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**Introducing esports coaching to sport coaching (not as sport coaching)**

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### Article

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1 **Abstract**

2 The popularity of electronic sports (esports) has increased over the last decade, and knowledge  
3 has been shared between sports and esports. Yet, research on esports coaching remains  
4 conspicuously absent. From this position, sport coaching researchers and practitioners lack an  
5 evidenced base to inform their critical consideration of esports coaching. In response, this study  
6 describes the experiences and contexts of 14 head coaches in professional teams competing in  
7 'League of Legends' competition. Analysis identified themes including; 1) uncodified career and  
8 education pathways for coaches; 2) coaches practice by a review-plan-do cycle shaped by the  
9 pressure to win; 3) coaches practice in a complex, technological and global environment; and 4)  
10 coaches practice amongst challenges and paradoxes. In doing so, the findings present an original  
11 analysis of esports coaching and provide a platform for sport coaching researchers and  
12 practitioners to critically consider the relevance, development, practice and context of esports  
13 coaching in relation to their own work.

14

15 *Keywords:* League of Legends; coaching practice; global sport; digital technology; orchestration

## 1 **Introduction**

2 Esports involve the competitive and organized play of specific video games (e.g., League  
3 of Legends) (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020) and has roots in entertainment, media, and sports  
4 (Scholz, 2020). Starting in the early 1990s via the introduction of network and multiplayer  
5 functions (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010), esports is an industry that has grown dramatically since  
6 2010. Today, esports are often played by branded commercial teams as part of formalized  
7 competitions bounded by geographic regions. A current debate in literature and industry explores  
8 whether esports should be recognized as sports (see., Jenny et al., 2017; Leis et al., 2021). Whilst  
9 we do not enter the ongoing debate here, there are commonalities that exist across both domains  
10 that may be of interest to sport coaches. For instance, the imperative to achieve results against  
11 rivals within a time-bound competition (Scholz, 2020) and the psychological demands on players  
12 connected to this (Himmelstein et al., 2017; Poulus et al., 2020) are common to many sports and  
13 esports. Like athletes, esports players require concentration, communication with teammates, and  
14 commitment to a season that involves weeks of continuous preparation and performances, often  
15 in front of large numbers of spectators. As a result, there are increasing efforts to develop high  
16 performance systems in esports (Nagorsky & Wiemeyer, 2020; Watson et al., 2021), and esports  
17 organizations somewhat mirror the multidisciplinary teams that have become ubiquitous in  
18 sports (Koomen, 2020). Given this degree of commonality, esports are an area of increasing  
19 interest to sporting bodies, sport researchers, and coaching practitioners. For instance, esports  
20 research has been published in sport journals such as the *International Review of Sport and*  
21 *Exercise Psychology* (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020), *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*  
22 (Pereira et al., 2019), and *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching* (Novak et al.,  
23 2020). International sport conferences have featured dedicated esports symposia (e.g.,

1 International Society of Sport Psychology 15<sup>th</sup> World Congress, 2021), and esports appear in  
2 higher education sport degree curricula (e.g., M.Sc. Sport Management, German Sport  
3 University Cologne). In industry, over 400 sporting organisations have included esports teams  
4 within their portfolio (Scholz et al., 2021), and international sporting events include esports  
5 competitions in their scheduling as demonstration events (e.g., Asian Games 2022) or as a  
6 parallel championship (e.g., Commonwealth Games, 2022). Thus, esports are increasingly  
7 recognised as an area relevant to sporting bodies, and sport researchers.

8         Although a standard feature of the esports landscape (Himmelstein et al., 2017), coaching  
9 in esports has received sparse attention from researchers. This is remiss because for some time  
10 now sport coaching researchers and practitioners have sought insight from esports. Most notably,  
11 principles of video game design and ‘gamification’ have been utilized as a framework for  
12 pedagogical practices in sport and PE settings (Price et al., 2018; Gee & Price, 2021). Virtual  
13 reality gaming has also influenced sport coaching practice and research (Le Noury et al., 2022).  
14 Conversely, an increasing influx of sport workers have transferred knowledge from areas such as  
15 sport psychology (Cotterill, 2021) and coaching (Fitch, 2020) into esports teams. This reflects  
16 the ambition of esports organisations to prepare individuals and teams for competition, create  
17 development plans, deliver training sessions, and analyse/review gameplay, activities that are  
18 well established as part of the sport coaches’ role (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015; International  
19 Council for Coaching Excellence, 2012). Indeed, within esports organizations, esports coaches  
20 are increasingly prominent (Hedlund et al., 2020). Therefore esports not only provide a source of  
21 knowledge for coaches and coaching researchers (e.g., gamification), but also provide  
22 opportunities for coaches and perhaps coaching researchers to practice in a germane domain. Yet  
23 esports coaching remains an unexplored area of research.

