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The give and take of social support in professional athlete career pathways

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamics of social support in emerging professional athlete career transitions. Drawing on a pragmatic research paradigm and using qualitative, instrumental multi-case methodology, the article investigates how social support shapes athlete experiences. Through in-depth accounts and reflexive thematic analysis across four cases: Boxing, Rugby League, Basketball pathways, and an independent practitioner case, the article examines the realities faced by athletes, including those who migrate internationally. Central to the inquiry are questions about the attributes that facilitate or hinder dyadic support relationships, and how practical organisational and relational support can foster both personal and athletic development in and beyond sport. By integrating existential perspectives, particularly concepts of isolation, authenticity and meaning, the research findings highlight the tension athletes, parents, coaches, and practitioners experience when bending to institutional roles and external pressures. Findings reveal that the most impactful support relationships are found not in the fulfilment of transitory or functional roles, but in connection and authenticity through genuine care, trust, presence, mutual benefit, and recognition of each other's needs. The article positions anxiety as an everyday concern in an athlete's life. As such, the support-provider's responsibility is to guide emerging athletes through struggles with truth and transparency, strengthening their autonomy, skills, and resilience to thrive in sport and life. This article proposes targeted recommendations relating to developmental support environments offering insights for sports personnel and athletes.

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KEYWORDS

Social support; talent development environments; existential psychology; professional sport pathways; athlete development

Introduction

Professional sport offers a legitimate and enticing career pathway for young athletes. Yet, the journey toward a lucrative contract and on-field success is marked by high attrition rates and characterised by a 'rollercoaster' of transition, intersecting personal and athletic events (Nesti, 2025). As such, choosing such a career means accepting that anxiety and pressure are a daily reality (Nesti, 2006), with career transitions defined as a transactional process of stress (Lavalley, 2019; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Adopting a pragmatic, qualitative, instrumental multi-case methodology, the research was conducted from Aotearoa, New Zealand. The paper analyses the meaning and structures of social support as a single-subject phenomenon through an existential lens. The contributing case data comprised emerging athletes (EAs) and sports personnel across three sports – Boxing,¹ Rugby League,² and Basketball³—and included a fourth case dedicated to the independent practitioner role, which included the lead author's personal experiences.

While research interest has increased in talent development environments (e.g., Hauser et al., 2022) and in

the 'team behind the team' and cohesion in sport environments (e.g., Toole et al., 2025), there is still limited, specifically directed literature on social support, relationships, and their effects on athlete development. This article responds to a call by Feeney and Collins (2015) for research to focus on dyadic social support relationships as a facilitator of development and thriving. Wachsmuth et al. (2025) recent publication suggests renewed importance in this topic, concluding that there is a need for more critical reflection on youth players' social support needs and on opportunities to address these needs.

By uniquely applying existential philosophy to the subject of social support, we first position anxiety as being rarely 'experienced as a pure or discrete category of positive or negative feelings' (Nesti, 2006, p. 51). In examining social support from both sides of the dyadic relationship, we recognise source feelings of anxiety as fears of isolation, failure (death of a dream) and lack of meaning (Sartre, 1946/2007) and introduce authenticity as a determinant of relational 'good faith' in an individual's relationship with themselves and others. As such, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of when,

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why and how relationships are pivotal to EA support and development. The following section provides background on the EA pathway and its context within professional athletes' career transitions.

Situating the research: Athlete professional pathways

Professional sport career transitions are a complex and multifaceted process that spans from talent identification through to exit or retirement (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). The funnel in Figure 1 reflects the significant dropout rate in an EAs pathway, which commences with talent identification and recruitment and exiting anywhere down the funnel; with successful EAs, contracted into professional environments as apprentices or rookies. Recruitment places individuals in environments with repeated cycles of selection (Güllich, 2014) and increasingly competitive phases, intense physical demands, escalating competition, and shifting relational dynamics. Progression demands physical, mental, emotional, and social excellence, sacrifice, and commitment (Thomas et al., 2024). Furthermore, the EA pathway typically coincides with a tumultuous period of adolescent development (Arnett, 2000). EAs who commence their pathway young, can still be under legal age to make independent decisions and most often are still deeply connected to their families for practical support, logistics, and emotional care (Dorsch et al., 2016; Harwood

et al., 2019). As EAs progress down the pathway funnel, most will be pushing for independence from parental guidance and seek greater autonomy in their sports careers and other personal, educational, and vocational lives (Arnett, 2000; Hong et al., 2022). Heightened qualities of self-efficacy (confidence, belief, resiliency), relational intelligence and courage, all contributing to athlete thriving (Nesti, 2025).

EAs in Boxing, Rugby League, and US collegiate Basketball face complex transitional journeys marked by shifting status, relentless demands, and often brutal realisations about the business of professional sport (Rothwell et al., 2020; Smith & Hardin, 2020; Thomas et al., 2024; Wacquant, 1995). While boxers may retain EA status well into their twenties through sustained competitive success, rugby league players confront career-defining milestones by age 21–22, and basketball student-athletes navigate a pathway that ends for most in withdrawal, failed eligibility, or graduation, with only a few transitioning to professional ranks (Stokowski et al., 2019). Across these cases, athletes recount leaving behind childhood friends, experiencing changing relational dynamics, facing rivals, enduring setbacks, and injuries, and even migrating overseas in pursuit of sport dreams (McGlinchey et al., 2022; Storm et al., 2022). In Boxing, the gulf between amateur and professional results in even some of the most decorated amateurs failing professionally (Thomas et al., 2024). These intense career transitions challenge physical, mental,

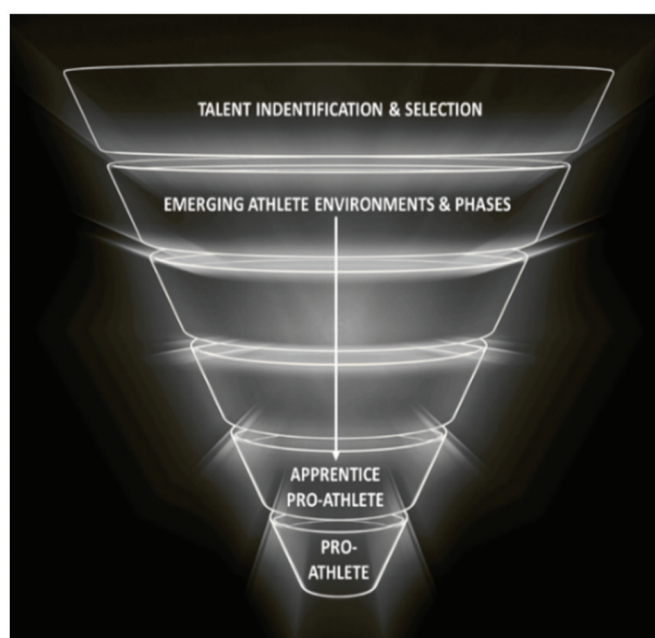


Figure 1. The professional athlete funnel.

emotional, and relational capacities, underscoring the importance of robust social support for athlete care and development (Tod et al., 2019; Williams & MacNamara, 2020).

