

Institution: University of Huddersfield		
Unit of Assessment: UoA24		
Title of case study: Improving welfare support for professional rugby league players		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Jan 2015 – Dec 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Kiara Lewis	Acting Head of Department of Allied Health Professions, Sport and Exercise	1997 – current
Dr Susanna Kola-Palmer	Senior Lecturer in Psychology	2010 – present
Dr Alison Rodriguez	Senior Lecturer in Psychology	2001-2015
Period when the claimed impact occurred: July 2015 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>The mental health and wellbeing of professional athletes in general and, in particular, sports which emphasize ‘mental toughness’ and are considered to reinforce masculine stereotypes, has been highlighted as an area of concern. Research conducted at the University of Huddersfield has identified key areas of improvement in welfare support in elite-level rugby league. As a result of the research, the Rugby Football League (RFL) made policy changes (affecting all twelve Super League clubs across the UK, France and Canada), which have markedly improved the service Player Welfare Managers (PWMs) can provide for players. Benefits include increased awareness, uptake and access to player welfare, and mental health benefits for both players and PWMs.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Professional rugby players have traditionally had limited welfare support, with the majority of support directed towards improving on-field support. However, professional rugby players are in a vulnerable position with short careers, uncertain contracts and a reluctance to seek help. Prevalence of anxiety and depression in male elite athletes in team sports is as high as 45% and rugby has been described as having a ‘toxic culture’ of denial of mental health problems. The research, undertaken at the University of Huddersfield, was conducted between 2015-2016 led by Dr Kiara Lewis in collaboration with Dr Susanna Kola-Palmer and Dr Alison Rodriguez. The work was also supported by undergraduate and PhD students at the University. The team worked closely with the Player Welfare Director (PWD) in devising the study aims and objectives and she (PWD) was instrumental in feeding the results back to the RFL [5.1]. The research produced evidence on the needs, assets, deficits and future requirements of welfare support which was fed back to the RFL who then made substantial changes to policy and practice to change welfare provision across the sport. Specifically, the research has contributed in the following ways:</p>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrated to the RFL that the players’ attitudes and knowledge of the availability of mental health support is a significant independent correlate of their mental well-being. 		

Lewis, Kola-Palmer and Rodriguez used an anonymous online survey of professional rugby players to assess their knowledge of and attitudes to RFL player welfare. The survey incorporated psychometrically sound, standardised measures of mental health, psychological stress and athletic identity as well as specific questions on the then current welfare provision to assess awareness [3.2]. In year one, 77 players completed the survey (25%), and in year two 169 players (47%) completed the survey. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time UK and French elite rugby football league players have been surveyed and levels of symptoms of mental health mapped and, it is also the first-time elite athletes' engagement with, knowledge of and attitudes to sport player welfare have been investigated. The relationship between more positive attitudes and knowledge of mental health support to better mental health, is a novel and important finding in RFL [3.3]. The results suggest that endeavours to increase positive attitudes and knowledge, and to reduce mental health stigma, may have real benefits in terms of increasing mental health.

2. Emphasised that PWMs perceived they were unable to support all the players' needs in the time available and felt under considerable pressure themselves with, at times, little support from clubs and coaches.

A qualitative study using total purposive sampling was conducted with the PWMs, in total 11 of the 12 PWMs across the UK and France were interviewed in the first year and 12 of the 14 in the second year. The interviews that were conducted used an asset-based approach to identify the assets, deficits and opportunities. The findings showed that PWMs perceived demands of the job were, for many, too high on a part-time basis (a majority of clubs had PWMs on 3 day a week contracts) and in some cases was impacting on their own welfare. They felt that they were unable to provide all the welfare support needed and that they were being impeded from their job by a lack of support from the club and coaches (without buy-in from the coach, players would not engage) [3.1].

3. References to the research

Evidence of research quality: The research has been reviewed by external sources and deemed to be 2* or above. The articles were published in high quality, peer reviewed, journals.