1           In the absence of context-specific research into esports coaching, sport coaches and  
2 coaching researchers lack a thorough evidence-based description of esports coaching to help  
3 them critically consider if their knowledge and expertise is relevant to the esports domain,  
4 whether to engage with esports, and if so, how. Further, those sport coaching researchers and  
5 sport coaches who seek to enhance the experience and performance of esports players are bereft  
6 of an evidence base necessary to support effective practice (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020). To be  
7 clear, our aim here is not to position esports coaching as sports coaching. Indeed, in the absence  
8 of a cultural acceptance of esports as a sport, any attempt to define esports coaching as sport  
9 coaching would be incongruent with Lyle and Cushion’s (2017) conceptualisation of sport  
10 coaching as “the extensive, comprehensive and multi-function process that prepares individuals  
11 and teams for participation in *sports* (emphasis added) competitions” (p.38). Rather, we aim to  
12 address the striking paucity of esports coaching research and begin to understand esports  
13 coaches, and the esports world that they inhabit, shape, and which reciprocally shapes them. This  
14 contribution is significant for sports coaching practitioners and researchers because developing a  
15 thorough understanding of the phenomenon (i.e., esports coaching) could help them avoid either  
16 a hasty dismissal of coaching in the esports domain, or alternatively, a rush to coaching action  
17 (Jones, 2012) that overlooks the distinctive features of the context. In effect, we seek to provide a  
18 first analytical description to introduce esports coaching and inform sport coaching practitioners  
19 and researchers about this relevant area. To that end, the present study seeks to answer three  
20 research questions: a) what are the experiences that have led individuals to become esports  
21 coaches; b) how do esports coaches practice within the esports context?; and c) what are the  
22 social and contextual features that influence esports coaches?

23

## 1 *Theoretical Perspective*

2           To understand esports coaches, their practices and context, this study embraced the  
3 metaphor of coaching as orchestration. The orchestration metaphor is built upon a premise that  
4 coaching is a dynamic, relational and situated process that takes place within a complex and  
5 uncertain landscape (Purdy et al., 2009; Jones & Ronglan, 2018). The metaphor positions the  
6 coach as akin to a conductor of an orchestra. Here both coaches and conductors are recognised as  
7 powerful actors within their context, although neither the coach nor the conductor is wholly in  
8 control of the performance. Much like an orchestral conductor integrating sections (wind,  
9 percussion, strings) to perform a symphony, coaches must continuously cooperate and harmonise  
10 with multiple actors (e.g., athletes, medical professionals, owners) in order to stimulate and steer  
11 effort in a desired direction (Wallace, 2007; Jones et al., 2013). Further, while the conductor may  
12 appear in control, they are however subject to uncertainty as at any point an actor's (e.g., an  
13 athlete) behaviour is liable to change. This aspect of the metaphor also appears apt for the coach.

14           In recognising the contextual complexity and limits of individual control, orchestration  
15 offers a realistic conceptualisation of coaching (Santos et al., 2013) and a pragmatic lens through  
16 which to observe, understand and evaluate esports coaches' practices. More specifically,  
17 orchestration provides a means to describe how coaches coordinate activity and "instigate, plan,  
18 organise, monitor and respond to evolving circumstances in order to bring about improvement in  
19 the individual and collective performance of those being coached" (Wallace, 2007, p. 25).  
20 Orchestration offers further promise as a metaphor to examine how esports coaches, like  
21 conductors, enact their role by working with and through other actors in circumstances that are  
22 dynamic and can be uncertain and ambiguous (Jones & Wallace, 2005). Moreover, orchestration  
23 is predicated upon the notion of a continuous struggle to create order within an inherently chaotic

1 and dynamic landscape (Miller & Cronin, 2013). Given that the esports industry is seen as  
2 complex, diverse and quickly evolving (Scholz; 2020), orchestration provides a suitable sense  
3 making metaphor to understand esports coaching as an interpersonal activity. As mentioned  
4 above, this is not to say that esports coaching is the same as sport coaching. Rather, it is to  
5 acknowledge that contemporary theorising such as orchestration recognises that coaching, and  
6 leadership in general, are effectively conceived as complex and situated relationships informed  
7 by biographical and social influences. From this perspective, orchestration represents a pertinent  
8 theoretical metaphor to provide a focused understanding of esports coaches' experiences, esports  
9 coaching practices, and esports coaching contexts, while simultaneously acknowledging that due  
10 to the complexity of interpersonal systems, other theoretical conceptualisations are possible and  
11 desirable.

## 12 **Methodology**

13 To explore esports coaches' experiences, practices, and context, this study adopted a  
14 qualitative approach from within an interpretivist paradigm. Informed by a relativist ontology  
15 that sees reality as multiple and constructed (Levers, 2013), the study sought to appreciate  
16 esports coaching, esports coaches, and the esports world, not as separate entities but as inherent  
17 constituents of a broader phenomenon. A subjectivist epistemology which sees knowledge as  
18 socially constructed through local and personal experiences was embraced (Potrac et al., 2014).  
19 These philosophical positions manifested in an appreciation of esports coaches' experiences as a  
20 route to understanding, and a recognition that the authorial team contributed to the research  
21 process by engaging with both participants and data as outlined in the procedures below. In terms  
22 of reflexivity, the first author had experience working alongside esports coaches in teams as a  
23 performance coach. This allowed him to understand context-specific terminology without

1 interrupting interviews and made him aware that coaches bemoaned the lack of esports-specific  
2 coach education and career structure. He also has experience as a sports coach and therefore is  
3 well placed to introduce esports coaching to coaching researchers and practitioners.

