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Journal Pre-proof

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Overweight and obese men's experiences in a sport-based weight loss intervention for men

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Abstract

A significantly greater proportion of men (relative to women) are overweight and obese, yet relatively few weight loss interventions have been developed that sufficiently target men. This lack of male-focused programming may be in part because ‘traditional’ weight loss programs are unappealing for what is considered a ‘hard-to-reach’ population. One program that appears to have such appeal for men is the MAN v FAT Football (MVFF) program, based out of the United Kingdom, which is designed for men with a body mass index of (or greater than) 27.5. MVFF encourages men’s participation in a community-based weight loss program that incentivizes weight loss through participation in a football league, and since 2016 MVFF has supported the weight loss efforts of several thousand men. Using MVFF as an exemplar male-only weight loss program, our aim was to derive insight into intervention characteristics that may be effective in attracting and engaging this particular population. We recruited twenty-seven players ($Mage = 41.13$, $SD = 9.93$), and ten coaches ($Mage = 31.8$, $SD = 11.55$) from program locations throughout the United Kingdom. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, we identified several appraisal aspects of the program that players and coaches considered important, including the *appeal of sport, competition on a level playing field, camaraderie, accountability, men sharing issues with other men, gender-sensitized environment, likeminded and similar men*, and perceptions that *traditional weight loss programs are tailored towards women*. Player experiences (i.e., *competence and enjoyment*) and functional supports in the program (e.g., *player handbook, weight loss coach*) were reported to drive outcomes of effective weight loss and program retention. Interventions aiming to target men may be more successful working *with* rather than *against* formulations of identity such as masculinity, and this can be achieved by tailoring program content (e.g., messaging), settings (e.g., among men sharing similar characteristics such as body-type or goals), and mode of delivery (e.g., through organized sports, and leveraging competition to drive healthy behaviours).

Key words: competition; hard-to-reach; sport; weight loss; masculinity

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Abstract

In Western countries, such as Australia and the UK, a significantly greater proportion of men (relative to women) are overweight and obese, yet relatively few weight loss interventions have been developed that sufficiently target men. This lack of male-focused programming may be in part because ‘traditional’ weight loss programs are unappealing for what is considered a ‘hard-to-reach’ population. One program that appears to have such appeal for men is the MAN v FAT Football (MVFF) program, based out of the United Kingdom, which is designed for men with a body mass index of (or greater than) 27.5. MVFF encourages men’s participation in a community-based weight loss program that incentivizes weight loss through participation in a football league, and since 2016 MVFF has supported the weight loss efforts of several thousand men. Using MVFF as an exemplar, our aim was to derive insight into how men experience a male-only competitive, sport-based weight loss program. We recruited twenty-seven players ($Mage = 41.13$, $SD = 9.93$), and ten coaches ($Mage = 31.8$, $SD = 11.55$) from program locations throughout the United Kingdom. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, we identified several appraisal aspects of the program that players and coaches considered important, including the appeal of sport, competition on a level playing field, being part of a team, camaraderie, accountability, men sharing issues with other men, gender-sensitized environment, likeminded and similar men, and perceptions that traditional weight loss programs are tailored towards women. Player experiences (i.e., competence and enjoyment) and functional supports in the program (e.g., player handbook, weight loss coach) were reported to drive outcomes of effective weight loss and program retention. Interventions aiming to target men may be more successful working with rather than against formulations of identity such as masculinities, and this can be achieved by tailoring program content (e.g., messaging), settings (e.g., among men sharing similar characteristics such as body-type or goals), and mode of delivery (e.g., through organized sports, and leveraging competition to drive healthy behaviours).

Key words: competition; hard-to-reach; sport; weight loss; masculinity

Introduction

Globally, on average, women outlive men by five years, yet the causes of this disparity in life expectancy are not fully understood (Pinkhasov et al., 2010; Rochelle, Yeung, Bond, & Li, 2015). Although biological factors (Mehta & Josephs, 2011; Phillips, 2005) and patterns of illness contribute (Kaplan & Erickson, 2000), behavioural and social-contextual differences between sexes/genders also likely account for the disparity. Compelling evidence suggests men engage more frequently in health risk behaviour (e.g., alcohol consumption, substance abuse; Erol & Karpyak, 2015; Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005; Kuhn, 2015), are more likely to engage in multiple health risk behaviours (French, Rosenberg, & Knuiman, 2008; Kritsotakis, Psarrou, Vassilaki, Androulaki, & Philalithis, 2016), and utilize health services less than women (e.g., Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005). Despite overweight and obesity being more prevalent in men, relative to women, in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Ng et al., 2014), men are also less likely than women to attempt to lose weight, or be concerned about their (over)weight (Timperio, Cameron-Smith, Burns, & Crawford, 2000).

