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## **CONSENT OR WILLING COMPLIANCE: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE CULT OF HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT.**

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Synopsis:

Interrogation of participation in high performance systems and impacts on individuals' human rights through the lenses of power and consent

Abstract:

### **AIM OF THE PAPER**

High performance (HP) athletes are commonly thought to exercise consent when participating in those systems designed to ensure each individual maximises his/her sporting utility. This can happen within a system whose practices have the potential to result in the maltreatment or abuse of the individual. This paper introduces and explores the nature of maltreatment, willing compliance, authority and consent in high performance environments and interrogates the ways in which athletes can experience maltreatment whilst working or training in elite state funded sporting systems. We argue that sport managers need to think counter-intuitively about high performance sport as we agree with Schneider (2004, p. 439) that 'the culture of sport itself...is not one that fosters protection of an athlete's human rights'

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Willing compliance is primarily explored through a Foucauldian lens on power (Ransom, 1997, Danaher et al, 2000) and is viewed as a normative and rational response to particular sets of culturally determined circumstances and processes, where an individual may rationalise his/her identity, and the acceptance of that identity, in the face of specific norms and values. Clearly linking to consent and domination (Blau, 1964) and coupled to high performance system processes we focus on situations where athletes are likely to willingly comply with the demands and/or conditions placed upon them. Such consent, freely given, is transformative in ethical and moral ways and ensures that even practices which have the potential for harm of the individual become actions which they in part consent or willingly comply to. Some of the management literature is more prosaic arguing that employees affectively sign

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'blank cheques' that enable 'a frame of mind in employees that produce(s) obedience' (Mitchell and Scott, 1988, p.350).

#### METHODS

Data was gathered via a narrative approach centred on understanding experiences of being maltreated. Narrative methods prioritise a specific individual's experience through eliciting stories of concrete events and happenings that have occurred in their life. Twelve elite athletes, ages 19 to 35 years were interviewed. All had competed in the United Kingdom and had national representational honours. A variety of sports and sports types were included within the sample: athletes competed across eleven different sports (hockey, volleyball, archery, rugby, cricket, football, eventing, handball, beach volleyball, taekwondo and tennis), and both team and individual sports were represented. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data with priority given, via the analysis, to the participant voice. As a result, the participant voice and perspective have been given primacy throughout the analysis and reporting of the results.

#### RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We conclude through the lens of critical management studies to consider how consent, compliance and willing compliance can explain why performers maintain involvement in sports even if there is the potential for a physical, psychological and/or emotional cost associated with their participation. This desire for separation of these terms is important if we are to consider how the human rights (HR) of HP athletes may be compromised by the often-unwitting actions of coaches and authority figures. A key point of our discussion is at the moral abstract level; that HR trumps both willing compliance and consent when it comes to maltreatment and possibilities for actual harm to occur.

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