#### 4 ***Participants***

5       Following University ethical approval, participants were recruited via a purposeful  
6 sampling process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) to access individuals with esports coaching  
7 experiences. 14 head coaches (18-29 years old) of professional esports teams agreed to  
8 participate. At the time of the interview, Autumn 2020, coaches were attached to teams  
9 competing in the third tier (n=1), second tier (n=12) or first tier (n=1) of ‘League of Legends’  
10 competition across three regions (Europe, North America, Oceania). For clarity, a tier-3 league  
11 could be theoretically likened to the domestic third division of a traditional sport, and League of  
12 Legends is a specific esports game. Participants all had experience in esports coaching (3.32 ±  
13 2.09 years). Although the longevity of this experience was somewhat limited, this may reflect the  
14 recent growth of esports coaching. None of the coaches had formal sports or esports coaching  
15 qualifications, although one had completed a diploma in sports science. The all-male sample  
16 comprised a range of nationalities; British (3), American (2), Australian (2), Danish (2), New  
17 Zealand (1), Swedish (1), Norwegian (1), Polish (1), German (1). This sample was appropriate to  
18 begin the process of understanding esports coaching, although we are mindful of the voices not  
19 included here. For transferability readers should consider the applicability of the findings to their  
20 own context (Smith, 2018).

#### 21 ***Data Collection***

22       Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 participants by the first author. All  
23 interviews took place online through voice-only calls on the messaging app Discord. These

1 occurred within five weeks of each other and following the cessation of a competitive season.  
2 Interviews lasted between 33:39 and 110:56 minutes. An interview guide was used comprising  
3 questions loosely based on qualitative work on sport coaches' experiences and behaviours, for  
4 example Côté and Sedgwick (2003) "*What are the experiences that have influenced you the most*  
5 *as a coach?*"; Mageau and Vallerand (2003) "*How would you describe your coaching style?*";  
6 and Mosley et al. (2020) "*How do you feel when you are coaching?*". Questions were open-  
7 ended and basic terminology was used to assist participants' understanding (White & Bennie,  
8 2015). The first author utilized interview skills (prompts and probing) and tentatively utilized his  
9 personal experience of working alongside esports staff and understanding of coaching concepts  
10 such as the International Sport Coaching Framework (International Council for Coaching  
11 Excellence, 2012), to encourage participants' descriptions of their experiences. Interviews were  
12 therefore consistent with Kvale's (2007) concept of an 'inter-view' where both parties work  
13 together to understand and travel the world of the participant.

#### 14 ***Data Analysis***

15       Once all 14 interviews were completed three members of the authorial team transcribed  
16 data verbatim. These transcripts led to 141,521 words and allowed four members of the authorial  
17 team to begin an inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Consistent with  
18 Terry et al.'s (2017) recommendations, transcripts were read and reread, with semantic codes  
19 noted on segments deemed meaningful by the researchers. After each transcript was analyzed by  
20 one of the researchers, these individuals met online to discuss the transcripts and refine codes.  
21 Here, the team did not prioritize a deductive application of the orchestration metaphor; rather  
22 they were open to understanding coaches' experiences. Through the coding process, key  
23 concepts were identified that illuminated esports coaches' experience and the esports coaching

1 world. To ensure a reflexive approach was undertaken, all transcripts were then re-examined,  
2 latent codes questioned and developed, sub-themes described, and themes proposed.  
3 Subsequently, the transcripts were revisited to ensure themes were credible and contained a sense  
4 of verisimilitude. Quotes were selected to illuminate the themes in the findings and address the  
5 research aims. Finally, the reviewers of the paper prompted further refinement of the themes  
6 presented.

### 7 ***Rigor***

8 Consistent with a subjectivist epistemology (Smith & McGannon, 2018), several  
9 processes were undertaken to ensure that the interpretations were credible, trustworthy and  
10 insightfully addressed the research questions. Firstly, during data analysis, members of the  
11 research team utilized their own perspectives to ‘check and challenge’ each other as part of a  
12 sense making process. This was necessary to reflexively consider the influence of the first  
13 author’s positioning as an esports coach on the study and led to different insights such as the  
14 complex system of esports, and the dynamic nature of game development. During the final stage  
15 of constructing themes, selected quotations were also shared with two other members of the  
16 authorial team who were not engaged in the initial data analysis. These “critical friends”  
17 encouraged more reflection on the data and streamlined reporting with respect to the research  
18 questions (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Similarly, the themes and quotations were shared with all  
19 14 participants as part of a member reflection process (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Through this  
20 process, participants confirmed the resonance of the findings.