It is widely recognised that, for overweight and obese individuals, 5-10% weight loss can account for substantial health benefits (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2006). It is perhaps not surprising though, given that overweight and obese men appear less concerned about their weight status and are less likely to attempt to lose weight (Timperio et al., 2000), that men in general are underrepresented in randomized controlled lifestyle weight loss trials (Pagoto et al., 2012). Pagoto and colleagues (2012) reported that in the trials they reviewed, only 27% of participants were male, and males were less likely to be targeted in weight loss trials – only 5% of trials targeted male-only samples, compared to 32% female-only samples. This under-representation of males is noteworthy because of the prevalence of obesity and vulnerability to obesity-related diseases in men (Lovejoy, Sainsbury, & Group, 2009; S. C. Smith et al., 2005; Sundquist, Winkleby, & Pudaric, 2001). Pagoto and colleagues (2012) suggest this under-representation may be due to (a)

1 men being less motivated to lose weight than women, as women experience greater societal pressure
2 than men to lose weight, (b) men may be less interested in seeking outside help for their weight,
3 relative to women, or (c) men are not interested in the type of interventions put forth in lifestyle
4 weight loss studies. Only 24% of studies that underrepresented men provided an explanation for sex-
5 distribution, with the most common reasons being (1) focusing on female-specific disease (34%), (2),
6 focusing on postmenopausal females (13%), (3) excluding men to enhance study power (13%), (4)
7 focusing on ethnic minority women (10%), (5) recruitment methods failing to attract men (8%), and
8 (6) previous research has excluded women (8%). In sum, despite their poorer overall health status
9 relative to women (Pinkhasov et al., 2010), men are a ‘hard-to-reach’, underrepresented, and under-
10 targeted population when it comes to designing, promoting, and recruiting for lifestyle weight loss
11 programs in particular, and health promotion and illness prevention programs in general (Bottorff et
12 al., 2015; Pagoto et al., 2012).

13 Relatively little evidence exists to provide robust guidelines for improving men’s uptake of
14 health services in general (Robertson, Douglas, Ludbrook, Reid, & van Teijlingen, 2008), or within
15 overweight and obese treatment (Young, Morgan, Plotnikoff, Callister, & Collins, 2012). There is,
16 however, some evidence regarding the intervention components that may contribute to successful
17 weight loss initiatives among men. George and colleagues (2012) provided a critical evaluation of
18 physical activity-only versus physical activity-and-nutrition interventions targeting adult men. A
19 number of effective intervention characteristics were identified in this review, including the provision
20 of regular feedback, gender-specific tailored advice, access to self-monitoring tools or online
21 components, social support, variety in activities provided, and a degree of friendly competition.

22 Bottorff and colleagues (2015) conducted a comprehensive review of physical activity
23 programs involving men to expand on these findings, reinforcing the notion that tailored advice and
24 personal contact positively contribute to the general effectiveness of men’s physical activity
25 promotion interventions. Further, the mode of delivery of physical activity—specifically through

1 group-based exercise or sporting environments—may motivate men and encourage them to engage
2 in exercise on their own, outside of the group or sport setting. Bottorff and colleagues identified
3 twenty programs that were offered exclusively to men, twelve of which adopted innovative
4 approaches to promoting physical activity in men by developing the programs from the ground up as
5 sex-specific and gender-sensitive. Four notable examples of such gender-sensitive programs drew on
6 men’s interests and involvement in football, based in England, Scotland, and Australia. These
7 programs, delivered through football clubs, involved participation in a 12-week “gender-sensitized”
8 program focused on providing overweight and obese men weight loss, physical activity, and healthy
9 eating advice. The success of these programs was attributed to men’s familiarity and comfort within
10 the football club settings, and adopting an approach to weight loss and physical activity promotion
11 that works with masculine ideals, rather than against them (Bottorff et al., 2015; Wyke et al., 2015).
12 Given our relatively limited understanding of how to improve men’s involvement in health services
13 and weight loss programs, it is important for researchers to generate new insight in this area. We
14 sought to provide such insight in this study by understanding men’s experiences in an established and
15 popular male-only weight loss intervention. In doing so, we used the focal program as an exemplar
16 for the investigation of participant motives for, and experiences in, a gender-sensitized, male-only
17 weight loss program.

18 **The Present Study**

19 The MAN v FAT Football (MVFF) program originated as a United Kingdom (UK)-based
20 weight loss program that centers on involvement in a 14-week, small-sided football (i.e., soccer)
21 league designed exclusively for men with a body mass index of 27.5+. Each week, men visit a
22 facility to play a small-sided football match with teammates, the result of which is determined by
23 players’ weight loss in the preceding week as well as their score on the pitch. Before each weekly
24 match, players are weighed-in by their league’s weight loss coach. Players are rewarded with a
25 weight loss ‘goal’ if they lose any amount of weight in the preceding week, and are rewarded with

1 further off-field goals for reaching various other weight loss milestones throughout the season. The
2 majority of players join the program as individuals and are placed into teams with people they did
3 not know before joining the program. There are a number of program elements—outside of the
4 structured physical activity—that are designed to support weight loss, including weekly brief
5 consultations with a league weight loss coach, the use of player handbooks, and web-based and
6 mobile communication forums. The MVFF program appears to satisfy several of the components
7 that have been highlighted as potentially supporting the uptake and effectiveness of male health
8 promotion (and weight loss) programs (Bottorff et al., 2015; George et al., 2012). Specifically, the
9 program incorporates, among other things, sport-based physical activity, social support, contact with
10 other men, gender-specific advice, access to self-monitoring tools, and an element of competition.
11 The popularity of the program attests to this assertion; at December 2019, prior to the COVID-19
12 outbreak and the temporary cessation of the program, four thousand men were participating in sixty-
13 three MVFF locations throughout the UK, and the cumulative amount of weight loss recorded in the
14 program stood at over 230,000lbs (or 104,000kgs).

