a collision sport like rugby, where the expression of fear, pain and/or sadness is considered weak and unmasculine (Light and Kirk 2000; Pringle 2008; Stick 2021). The coaches prioritized players physically supporting and protecting their teammates during games and training but also supporting them socially and emotionally as well.

A normative characteristic often associated with rural masculinity in Australia is a stoic resistance to asking for help and revealing emotions (Alston and Kent 2008). Considering that these coaches were based in regional-rural communities, rugby was construed to provide an acceptable avenue for them, as demonstrated by recounts from Chris, Joel and Brent, to encourage the males in their charge to share their emotions and to be comfortable depending on others for support. The supportive nature of the game on the field appeared reflected in the off-field culture promoted by these coaches, from an embodied perspective requiring players to develop interpersonal and communication skills outside the playing arena.

An intriguing contrast to this tenet of mutual support which the coaches strongly associated with rugby and that was central to these participants' passion for the game, Harry and Brent illuminated a widely accepted feature of contact sport participation when describing experiences of players competing against former teammates. This highlights the tacit principle that underpins such situations in sporting contests, and particularly in contact sports; while there is often no deep animosity, former teammates will traditionally be more aggressive in their confrontations with each other as opponents on the field than with other players (Carey 2014). Some collision sport athletes have equated playing against former teammates with playing against their brother or best friend who 'you want to beat worse than you beat anybody' (Gagnon 2015, 1). This may be the result of light-hearted competitiveness, a desire to display dominance over others, or to moderately punish what might be seen as a minor betrayal (Gagnon 2015). The participants' jovial recounting of incidents involving this situation suggested an arguably healthy perspective on sportsmanship peculiar to contact sports where affection, respect and fraternity are expressed through rough physicality. While aggressive in its action, the body is the instrument used to communicate playful dominance that reinforces shared social bonds and understandings which have developed through corporeal involvement in the game's culture.

The coaches saw rugby as also having a unique culture off the field which they valued highly and which they encouraged their players to embrace. According to Branchu (2023, 141), rugby is a sport in which:

> Time off the pitch is as important as what goes on the pitch; the alcohol consumption, food consumption, attitudes and community are part of the sport. The 'rugby family' is rumoured to give you friends all around the globe, based on shared identity and supposed shared values. This is where rugby is meant to distinguish itself, and that it does … being welcoming and kind to its opposition once off the pitch.

This view of rugby is consistent with the touring and social experiences surrounding the game which resonated with Chris, Joel and Harry. The off-the-field socializing with teammates and opponents (which did not necessarily involve alcohol as the coaches all coached junior players as well as adults) and post-match customs such as thanking the referee, shaking hands and 'tunnelling-off'[1] were seen as important and unique rituals by the coaches. These customs were perceived as allowing players to convey empathy and respect for their opponents' efforts and demarcated the end of on-field hostilities. The mutual reliance of both teams on each other in terms of safety and enjoyment when playing is an important contributor to these rituals' endurance. The significance of the referee to this process is also acknowledged and respect for officials is explicitly embedded in the laws of the game[2] (Skene 2024). The coaches' valuing of this feature of rugby may be interpreted as illustrating their perceptions concerning the meaning of the game – one that prioritises explicitly transitioning from confrontation to camaraderie and seeks to transcend players from an individual paradigm to a collective one based on the shared embodied phenomena of playing the game on the field and displaying respect and fraternity with teammates, opponents and officials off it.

Limitations and future research

IPA adopts a deep analytic process to discover and highlight common themes reflecting participants' lived experiences, traits, and concerns. A perceived limitation or weakness of IPA research is its lack of generalizability and transferability (Smith 2018) due to the small number of homogenous participants IPA researchers commonly use (Larkin, Shaw, and Flowers 2019). However, IPA seeks to generate deep insights and rich meanings which can provide broader understandings or prompt dialogue which may have wider implications (Reid, Flowers, and Larkin 2005), resulting in 'theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalisability' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022, 45). This study's participants were men as the population base of experienced rugby coaches in regional Queensland is quite small and predominantly male. However, as the game expands from its traditional male base, it would be worthwhile for future research to investigate regional (and metropolitan) female rugby coaches' lived experiences. Moreover, while sport is seen as an ideal vehicle for teaching life skills (Bae, Lim, and O'Sullivan 2023), and these coaches consider rugby to be especially valuable in this regard, the transferability of such skills to participants' life worlds outside of sport is worthy of further study. Exploring other collision team sport coaches' experiences and perceptions, while beyond the present study's purview, also presents interesting research opportunities.

Conclusion

This interpretative phenomenological analysis exploring regionally-based volunteer coaches' lived experiences has provided a novel contribution to the literature by shining a light on these coaches' perceptions concerning the contribution their sport's specific features uniquely provide to participants. The coaches in this study posited rugby's unique laws and cultural rituals as affording a distinctive embodied context through which to develop players' life skills individually and collectively. These were expressed through the cooperative, corporeal interactions required between teammates specific to rugby (like scrums and line outs), the high-risk environment generated by the heavy physical contact involved in the sport and the demands on players to put themselves in danger to support teammates and further team goals. The especial traditions and mores associated with the game on and off the field were also highly valued as evidencing players' respect for others and emotional regulation. In dealing with the physical and emotional challenges presented by the nature of the game, the coaches suggested rugby as almost tailor-made for the development of life skills such as resilience, cooperation, supportiveness, self-control, leadership and empathy in their players. This advances the field by demonstrating that the embodied experiences specific to the contact sport environment, and their potential to develop players' life skills, appear significant to coaches' understanding of the meaning of their sport, their role in it and their motivations to continue.

Notes

1. As players leave the field at the end of the game, near the sideline, one team breaks into two lines to form a channel through which their opponents walk while they applaud them off the field. This is then reciprocated by the other team.
2. According to World Rugby (2025), Law 6.5 (a) states that 'the referee is the sole judge of fact and of law during a match.' Law 9.28 states, 'Players must respect the authority of the referee. They must not dispute the referee's decisions.'.

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