1 **Findings**

2 ***Theme 1: Uncodified career and education pathways for coaches***

3 Reflective of its rapid and recent development, esports are simultaneously a developed  
4 commercialized activity, but also one that is uncodified in some respects. Most notably, and  
5 consistent with the first author's experience (see reflexive statement), career pathways and coach  
6 education in esports are almost wholly informal. Additionally, there appears to be an absence of  
7 regulation for esports coaches.

8 I got to a point where I'd enjoy more helping the team setting up tournament teams,  
9 almost coaching teams rather than playing. I'd find myself being the person after the  
10 game, trying to reflect, trying to improve, looking at strategies like, yo, we should try  
11 this. And so then when I saw this opportunity come up, like, oh, we're looking for a  
12 coach, before they were actually in League properly... I had no idea what I was doing,  
13 but for some reason, they picked me up to come with them...And I was really, really  
14 bad... But for some reason they're like, yeah, you know what, let's do it. I mean, I guess  
15 in hindsight, it's also like super amateur. Coaches weren't really normal then anyway.  
16 [Coach 1]

17  
18 In this codification vacuum, coaches' learning was very much experiential. This included their  
19 experiences as players, which provided them with a source of knowledge and social capital to  
20 elicit coaching opportunities.

21 I thought if I could help others reach like a really high level, then that'd be like, fun and  
22 rewarding, so I think that's what got me interested in it. And I'd always enjoyed watching  
23 the like esports aspect, I watched hours for hours and hours for years. So, I thought yeah,  
24 I'm not gonna be able to play at this level but I think my knowledge is good enough to  
25 coach at this level. [Coach 1]

26  
27 Relationships with existing or more senior individuals within the industry such as team owners  
28 were also key to accessing coaching positions. Coaching role models rarely featured within these  
29 networks, although some coaches cited mentors that helped them to understand esports coaching  
30 practices and develop personal understandings of concepts such as leadership.

31 One mentor was just very direct. He made it very clear to me that as a leader, you have to  
32 be okay with people disliking you. Because people will dislike you in the moment, but

1           they'll respect it later. Because they recognize that it was needed. I've learned over the  
2           years you obviously can't just be a dick like that doesn't do anything. But just his  
3           willingness to be blunt and not hold punches when it was something that you needed to  
4           hear because it would make you better, is something that like really resonated with me.  
5           And I've tried to like uphold that, where I'm not going to try and hold back feedback.  
6           [Coach 11]

7  
8           Coaches also sought learning opportunities through reading popular science texts or accessing  
9           webinars. Furthermore, coaches repeatedly articulated a desire for more coach learning  
10          opportunities.

11          In an ideal world every coach has a degree in psychology or in sports psychology...but  
12          that's not the case so if you don't have that degree then you need to inform yourself.  
13          [Coach 5]

14  
15          In sum, coaches self-organized their own careers and reported learning through reflecting on  
16          personal experiences, trial and error, accessing ad-hoc literature, and utilizing their social  
17          networks. In doing so, the esports coaches within this study managed to develop and somewhat  
18          thrive in the absence of formal coach education and coach regulation pathways.

### 19          ***Theme 2: Coaches practice by a review-plan-do cycle shaped by the pressure to win***

20          All participants acknowledged the intention to win League of Legends competitions and the  
21          implications of not doing so (i.e., redundancy from coaching roles). Given the short season (circa  
22          7 months), which are further divided into splits (circa 8-week periods) and weekly competitions,  
23          the coaches in this study were very much focused on short-term performances. Prize money,  
24          league tables, championships, relegation, social media scrutiny and public player rankings  
25          further reflect the short-term performance orientation of esports. For example, as part of the  
26          draft, coaches were explicitly aware that the aim is to win. To be clear, the draft is the process  
27          immediately prior to a game in which the two competing teams each select five champions  
28          (game characters) from a pool of over 150. One coach conveyed that winning was the primary  
29          focus of the draft;

1 the feeling of coming up with like a really good draft is just that like, really like there's  
2 that elation ..., like there's that kind of feeling but also almost relief from that because  
3 you know that you put the players in the best possible situation for them to win as  
4 well...I've done everything I can for them. I've done everything, it's now up to them...or  
5 the way that I have framed it to players at one point is, this game's already won, don't  
6 fuck it up. [Coach 10]

7  
8 Consistent with the above, coaches were highly aware of their team's win/loss record in practice  
9 games, which are often termed scrimms (i.e. scrimmages), and official competitions. Some  
10 coaches expressed how this can elicit emotional highs, trigger negative emotional feelings, lead  
11 to outbursts of anger and frustration, or prompt post-split self-reflection.