15 As noted previously, it is unclear whether men are simply ‘hard-to-reach’ (i.e., due to lack of
16 motivation to lose weight, reflecting societal pressures that disproportionately affect women) or are
17 poorly targeted in weight loss interventions in particular, and health promotion interventions more
18 broadly. As Pagoto and colleagues (2012) suggest, qualitative research methods may be particularly
19 helpful in generating insight into intervention features that men find attractive and effective. For
20 instance, previous qualitative research by Lozano-Sufrategui and colleagues (2016) indicates that
21 while the experience of weight stigma may undermine men’s senses of self-concept and masculine
22 values, participation in men-only weight management programs provides a safe environment for men
23 to repair this damaged self-concept. Similarly, qualitative insight into older men’s experiences of a
24 men-only, football-led weight management program suggests that men value playing sports and
25 physical activity in environments that offer ‘inclusive’ (i.e., collaborative and cooperative)

1 competition and caring interpersonal relationships. This football-led program provided participants
2 with an opportunity to ‘do’ things together, facilitating a strong bond between men, promoting a
3 sense of an inclusive environment (Lozano-Sufrategui, Pringle, Carless, & McKenna, 2017). The aim
4 of this study, then, was to derive insight into how men experienced MVFF as a competitive sport-
5 based weight loss program. We explored player and coach perspectives on men’s motives for joining
6 the program and their experiences in the program, with the hope that this insight could be used as a
7 vehicle for understanding how to develop weight loss interventions that are attractive to, and
8 effective for, men. In short, we wanted to understand: What was it about the MVFF program that
9 worked (or didn’t work) for the men involved in the program?

10 **Method**

11 **Philosophical perspective**

12 An interpretivist paradigm was adopted in this study, underpinned by the concepts of
13 ontological relativism (i.e., there are multiple realities) and a subjectivist epistemology (i.e., that
14 interviewer and interviewee co-create understandings; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Within this
15 paradigm, knowledge created during the process of research focused on understanding participant
16 accounts of lived experiences is the result of a co-creation of reality. There are no objective criteria
17 with which to verify that the mutual understanding created reflects an objective social reality;
18 instead, this co-constructed understanding is situated socially, culturally, and historically. Throughout
19 data analysis and manuscript preparation we were guided by the notion that “qualitative researchers
20 realize the futility of attempting to achieve objectivity. They do seek, however, to be *reflexive* about
21 their work and to show that the data they produced can be traced back to its origins” (Sparkes &
22 Smith, 2013, p. 181). A reflexive approach to research involves “thoughtful, self-aware analysis of
23 the intersubjective dynamics between researcher and researched... It demands acknowledgement of
24 how researchers (co)construct their research findings” (Finlay & Gough, 2003, p. ix). With a
25 reflexive approach in mind, this research was situated in a ‘Western’, English-speaking perspective,

1 as the program was located in the United Kingdom, the country of birth of three members of the
2 research team. All members of the research team have prior experience with involvement in team
3 sports, and the three from the United Kingdom have personal experience, in particular, with Football
4 ($n = 2$) and Rugby ($n = 1$) environments, and as such are familiar with the types of language and the
5 culture in such environments. This no doubt shaped our initial interest in conducting this research
6 and exploring this topic; we certainly imagined that, were we ever to find ourselves in a similar
7 position (i.e., we were overweight or obese), we would find a competitive, sport-based program to be
8 an attractive option to lose weight. With that in mind, we also note the potential limitations and
9 dangers of relying on one's ability to imagine oneself in another's situation. Our capacity to 'truly'
10 understand the lived experience of another is limited by our bodies and by alterity (i.e., otherness, the
11 absolute distance between ourselves and the 'other'; Levinas, 1998; Smith, 2008). Further, the first
12 author (who conducted the interviews), was, or is (a) from a different country to all but two
13 participants (i.e., Australia), (b) younger (i.e., aged 22 at the time of data collection), than the
14 majority of interview participants, (c) white, (d) male, (e) physically active, (f) 'healthy' BMI range,
15 and (g) pursuing a doctoral degree in exercise and health psychology. At times, various regional
16 accents meant that terms used by participants required elaboration and although no substantial
17 language barrier was evident, it may be presumptive to assume that the usage of certain words have
18 identical meanings across United Kingdom and Australian cultures. Age or physical appearance is
19 unlikely to have been a salient feature for the majority of interviews, which were held over the
20 phone. Issues of misunderstanding or misinterpretation were considered in discussion with other
21 authors. This research was conducted over a three week period during a research trip to the UK,
22 during which the first author had the opportunity to experience firsthand the culture, not only of the
23 UK more generally, but also of specific league locations. The environment and feeling in the
24 program became more tangible and real, and this shaped his later understanding of interview texts by
25 providing first-hand, contextual experiences of the things players spoke about in interviews.

