

# Supporting the team, caring for the players: understanding fan perceptions of athlete wellbeing programmes

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Active supporters and the organisations they form are crucial stakeholders for football clubs. Previous literature has noted the increasing interest and positive outcomes associated with corporate social responsibility initiatives within sport organisations, which fans perceive and include employee wellbeing. Whilst scholars have explored various stakeholders' perceptions of athlete wellbeing, an opportunity exists to understand how active supporters perceive athlete wellbeing programmes. Thus, the purpose of the current research was to explore the perceptions of A-League Men's active supporters regarding an athlete wellbeing programme.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Informed by stakeholder theory, active supporters of the A-League provided their perceptions of the Player Development Programme (PDP) – the athlete wellbeing programme associated with professional football in Australia. Data were collected through open-ended questions within an online survey and analysed through inductive thematic analysis.

**Findings** – Three themes were generated that answer the research question: impactful and beneficial; worthy of more attention and promotion and limited understanding. These themes underscore the positive impact of the wellbeing programme on both the club and its athletes whilst highlighting the necessity for increased programme visibility within the club and the broader community.

**Originality/value** – The current study's findings contribute to the sport management literature by exploring active supporters' perceptions of an athlete wellbeing programme in football. Since athlete wellbeing is essential for active supporters, including wellbeing initiatives within the club's corporate social responsibility initiatives could produce positive marketing and sponsorship outcomes for clubs.

**Keywords** Stakeholder theory, Fans, Corporate social responsibility, Active supporters, Athlete wellbeing

**Paper type** Research paper

Professional sport organisations need to satisfy a multitude of stakeholders to ensure success (Senaux, 2008). As an example, active supporter organisations (i.e. organised fan groups) of football clubs are recognised in the sport management literature and by club



management as stakeholders that influence the management, governance, and commercialisation of football clubs (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018; Senaux, 2008). Cleland (2010) proposes that supporters who are “‘active’ refers to those who actively engage with clubs and supporter organizations” (p. 538). More specifically, active supporters and the organisations that they form contribute to club decision-making (Cleland and Dixon, 2015; García and Welford, 2015; Winskowski, 2022) and co-produce football matches (Junghagen, 2018). Thus, members of active supporter organisations (i.e. active supporters) become involved in the management and governance decision-making of football clubs. To ensure a synergistic relationship between the football club and the active supporter organisations, club management needs to understand active supporters’ perspectives and beliefs about the club’s management and governance (Junghagen, 2018; Winskowski, 2022). Athlete wellbeing programmes are one aspect of football clubs that have received relatively little academic attention regarding active supporters’ perceptions, as the literature has focussed on athletes’ (Knights *et al.*, 2019) and service providers’ (Chambers *et al.*, 2019) perspectives. As such, an opportunity exists to understand active supporters’ perspectives on athlete wellbeing. Thus, the purpose of the current research was to explore the perspective of active supporters, a highly engaged subset of fans, regarding an athlete wellbeing initiative employed in Australian football.

Wellbeing is a complex and multifaceted concept that can have different meanings depending on the context and person (Brady, 2021). An influential description from Huppert *et al.* (2004) is that wellbeing is “a positive and sustainable state that allows individuals, groups or nations to thrive and flourish”. For an individual’s wellbeing, their psychological, physical, and social states are positive (Huppert *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, the World Health Organisation defines wellbeing as “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions” (World Health Organization, 2021). Advancements in the literature have moved to a holistic approach to wellbeing (Brady, 2021). For example, Lundqvist (2011) provides an integrated model that incorporates context-specific wellbeing for athletes. In high-performance sport, the coach has a key role in the wellbeing of athletes, which can be affected by their behaviour (Berntsen *et al.*, 2019; Brady, 2021). An athlete’s wellbeing is also informed by their relationships with others, including the team and support staff (Brady, 2021). As athlete wellbeing is influenced by sport organisation stakeholders, how athlete wellbeing programmes are perceived by active supporters could impact the communication of these programmes by the sport organisation. As such, the sport organisation potentially creates value for interdependent stakeholders by incorporating wellbeing into their CSR communication, thus, influencing athlete wellbeing.

The Player Development Program (PDP) represents the Australian football (i.e. soccer; in this manuscript, football is used) wellbeing programme that is offered to athletes by the player’s union, Professional Footballers Australia (PFA; Professional Footballers Australia, n.d). Previous athlete wellbeing literature considers stakeholders beyond the athlete or programme provider (Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019). Despite this, academic investigations of the perceptions of athlete wellbeing programmes from the perspective of football stakeholders, especially active supporters, have been limited to date. In Australian football, active supporters are the members of fan organisations that support the associated club. Without understanding the beliefs and concerns of the diverse stakeholders involved, tensions may arise between club management and active supporters, leading to potential conflicts (Junghagen, 2018; Winskowski, 2022). One tension identified is active supporters’ co-production of the match-day event and the club’s need to create revenue (Junghagen, 2018). Indeed, the importance of active supporters as stakeholders centres around their impact on co-production and management decision-making, with limited research exploring the various off-field aspects of the club (Junghagen, 2018; Senaux, 2008).

