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# Exploring Interpretations and Implications of Coaches' Use of Humour in Three National Paralympic Teams

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The purpose of this study was to explore interpretations and implications of head coaches' use of humour in three national Paralympic teams from the perspective of athletes and integrated support staff. We conducted six focus groups with 19 Paralympic athletes and individual interviews with 10 support staff members across the teams. Our reflexive thematic analysis resulted in two overarching themes that helped us understand how humour influenced feelings of psychological safety in the team environment, as well as considerations or challenges with using humour as a coaching strategy, including miscommunication or misunderstanding. Relational awareness, emotional intelligence, and effective communication were identified as important coaching competencies to consider when implementing humour as a leadership behaviour, particularly in an environment where power differentials of status and disability were present. The study was among the first to explore interpretations and implications of humour as a coaching strategy from athletes and staff in the high-performance parasport context. Coaches who implement humour within their environments are encouraged to reflect on the receivers of the interaction and how to maximise the facilitative rather than debilitative functions of humour as a "double-edged sword" to ultimately promote team satisfaction, well-being, and success.

***Keywords:*** coaching strategies, humour receivers, emotional intelligence, effective communication

**Key Points**

- Humour had facilitative functions in the parasport setting, including creating an enjoyable learning environment, helping athletes find their optimal arousal levels before competition, and promoting resilience when dealing with adversity.
- When used ineffectively, humour can be miscommunicated or misinterpreted, leading to feelings of unease, confusion, or discomfort within the team.
- Relational awareness, emotional intelligence, and effective communication were critical coaching competencies, particularly in an environment where power differentials of status and ability were present (e.g., able-bodied coaches, athletes with disabilities).

Coaches in high-performance sport environments have the potential to foster a positive team environment depending on their coaching behaviours, strategies, and core values (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Vallée & Bloom, 2016). Many coaches incorporate the intention of having fun as part of their coaching philosophy, including at the high-performance level, where there are increased levels of pressure, incentives, and stress (Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016). For example, four-time National Basketball Association (NBA) champion Golden State Warriors head coach, Steve Kerr, described his four core coaching values as mindfulness, compassion, competition, and joy. When discussing joy, Kerr explained how "it's meant to be fun" and emphasised the importance of finding the joy amongst the intensity that sport requires (The Daily Coach, 2023). In a similar way, Britain Paralympic head coach, Paula Dunn, explained her intention of creating a fun, but purposeful, environment in track and field:

> I want us to have a clear direction of where we're going and how we want to work, but this is supposed to be fun . . . . It's sport—we've got to enjoy it. Yes, it's serious. Yes, it's hard, but, ultimately, we came into this because of a love of the sport. (Portch, 2023)

One strategy that coaches can use to create a positive and enjoyable environment for their team is implementing humour.

Humour has been defined as a form of verbal or nonverbal communication, such as jokes, puns, pranks, and irony, often expressed within preexisting social relationships with the capacity to serve a variety of functions (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012; Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014). In sport, humour can be adopted by both coaches and athletes and offer facilitative outcomes within the environment, such as relieving stress in a highly pressurized environment (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014), helping athletes move forward after making mistakes in training (Banas et al., 2019), creating a motivational learning climate (Morgan, 2017), developing a sense of belonging and team identity (Høigaard et al., 2017), creating strong coach–athlete relationships (Corkery & Fletcher, 2023), as well as diffusing conflict within the team (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). With the understanding that humour is a social phenomenon, however, it is not guaranteed to lead to

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