3.1. Lewis, K., Rodriguez, A., Kola-Palmer, S. and Sherretts, N. (2018): 'It's not mind blowing really....it's about keeping people happy': the perceptions of player welfare managers in Rugby Super League, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 10 (5), 635-654.
[DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2018.1459805](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2018.1459805)

3.2. Kola-Palmer, S., Buckley, S., Kingston, G., Stephen, J., Rodriguez, A. Sherretts, and Lewis, K. (2018) "Someone to talk to": Influence of player welfare provision on mental health in professional rugby league. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 13 (3)
<https://doi.org/10.1123/jcsp.2018-0041> [can be supplied on request]

3.3 Kola-Palmer, S., Lewis, K., Rodriguez, A, Kola-Palmer, D. (2020) Help seeking for mental health issues in professional rugby league players. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11(9) 570690.
<http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.570690>

4. Details of the impact

A report was produced for the Rugby Football League (RFL) following each year of the study [5.2/5.3]. The reports were given to the Player Welfare Director (PWD) who took them to the RFL board, Chief Executive Officers and coaches at each club, and the Player Welfare and Education Forum which brings together key stakeholders in player welfare. The reports were therefore viewed by those with managerial and everyday responsibility for player welfare at all twelve Super League clubs (with responsibility for approximately 400 players). The research was deemed essential by the PWD for the changes in welfare provision to occur: "People are

probably sick of hearing the University of Huddersfield Survey said, because I use it all the time, because it does just give the outside validation to something. It creates a greater impression; it's much more difficult to be argued against when it's done independently" [5.4].

The research led to the following benefits to the people involved in professional rugby league:

1. Increased support for the mental health of PWMs
2. Increased awareness of welfare support and more positive attitudes of players
3. Employment of full-time PWMs through a change in RFL policy
4. More positive attitude of clubs towards welfare support

1. Increased support for PWMs' mental health (Quality of Life impact):

One of the recommendations from the first report was that a support strategy was needed for PWMs as well as additional qualifications and training [5.1]. This was picked up by the RFL and thereafter PWMs were provided with a workshop by Sporting Chance (who provide mental health support) to help them in recognising signs of depression. The PWMs have also had to undergo formal supervision through Sporting Chance at least once a year. Additional sessions are now offered if the PWM has had to deal with a particularly traumatic event [5.4]. Following the second report the RFL agreed to continue to centrally fund Sporting Chance so their services are free to all players and PWMs who need them [5.3]. This has been recognised by PWMs as important in supporting their own mental health; when asked what impact the report had had on him personally one PWM replied *"The bits of care for us as Welfare Managers has been good. So, the opportunity to speak to somebody from Sporting Chance has been valuable and I have done it a couple of times because we take on a lot, we do take a lot on ourselves, everyone dumps their problems on us at times"* [5.5].

2. Change in awareness and attitudes of players towards welfare (in particular mental health) support (cultural impact):

The first report recommended that the RFL needs to further reinforce and communicate the importance of player welfare priorities, and players should be made aware of welfare policy and know who their player welfare manager is [5.2]. Following the release of the report all players (currently over 400 players across twelve clubs in UK, France) were provided with a booklet outlining the player welfare provisions that are available to them. PWMs were encouraged to present to all players at the start of the season and to hold a social occasion for players' parents and partners to explain the provision that is in place [5.6].

The results of the second survey showed that player awareness had improved: 75% of players (compared with 69% in 2015) now know their club has a welfare policy and 78% (compared with 58% in 2015) know how to access mental health support [5.3]. This is supported by player X *"I wasn't aware of all the support and the welfare that was around where I feel like (PWM) and the club make a conscious effort now and making everything clear of what you can get and help and everything"* [5.7].