Athlete wellbeing programmes (e.g. the PDP) have garnered increased attention in sport management literature, the media, and throughout the high-performance sport ecosystem

(Dutton, 2018; Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019). These programmes promote positive retirement transitions, facilitated by numerous factors, including preparedness for a post-athletic career, emotional readiness to retire, and a strong support network (Knights *et al.*, 2016, 2019; Lavallee, 2019; Voorheis *et al.*, 2023). The need for athlete wellbeing programmes is vital given that retirement transition, or cessation of an athletic career, can have many negative impacts on athletes – both mentally and physically (Mannes *et al.*, 2019; Park *et al.*, 2013; Roux *et al.*, 2023). Within the Australian context, service providers and individuals involved in athlete wellbeing programmes have reported confusion surrounding the clarity and consistency of such programmes, contributing to poor engagement (Chambers *et al.*, 2019; Stansen and Chambers, 2019). Chambers *et al.* (2019) demonstrate that key stakeholders in high-performance sport environments (i.e. coaches and athletes) are confused about the services offered in athlete wellbeing programmes as programme changes are frequent. Stemming from this confusion, holistic wellbeing was unable to be incorporated into the programme.

From an organisational perspective, ensuring that the wellbeing support process is streamlined and proactive and that athletes understand who is responsible for their wellbeing is essential (Knights *et al.*, 2019). Social support from athletes' significant others and organisational support from the club and association contribute to a positive transition to retirement (Hong and Fraser, 2023; Knights *et al.*, 2019; Voorheis *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, scholars have investigated the perspectives of athletes' social contacts (e.g. coaches, friends, teachers, parents, and staff) regarding wellbeing support in the European setting (Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019). However, active supporters' perspectives have received little attention throughout the literature on athlete wellbeing.

The current research is guided by stakeholder theory to position members of active supporter organisations as stakeholders in football clubs in Australia (Freeman *et al.*, 2010). Stakeholder theory describes the different constituents that can affect or be affected by the firm (Freeman *et al.*, 2010; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). In practice, active supporter organisations provide a touch point for researchers to connect to fans without involvement from the football club. The A-League Men's competition has served as the context for previous investigations of athlete wellbeing programmes, and this work has revealed the lack of support from clubs, leagues, and player associations and the feelings of animosity these athletes express (Knights *et al.*, 2019). The present research extends current knowledge by focussing on active supporters, integrating a previously unexplored stakeholder group into the athlete wellbeing literature (Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019).

Exploring the perceptions of active supporters provides additional insight into this stakeholder for clubs, potentially providing benefits to sponsors through CSR (Walker and Kent, 2009) and assisting in reducing tensions between the club and the active supporter organisation (Junghagen, 2018). This research is expected to contribute to the marketing and sponsorship literature by providing insight into whether and how wellbeing could be incorporated into club communications. It is essential that professional sport clubs in Australia find means of differentiation to attract and retain fans and sponsors. As the Australian sport marketplace is competitive, with four major football codes totalling 52 men's teams, marketing activations and brand communication surrounding athlete wellbeing potentially create a point of differentiation for active supporters and sponsors. The following research question is advanced to explore consumer perceptions of athlete wellbeing programmes: *How do active supporters, as stakeholders of an A-League football club, perceive the A-League Men's athlete wellbeing programme?*

## Literature review

### *Football fans as active supporters*

In the sport management literature, the term active supporters/fans can be traced back to binary typologies of fans from Clarke (1978) and Redhead (1993). By differentiating between “active/participatory” and “passive” supporters through different stages of behaviour,

Redhead's (1993) typology has been influential in the football fan literature (e.g. Cleland and Dixon, 2015; Cleland, 2010). Sport management scholars have leveraged active supporters to position football fans as stakeholders of clubs (García and Welford, 2015; Junghagen, 2018). Active supporters contribute to club decision-making, management, and governance (Cleland and Dixon, 2015; García and Welford, 2015), demonstrate high commitment to the team, and "are undoubtedly stakeholders" (Senaux, 2008, p. 14). Comparatively, passive supporters, armchair supporters, or those who attend matches to experience the co-produced stadium atmosphere show less team commitment (Cleland and Dixon, 2015). Specifically, active supporters influence club management decision-making by voicing their concerns during matches, purchasing tickets and merchandise, and actively supporting the team to create an exciting atmosphere (Junghagen, 2018; Senaux, 2008).

Active supporter organisations co-produce football matches by creating an atmosphere for the match that is otherwise unable to be produced by the club (Junghagen, 2018), aligning with the concept of value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Fyrberg Yngfalk (2013) argues that co-creation by active supporters is enabled through strong identification with the organisation, hence establishing that sport organisations can influence the experience of their consumers by facilitating opportunities that enhance identification with the team. For example, St. Pauli F.C. has crafted a prosocial identity by incorporating unique sociocultural and historical elements of their geographic location, encouraging fan identification (Daniel and Kassimeris, 2013). In creating a prosocial identity, clubs can potentially connect with sponsors that share similar values and provide benefits to a range of stakeholders.