12 As the split (8-week season) goes, I tend to fade and start enjoying it less and less...by  
13 some of the later weeks of the split, I end up...counting the days, counting the weeks until  
14 it kind of just ends. And that's just because it's so stressful. Like it feels out of your  
15 hands in many a way. You feel like you've wasted a lot of time with just dealing with  
16 things between people. But overall, you have some of the best moments like sometimes  
17 you rock up to scrimms (practice games) and you love it, you see how happy they are, how  
18 much they love playing the game. You see all this stuff that you've been labouring on  
19 teaching, and you see them doing it and you're just so proud of them. And I enjoy finding  
20 new things and I enjoy when they trust me, when they sit there, and they go "yeah, I can  
21 see why this works" and then they do it and you can kind of see that smile light up their  
22 face like hey, this works, I'm doing it, look at me go. So, it's a bit of a mixed pot.  
23 Sometimes it's the least fun thing in the world and sometimes it's some of the best times  
24 you'll ever see. I can get very angry, or I can be very happy. [Coach 4]

25  
26 The effects of a sometimes-overwhelming focus on performance (read winning), not only  
27 impacted coaches' emotions, but also their daily practices. For example, coach 3 (and others)  
28 reported that the retrospective analysis of previous games comprised a key part of their role  
29 because games, including the verbal interactions between players, are recorded.

30 If we're having a problem with a concept, I will watch scrimms (games) from other teams  
31 from my friends overseas. Overnight, I will watch 10, 20, 30 VODs (video replays),  
32 which have the same example. And I'll come up with like a hypothesis on how to fix the  
33 situation. And then I'll just watch heaps of VODs and just test and test a lot. For example,  
34 one of our players was concerned that he wasn't getting a lot of farm (an early tactical  
35 process in League of Legends) so, I just watched; like, I went to the stage of the game,  
36 which he was having a problem with for 20 game VODs and I just watched that four/five  
37 minutes section. And I just broke down the things that they're doing differently to us and

1           then I was able to go back to the player the next day and say...just what that guy was  
2           doing differently to what we were doing.

3  
4 As described, the performance orientation meant that coaches regularly spent time on post-hoc

5 subjective evaluations of performances, and one coach spoke of working with an analyst to

6 produce objective statistics. Reviewing competitive performances invariably served as a daily

7 basis for enacting a cyclical review-plan-do process in training scrimms (games), group review

8 meetings, and one-to-one meetings. Again coach 3 describes;

9           we have a meeting an hour before practice. And at the beginning of that meeting, I will  
10          explain or talk to them about the main concept which we want to work on. And  
11          sometimes these concepts run for more than one scrim set, but sometimes only room for  
12          one. ... And then I will do a number of things. I'll either keep a small group of the players  
13          and go through the concept with them or keep the whole team if it's a team concept.

14  
15 The performance narrative also permeated coaches' relationships with others in the esports

16 context, and their daily lives.

17          We're in a gaming house this year... you know, you go into a meeting with the guy and  
18          I'm standing at the front of the whiteboard, and the PowerPoint, but then I run downstairs  
19          and I'm having lunch with them as well. And then the evening. Like, we're still next to  
20          each other, you know? If I come downstairs at eleven o'clock at night, they're  
21          downstairs. Um, so yeah, it is certainly unavoidable. [Coach 3]

22  
23 Most coaches spoke of building trust, friendships, and humour with players, spending social time

24 with players, and providing players with rewards as strategies to foster a sense of closeness with

25 players. These strategies were often justified as a means to more productive performances. Thus,

26 coaches' emotions, daily activities (reviewing game footage, holding team meetings for the

27 review, organising scrimms (practice games), preparing for competition e.g., planning drafts) and

28 relationships were framed within an overall performance orientation.

### 29 ***Theme 3: Coaches practice in a complex, technological and global environment***

30          Inherent in esports are technologies that enable multiplayer interactions, games, and

31 competitions. Theme 3 demonstrates the dynamic nature of this activity. More specifically,

1 esports are not static games but are subject to regular updates (patches) from commercialized  
2 games producers. These updates can include new champions (game characters) and adjustments  
3 to existing champions' abilities. Esports coaches in different geographic and cultural contexts  
4 will try to respond to the latest updates by teaching the most effective tactics termed the 'meta'.  
5 For League of Legends coaches the meta is a dynamic construct that informs their everyday  
6 practice but will soon be 'out of date'. Coach 10 shared how interpreting the meta took time and  
7 analysis of opponents;

8 I would always try to watch every game from teams in our group because we'd have to  
9 play against them and it informs our group's meta (tactics) essentially like what teams are  
10 doing our side, because even within the championship there were essentially two  
11 different metas between the two groups. It's interesting to see how fluid the concept of a  
12 meta is. The best way to put it is, the meta is more of a guideline, not a set in stone kind  
13 of thing. That's what I learned with all of my theory crafting actually is just how many  
14 strong champions go unplayed because people don't understand they're strong or how  
15 strong patches change. Usually, it takes two to three patches' time for a champion to  
16 actually become recognized meta, even though the change happened, you know, two  
17 patches ago.