1 **Sampling procedure and participants**

2 The Human Research Ethics Committee at the first author's institution granted ethical
3 approval for this study. Twenty-seven players (Mage = 41.13, SD = 9.93) and 10 coaches (Mage =
4 31.8, SD = 11.55) participated in the study. Three coaches had previous experience as players in the
5 program, and two coaches were women. Three players were no longer involved in the program. The
6 mean starting BMI for players and coaches who had participated in the program was 37.16 (SD =
7 5.77), mean end BMI 31.89 (SD = 6.35), with an average weight loss of 18.48kg (SD = 12.39).
8 Participants (MVFF players and weight loss coaches) were recruited through a combination of
9 criterion-based, maximum-variation, and snowball sampling methods (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).
10 Players were eligible to participate if they were adult males (aged 18 or over) and were a current or
11 former participant in a MVFF league. Maximum-variation in the sample was sought by recruiting
12 players from a variety of locations ($n = 8$) throughout the UK, and were primarily recruited using a
13 flyer distributed through a messaging platform (i.e., league WhatsApp groups). Potential participants
14 were invited to contact the lead author, and prior to all interviews, participants were provided with
15 information about their rights and the purpose of the study. The first author also attended a number
16 of league match nights, where players were approached in person and invited to participate in
17 interviews. Snowball methods were used (i.e., through discussions with league coaches, and during
18 interviews with players) to identify and contact information-rich cases (i.e., players who had
19 experienced substantive weight loss, had been involved in the program for an extended period of
20 time, or were vocal and likely to share their experiences in the program). Coaches were approached
21 and invited to participate in interviews via a member of the organization itself (i.e., MVFF). Coach
22 eligibility criteria were adult male or female, and a current or former coach in a MVFF league. All
23 players and coaches provided their informed consent at the beginning of their interview.

24 **Data collection**

1 A semi-structured interview guide was developed with two faculty members (XX and XX)
2 who have prior experience conducting semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews, as co-
3 construction (process co-constructing finite knowledge). No *a priori* theoretical or analytical
4 framework informed the development of the interview guide; instead, the final interview guide
5 included open-ended questions developed to gain an understanding of participant motives for joining
6 the program (e.g., “Can you give me a back story for why you joined the program?”) participant
7 experiences within the program (e.g., “Can you tell me about your experiences participating in MAN
8 v FAT Football?”), experiences of the various aspects of the program (e.g., “What was it about the
9 program that worked, or didn’t work, for you?”, “How did you experience the aspect of competition
10 in the program?”) and factors related to program retention and attrition (e.g., “What works / doesn’t
11 work about this program compared to other weight loss programs?”). Semi-structured interviews
12 provide researchers with the flexibility to pursue lines of inquiry that are of interest, while entering
13 into the interview with a certain degree of structure. The majority of interviews were held over the
14 phone ($n = 30$), with the remainder conducted in person at a setting the interviewee selected (e.g.,
15 cafes, local pubs; $n = 7$). All interviews (except two) were conducted with one participant and one
16 interviewer (the first author). One face-to-face interview was conducted with two players, and in one
17 phone interview, two co-authors (who contributed to the interview guide) were present. The data
18 collection period was conducted during a research trip to the UK. At the time of data collection, the
19 notion of data saturation guided the lead author’s approach to qualitative research. Data saturation
20 refers to the point at which the information collected begins to repeat itself, and as such conducting
21 additional interviews is relatively unlikely to yield novel information relevant to the research
22 question (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). It should be noted that the consistency between this approach and
23 a reflexive thematic analytic approach has been questioned (Braun & Clarke, 2019; O’Reilly &
24 Parker, 2013), and it is important to qualify that we use the term saturation in this study
25 pragmatically. Our conception of saturation is not a ‘realist’ one; we do not make claims to

1 'finalizing' the range of men's experiences in the MVFF program. Being reflexive about saturation, it
2 is possible that conducting more interviews, or conducting follow-up interviews with participants,
3 would yield potentially novel findings; rather, we were guided by pragmatic concerns – data were
4 conducted during a relatively brief (i.e., three week) window, and it became evident during data
5 collection that interviews began repeating themselves.