Theoretical framework

The following two sections situate the theoretical frameworks underpinning this analysis. Uniquely positioning existential principles alongside social support theory for analysis, recognises that structure and meaning fit somewhere between objective and subjective realities (Maarouf, 2019; Nesti, 2006).

Relationships in existential context

Situated within the context of Sartrean existential concerns (death, isolation, identity, meaning, freedom, (responsibility or choice). Navigating these underlying fears contributes to anxiety as an emotional state contributing to crisis, struggle or thriving (Sartre, 1943/2018). In this article, endings refer to transitional states, and the complexities of identity are simplified to human facticity (e.g., body, age, ethnicity, gender) and roles. Freedom represents the participants' free will to choose a career, respond to events, or seek help, but equally, in their responsibility for and in the meaning they attribute to those choices.

The central actor in sport is the EA, but they do not – and cannot – function or perform at elite levels in isolation; they engage with teams, sports personnel, as well as family, friends, fans, and mentors. Individuals fill functions (e.g., technical development, emotional support) and assume roles (e.g., athlete, coach, practitioner, family) through a pattern of behaviour and actions that depend on time, place, and social context (Carron & Eys, 2012). Sartre (1946/2007) argues that individuals only find meaning through their 'intersubjectivity', that is, in relation to others. Further, Sartre contextualises individuals as 'objectified' when they see themselves 'through the eyes of others'.

Buber (1965) defines relationships dialogically as two one-sided yet reciprocal exchanges or connections. *Authenticity* emerges when both sides of the dyad recognise and honour the humanity of the other, engaging without bias or self-interest (Buber, 1965). Sartre (1943/2018) refers to this as acting in 'good faith', being true to oneself, both in thought and in action. In contrast, acting in 'bad faith' involves performing a role—'wearing a mask' – often in response to social pressures or external expectations. Consequently, individuals from both sides of sports dyads strive to satisfy expectations,

maintain harmony, adapt to designated roles, or protect status and self-esteem (Aggerholm, 2015).

In operational terms, Franck and Stambulova's definition provides further context to the transitional nature of EA pathway relationships as follows:

Transitory relationships are defined as being influential primarily within an athletic context and, although usually short-lived, provide important guidance to the athletes in terms of their career directions or changes. Existential relationships influence athletes' sport and non-sport lives, their value systems and motivations for long-lasting athletic careers. (Franck & Stambulova, 2018)

Social support theory

Social support is provided in various forms: tangible and informational (instrumental), or esteem and emotional (emotional) (Rees & Freeman, 2012). The availability of social support (perceived or actual) has been shown to improve an individual's self-efficacy (resiliency, confidence, and belief) and perceived control (Rees & Freeman, 2006, 2009). Furthermore, increased coping and these associated efficacy and control outcomes was found to enhance sporting performance (Freeman & Rees, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2009).

Expanding upon these foundational theories, Feeney and Collins (2015) positioned the social support function as a mechanism for coping and as a contributor to overall thriving, differentiating social support not only as a resource for coping with adversity (source of support) but also as a facilitator of growth and development (relational catalyst). The authors noted that, not all events are adverse, but all events demand resources. Successful support relationships occur when support is given without condition (authentically), the recipient feels understood, validated, and cared for, and the supporter respects the recipient's autonomy. Feeney and Collins (2015) define relationships as holding varying bi-relational boundaries defined by levels of dependence between the 'support-provider' and "recipient". Successful support relationships occur under optimal dependence, where support is given and received without condition or dependence. These social support principles align closely with Buber's existential tenet for authentic dialogical relationships (Buber, 1965). Feeney and Collins' broader perspective offers a more holistic understanding of how social support can facilitate an athlete's ability to thrive during career transitions characterised by multiple stressors, events, and over prolonged timeframes.

Feeney and Collins (2015) provide further clarity to the linkages between existential dyadic relationships

and social support theory by identifying the recipient not as a passive player but as responsible for shaping their relational outcomes. For example, this might involve the athlete reaching out (help-seeking), being receptive to efforts, not over-taxing supplier demands, and returning gratitude and mutual investment. This approach recognises both support-provider and recipient as individuals with unique needs and motivations, emphasising social support as bi-directional in terms of choice, responsibility, meaning and reciprocity.

Understanding these relationship dynamics is particularly salient when investigating EAs who navigate not only the physical, psychological, and social demands of professional sport but also cross-cultural transitions as they relocate internationally in pursuit of opportunities. Developing *autonomy* implies a support relationship that fosters self-reliance, decision-making, and self-development (Feeney & Collins, 2015).

Research design

This study employed a pragmatic, qualitative instrumental multi-case methodology (James, 1907; Stake, 2006), using existential axiology as a framework for understanding EA career transitions in professional sport (Nesti, 2006). The method implemented is presented in Figure 2. The design aimed to capture participants' real-life, on-the-ground experiences in real time (Krane & Baird, 2005). Building on the four case reports in the original thesis (Thomas, 2023), this paper adds further depth by examining social support from both supplier and recipient perspectives through a dyadic, existential, and developmental lens.

Ethical approval and Rigour

Approval was obtained from our institutional ethics committee. Participant protection, including informed consent and confidentiality, was maintained throughout, with follow-up interviews conducted post-fieldwork (Merriam, 1998). The research-practitioner's (RP) immersive insider trust and position enabled open discussion of existential and relational challenges in dyadic relationships (Krane & Baird, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2022). Managing the risks of over-familiarisation required awareness of when RP was a practitioner, a researcher, or a friend, with further integrity extended by reflective interviews and data validation by critical friends, an independent sports psychologist, a basketball development coach, and RP's supervisor panel.