The actions of active supporters demonstrate how individuals govern their affiliations with sport teams, and how these connections can be established, managed, and discontinued (Wann *et al.*, 1996) based on evaluations of how group membership reflects onto the individuals' construction of self (c.f., Tajfel and Turner, 2004). For example, active supporters of Manchester United Football Club (MUFC) demonstrated their unease with club management decision-making, feeling disillusioned that their opinions were not considered by management, resulting in the formation of a new club, FC United of Manchester (García and Welford, 2015). As demonstrated by MUFC active supporters, an individual's affiliation with a football club can be withdrawn when their evaluation of group membership becomes negative — demonstrating that active supporters are essential club stakeholders and that their evaluation of affiliating with a team relies on the sport organisation's decision-making and performance, both on and off-field (c.f., Doyle *et al.*, 2017; Lock *et al.*, 2011; Wann and Branscombe, 1990). Moreover, football clubs have supported social and political actions by fan groups, encouraging fan identification with the club (Daniel and Kassimeris, 2013). However, less attention has been placed on understanding active supporters' perceptions of off-field athlete-focussed programmes like the PDP. Understanding these perceptions is essential for clubs to communicate with their stakeholders. From a marketing perspective, by understanding these perspectives, the club could incorporate wellbeing into their CSR initiatives, potentially increasing fan identification (Daniel and Kassimeris, 2013). There may also be opportunities for the club to sponsor or partner with wellbeing or mental health charities to deliver community support (Hawthorn Football Club, n.d.).

#### *Stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility, and football fans*

Stakeholder theory provides a framework for organisations to recognise salient constituents that affect or are affected by the organisation's actions (Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021; Freeman *et al.*, 2010; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). Under this theory, it is argued that businesses are comprised of stakeholder relationships, which must be effectively managed to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes (Freeman *et al.*, 2010). However, some scholars have argued that firms may need to be selective or prioritise the needs of one stakeholder over others at specific times (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). Sport management research demonstrates that active supporter organisations are an essential stakeholder who can influence the club and whose needs must be prioritised

(García and Welford, 2015; Junghagen, 2018). In Australia, active supporter organisations have proven their importance as stakeholders through actions like organising match boycotts (Johnson, 2015; Ticher, 2015). The Red Black Bloc led boycotts in round nine of the 2015 season, resulting in a 32% drop in match attendance, impacting stadium atmosphere as well as revenue from ticketing, merchandise, and food and beverage sales (Johnson, 2015; Ticher, 2015). After two weeks, Football Australia negotiated with representatives of the RBB and other active supporter organisations, resulting in agreeable outcomes (Mulvenney, 2015). The salience that active supporters hold in Australian football allows the current research to position Australian active supporters as stakeholders, similar to those in Europe (c.f., Biscaia *et al.*, 2018; Senaux, 2008; Zagnoli and Radicchi, 2010).

Brown and Dacin (1997) describe CSR as: “The organisation’s status and activities with respect to its perceived societal obligations.” (p. 68). As such, more recent conceptualisations of CSR refer to the organisation’s responsibility towards the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental outcomes (Aguinis, 2011). Additionally, firms incorporate legal, ethical, and discretionary dimensions of CSR into governance and organisational culture (Carroll, 2016). Positive outcomes such as sustained competitive advantage and customer loyalty result from CSR initiatives by organisations (Islam *et al.*, 2023). Sport management scholars have shown that sponsor commitment to a CSR initiative affects consumers’ attitudes and behaviours (Asada *et al.*, 2023). Minimally committed sponsors to a CSR-linked sport initiative can adversely impact consumers’ perception of fit between the sponsor and sport organisation (Asada *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, highly committed sponsorships are more effective than standard sponsorships, increasing word-of-mouth intentions and positive attitudes towards the sponsor (Asada *et al.*, 2023). Hong and Fraser (2023) also suggest that athlete wellbeing programmes should be incorporated into the policy of sport organisations CSR initiatives. In the current research, CSR relates to the potential for A-League clubs to incorporate the PDP (i.e. the A-League’s athlete wellbeing programme) into their communication with stakeholders as a CSR initiative.

More recently, Dmytriiev *et al.* (2021) have considered the relationship between stakeholder theory and CSR, cautioning against viewing these frameworks as separate concepts. Instead, they propose that scholars can position their research between these two theoretical frameworks across a continuum of three interrelated dimensions: (1) perspective on business, (2) beneficiaries of responsibility, and (3) direction of responsibility. The current research applies the perspective of the company to explore and understand what is good for both the club and its stakeholders (perspective on business); the responsibility is limited to those within the intersection of stakeholder theory and CSR (beneficiaries of responsibility); and is primarily concerned with multi-directional responsibility between the club and its stakeholders (direction of responsibility; Dmytriiev *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the current research is guided by stakeholder theory (Freeman *et al.*, 2010; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997).

When examining the relationship between these frameworks, the intersection can be found in the overlap of particular stakeholders, which include local and surrounding communities, governments, consumer advocacy groups, employees, and consumers (Dmytriiev *et al.*, 2021; Freeman and Dmytriiev, 2017). Sport management literature has provided insight into the effect of CSR on a range of outcomes, especially from the perspective of consumers (Mansouri *et al.*, 2024; Walker and Kent, 2009). CSR initiatives are considered advantageous for the club’s reputation from the perspective of highly committed fans (Constandt *et al.*, 2019) and promote patronage intention for fans (Mansouri *et al.*, 2024). As such, if stakeholders deem the football club responsible for the wellbeing of athletes, proactively engaging with athlete wellbeing programmes (i.e. the PDP) may lead to positive club outcomes. Sport management scholars have discussed the need for CSR initiatives to be authentic so that positive outcomes emerge for stakeholders (Mamo *et al.*, 2022). Notably, sport organisations that communicate their CSR initiatives on social media can drive engagement with fans (Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024). However, scholars have also noted the difficulty football clubs experience in effectively communicating and promoting CSR initiatives (Junghagen, 2018). In the context of the

intersection of stakeholder theory and CSR, the PDP can be communicated as a social responsibility initiative to stakeholders by the club. Thus, the club can use its involvement in supporting athlete wellbeing to provide social value to active supporters and create marketing value for economic stakeholders.