18  
19 The dynamic nature of the meta (optimal tactics in relation to the latest update) is not limited to  
20 the release of the latest game update (patch), because games also require players to draft  
21 champions (choose game characters) that have specific roles, strengths and weaknesses. The  
22 draft occurs in the immediate minutes before a game, and pre-determined strategies may need to  
23 be adjusted depending on which champions a team and their opposition draft.

24 My job in the draft is to make sure that we go into a game with the absolute highest  
25 chance of success...the draft picks, the preparation, making sure we get the highest  
26 chance of success in the game. But then I have one minute to give the players a game  
27 plan based on the draft and that can change very much. So that requires me to be on my  
28 toes. Requires me to be very aware of what's strong in the meta (tactics). How do they  
29 play? What should we look out for? What do our champions (characters) need to do  
30 versus their champions to win? And then I have one minute to, like, convey that all into a  
31 quick one minute, like boom boom boom, talk about this. And then they go into the  
32 game. And, you know, for me to have the absolute highest success rate, I need to see  
33 myself also as a performer. [Coach 7]  
34

1 As alluded to by coach 7, the dynamic nature of adapting to an ever-evolving meta (tactics) and  
2 the drafting of champions (characters) is further complicated because the game is only accessible  
3 through players themselves. Players have individual skills and abilities that may or may not  
4 correlate with the latest meta or champions drafted. Thus, a players' own strengths and  
5 weaknesses further add to the complexity of esports coaching. It is also important to recognize  
6 that esports leagues cross international boundaries. When a patch is released, coaches can  
7 respond with different tactical strategies which may reflect local cultural practices, and thus  
8 coaches may use global competitions as a source of knowledge. One coach described the  
9 challenge of creating tactics to counter global trends;

10 I'll do my own research like these are the best champions of the patch and this is what  
11 seems to be good as this is what pro players do and this is what priority picks are right  
12 now and I see if this is what we want to play, because if (our players) don't want to then  
13 we will not...I won't force them into an uncomfortable position. For example our  
14 midlaner (a player) did not play control mages (a category of game character) even when  
15 there was a big Syndra (a control mage character) meta...we did not play Syndra, either  
16 we banned it or we picked something that 99% of other midlaners don't do. We had to  
17 work around that and that was always interesting for me because it sometimes made  
18 preparation or drafting hard but it was fun because it was a challenge to make a good  
19 situation out of what in other opinions would be the worst or a deficit [Coach 5]  
20

21 Moreover, somewhat reflecting theme 1 (the uncodified nature of esports), teams tend not to  
22 have youth or reserve leagues to develop players. Therefore, in order to respond to the latest  
23 meta (optimal tactics in relation to the latest game update), coaches may recruit players from  
24 different or higher leagues. Related to theme 2 (the performance orientation), global player  
25 rankings provide a market of players that is increasingly supported by agents, but can lead to  
26 challenging social encounters. For example, coach 4 reflected on his time working with south  
27 Asian players and with apparent regret declared;

28 I catch myself all the time and have to pull myself up. I talk to (import players) like they  
29 are babies. You know, like baby English. And I always catch myself and I'm like, well,

1 he understands me, like, I don't need to speak like he's a five year old...As a coach, you  
2 need to try to be above it...my player pointed it out to me once at the start of the...year,  
3 he's like, you do this all the time. Whenever you speak to this guy...you speak to him like  
4 he's five. I was like, do I? And then I caught myself for the rest of year.

5  
6 In sum, esports are part of a complex system involving commercialized gaming companies, ever  
7 evolving technologies, and players from across international contexts.

#### 8 ***Theme 4: Coaches practice amongst challenges and paradoxes***

9 Given the complexity identified in themes 1-3, it is not surprising that esports coaches  
10 may experience challenges and paradoxes within their practice. For instance, most coaches  
11 espoused discourses of players inputting into team decision-making processes. For example,  
12 Coach 14 declared;

13 I think in any good team, the players have a very big say in everything...they need to feel  
14 like they are heard, and they are understood. If you have players who feel like they're just  
15 being controlled, and they're just tools to be used for a certain task, then that's not going  
16 to lead to a very good relationship. So, you want your players to feel like they're  
17 understood and heard, and their opinions are valued. And they come with logical points  
18 as well.

19  
20 However, reminiscent of research from sport coaching (e.g., Downham & Cushion 2020),  
21 coaches also highlighted that players' voices were encouraged only when they aligned with the  
22 predetermined perspectives of the coach.