Maintaining authenticity and ongoing trust were paramount to RP's professional relationships.

Sampling and data collection

In case study research, the researcher chooses what to study; each case can have a distinct context, and the data collected across cases can take varying forms (Gentles et al., 2015). Purposive and convenience sampling (refer Table 1) ensured the experiential relevance, breadth, and depth of participants, across Boxing, Rugby League, Basketball, and participant cases (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Etikan et al., 2016). Data collection consolidated three primary sources: immersive fieldwork (both inside and outside of performance environments), semi-structured interviews informed by existential psychological principles (Nesti, 2004), and scholarly literature identified in EA domains from 2010 to 2023. The three-year longitudinal approach deepened interpretation through participant-articulated views, transitional experiences, and RP's depth of engagement (Maarouf, 2019).

Analysis

Analysis followed an iterative process of reflexive thematic data interpretation across the four case reports, reworking original themes and sub-themes and returning to the source data for additional samples and clarification when applicable (Figure 2). Using the existential social support framework (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2015) and research questions as a compass, the lead author reviewed and processed convergent and divergent themes until writing was completed (Braun & Clark, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Generative AI (Perplexity Pro) was used as an editing tool to refine original text, grammar, and sentence structure.

Results

The following findings and discussion are reported in two parts, as shown in Figure 2. Part 1 presents findings and discussion on social support relationships across the four cases. Part 2 provides further discussion on the implications of support structures and relationships for long-term EA development.

Part 1: Factors of social support relationships

This section presents key findings in response to the question: What factors strengthen or diminish authentic social support relationships? The findings are presented

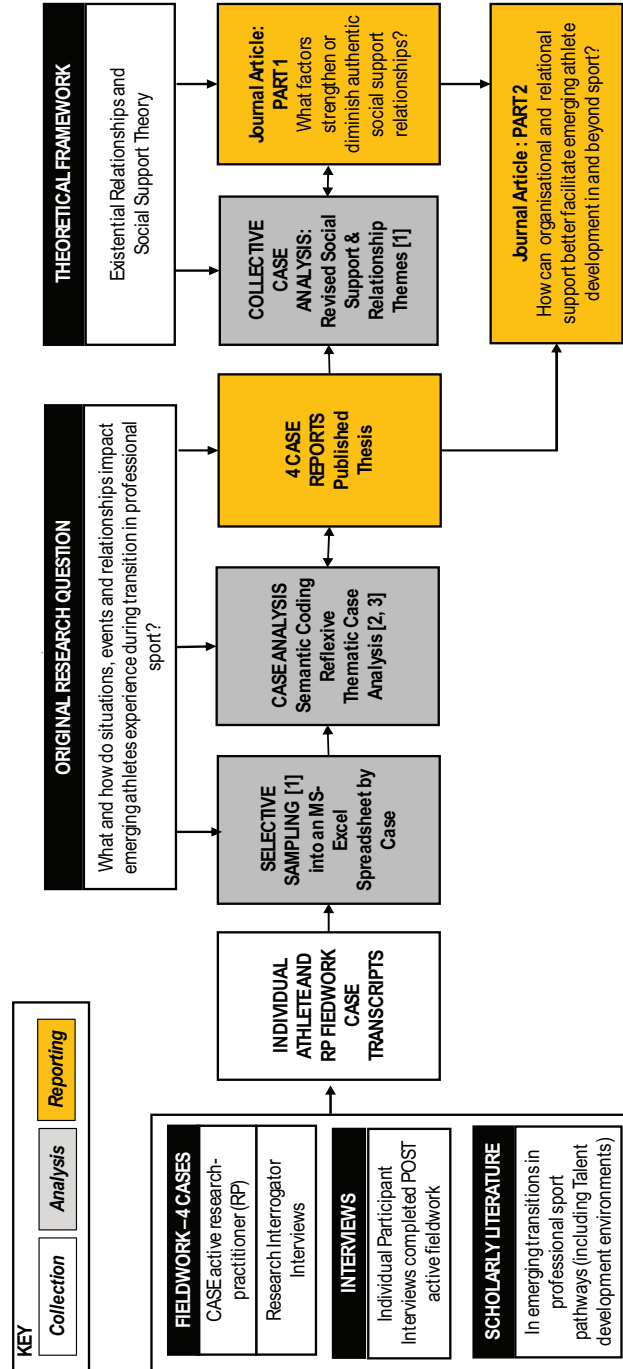


Figure 2. Research Method. 1. Selective sampling involved identifying instances that are related to the research scope and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Gentles et al., 2015). 2. Semantic Code(s) systematic notation for all selected samples in each case, analysing words and meaning, codes use common participant words as code followed by Reflexive Theoretical Thematic Analysis focuses on patterns, guided by research questions appropriate for participatory and applied research (Braun & Clark, 2013).

Table 1. Participant numbers by case, role, data collection method.

Participants	Role	Ethnicity	DATA		Participants	Role	Ethnicity	DATA	
			Fieldwork	Interview				Fieldwork	Interview
CASE 1 - BOXING					CASE 3 - BASKETBALL				
Boxing-Coach	O	E	1	1	BB-Manager-1	O	E	1	1
Matchmaker	O	O		1	BB-Manager-2	O	E	1	1
Boxing-Manager	O	E		1	BB-Coach1	O	E	1	1
Boxer A	EA	O	1	1	BB-Coach2	O	P	1	1
Boxer B	EA	E	1	1	BB-Developer	O	O		1
Boxer C	RA	M		1	BB-Trainer	P	E	1	1
RP	P	E	1	1	BB-Analyst	O	E		1
TOTAL			4	7	Baller-to-Executive	O	E		1
CASE 2 - RUGBY LEAGUE					CASE 4 - PRACTITIONER				
Player-A	EA	P	1	1	Baller-A	EA	M	1	1
Player-B	EA	P	1		Baller-B	SP	E	1	1
Player-C	EA	P	1		Baller-C	EA	M	1	1
Player-D	EA	E	1	1	Baller-D	EA	E	1	
Player-E	EA	P	1	1	Baller-E	EA	O	1	
Player-F	EA	P	1		Baller-F	EA	O	1	
Player-G	RA	P		1	Baller-G	EA	E	1	
RL-Trainer	P	P		1	RP	P	E	1	1
RL-Manager1	O	P		1	TOTAL			13	12
RL-Manager2	O	P		1	CASE 4 - PRACTITIONER				
RL-Agent	O	E		1	Psych	P			1
RL-Physio(therapist)	P	E		1	Independent-Trainer	P			1
Wellbeing-Manager	P	M		1	RP	P		1	1
RP	P	E	1	1	TOTAL			1	3
TOTAL			7	0					
KEY					Ethnicity:				
Role:					E = New Zealand European				
RP = Researcher-Practitioner (Lead Author)					O = Other				
O = Organisational Sports Personnel					M = Māori				
P = Practitioner					P = Pacific Islander/Polynesian				
EA = Emerging Athlete									
RA = Retired Athlete									
SP = Senior Professional Athlete									