Overall, as active supporter organisations of football clubs have demonstrated their salience as a stakeholder, managers need to understand their perspectives to maintain a positive relationship (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018; Junghagen, 2018). As an increasing number of stakeholder perspectives regarding athlete wellbeing continue to inform the existing body of literature, exploring active supporters' perceptions of the PDP advances this literature and could ensure that athletes are offered relevant and timely care (Knights *et al.*, 2019; Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019). Thus, the current research explores the intersection of stakeholder theory and CSR (Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021) by aiming to understand a salient stakeholder's (i.e. active supporters) perspective of a CSR initiative (i.e. the PDP). To do so, the following research question is advanced: *How do active supporters, as stakeholders of an A-League football club, perceive the A-League Men's athlete wellbeing programme?*

## Method

A qualitative research design was employed to investigate the perceptions of active supporters of the A-League Men's PDP. As the research objective is exploratory and examines the perspectives of active supporters, a qualitative research method was deemed appropriate (Korstjens and Moser, 2017).

### Participants

Members ( $n = 183$ ) of an A-League Men's Club active supporter organisation accessed an online survey. This survey informed a larger research project and was used as a recruitment tool to identify active supporters who were aware of the PDP for the purposes of the current research. Fourteen (7.65%) active supporters indicated knowledge of the PDP and were invited to share their thoughts on this athlete wellbeing programme via open-ended questions. Thus, these 14 participants were selected as they demonstrated knowledge of the PDP. As the participants of the current research were members of the active supporter organisation, it is assumed that they are highly engaged supporters. Participant demographics are included in Table 1. The mean age of the participants was 53 years ( $SD = 16$ ), with participants reporting

**Table 1.** Demographic information of study participants

Pseudonym	Age	Length of club membership	Length of active supporter organisation membership
Blake	19	1	1
Dakota	36	6	6
Quinn	36	4	1
Riley	37	4	3
Max	50	6	2
Tyler	53	4	1
Taylor	54	10	1
Jordan	57	9	1
Sam	61	10	2
Alex	63	15	1
Casey	64	2	3
Blair	69	15	1
Cassidy	73	2	1
Dylan	74	10	3

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

an average membership length with the club of 7 years (SD = 4.59) and an average membership length with the active supporter organisation of 1.93 years (SD = 1.43).

### *Materials*

Participants who completed the survey and indicated an awareness of the PDP were invited to share their perceptions via qualitative, open-ended questions. The survey consisted of five questions about the participant's thoughts, experiences, and beliefs about the PDP, adapted from previous research (Chambers *et al.*, 2019; Stansen and Chambers, 2019). The opening question prompted participants to relay their knowledge of the PDP and how they came about this knowledge. The three ensuing questions provoked responses about the PDP (*How do your experiences as a fan of your club shape your perceptions of athlete wellbeing services?*), the players who use the programme (*What are your thoughts about players who participate in athlete wellbeing services?*), and clubs that support the PDP (*Reflecting on your experiences as a fan, share your thoughts about clubs promoting these services to players?*). The final question was left open for participants to add further insights not covered by the main questions.

### *Procedures*

A convenience sampling strategy was employed, and one active supporter organisation of a specific team agreed to forward the survey to their members within a regular email update. The active supporter organisation was initially contacted on social media, and additional information regarding the research was supplied over email. Previous literature has demonstrated that recruiting participants via organised fan groups has been effective (García and Llopis-Goig, 2020; Theysohn *et al.*, 2009). To support the recruitment of active supporters, inclusion and exclusion criteria were adopted so that only the target population was selected and to ensure ethical requirements were met. First, participants must have held membership with the active supporter organisation for the duration of the season in which the research took place. Second, responses were excluded if participants were not members of an active supporter organisation or were under the age of 18. Participants were asked if they had knowledge of the PDP and were subsequently invited to complete the qualitative survey. The 14 respondents who indicated they had this knowledge reflect the sample from which data were collected.

### *Data analysis*

The qualitative data were collated into Lumivero NVivo 14, where thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Participants provided rich data, with responses ranging from one to 133 words and an average length of 20 words. This data from the 14 participants allowed the research team to generate themes that answered the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The first author followed the six-phase process of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), employing inductive coding. First, preliminary readings of the data were used to increase familiarity with the data, and a reflective journal was kept noting any interesting or significant points within the dataset. Second, initial codes were generated (e.g. positive fan engagement helps athlete wellbeing), and data related to each code were collated. Third, potential themes were generated from the codes and relevant data were arranged into each theme (Braun *et al.*, 2016). Fourth, themes were reviewed in relation to the coded extracts. Fifth, the resulting themes were named and defined. Finally, data extracts in the form of respondent quotes were chosen to support the themes identified.