6 **Data analysis**

7 Data analysis was led by the first author. All audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim by
8 the first author, and an inductive, reflexive thematic analysis approach was adopted, following Clarke
9 and Braun's (2016) guidelines. This approach included an initial stage of familiarization with the
10 interview transcripts, listening to audio-recordings, and generating an initial code guide. Initial codes
11 were created by identifying units of text that referred to the same or very similar semantic (i.e., a unit
12 of text directly expressed an idea or experience) content. Following this initial familiarization, the
13 entire dataset was then systematically coded by the lead author, and a tentative framework of themes
14 were identified. Themes were developed by primarily identifying the semantic meaning of
15 participant responses during interviews, although this was supplemented by exploring, in some cases,
16 the latent meaning (i.e., coding for implicit ideas or meaning behind what was explicitly stated) of
17 participant responses. This tentative thematic framework was then subsequently refined and re-
18 ordered in a series of 'critical friends' (Sparkes & Smith, 2013) meetings, wherein the lead author
19 met with one, two, or three of the co-authors to discuss their critical interpretations of the initial
20 findings. Themes were re-ordered, re-defined, re-categorized, re-structured and represented, and in
21 several cases abandoned, based on discussions around how themes fit with the aims of this research
22 project, and the guiding research question: what was it about the program that worked (or didn't
23 work) for the men involved? The original framework consisted of many isolated themes, and the
24 restructuring process allowed us to identify three distinct higher-order categories of themes presented
25 in the results below. These higher-order themes were (1) appraisal aspects of the program, which

1 refers to elements of the program that players and coaches appraised as driving positive (or negative)
2 outcomes within the program, (2) perceived experiences within the program, referring to internal
3 perceptions regarding experiences during the program, and (3) functional supports within the
4 program, perceptions regarding specific functional aspects of the program that supported players'
5 weight loss efforts. The approach informed by the philosophical and epistemological assumptions
6 above is evident (a) in the open-ended nature of the research questions, and (b) the process used in
7 refining themes, namely the adoption of a 'critical friends' approach (Sparkes & Smith, 2013),
8 wherein all co-authors were invited to interrogate, question, and provide alternate interpretations of
9 the codes and themes generated by the analysis completed by the first author. The process of writing
10 the manuscript also served as part of the process of analysis, and this is captured in the attempt at
11 presenting our findings in a 'narrative' fashion, as opposed to attempting to describe themes in
12 isolation – what became evident in the process of data analysis and writing is the interconnection
13 between various elements of the program.

14 **Results**

15 The aims of this study were to—using MVFF as an exemplar of a male-only weight loss
16 program—derive an understanding of how men experience a competitive sport-based weight loss
17 program. Interviews generated 245 pages of 12-point, single spaced text. Themes were grouped
18 together in higher-order categories reflecting participants' perceptions of *appraisal aspects of the*
19 *program, perceived experiences in the program, and functional supports of the program*. Participants
20 were provided with pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Each of the aforementioned higher-order
21 categories are interrelated, and rather than attempting to create or magnify (artificial) distinctions
22 between themes, it is our hope that readers will gain some sense of how they combine to form a
23 complete 'whole'. That being the case, the accounts below follow a narrative structure to illustrate
24 the interconnections between themes. The frequency of meaning units are not reported, which is
25 consistent with the philosophical assumptions underpinning this research (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

1 **Appraisal aspects of the program**

2 Players and coaches described aspects of the program as drivers of (a) recruitment, (b)
3 program effectiveness, and (c) retention. These aspects included the appeal of sport, competition, and
4 playing on a level playing field. Sport was closely linked to being part of a team, wherein a sense of
5 camaraderie and accountability was fostered with likeminded and similar men. These concepts
6 collectively created a space where men shared issues with other men—contrasted against a
7 perception that traditional weight loss programs were tailored towards women—in a gender-
8 sensitized environment.

9 **Appeal of sport**

10 Players and coaches described the importance of the appeal of sport, competition, and playing
11 on a level playing field as crucial drivers of men's recruitment, retention, and effectiveness in weight
12 loss programs. For coach Talib (C3), a key attractor for enrolment for many players was sport:

13 I think it's sport itself, I think that's the key word I think, just sport. Because the only reason
14 this is working in football here, is because these guys love football. But if you had a bunch of
15 guys that love cricket, you could apply it. You could apply this to virtually any sport.

16 Players and coaches alike attributed the popularity of the program throughout the UK to
17 football, "...because men love football in England, it's just like, the perfect thing to lose weight to be
18 honest." (Coach Ryan, C4). For former player Conrad (P19), football is an activity in which men are
19 often socialized, typically play with other men, and are more prone to think about:

20 I think because it's football, it's generally something that men think about more than other
21 activities. It was something that you are kind of geared at, geared towards from when you
22 were little. The whole thought process of football as a young boy, you're playing football
23 with boys. Most of the time. You hardly ever play football with girls. Something to attract
24 men, for me would be quite good.

25 **Competition**

1 For Talib, structuring the program around football allowed players to address weight loss, but
2 they “don’t have to face it in a really serious way. It’s a sporting environment and [players] know
3 they’re there to lose weight and they know...the off-pitch results make a massive difference to the
4 league tables, and the league table is everything.” Closely linked to the notion of participation in
5 sport is the prospect of engaging in competition, and the multi-layered (i.e., on- and off-pitch)
6 competition was appealing to men because “Men thrive on competition, so having the element
7 of...[playing] against other teams in a football environment...for a man, it’s always going to be
8 competitive...” Talib continued, stating that “although the football is kind of the main attraction, it’s
9 not the main focus, because you’re there to lose weight”.