across four themes, supported by scholarly sports literature, and analysed using the theoretical framework presented above:

- Ready or Not?
- Small Things Matter
- Significance of Family for Pasifika Athletes
- What About Me?

Ready or not?

EA transitional realities of *Being a Talented Teenager, Away from Home*, and *You Can't Do It Alone?* are examined under the title *Ready or Not?* This theme demonstrates that athlete readiness (or lack of) was shaped not simply by physical facticity and athletic preparation but in their existential struggle to understand who they were becoming, and what and why they wanted their sporting dream. Whether adolescents were existentially aware of the emotions they were feeling, what they described was a sense of isolation, 'The person going to look out for you most is yourself' (Player-E) and a need to 'grow up fast'.

Teenagers with talent. Athletes described the abrupt leap from adolescence into high-stakes environments.

Player-E explained, 'I went from being in NZ to Australia in like four months. I wasn't ready to be more independent. I didn't have my mother to drop me off'. This sense of unpreparedness echoed across participant stories, with BB-Manager2 voicing his parental perspective: 'No matter what the recruiters promise you, it is still lonely'. Adding to the pressure, Baller-to-Exec described the relentless scrutiny: 'Imagine having your boss sitting over your shoulder every day at work, watching every move you make [waiting to] tell you you've made a mistake', combined with constant physical performance measurements that became artefacts of their self-worth and objectification (Aggerholm, 2015; Sartre, 1944/1976). Athletes candidly expressed a longing to 'just be a kid sometimes' (Player-E) but were compelled to become more independent and resilient to survive, findings consistent with those of Jones et al. (2014) and Mills et al. (2014). Such admissions peel back the teenage bravado and expose the profound challenge of growing up in professional sport pathways. Those who could see past the hype and beyond the anxiety had realistic, adaptable expectations and were ready to convert the opportunity into a career (fieldnotes). Like Player-A,

who successfully transitioned into and from the apprenticeship phase, speaks of meaning derived from a strong sense of self: 'Growing up, I always had a mindset of knowing that I could do anything on my own. Like not in the way of – I don't need anyone, just my own mindset'.

Away from home. Yet Player-A still reflected on his initial move as tough, sharing, 'Being around different boys, lots of great players and different types of coaching, like it was just hard for me at the start'. The transition from familiar playing grounds to new environments tested even strong-willed athletes' adaptability, autonomy, and relational intelligence. Player-A's description of dislocation was a shared experience of competing for positions and contracts that saw other athletes as rivals, evolving to teammates who bonded through shared struggle. Many participants referred to a sense of 'brotherhood' as an essential buffer against the feelings of isolation and struggle. Baller-A described the benefit of these relationships beyond the team: 'Being able to just be comfortable around campus and comfortable around people' as vital, especially when change was a constant due to shifting rosters of coaches or teammates. Local ties – through surrogate families, club houses offered additional crucial support with 'teammates family living just across the road' (Baller-A)

As athletes move away from parental safety nets – where parents once provided logistical support, advocacy, and fought selection battles on their behalf – emerging independence becomes non-negotiable. The challenge is not just logistical but existential. The ability to communicate with a vast array of stakeholders and strangers on issues ranging from performance to conflicts became pivotal to their athletic and personal growth. As Baller-A acknowledged, 'If you are Māori or PI [your culture] is to be more humble, but in the US, they see this as a weakness'. Such cultural nuance could amplify the struggle to ask for help: Player-E, an 18-year-old Tongan, was 'too shy to ask for a ride', which led to missing key training sessions and even a game he longed to play. For some, like Player-D, a 23-year-old NZ-European graduate, maturity brought greater confidence: 'I could ask my agent to tell them . . . but doing it myself and being upfront, I feel like there would be a lot more respect'. These existential and social support perspectives highlight that thriving in this transition depends on the individual's ability to form meaningful connections and confidently claim one's place in a new social order while still honouring their personal values.

You can't do it alone. Even in the harsh world of boxing, the truth remains: 'No one can get in there and fight

for you', Matchmaker reflected that after the theatrics of the ring-walk, you are alone in the ring. Critically, boxers need their corner to 'to make sure [he] gets to see his kids after this fight'. (BoxingCoach). Boxer-C highlighted the importance of these relationships, stating, 'I didn't have a lot of people around me – I didn't need a lot – just a trustworthy team who could independently make strategic decisions and pull me back when I got ahead of myself'. RL-Physio summed up this shared need: 'You can't expect a 17-year-old to handle everything alone'. Athletes repeatedly pointed to the importance of relational support – 'someone to talk to [who] respects that there's a problem, a shoulder to lean on when you need help' (Player-E), and 'someone who genuinely cares and understands how I'm feeling' (Baller-to-Exec).

Theme summary. 'Ready or Not?' demonstrates that far from being defined by selection or talent alone, emerging athletes must continually navigate isolation, uncertainty, and the gaze of others as they transition into new environments and take greater ownership of their path (Sartre, 1944/1976; Storm et al., 2022). The evidence reveals that independence, relational intelligence, and resilience are developed not in isolation but through connections with family, teammates, mentors, and sports personnel. Ultimately, readiness is built through moments of vulnerability, reflection, and relational support, as such, findings affirm that supporting an EA's capacity to thrive is in guiding their development as a whole person – not just sports performer – especially through adolescent years (Arnett, 2000; Rongen et al., 2021; Wylleman & Reints, 2010), and critical transition points in their sporting lives. Support provision should be mindful of the evolving developmental stages of adolescence – optimising their need for both autonomy and struggle – and accelerating the potential for personal and sporting performance (Collins et al., 2016; Feeney & Collins, 2015).