## **Results**

Thematic analysis yielded three distinct themes from the data. Firstly, participants perceived the PDP programme as important, highlighting its impactful and beneficial nature (Theme 1).

Secondly, there was a consensus that the programme warranted greater emphasis and promotion (Theme 2). Lastly, it was noted that there existed a significant lack of knowledge about the programme among active supporters, indicating a limited understanding (Theme 3). These themes are labelled *Impactful and Beneficial*, *Worthy of More Attention and Promotion*, and *Limited Understanding*.

### *Impactful and beneficial*

The first theme, *Impactful and Beneficial*, is characterised by the perceived benefits for athletes and clubs engaged with wellbeing services. Active supporters believe the PDP to be a positive aspect of the A-League, with Max stating, “I think this is excellent and it should be made more evident that this is a part of all their training programs.” Active supporters also believe that including wellbeing programmes can assist injury recovery, providing additional benefits to athletes, as Dakota states: “They are less likely to seriously break down during a season and recover from small injuries faster.” Further, Casey responded, “I think peer involvement is essential to help ease pressure on young players in particular”, describing the beneficial involvement of wellbeing for young athletes. This response from Casey highlights the aspects of social support and the importance of young athletes participating in wellbeing programmes. The perceived positive aspects of this off-field programme, combined with the vocal support for the PDP, allow the Australian football environment to incorporate the PDP further into its structures, appeasing active supporters as a stakeholder.

The belief that wellbeing programmes are vital for athletes is also included in this theme as many aspects of professional sport negatively impact the retirement transition. Dylan commented that it was “vital that clubs support their playing staff due to the way that injuries, loss of form etc can affect young people’s lives.” Active supporters’ knowledge of negative transitions demonstrates the importance of clear communication for all stakeholders of football clubs. As Dylan specifically highlighted that loss of form and injury could cause retirement, clear communication from the team is needed to ensure that active supporters recognise that their expectations of club responsibilities are met. Active supporters recognise that the short length of an athlete’s career is also a reason for the inclusion of athlete wellbeing programmes, with Dylan extending their response, “I think it’s vital that players participate as their careers are short and injuries and loss of form can impact severely on young people.” By identifying aspects of negative transitions, active supporters were able to further realise the value they place on athlete wellbeing. The responses from Dylan and Casey can be linked to presenting a view of the PDP that is impactful for young players to engage with through peer involvement as it supports negative transitions and short careers.

Active supporters also extend positive associations toward the club. Blake states, “I think a club will attract positive endorsement and reputation if they are seen to be taking their athlete’s wellbeing seriously and place their players before anything else (money, winning etc).” The club’s encouragement and support of the PDP builds a positive reputation from the perspective of active supporters. Blake’s comment illustrates that active supporters are concerned with the management and governance of the club related to the relationship with players and the community, where off-field programmes can provide positive attributes and associations outside of winning. Additionally, active supporters’ social identity as a stakeholder can remain positive if the club emphasises wellbeing. Active supporters expect the club to offer wellbeing services to athletes, as Alex responded, “Clubs as employers must look after the wellbeing of players.” The positive associations and influence on the club’s reputation demonstrate that the PDP is impactful and beneficial for clubs from the perspectives of active supporters.

### *Worthy of More Attention and Promotion*

The second theme generated by thematic analysis is *Worthy of More Attention and Promotion*. This theme is defined as active supporters’ belief that organisations should work to promote the PDP further to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of it. Participants believed that wellbeing and

mental health support are lacking in the community and that programmes akin to the PDP can position wellbeing as an essential community aspect. Max responded, “I think this is fantastic and there should be so much more of it for the health of the community, players, staff and fans.” Max elaborated, adding that more attention regarding PDP-type programmes is needed across all levels of football to ensure that the larger football community has wellbeing support:

I think this should be highlighted to the community and we need to start addressing wellbeing as a priority from the grassroots up so that wellbeing is proactive and a priority rather than reactive to stress, anxiety, depression situations in the clubs and community.

Active supporters support their club in creating a healthy community and emphasise the value of mental health within sport and society, demonstrated by Sam’s view “very important particularly with younger players.” Active supporters want their club to draw attention to and promote wellbeing within their community, helping to destigmatise mental health services and encourage wellbeing support. The aspect of community in this theme gives precedent to the club to engage active supporters as a community member and club stakeholder to promote wellbeing outside of the club and football environment.

Alongside promoting wellbeing to the community, active supporters also believe they have agency in their relationship with the club through an ability to influence the prioritisation of wellbeing services. Max stated, “I think when fans are recognised as vital stakeholders, more emphasis is also given to the wellbeing of players. It is a culture that then carries over to all levels of the club.” The reflection on fans’ influence on athlete wellbeing demonstrates the importance of fans in the larger role of athlete wellbeing in football, where further promotion and attention to athlete wellbeing could deliver positive outcomes, linking to the perceived *Impactful and Beneficial* outcomes associated with the PDP. Further, Max’s answer relays the position that active supporters are stakeholders and have salience in their position to effect club processes as a recognised stakeholder.