10 The multiple layers of competition motivated enrolment in the program, affording players the
11 flexibility to endorse one element over the other. Some players placed a primary emphasis on the
12 football element of competition in the program, whereas others, such as Carl (P11), placed greater
13 emphasis on the weight loss side, as “[the] weight loss part...I cottoned onto and focused on. I didn’t
14 really have any football skills, so I knew that was a way that I could contribute to the team.” Carl
15 compensated for a perceived lack of ability by contributing to the team score on the scales. Some
16 tensions existed between the two approaches outlined above. Some players perceived that the
17 emphasis on the football competition could “go too far”, leading to negative experiences, as “some
18 people...[forget] that it is a weight loss program and take the football side a bit too serious” (Charles,
19 P18).

20 **Level playing field**

21 For many players, prior re-entry into social football leagues had become (apparently)
22 unattainable. Gradual weight gain and shifting priorities due to work or family, perceptions that
23 players would be unable to keep up with “18, 19, 20 year-olds who are all in fantastic shape”, and
24 perceptions that gyms or other traditional exercise settings would be “full of guys that have been
25 going for years”, “built like Hercules and you’re out of breath just removing his weight...it’s really

1 intimidating for some” (Patrick, P5). The program provided an attractive alternative for players who
2 perceived barriers to entering such traditional spaces, as they were able to engage in competition on a
3 level playing field, or as Cory (P16) put it, “I like playing football against guys like my weight or
4 heavier...it’s good to play against your peer group because sometimes you’re with younger, faster
5 guys and smaller guys...if you’re with guys your own size you realize you’re still a good player.”
6 Posters and website advertisements for MVFF showed overweight or obese men playing football,
7 supporting player perceptions of a level playing field, given “the fact that they’re actually
8 advertising, they’re clearly able to participate” (Damian, P26). Players would not be “up against real
9 sportsmen”, they would be “able to play with a load of fat blokes” (Rob, P21).

10 **Part of a team**

11 Being part of a team was an integral aspect of the program motivating enrolment, retention,
12 and effectiveness in the program. Players “form really thick fast bonds with their teammates which I
13 think inspires them to keep on going” (Coach Leah, C6). The team was reported to serve multiple
14 functions in the program such as driving accountability, adherence, and interpersonal support as
15 Derek (P25) explains:

16 It’s the team, 100%. I went there knowing absolutely nobody, it was just me I thinking what
17 am I doing, the first week when I got there, I wasn’t sure what’s going on, what was going to
18 happen, weighed in, joined the team and straight way, everyone is there for some reason and
19 everyone’s also there to play football. So you get a massive kick as a team and you don’t
20 want to let that team down, but the first couple of weeks, you’re not too sure, but after that,
21 you realise you’re letting 9 other blokes down, if you don’t lose weight, so that is the massive
22 push that keeps you going, keeps you coming back.

23 For Dennis (C10), the team provides a valuable support network to players:

1 Knowing that their team player is there to support them, knowing that there's a team player to
2 talk to and just having a group of male friends. For some of these guys that can be an issue
3 especially if you're married and you don't get to socialise with your friends anymore.

4 **Camaraderie**

5 Although teams were randomized, strong bonds, or a sense of camaraderie, were reported to
6 quickly develop. The "team ethic" and "support network" that developed in the program, meant that
7 some teammates took a softer "arm around" the shoulder approach, whereas others were "straight
8 talkers" (Coach and former Player Liam, C8). Camaraderie was often likened to 'pub-talk'. Through
9 the development of trust and a feeling of being in a 'safe environment', men were able to support
10 each other, as Grant (P10) elaborated: "When you get a load of blokes down at the pub, they quite
11 openly talk about stuff like this...once you get that camaraderie, that's how it happens. You support
12 each other, don't you?" The camaraderie that developed between teammates was reported to support
13 retention in the program, as Carl (P11) explained, "Everyone was quite social about it...it was
14 something that I definitely enjoyed, I think it was the main part that kept me staying there."

15 **Accountability**

16 The notion of camaraderie closely linked to a feeling of accountability to lose weight for
17 one's team. Losing weight can be a "lonely" process of abstaining from enjoyable activities. The
18 program appeared to raise awareness about healthy behaviour; players were members of a team with
19 a shared purpose as Paul (P14) stated, "if you put weight on, you're letting the guys down...it's
20 psychological probably, how much that affects you...you're conscious of that team responsibility".
21 Feelings of accountability did not necessarily develop instantly. Coach and former player Brian (C9)
22 elaborated, "some players will turn up and just literally want to be held accountable", whereas for
23 others, it appeared to take a process of getting to know players until the "smallest click", based on
24 "common ground and I think a friendship or a partnership that they're more accountable to". Grant
25 (P11) noted that accountability to oneself was insufficient to drive weight loss behaviour, as "...I

1 know if I stop MAN v FAT Football, the weight would go back on.” Feelings of accountability were
2 not universally positive for all players. Accountability could be interpreted as external pressure to
3 lose weight, leading to maladaptive, avoidant strategies, as “...that pressure sometimes can lead to
4 people not turning up some weeks because they know they’ve gained weight and stuff” (Coach Ryan,
5 C4).