Small things matter

Within the existential-social support framework, *Lingering with Intent* and *Small Things Make a Difference* examine the importance of presence, reliability, and genuine care in these support relationships. The theme emphasises that it is in the little things and in the provision of a safe space that connection and opportunities for existential support arise.

Lingering with intent. 'Expecting young athletes to just know when and how to seek help is risky – especially for young men' (fieldnotes). The very act of help-seeking is fraught with barriers: reluctance often stemming from cultural norms, masculine protection, fear of

reputational loss, or fear of jeopardising their position (Brown et al., 2019; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Lewis et al., 2018).

Many EAs 'hide behind performance masks and roles' (Aggerholm, 2015), making it a struggle to 'ask for help or open up on emotional matters'. Practitioners echo this reality, sharing, 'It is when I can linger with intent around the gym, the rooms, it is then people set off, "Hey, can I have a chat?" And that is where I think I make the most difference, because you get that rapport, that connection'. (Psych). This story underlines presence: not simply being there, but showing quality, intentional involvement from reliably available people who recognise the person beyond the athlete. Using organic opportunities and finding an informal setting offers a less confronting way to open up difficult conversations or ask about off-field matters (Fieldnotes, Psych). RP observed that 'attending their games, sparring sessions, bouts' demonstrated mutual investment and shared passion among herself, the athletes, the coaches, and the parents. Presence, at its best, is intuitive and responsive: for EAs who may not naturally seek out support, practitioners must interpret subtle signals of opportunity for reflection, or of distress, yet hold space for honest struggle as a process for growing independence, confidence, and resilience (Collins et al., 2016).

Athletes valued 'someone to just to talk to' (Baller-Exec), but also expressed the importance of trust and transparency, someone 'who doesn't have any connection with the management team, or coaching staff ... like you taught me about opening up your feelings' (Baller-C) and 'people that can hold you accountable but not tear you down' (Baller-B). When support, regardless of role, comes from inside the performance environments, perceptions of neutrality and a safe space to remove the performance mask can be compromised. Psych emphasises, 'I will share performance-related information to [academy staff] but if they're telling me something personal, then I keep it private'. Striking this balance means granting EAs a safe place to be their authentic selves and explore their anxieties and sense of meaning in and beyond their sporting lives.

'Small things make a difference'. Trust was foundational to both seeking support and trusting the supplier. Trust accumulates as small things over time (Psych, RP) and builds into genuine connections. In today's modern world, communication is often a timely text, a small reminder to the recipient they are seen, acknowledging achievements and milestones – 'proud of you' – inspiring confidence – 'you got this' or reassurance of support availability – 'I have your back, here if you need' (RP). Among adolescent athletes, a typical response was just

an emoji, but small things matter; even an emoji can maintain open channels of communication, acknowledge perceived support availability, and lead to an enduring connection. For example, shortly after moving to US-College, Baller-C reached out, 'hey RP, I need some help, since the move over here I've been struggling ...', (fieldnotes) and these connections are also illustrated in Psych's story of a rugby player who moved overseas, on his return several years later, 'when he saw me, he gave me a hug'. These communications have value for practitioners, too.

However, not all coaches and staff can, or are willing to, provide the same commitment or duty of care. For example: 'I find some coaches or staff that have an ego or struggle in this space, some are simply not very empathetic at all' (Wellbeing-Manager); 'the coach will say he is a bit off his game, and I'll be thinking, yep, because this happened' (Psych). This was seen in Baller-C's experiences in a semi-professional environment before he left for the US. BB-Developer observed, 'By the end of the season Baller-C disengaged, and no one cared to try and talk or help him through'. For Boxer-A, misplaced trust was catastrophic to his life and career: 'these people I trust so much who were leading me and I was just following, I thought they knew what they were doing'. Athletes consistently valued authentic investment: 'honest conversations that reflect genuine interest' (Baller-B), candid feedback outweighing empty praise. However, 'real talk' and 'hard, honest conversations' can only happen where trust, transparency and reliability exist (fieldnotes): 'I don't know why BB-Coach1 apologised, because [the fact was] he chose to put me in the last minute' (Baller-C), confirming he found the apology inauthentic. From BBCoach1's perspective, 'in a professional environment you're representing an organisation'.

Theme summary. *'Small Things Matter'* affirms the framework's existential perspective: authentic support is relational, context-sensitive, and attentive to the whole person. Practitioners must be able to interpret signals of distress while remaining sufficiently aware to allow space for struggle, growth and athlete autonomy. It is about showing up, seeing the athlete beneath the surface, and responding with genuine care and presence until the masks come down, trust is established, and the real conversation can begin. Here, a connection is founded, providing a gateway from a transitional to an existential relationship (Franck & Stambulova, 2018); both parties seeing the humanity in the other (Buber, 1965). Offering a cross-section of sports personnel (the team behind the team) allows for diverse personal

connections and modes of instrumental and emotional support, promoting resilience development in natural moments and contexts (Cupples et al., 2021; Toole et al., 2025).

Significance of family for Polynesian athletes

In this theme, we examine the collective responsibility, autonomy, and freedom for Polynesian athletes to choose their own sporting careers. This theme was divergent as distinctively dominant in the Rugby League case with Polynesian athletes ($n = 6$) and none from Boxing and Basketball. Like Porto Maciel et al. (2021), we found stress and dissatisfaction when family involvement slips into pressure, criticism, or unrealistic expectations. Family connections and cultural identity are foundational in the lives of EAs within the study's distinctive Pacific landscape. Collectivist values, rooted in concepts such as 'Vā' – the sacred relational space connecting the individual to family and community – profoundly shape social support systems for Polynesian athletes. Cultures that value unconditional respect for elders, humility, are juxtapositioned with the pride of warriors (Keung, 2018; Marsters et al., 2020). Family culture and care are nicely illustrated in a text conversation between RP and Player-B's mother, 'He never said he's homesick, he say everything is good Mum . . . [we tell him] keep fighting n work hard he said yes dad n mum I'll do my best', (fieldnotes).