23 I'll make sure that they're focusing on the right things and get to...the right answer...the  
24 players talk first, and afterwards I'll make sure any points that they needed to see are  
25 brought up. [Coach 10]

26  
27 I let them try to start off the discussion naturally, and then I tried to direct it or lead it to  
28 where I want it to. [Coach 14]

29  
30 We always want to say going into every discussion and everything (that) we are offering  
31 equality, but the star player is just a little bit more equal. [Coach 13]

32  
33 Coaches also spoke about the importance of holistically developing players for performance,  
34 while valuing players' well-being, through strategies such as meditation and physical activity. In

1 some cases, these claims were not supported by subsequent accounts of interactions with players  
2 or evaluations of performance. For example, coaches rarely acknowledged the influence of well-  
3 being on game performance. More typically, perceived in-game mistakes were attributed to a  
4 lack of focus from players and direct instruction from the coach was deemed the appropriate  
5 pedagogical solution. Indeed, coaches generally adopted a coach-centric approach in which they  
6 took it upon themselves to provide solutions, for instance Coach 1;

7 I place all the responsibility on me. I feel like that's the way it should be done...if  
8 something's not going right, then it's on me to fix it. And if I can find the perfect solution,  
9 or if I can find the correct way to fixing things, maybe sometimes that means the players  
10 have to motivate themselves as well. I can find that solution that may turn around  
11 everything you know, I may find that style that can turn around everything. (In response  
12 to poor performance) what I'm going to do is I'm gonna go and fix it. Right? So we're  
13 going to fix it.”

14 Furthermore, the long-term development of players as individuals or professionals was rarely  
15 mentioned. This narrow view of pedagogy (i.e., largely confined to coach-led direct instruction)  
16 may reflect the short-term performance orientation described in Theme 2, and the uncoded  
17 career and coach education pathways highlighted in Theme 1. In detailing these challenges and  
18 paradoxes, our intention is not to castigate the coaches, but to highlight areas where those with  
19 expertise in coaching policy, coach education, and coaching research may be able to support  
20 esports coaching.

## 21 **Discussion**

22 The current study aimed to understand esports coaches, and the esports world that they  
23 inhabit, shape, and which reciprocally shapes them. It was guided by three research questions; a)  
24 what are the experiences that have led individuals to become esports coaches; b) how do esports  
25 coaches practice within the esports context?; and c) what are the contextual features that  
26 influence esports coaches? Inductive analysis of interviews with League of Legends coaches led

1 to the construction of four themes; 1) uncodified career and education pathways for coaches; 2)  
2 coaches practice by a review-plan-do cycle shaped by the pressure to win; 3) coaches practice in  
3 a complex, technological and global environment; and 4) coaches practice amongst challenges  
4 and paradoxes. Across these themes, esports are depicted as a global, technologically influenced  
5 context wherein coaches strive to achieve short-term performance objectives without formal  
6 coach education or structured career pathways. This discussion will utilise the previously  
7 introduced orchestration metaphor to explore these themes.

8           Consistent with the established social-relational conception of sport coaching (Cushion et  
9 al., 2006), esports coaches described working with various actors including teams of players and  
10 team owners within a complex social and economic context. Theoretically, these interactions and  
11 this context lends itself to the metaphorical image of the esports coach as a conductor (Jones &  
12 Wallace, 2005; 2006). Indeed, the esports context and coaches' experiences appear to be filled  
13 with ambiguity and uncertainty, thus there is a need for a guiding hand to steer others (i.e., to  
14 orchestrate). For instance, the ever-changing technological landscape means that tactical  
15 knowledge in esports is often time bound because the 'meta' (i.e., optimal tactical strategy)  
16 changes in response to frequent (e.g., fortnightly) updates to games (i.e., patches). These updates  
17 are provided by a commercial manufacturer and are not available to esports coaches nor players  
18 until the official release. This means that at regular points in the season, players' tactical  
19 knowledge will, to some extent, be outdated. Consequently, esports coaches continuously need to  
20 devise new strategies and 'conduct' bespoke preparation in response to unpredictable changes in  
21 the game. To do so, they report looking to other leagues in different geographical locations to see  
22 how fellow coaches are reacting to the latest patch. Of course, these coaches are also reacting to  
23 the latest developments in the game, and therefore the 'meta' remains a somewhat ambiguous

1 and temporal construct. Thus, consistent with the orchestration metaphor (see Jones et al., 2013),  
2 esports coaches, like conductors are required to monitor changes in the game, notice how others  
3 are responding, and harmoniously co-ordinate a new strategy with their team (i.e., guide the  
4 orchestra through uncertain moments). Esports coaches' expertise in orchestrating in this way  
5 may be of interest to sports coaches or organisations who similarly have to adapt to dynamic  
6 challenges.