There are a number of other quotes from the second round of interviews (following changes made following the first set of interviews) with the PWMs. These illustrate the PWMs' experience of the changes in awareness and attitudes of players as a result the research:

"Players are now asking me types of questions which they weren't asking a couple of years ago, do you know what I mean [Interviewer: yeah]. So yes, its busier, but its busy because a lot of it is now being driven by the lads asking questions as opposed to me having to go to them" [5.7]

"It's (Sporting Chance) vital and again in that culture shift, now that one or two lads have had help and received help and know there's help out there, it's encouraging others to speak up" [5.7]

Interviewer: *"do you think, has there been any change in the culture of whether or not players will seek help and seek advice?"* Respondent: *"Yes, yes, because the more it becomes public, as long as it's out there, the players have sought help and when players are going round doing presentations of, you know, sticking their hand up and saying 'look, I had depression, I were an*

alcoholic, I had a gambling addiction', that sends a message across then, that yeah, it all of a sudden becomes acceptable" [5.7]

"I think speaking as myself, as a former player, I think the cultural changes, the perception of Sporting Chance and the range of services they offer have certainly changed. As I say, it was, at first, it was oh he's a drug addict, or he's a gambler or he's an alcoholic and its certainly not that. I think we really appreciate the vast array of services that they offer" [5.7]

3. Change in RFL policy to ensure all clubs employ a full time PWM (Public Policy impact):

The second report [5.3], having found that PWMs were struggling with the demands of the job, recommended that the all Super League clubs should have a full-time PWM (the majority at this time were employed on 3 days per week contracts as the role was not considered to be as important as other club roles). Following the recommendation, the RFL announced that all 12 Super League clubs would have a full time PWM [5.9]. Further revisions to the Player Welfare Policy included reference to 'Athletic Identity' (as players whose identify was more closely linked to being a rugby player, rather than a husband, parent etc., were at greater risk), an increase in career 1-2-1s, and a more structured policy of targeting 'hard to reach' players [5.10]. The move to full-time has been recognised by the PWMs as the most important change for them. *"For us, I suppose one of the main things that came out of it (the research) was clubs moving to full time provision" [5.5]* and how that benefits players *"the biggest benefit to me of it being full time is the time that I have to spend with players, without any other responsibilities" [5.5]*, they go on to explain it can benefit both players' mental health and performance *"I feel if you get the welfare provision right at the club, there is a, there is added benefits actually from the performance point of view as well" [5.5]*.

4. Change in attitude of clubs towards welfare support (Social Impact):

In the first report the high risk of depression of players was highlighted. Having received this information there were changes in practices to make player's mental health more prominent. This is supported through correspondence with the PWD [5.6] *"Information on depression has now meant we have a more strategic way of "screening" the lads every morning. This means there are daily well-being surveys but also a 6 weekly mental health questionnaire to try and pick up on any signs" [5.6]*

The RFL Player Welfare Policy has been revised to follow a holistic personal development model. Workshops included time management, mindfulness etc. Our research is referenced in the policy guidance [5.10] and attracted lots of media coverage (over 15 articles in local, regional, national and international news outlets).

This change has been seen from all areas of the RFL structure as described by a PWM: *"I would think more so in the last sort of eighteen months, I think, he's (CEO) coming to understand that the role (PWM) is a necessity within the Clubs and I think that, you know, I'm actually benefitting from that" [5.8]*.

As a Canadian club has now entered the Super League the policy and practical changes are being implemented across all clubs in the UK, France and Canada.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1) Email from PWD confirming that changes have been made/Email from PWD explaining how the research was disseminated to the RFL
- 5.2) Report 1 of the research findings
- 5.3) Report 2 of the research findings
- 5.4) PWD testimonial
- 5.5) PWMs transcripts from 2019
- 5.6) Actions taken by the RFL as a result of the reports
- 5.7) RFL Super league player transcript

5.8) PWMs transcripts from 2016

5.9) <http://www.rugby-league.com/article/50559/betfred-super-league-clubs-agree-full-time-player-welfare-provision>

5.10) RFL Welfare Education Manual 2018