Polynesian parents themselves endure pressures and struggles as they let go of their adolescent sons, giving them space to grow, joining new fraternities that they are excluded from, and navigating their own realities of professional sports. Families also make significant sacrifices, and some even relocate their families overseas to advance their EA's career. The recorded fieldwork also identified many Polynesian parents who lacked the necessary information, experience, or independent advice to inform their decision-making. Socioeconomic realities amplify these dynamics, with sporting success symbolising a pathway to financial stability and social status (fieldnotes). Athletes expressed that 'family supporting you makes you feel good; it makes you fight harder' (Player-C), while he and others described the pressure as oscillating between 'inspiration', 'burden', and 'tough discipline'. Every day, sideline exchanges with Polynesian fathers often included responses like, 'He played alright – he's got a lot more to work on' (fieldnotes), revealing understated encouragement, usually followed by difficult conversations at home.

Consequently, Polynesian athletes commonly fear letting family down, particularly family (Marsters et al., 2021). For this cohort, being injured or released is

traumatic and is commonly accompanied by shame (Wellbeing-Manager, RP), crisis and withdrawal (Player-F). RL-Physio also witnessed how familial drivers could precipitate risky decisions, such as playing through injury or accepting unfavourable contracts. As Player-G expressed, 'Family are sometimes not the right people to be involved'. Adversity and failure came with a sense of shame to the family, intensifying the psychological toll of injury, release, or dips in form (Marsters et al., 2020; Panapa & Phillips, 2014).

Theme summary. Collectivism provides emotional strength and meaning through a deep sense of belonging, familial responsibility, and cultural pride, but was also identified as a source of pressure and expectation. 'Despite being an older Palangi (white) woman, families valued the genuine care, support and affection I had for their sons' (RP reflective interview). This trust smoothed awkward conversations and added a layer of independence to advice and decision-making for both EAs and their parents, as confirmed by the statement 'You are very understanding when it comes to Island parents' (Player-E). Such comments underscore the need for trusted mentors outside the family to bridge the gap, who appreciate cultural values yet provide objective guidance (Keung, 2018). By adopting an existential perspective, the research highlights the need to facilitate culturally sensitive dialogue that recognises the athlete's individuality, autonomy, and drive for personal meaning within and beyond the collective.

What about me?

In this theme, subthemes *Inside or Out* and *Meaningful Investment* examine support relationships from the other side of the dyad, with primary focus on practitioners. Here, we find practitioners grappling with roles embedded in organisational structure, personal investment, and remuneration, that often contradict self-expression and meaning.

Inside or out. Both the physical and social environment in which the support-provider operates was identified as a key contributor to both their ability to build connection and to operate in 'good faith'; true to their values, meaning and practice, and to the EAs they engaged with. Environments represented shifting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Practitioners described, 'Being involved in the performance environment from the inside [as] a real privilege. I get excited about just being around and available for them' (Psych). Yet, belonging comes with instability; as priorities shift, allegiances are questioned, and access can be withdrawn.

Matchmaker summed up his reality: 'After mapping out his career together for years, I was told to stay in my lane'. He stressed that speaking the truth inside the boxer's inner circle was rare but critical to long-term boxing outcomes. Cultures of territoriality and rigid boundaries emerged – 'You need the person to be in your environment – they have to be watching it. They have to be exposed', (Boxing-Coach). Yet, as stakes rose, access inside the support circle contracted; despite RPs services described by Boxer-B as providing 'processes that produced clear plans and communication [as] really good because I knew I'd done everything possible ... and I went into the ring confident'.

Challenges to collaboration and ego management are constant. Independent-Trainer voiced frustration: 'Let's work together, because our job is ultimately, the players. It's not about you and me. So put your ego aside'. Well-being roles are reduced to 'education and employment taking them away from the personal stuff' (RLManager1); Wellbeing-Manager reflected, 'my heart and soul desperately wanted to meet deeper needs', yet she described how most welfare was handled second-hand – 'welfare information is discussed on the Physio table', while she was left 'box-ticking'.

Meaningful investment. Committing to support in the performance sphere means reckoning with existential weight and responsibility: "You have to [be] dedicated to the madness. Is it worth it? When it comes down to it, we are the ones who choose and therefore the only ones to blame' (Boxing-Manager). The emotional toll isn't abstract – RP described pre-fight tensions, juggling emotional outbursts, volatility, and the coach's ego, and acting as a stabiliser to maintain an athlete's confidence for the battle, while shelving her own needs. Support-providers are expected to subordinate their own emotional needs, content with "making a small difference". RP and Psych debated, "in valuing your contribution beyond making a small difference in an athlete's life, one must be guarded, for fear of being seen as self-

serving'. BB-Manager-1 voiced this ambiguity: 'I give up my time to be there for athletes ... when they're thankful, it's rewarding. But when it feels like they expect it ... I can't do it'.

Professional boundaries matter: their violation can have dramatic consequences, as with Player-G's cancelled boxing move. RP reflected, 'He is a man now; he needs to take responsibility, boxing is not a game', while lamenting wasted talent and 'the opportunity to prove [myself] and be part of something big' (fieldnotes). Recognition, reciprocity, and finite investment are central: 'I am not going to waste my time ... your shelf life is limited' (Boxing-Manager). As such, we align with Feeney and Collins (2015) tenet that authentic, facilitative support must be mutual, in both investment and benefit. Each party must continuously affirm commitment, mutual respect, and value in a context where roles and careers operate in dynamic, high-pressure sporting environments.