Although active supporters believe that the PDP should be promoted to the community, they were unaware of the club’s current wellbeing engagement activities. Quinn states, “I don’t believe I have noticed the clubs promoting this.” Additionally, Dakota states, “Honestly feels like it’s not promoted at all, especially with the injuries we had this season.” Quinn and Dakota recognise that the PDP is not widely publicised throughout the community and internally within the club. Promoting the PDP or athlete wellbeing could provide additional avenues of support for athletes. As a “vital stakeholder”, the club needs to communicate with active supporters about athlete wellbeing.

#### *Limited Understanding*

*Limited Understanding* is defined as active supporters demonstrating some confusion and lack of understanding regarding what the PDP entails. The misperceptions of active supporters of the PFA further illustrate this lack of understanding. When asked about the PDP, some participants understood it to be the athlete wellbeing programme provided to A-League Men’s players by the PFA but lacked specific details of the programme, exemplified by Blake:

I understand the PFA assist players in their wellbeing and contract issues and act as a mediator between club and player. It is my understanding the PFA work diligently to explore any and all options for players to progress their careers ([e.g.,] overseas opportunities, etc.).

The limited understanding comes from active supporters’ beliefs about the programme’s scope. In Blake’s statement, the misunderstanding and confusion over including the PDP is evident through his mention of resolving contract issues, assisting with mediation, and helping with career transfers. These three services are offered to athletes by the PFA, separate from the PDP, whilst the PDP focusses on wellbeing, education, and retirement. Additionally, active supporters were confused about the role of the PDP within the A-League Men’s competition. Alex demonstrated this confusion in his account, “PCs advocates for players on matters such as

salary cap, insurance, minimal wages, player conditions such as minimal lighting.” This account from Alex highlights the inconsistent and confused view of the PDP by active supporters. The issues raised by Alex have previously been part of negotiations of the PFA in their role as a union but do not relate to the PDP or athlete wellbeing, further demonstrating this limited understanding and confusion.

This theme also reveals the lack of understanding of active supporters regarding the PDP. Sam implies a link between limited promotion of the PDP and limited knowledge of the programme in responding, “I don’t know about the specifics but understand this is provided”. This is echoed by Taylor, “Not aware of detail, but have knowledge that it exists.” In both Sam’s and Taylor’s responses, it is understood that at some point, athlete wellbeing was promoted as they demonstrated knowledge of the programme, yet they only have a limited understanding as the specifics of the programme could not be articulated. *Limited Understanding* demonstrates that the strategies the club used to communicate aspects of the PDP or athlete wellbeing are not sufficient, as some active supporters were confused about the content of the programme or could not relay specific details. However, *Limited Understanding* demonstrates that even though participants were confused about the PDP, they did not respond negatively to the involvement of the PFA in the A-League environment. As the knowledge of active supporters was inconsistent, club managers need to ensure that there are opportunities for active supporters to gain accurate information regarding the PDP.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to understand the perspectives of active supporters concerning an athlete wellbeing programme. Findings demonstrate that active supporters believe athlete wellbeing programmes are *Impactful and Beneficial* for athletes and clubs and are *Worthy of More Attention and Promotion*. In contrast, some active supporters revealed a *Limited Understanding* of the PDP. The first two themes provide evidence that the PDP is perceived favourably by active supporters, representing a topic to be highlighted in marketing and communication campaigns. The third theme encourages clubs to incorporate the PDP more prominently in marketing activations to overcome perceptions of limited information being communicated.

The first theme, *Impactful and Beneficial*, relays active supporters’ positive perspectives concerning athlete wellbeing and the PDP. Respondents generally reported positive associations between participation in wellbeing services (i.e. the PDP) and the club and athlete, supporting previous literature showing positive outcomes of incorporating wellbeing into the clubs’ CSR initiatives (Liu *et al.*, 2019; Mansouri *et al.*, 2024; Walker and Kent, 2009). Moreover, this finding supports the growing literature that positions athlete wellbeing as essential to crucial stakeholders of football clubs (Constandt *et al.*, 2019) and extends knowledge of the core business aspects of football clubs where wellbeing should be incorporated (Dmytriyeu *et al.*, 2021). In developing the core business aspects to incorporate athlete wellbeing, the football club has the opportunity to create value for multiple interrelated stakeholders (Freeman *et al.*, 2010). The current findings show that value can be created for active supporters, athletes, and the club, and potentially for sponsors, employees, and the local and surrounding communities (Dmytriyeu *et al.*, 2021; Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019). Clubs can include wellbeing in their CSR initiatives, potentially increasing patronage intention (Mansouri *et al.*, 2024) and social media engagement (Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024), improving value for sponsors. Incorporating wellbeing as a core business aspect may create value for active supporters by allowing identification with off-field (i.e. non-performance-related) club attributes.

As scholars increasingly explore aspects beyond on-field performance that may attract and retain fans (Doyle *et al.*, 2017; Lock *et al.*, 2011), the findings suggest that off-field programmes, such as the PDP, can positively benefit clubs. More specifically, the findings establish the need for club management to communicate with active supporters regarding their genuine care for athletes through wellbeing support. This is vital for sport managers as it

allows clubs to address social (and more broadly off-field) issues in the club and community with the support of this stakeholder (Mansouri *et al.*, 2024). Past research has demonstrated that fans can establish, maintain, and increase their identification with a team for myriad reasons beyond on-field success (Doyle *et al.*, 2017). In this sense, clubs can construct a positive and distinct image associated with being an organisation that genuinely cares about its players. This possibility extends knowledge related to how sporting club identities are formed and managed, where the facilitation and promotion of athlete wellbeing initiatives may serve as a means to deepen a team's connection with its active supporters (Lock *et al.*, 2011). In this case, a team's commitment to the health and welfare of their players could also augment unique aspects such as their performance history, geographical location, and style of play, which have been shown in past work to be essential to fans (Lock *et al.*, 2011).