7        Enveloping the coaches' accounts of orchestrating players is an overarching performance  
8 narrative i.e., involvement driven by "competition, winning and social esteem" (Douglas &  
9 Carless, 2006, p.19). This narrative was associated with regular evaluations on the basis of  
10 win/loss records which are provided by team owners and a global audience communicating via  
11 social media. Under such pressures, esports coaches' careers appear to be somewhat precarious  
12 and short term. In response to these social-cultural pressures, many coaches saw themselves at  
13 the forefront of their teams' performance and considered themselves able to control players'  
14 behaviours and performances. For example, coaches frequently spoke of fixing players' mistakes  
15 and saw winning as confirmation that their coaching practices were successful. Esports coaches  
16 portrayed an assured image that implied that they are au fait with the latest 'meta' (optimal  
17 tactics), well-informed of strategies and players from different geographical contexts, and able to  
18 determine performance outcomes. The coaches' perceptions of control over performance is  
19 reminiscent of a Goffmanian front that has been observed in studies of sport coaches (Corsby et  
20 al., 2022). For instance, studies of football (soccer) coaches in the UK have demonstrated that  
21 coaches present authoritarian behaviours to meet audience expectations and maintain control of  
22 athlete behaviours (Roberts et al., 2019; Partington & Cushion, 2012; Potrac et al., 2002). In a  
23 precarious environment such as esports, it is not surprising that esports coaches should similarly

1 espouse narratives of control, authority and expertise to meet the expectations of players, team  
2 owners and fans. This image is, however, somewhat inconsistent with the metaphor of the  
3 orchestrator coach who acknowledges the limits of their control and instead steers and  
4 harmonises individuals for collective performance (Jones et al., 2013). Thus, the control and  
5 influence of esports coaches is an area of interest for coaching researchers that warrants future  
6 study.

7         Straddling the rhetoric of self-assured control, and paradoxical uncertainty, esports  
8 coaches' everyday practices could be characterised as providing structure and improvisation.  
9 Like the metaphorical conductor, esports coaches provided direction to players. Simultaneously,  
10 esports coaches also need to continuously adapt to the latest development, which could include a  
11 patch (update), a draft (character selection), roster changes, and audience expectations. To do so,  
12 the coaches in this study described 'behind-the-scenes string pulling' with players (Jones et al.,  
13 2013 p.272). This work involved reviewing previous games with players and directing their  
14 attention towards implementing an overall team strategy in subsequent games. This cycle of  
15 'review-plan-do' predominantly involved esports coaches engaging in direct instruction.  
16 Alternative frameworks such as discovery-based approaches (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002),  
17 autonomy supportive coaching (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), or non-linear approaches (Roberts  
18 et al., 2020) did not appear to be utilised, although this may reflect the absence of formal coach  
19 education. Sport coaching researchers and educators may be able to provide value here by  
20 introducing pedagogical strategies that support performance and holistic player development.  
21 That said, coaches also described building close relationships with players through teamwork  
22 activities and ad-hoc social interactions in gaming houses (i.e., shared accommodation). Such  
23 acts are consistent with orchestration which promotes noticing and consciously attending to the

1 dynamics within the team environment alongside the tactical and technical progress of  
2 performers (Jones et al., 2013).

3 More broadly, in the striking absence of a codified career pathway, formal qualifications  
4 and continuous professional development, esports coaches orchestrated their careers. For  
5 example, they have embraced informal and non-formal learning methods such as experiential  
6 learning, ad-hoc mentoring, and engaging with popular literature. Networking skills were also  
7 critical for coaches to secure mentoring and coaching opportunities. Through such activities,  
8 esports coaches appeared to use multiple resources to orchestrate (monitor, notice, and co-  
9 ordinate) and harmonise their own existence as a coach. A pertinent area for research would be  
10 to explore how formal coach education might help coaches to navigate the social interactions  
11 within the esports domains. The subsequent impact of coach education on esports coaches'  
12 performance orientation, their personal and athletes' wellbeing, and ability to utilise athlete-  
13 centred pedagogies are also areas where sport coaching researchers and practitioners may have  
14 expertise of value to esports organisations. Beyond this, recognising the global, digital and  
15 commercial context of esports teams, there is also a need for research to:

- 16 1. Develop healthy long-term esports player and coach development pathways.
- 17 2. Examine the potential for alternative narratives, such as esports as a vehicle for  
18 positive youth development.
- 19 3. Reconceive the role of the coach as not only intertwined with other humans, but  
20 also technology.
- 21 4. Map the networks and complexity of the esports system.

22 Conversely, this study highlights areas where esports practices may be of value to sports  
23 coaching such as:



1 within a connected global context. Here talent, knowledge, and coaches themselves are part of a  
2 developing cross-cultural marketplace. As coaches navigate and to some extent orchestrate this  
3 complex system, they are currently underserved in terms of access to context-specific education  
4 and formalized career pathways and rely heavily on their own initiative to seek out career and  
5 developmental opportunities. Perhaps related to this, esports coaches primarily articulated a  
6 traditional pedagogical approach of reviewing game footage and providing direct instruction.  
7 This is just one area where sharing knowledge between sports coaching and esports coaching  
8 may be productive. Other areas have been identified in this article. In providing this initial  
9 description and analysis, this paper has for the first-time unveiled coaching in esports as  
10 experienced by esports coaches themselves. This significant contribution illuminates a new  
11 domain that may be of interest to sport coaches as a source of new insights or as an opportunity  
12 for sport coaching researchers and practitioners to contribute to this developing area of activity.  
13

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