Theme summary. Applying a critical existential lens, we find practitioner relationships in the performance space are fraught with anxiety between seeking meaning and masking self-interest. Both parties are embedded in organisational roles, cultures, and environments; each with its own set of expectations and pressures. Both suppliers and recipients of support seek authenticity and fulfilment within organisational environments defined by rules, hierarchies, and shifting loyalties. Athletes routinely see themselves through the eyes of family, selectors, coaches, and fans, adopting masks to perform, meet others' expectations or fit into a team's fraternity (Aggerholm, 2015; Sartre, 1944/1976). Sports personnel often comply with institutional demands ('box ticking' or winning) while struggling to balance their personal values and desire for recognition and meaning with expectations, professionalism, and selflessness (Stansen & Chambers, 2019). This reciprocal masking, as Buber (1965) and Feeney and Collins (2015) suggest, erodes authenticity – reminding us that these

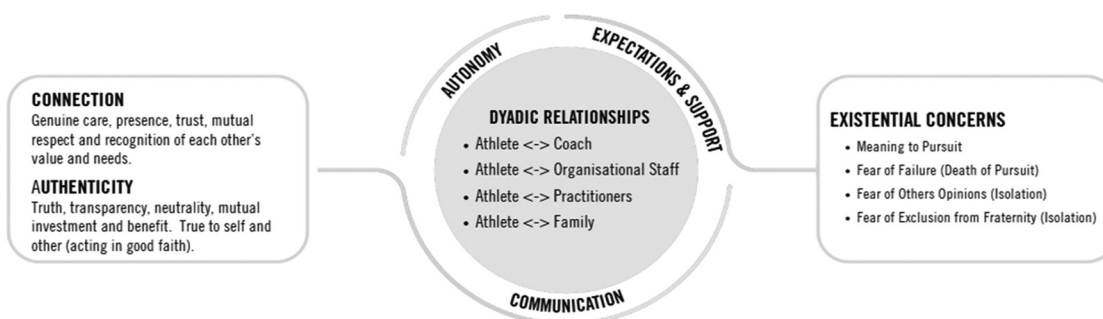


Figure 3. Conceptual model of interactions in social support Relationships.

relationships can never be entirely free of objectivity or the search for recognition, but are best navigated with reflexivity, humility, and ongoing dialogue about meaning, boundaries, and care.

Discussion

This section draws together the four themes and examines how [Figure 3](#) conceptual model articulates core elements – such as authenticity, autonomy, communication, and connection (Burns et al., 2019) – and how these are reflected in, complicated by, or challenged within the real-world experiences and dyadic interactions uncovered above (Buber, 1965; Franck & Stambulova, 2018; Sartre, 1946/2007). The dynamic interplay between existential perspectives and social support theory forms a critical lens for evaluating what strengthens or erodes facilitative support relationships in athlete development environments (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Nesti, 2006).

The model, integrating existential principles (anxiety, authenticity, meaning, and avoidance of isolation) with social support theory (optimal dependence, autonomy, and thriving), predicts dynamic, sometimes conflicting relationships between athletes and support-providers. As Sartre (1946/2007) asserts, authenticity and meaning are never forged in isolation, but emerge through our interrelationships, choices, actions, and the acknowledgement of others. This is particularly relevant to emerging athletes navigating adolescence – individuals full of talent and promise, yet still largely existentially unaware and in the early stages of self-reflection and understanding of who they are and how they fit into the world (Arnett, 2000).

Findings affirm core elements of connection – genuine care, trust, mutual respect, presence, and recognition – yet show that authenticity is not a stable trait but an ongoing aspiration (Nesti, 2025), constantly renegotiated amid tensions between social roles, performance pressures, and existential anxieties. As Sartre and Buber caution, inherent psychosocial contradictions arise when committing to organisational roles and their associated pressures and expectations; these risks include bias and self-interest, with the potential for inauthenticity and bad faith in social support relationships when truth, transparency, and mutual investment are absent (Buber, 1965; Sartre, 1943/2018).

The model's emphasis on connection and authenticity was iteratively designed as the report was refined. Findings underscore these narratives in relationships that honour humanity and foster real talk, facilitate resilience and development, while those driven by box-ticking, objectification, or role conformity risk inauthenticity, breeding isolation, and masking true nature and need. Meaning and fulfilment serve as fundamental mitigators for authentic support-

provider and recipient relationships. Recognition – being genuinely seen and valued – emerges as a pivotal relational mechanism, reinforcing trust, affirming value, and fostering the ongoing creation of shared meaning and mutual benefits while still retaining both parties autonomy (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Sartre, 1946/2007). These findings are consistent with Feeney and Collins's (2015) theory, which highlights that thriving is enabled not only by overcoming adversity but also through the pursuit of opportunities and shared purpose within supportive interactions.

Finally, cross-cultural findings – notably among Polynesian athletes – demonstrate how family, autonomy, and cultural meaning interact with support mechanisms in ways the framework anticipates but also complicates, requiring more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches and future research. Thus, while the conceptual model provides a robust and unique viewpoint for understanding support relationships, the findings underscore the complexity of sustaining authenticity amidst institutional demands, shifting roles, and the ongoing struggle for existential meaning – suggesting that critical reflection and collaborative practice amongst sports personnel are essential for athlete thriving and holistic care.

Part 2: Implications for emerging athlete care and development

This section provides further discussion and examination of how organisational and relational support can facilitate the care and development of EA in and beyond sport. The findings revealed a persistent shortfall in opportunities for personal and collaborative development for EAs, with participants describing environments focused on immediate performance (e.g., Baller-C, Player-E) and progression that often overshadowed concerns for long-term athletic and personal development (Hauser et al., 2022). If EA pathways endorse performance results without accountability, collaboration and long-term athletic and personal development, the culture will not change (Rongen et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2019). Furthermore, critical support resources often sat outside the performance environment or in silos within it. These findings demonstrate that EAs, who are typically still in adolescence and navigating complex, dynamic sporting environments, require a wide range of care, support, and development. 'One size or person doesn't fit all' (fieldnotes), as such, optimal athlete development arises when diverse personnel with complementary expertise and approaches collaborate and share perspectives willingly (Cupples et al., 2021).

Participants overwhelmingly agree that ‘you can’t divorce performance from the other stuff’ (e.g., Baller-B, Psych). Despite this consensus, practitioners continuously expressed frustration at being ‘an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff’ (Psych) rather than relational catalysts for developmental change. Buber’s dialogical framework (Buber, 1965), which emphasises the importance of authentic relational presence, contrasts sharply with the superficial ‘box-ticking’ approaches, highlighting the necessity for a greater understanding of the value of different support roles required in complex sporting environments (Wachsmuth et al., 2025).