In the theme *Impactful and Beneficial*, participants broadly detailed the perception that the PDP is vital to the transitions of young athletes through professional football and is advantageous to the clubs' reputation. In this theme, participants also shared the perception that the club has an obligation to the health and welfare of their athletes. As such, a genuine commitment to athlete wellbeing could lead to attributional advantages, reflecting a marketable point of difference for clubs. For example, a team known for fostering an environment that supports athletes' wellbeing may obtain a competitive advantage in the transfer market and recruiting youth athletes. This aspect of the club's management could also be promoted to active supporters and may serve as a point of difference that positively distinguishes a team from its competitors (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). FC St. Pauli's identity, for example, reflects the historic counter-culture and social justice movements of the local community (Daniel and Kassimeris, 2013). Similar to the identity of FC St. Pauli, the positive outcomes associated with the PDP highlight the potential for the club to improve the relationship with active supporters by aligning the club identity with prosocial behaviours external and internal to the organisation (Daniel and Kassimeris, 2013). In doing so, the club potentially enhances the active supporters' identification with the club, which may lead to favourable behaviours (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018).

In the *Impactful and Beneficial* theme, respondents detailed the perspective that club management has an obligation to support the health and wellbeing of their professional players. By supporting the wellbeing of the athletes, the club was said to gain positive perceptions from stakeholders. Hence, by creating value for one stakeholder (athletes, through wellbeing support), the club creates value for additional stakeholders (e.g. active supporters through positive club perceptions). This finding supports the assertion stakeholders are interdependent (Freeman *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, *Impactful and Beneficial* supports clubs in responding to the wellbeing needs of athletes, as a beneficiary of responsibility (Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021). This is made possible through the CSR framework, which enables the club to prioritise a single stakeholder whose needs have been underserved (Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021). The club can gain additional advantages through the communication of athlete wellbeing as a CSR initiative, as detailed in *Worthy of More Attention and Promotion*. Moreover, the findings contribute to the literature on how an integrated approach to corporate responsibility, combining stakeholder theory and CSR, can be used to examine specific social responsibilities of a sport club and derive advantages for interdependent stakeholders and the club (Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021).

Related to the second theme, *Worthy of More Attention and Promotion*, active supporters identified the effect that attention to mental health and promotion by the club can have on the community. Active supporters acknowledged mental health as a core aspect of community health and felt the club could do more to destigmatise mental health support by promoting athlete wellbeing. The current research findings support clubs explicitly linking the PDP to their community engagement practices drawing attention to and promoting wellbeing in the community (Yun *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the responses indicate that active supporters could use their salient position as stakeholders to ensure that athlete wellbeing is a priority for clubs (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). This salience could be used to ensure that organisational support is offered, potentially reducing the feelings of animosity players express regarding the club during retirement (Knights *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, the results support findings from Constandt *et al.*

(2019), where “committed fans” (or active supporters) are generally aware and interested in CSR activations by the club. From the perspective of the club, promoting and giving more attention to the PDP could help to further engage active supporters whilst potentially attracting sponsors with an interest in pursuing mental health initiatives, benefiting the club. Additional investment and promotion of the PDP may also have benefits for the players themselves.

*Impactful and Beneficial and Worthy of More Attention and Promotion* demonstrate that communicating with active supporters about the PDP could enhance the club-fan relationship (Mansouri *et al.*, 2024; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, with the support of active supporter organisations as a stakeholder, the club could enhance knowledge about wellbeing throughout the community, potentially reducing the confusion noted in previous literature (Stansen and Chambers, 2019). The findings extend knowledge about the intersection of stakeholder theory and CSR in sport management, whereby athlete wellbeing programmes have mutually beneficial outcomes for various stakeholders (Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021). More specifically, participants detailed how active supporters, athletes, sponsors, and the community as stakeholders can all benefit from the promotion of the athlete wellbeing programme as part of the club’s CSR communication. These findings support previous literature that has argued stakeholder theory and CSR are distinct, yet complementary theoretical frameworks, intersecting at Corporate Social Responsibility to Stakeholders (Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021).

The results presented in the third theme, *Limited Understanding*, encompassed active supporters needing clarification about the role of the PDP and its purpose within the A-League. Moreover, some active supporters demonstrated confusion about the PDP, where they recounted PFA actions that are unrelated to the PDP. Previous literature has highlighted the need for clubs to communicate effectively with their stakeholders, especially active supporters (Cleland, 2010; Constandt *et al.*, 2019). If communication is insufficient, tensions may arise between the club and the active supporter organisation (Junghagen, 2018). Although *Limited Understanding* primarily focussed on the uni-directional communication from the club to the active supporter organisation, the findings reinforce the need for multi-directional communication between the club and its stakeholders (Crane and Glozer, 2016). Multi-directional communication seems especially essential as previous literature has detailed the perceived confusion from coaches and athletes regarding athlete wellbeing programmes (Chambers *et al.*, 2019). *Limited Understanding* contributes to the existing literature on athlete wellbeing programmes by detailing that some active supporters are also confused by the nature of these programmes. Extending the potentially confused stakeholders identified to include active supporters, as well as coaches and athletes (Chambers *et al.*, 2019).