6 **Likeminded and similar men**

7 Likeminded and similar men surrounding players supported notions of camaraderie,
8 accountability, and being part of a team. Players were able to connect over common issues, as Grant
9 (P11) indicated, “...you’re ultimately among other blokes who, even if they do not have those issues
10 themselves, they can personally sympathize with how it might happen because you are ultimate
11 dealing with people that had had weight problems.” Two salient aspects of identity, gender and body-
12 type, appeared to promote perceptions of similarity, as Rob (P21) intimated: “There was just fat
13 blokes having a kick around. There is nothing else that you can get involved in that’s anywhere close
14 to that.” One coach (Leah, C6) identified the process of self-identification as “fat”, and the direct,
15 honest approach (or ‘language’) of the program as a positive: “everyone turns up and they are in
16 accord so they already all self-identified as fat, like they already realize that they are fat. It is not like
17 someone has sprung it on them like ‘Surprise! We think you’re fat!’” Matt (P2) described his feelings
18 attending the initial registration session at the beginning of his first season as “quite refreshing”
19 entering a room with a range of men of different sizes, reassuring him that there was nothing to be
20 embarrassed about, as “some of the guys [were] significantly bigger than me... You feel less self-
21 conscious as a result almost immediately. Everybody there is there for the same reason, there is
22 nothing to be embarrassed about.” This created a supportive environment, where “people...do praise
23 each other... That is important”. Matt expressed ambivalence over whether the same result could be
24 achieved with a mixed-gender group: “I’m not saying you couldn’t do that in an environment of men

1 and women, you could, but I think it would feel different. I would just mean they would feel more
2 self-conscious”.

3 **Men share issues with other men**

4 The combination of camaraderie, gender-sensitization, and perceptions of like-mindedness
5 and similarity between players in the program fostered an environment where men share issues with
6 other men, including weight loss, body-image, or mental health. Coach Ben (C1) explained that
7 MVFF created an environment where “blokes...see that they’ve got somewhere that is for them”:

8 I think because we are all men together, we’re always amazed by how much men talk about
9 their mental wellness as well. In amongst other men, whereas if you’re just in the pub with
10 somebody, you have the kind of conversations our guys have on the pitch or in the changing
11 room, or on the WhatsApp. It’s not unusual for someone to put in their WhatsApp group,
12 ‘Guys I’m having a really shit time this week, I just cannot get my head around this, this, or
13 this in my life’, and the amount of consolation, support, advice, whatever you want to call it,
14 that the other guys come up with, and I think that is crucial to the way we work.

15 **Traditional weight loss programs are tailored towards women**

16 Players and coaches frequently highlighted the contrast between the approach men and
17 women adopt to weight loss, lamenting that traditional weight loss programs are tailored towards
18 women. Cory elaborated on his experience attending such a program, finding “success on and off,
19 but I felt that it was mainly a group for women, and I think it was mainly recipes and it’s mainly
20 mothers...I couldn’t relate much to them” whereas, in contrast, MVFF better suited his needs, as it
21 was “more positive, more competitive, more dynamic, and more aggressive.” Traditional weight loss
22 programs are typically tailored, intentionally or not, towards the expectations and demands of
23 women. This was described by the participants as due to the content of group meetings (e.g.,
24 discussing “fitting in bikinis”, “wedding dresses”, “slimming down”, or “eating salads”),
25 demographics (i.e., majority women), and nature of meetings (i.e., sedentary).

1 **Gender-sensitized environment**

2 MVFF was described as allowing men to engage in weight loss in a stigma-free, gender-
3 sensitized environment, instead of feeling “completely alienated”. Ben (C1) described the social
4 environment in his leagues, run “very much on the fact that they are men”, and his “changing room
5 was full of blokes’ banter”. Players would make jokes at each other expense, but “there’s no
6 judgement about that at all”. For Lorne (C5), the program creates a comfortable yet fun environment
7 for men:

8 For me, the spirit of MANvFAT is it's a comfortable but fun environment for blokes to come
9 along and speak freely about any health issues and speak freely about weight loss issues as
10 well, without feeling stigmatised and everything like that as well, and it just offers men an
11 opportunity where they can feel comfortable, where they might not feel comfortable in other
12 commercial programs such as [commercial weight loss programs] which are much more
13 designed for a female audience as opposed to a male audience.

14 Leah (C6) had a unique perspective working as a female coach in a male-dominated
15 environment. She adopted a male online pseudonym for her correspondence with new players, to
16 which she attributes the “attraction” and rapport developed with players when they initially express
17 interest in joining the program:

18 I think although I’m a girl [laughter] it’s a very masculine environment [and] I think that does
19 probably make the guys a bit more comfortable. I have a male name which I think sometimes
20 can help a little bit before they come along because the attraction they’ve had with someone
21 called [male pseudonym], so they do come in a little bit shocked that I’m a girl but like it’s
22 not a problem that I am but I feel it works a lot better being a male only program.