Organisations and practitioners who are committed to athletes’ evolving needs – whether in moments of triumph, challenge, or crisis – help dismantle barriers, creating spaces for personal development that transcend mere performance metrics. While athletic training and pressure were omnipresent, recognising anxiety as an existential norm and part of their career choice will support athlete development (Nesti, 2025). Support is not about prescriptions or fixes, but in guiding and preparing EAs (and their parents) through predictable transitions, setbacks, and moments of uncertainty through a lens of reality (Nesti, 2006). Notwithstanding the recognised benefits of adversity and anxiety – where setbacks can foster coping resources and strength – the findings underscore the need for intentionally developmental environments. Such settings should nurture physical, mental, emotional, and social skills and resiliency alongside technical and tactical sport preparation (Collins et al., 2016; Cupples et al., 2021).

‘We need to establish the right conversations, teach them different skills ... get them comfortable being vulnerable so we can embed it in their DNA’ (Wellbeing-Manager). Achieving the desired level of duty of care and connection would require collaborative efforts among multiple individuals with the appropriate qualities, expertise, and reliability (Toole et al., 2025). Such collaboration would meet EA instrumental and emotional support needs and serve as a relational catalyst for development and success, reinforcing athletes’ autonomy, growth and self-efficacy in and beyond sport (Rongen et al., 2018). Notably, such investment demonstrates genuine care for the individuals who enter their pathways, making the organisation a more attractive proposition to talented athletes and their parents.

Recommendations

Consistent with pragmatic instrumental case-study methodology, the following practical recommendations are provided for organisations aiming to enhance the care, support, and developmental experiences of EAs.

- (1) Remove silos between welfare/well-being, sports psychology, and athletic performance. Foster a collaborative environment in which all support roles are integrated, and psychosocial development is embedded alongside technical and physical growth (Mitchell et al., 2020).
- (2) Clearly articulate pathway programme intentions (winning versus development) and ensure these are honoured throughout the organisation. Additionally, we recommend including performance metrics that value both athletic achievement and personal growth.
- (3) Recognising professional sport as a viable career, develop comprehensive frameworks and support systems that better prepare EAs and their families on pathway entry, especially those relocating or migrating overseas. Resources should increase knowledge, set realistic expectations, and promote readiness in both the athletic and personal domains (Martindale et al., 2023).
- (4) Reflecting the realities of the performance ‘funnel’, revise EAs’ dual-career investment with a benefit-versus-cost perspective. Design programmes appropriately positioned and timed, to filter in career and life skills and plans that can trigger action for Plan B when required. Prioritise timely, open conversations about transition possibilities or release, while maintaining consistent support beyond the athlete’s pathway (Williams & MacNamara, 2020).

We strongly endorse the view of Rongen et al. (2018) that ‘deliberate development organisations’ are crucial for positive and sustainable outcomes for EAs. Within this framework, recommendations that foster support relationships as relational catalysts for EA development are uniquely informed by existential analysis and social support theory. This distinction highlights the paper’s conceptual advance, bridging deeper philosophical understanding with actionable practice.

Research limitations and future research opportunities

This study’s scope was limited by its case and participant selection: only three sports, a single geographic and cultural context, male athletes, and single-subject analysis. The purposive sampling reflected pragmatic realities, driven by the research-practitioner’s fieldwork access. As a result, findings may be biased by personal perceptions

and subjectivity. Nonetheless, by integrating field observations with reflective interviews from athletes, staff, and coaches, the study's depth and credibility were strengthened. Reporting participants' own language further enhanced authenticity, transparency, and objectivity in interpreting experiences.

A key philosophical limitation lies in the inherent indeterminacy of existential analysis – any attempt to capture meaning, authenticity, or relational nuance resists standardisation or universal conclusions. This underlines the importance of reflexivity and critical engagement with theory in applied practice, embracing unique and evolving realities rather than oversimplification.

Researcher presence and accessibility during the study may have influenced observed support dynamics, potentially amplifying support delivery. Even so, such embeddedness is part of applied and relational research, capturing the realities of athlete support interactions.

Future research should build on Feeney and Collins (2015) call to advance understanding of dyadic support relationships, investigating how supportive bonds serve as protection during adversity and as catalysts for growth. Expanding participant demographics to include female athletes, more sports, cultures, and regions would yield more comprehensive insight. Longitudinal and intervention studies examining the impact of support practices, athlete care, and resource frameworks are needed to extend this work's practical contribution.

Conclusion

This research advances new insights into the existential and relational dimensions of social support in professional athlete pathways, moving beyond traditional performance-centric perspectives to foreground authentic human connection, mutual investment, and presence as foundational to athlete thriving. The multi-case, longitudinal design – spanning Boxing, Rugby League, Basketball, and practitioner contexts – enabled a contextually rich exploration of how athletes and support-providers navigate transitions, autonomy, and the pressures of role conformity.

Critically, the findings demonstrate that the most impactful support relationships are neither transactional nor solely developmental, but hinge on the dynamic negotiation of authenticity – a concept drawn from existential philosophy (Sartre, Buber) and reframed in an applied context. This work identifies persistent tensions: while social support theory prioritises optimal dependence, thriving, and reciprocal benefit, existential perspectives reveal that connection and meaning are

intrinsically vulnerable to conflict, objectification, and 'bad faith', especially when support roles become institutionalised or driven by performance metrics.

Original contributions include: (1) unveiling how dyadic support networks facilitate resilience and meaning-making through countless 'small things' and everyday embeddedness, rather than through structured interventions alone; (2) highlighting cultural specificity – in particular, collective and individual tensions for Polynesian athletes; and (3) exposing relational risks for athletes and support-providers alike, including reciprocal masking, inauthenticity, and the challenge of maintaining openness across transitions and power differentials.

These findings urge practitioners and organisations to move beyond box-ticking approaches and instead foster environments that balance autonomy, trust, and care. The research calls for deliberate, collaborative support structures that honour the humanity of athletes and support-providers, enable 'real talk', and strive for existential authenticity in the daily fabric of talent development. Ultimately, this article underscores the importance of moving beyond transitional or outcome-driven support and advocating for athlete care rooted in enduring connection, mutual recognition, and truth-telling in engagement with adversity and development.

Notes

- 1.. Professional boxing team, including individual athletes and stakeholders.
- 2.. NRL New South Wales pathway, athletes, sports personnel, and practitioners involved with various club.
- 3.. Semi-Professional New Zealand NBL team, which includes emerging collegiate athletes. With the advent of legislative changes to payments to Collegiate athletes, including scholarship, signing on fees and name, image, likeness remuneration, College sport is no longer considered an amateur pathway.

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