#### *Marketing and sponsorship implications*

The findings introduce implications for sport marketing and sponsorship professionals. First, management should leverage the PDP as a generally favourable aspect of the club to build positive outcomes (Mansouri *et al.*, 2024; Walker and Kent, 2009). As active supporters believe that club engagement with athlete wellbeing could improve the club’s reputation, leveraging the positive outcomes of the PDP is warranted. Thus, clubs should actively market and promote that they emphasise athletes’ humanity, share a commitment to athletes as people first, and offer genuine care for athletes off-field (Constandt *et al.*, 2019). Introducing athlete wellbeing as a core aspect of the football club brand is one option for the organisation to leverage the PDP and its positive associations for active supporters as a non-product-related attribute (Yun *et al.*, 2020). To achieve this aim, the club could incorporate aspects of athlete wellbeing into their CSR practices to engage active supporters, creating a non-traditional stakeholder relationship that moves away from a transactional approach (Rowe *et al.*, 2019). In doing so, the club should take a multi-directional approach to its marketing efforts with stakeholders to develop CSR initiatives and promotions that are perceived as authentic and mutually beneficial (Crane and Glozer, 2016; Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021; Mamo *et al.*, 2022).

The theme *Limited Understanding* can inform club marketing practices to introduce knowledge-building activities with active supporters (Crane and Glozer, 2016), aiming to share the positive aspects of the PDP. By informing active supporters of the positives of the PDP, the club can ensure that they are promoting the *Impactful and Beneficial* aspects of the PDP and rectifying active supporters' belief that the PDP is *Worthy of More Attention and Promotion*. Through marketing communications with active supporters, the club can resolve stakeholder tensions related to player welfare and wellbeing and potentially find brand benefits (Junghagen, 2018; Yun *et al.*, 2020). It is believed that football contributes to the physical and mental health of fans who play and watch the game whilst providing value to corporate sponsors through CSR initiatives (Snyder, 2012). Thus, integrating mental health knowledge-building activities into the clubs' CSR programmes and marketing communications could contribute to community wellbeing, whilst benefiting sponsors.

Finally, the findings support Australian football clubs' use of the PDP to sponsor or partner with mental health organisations or charities. Clubs of different football codes in Australia have partnered with mental health organisations to promote wellbeing in the community. For example, Hawthorn F.C., an AFL club, have an ongoing partnership with Beyond Blue (Hawthorn Football Club, n.d.). Similarly, A-League clubs and the PFA could link the PDP to a mental health charity through a partnership, increasing and diversifying the charity's sponsorship portfolio and engagement. Sponsorship engagement has been found to be a critical factor in consumers' prosocial behaviours (Goh *et al.*, 2021). By partnering with a mental health charity, Australian football clubs can draw more attention to and promote mental health and wellbeing in the community whilst encouraging active supporters' prosocial behaviour.

#### *Limitations and future research*

Limitations of the current research are acknowledged, and these can be addressed through future research. The current research investigated the perceptions of highly involved active supporters of the A-League Men's, limiting the variation of respondents. As such, the sample may be predisposed to strong opinions regarding the PDP, possibly explaining the generally positive responses. Further, the current research focussed on the active supporters of the A-League Men's, without explicitly including active supporters of A-League Women. Future research is needed to investigate active supporters of Women's football alongside an exploration of moderately engaged or casual fans to produce a holistic perspective of athlete wellbeing within the broader A-League fanbase. This future research could employ focus groups comprised of a range of different types of fans.

The differences between the Australian football environment and other national contexts limit this research. The cultural and socio-historic differences recognised within the international football community reveal the need for extensive multi-country investigations of football stakeholders (Bandyopadhyay, 2006). Future qualitative research may explore active supporter perceptions of athlete wellbeing across multiple cultural contexts to address this limitation. This could allow for higher-level policy implementation by FIFA or national football bodies (e.g. Football Australia).

The limited sample size is the final limitation identified for the current research, as 14 participants demonstrated knowledge of the PDP and responded to the qualitative survey. The limited sample size was partly due to the method employed: an online survey distributed through an active supporter organisation. The reliance on gatekeepers to distribute the survey proved challenging in accessing a large participant pool with knowledge of the PDP. A second contributing factor to the limited sample size is that the participants were all recruited from one A-League Men's Club active supporter organisation. This limited sample size reflects a starting point for understanding active supporters' perceptions of the PDP and athlete wellbeing in general. To address this limitation, future research could include a larger sample of participants by employing a quantitative survey. Future quantitative research that investigates active supporters' (or fans') perceptions of athlete wellbeing could focus on

how the sporting organisations communicate wellbeing initiatives and if the perceptions of the organisation and athlete are positive. This future research could recruit participants from various A-League active supporter organisations and active supporters from other football or sport leagues with similar athlete wellbeing programmes.

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