23 For coach and former player Liam (C8), the environment in MVFF starkly contrasted with
24 previous experiences in female-dominated weight loss programs, leading to him feeling more
25 comfortable being weighed in front of a group of men, instead of a group of women:

1 Yeah it was good, I found it better than going into weighing rooms previously, and they're
2 dominated by ladies talking about things that you can't necessarily relate to, talking about
3 wedding dresses and baby weight that they've gained and things like that and you know it's
4 very relevant to them, but it's just something where you feel a little bit excluded because you
5 know you couldn't relate to it directly. So to be with a group of guys, I think guys just feel a
6 little bit more comfortable. For me I felt very self-conscious so in that kind of environment,
7 so being surrounded by a group of guys I certainly felt more comfortable in the room. I didn't
8 shy away from standing on the scales as much as I would if maybe I was standing next to
9 ladies all round me.

10 **Perceived experiences in the program**

11 Players and coaches provided accounts of two broad experiences within the program,
12 competence and enjoyment.

13 **Competence**

14 Related to notions of competition, sport appeal, and level playing field, players described
15 perceptions of competence regarding weight loss, football ability, and fitness improvements over the
16 course of participation in the program. For Brian (C9), "the easiest part for me to sticking to [the
17 program] is because I had success with it so quickly". Amit (P1) found his early success surprising,
18 in contrast with his previous failures at losing weight, which "is a big deal, because I've never had
19 this sort of change in my life...this is certainly something that's worked for me, so in that sense, very
20 positive with achieving weight loss." Carl (P11), who went from playing a few minutes to a whole
21 game found that he "had a lot more fitness and was able to out-run people on the pitch...[which] was
22 something that was good".

23 Weight loss was described as leading to a change in body image. For Sam (P27), "...that
24 makes a big difference...with clothes and things like that...the last time I was this weight was
25 probably before I started university." These changes were a source of *enjoyment* for Sam: "the reason

1 why I'm doing it again is because I've really enjoyed it and we've got a great team and I want to be
2 able to lose some more weight.”

3 **Enjoyment**

4 Players often attributed perceptions of enjoyment or fun to playing sport and engaging
5 socially (i.e., in banter) with other players. For Lyle, (P3) the football was a “nice add on” to the
6 weight loss aspect of the program, providing an additional reason to attend game nights every week,
7 because making it “enjoyable gives you the reason to go”. Martin (P4) echoed this sentiment,
8 comparing his experiences in gyms—wherein his motivation would gradually fade over time—with
9 his “love of the game”, his love of “being out on that field...I actually look forward to going to MAN
10 v FAT; I get excited about the football.” For Orson (P2), being able to enjoy the football in the
11 program allowed players to integrate physical activity into their lifestyle, “...almost like a ritual...it
12 has that sort of ritual element, which I find very powerful...I love the football.”

13 **Functional supports in the program**

14 Players and coaches described various functional elements in the program that supported
15 player experiences and weight loss, including the player handbook, weight loss coach, captains, team
16 WhatsApp groups, and the online forums.

17 **Player handbook**

18 The player handbook allowed players to monitor and draw awareness to salient weight loss
19 behaviours such as physical activity and dietary intake, and served as a tool for the weight loss coach
20 to provide feedback on player progress. As Orson (P2) elaborated: “I've religiously recorded all my
21 meals. I've found that really helpful to be able to look back and review exactly what you ate that
22 week, and where I went wrong, where I ate what I shouldn't have and patterns emerging.” For Lyle
23 (P3), feedback was “more about changing your lifestyle rather than criticizing it, and the
24 understanding that it doesn't happen overnight and you do have bad weeks.”

25 **Weight loss coach**

1 The player handbook was closely linked to the relationship between player and weight loss
2 coach. For some coaches, the role was an active one; they were in a position of leadership within the
3 league, and had a responsibility to “set the tone for the league. If you can be positive and outline
4 what the league’s trying to achieve and what players are expected [to do] and what help you can give
5 them...it’s really key to the success” (Coach Brian, C9). “The best coaches always keep the players
6 focused for as long as possible.” Not every player is “reachable”, and not every player “wants to chat
7 all the time”. Nonetheless, as long as the coach placed the primary focus on losing weight, then
8 players were reported to benefit from the coaches’ leadership. The players also emphasized the
9 importance of coaches promoting camaraderie and accountability. According to John (P23) “if you
10 put on one [week], [coach]’d be like “What happened, what did you do wrong? If you’re going to
11 have to explain yourself, it was another reason to lose that weight.”

12 **Captains**

13 Teams nominated captains, a liaison between coach and teams, with some captains taking the
14 role seriously. As Ben (C1), a player- / captain-turned-coach, elaborated that as he lost weight, he
15 began to think about “helping the other guys in my team”, which is “one of the massive things about
16 MAN v FAT...that kind of camaraderie and collaboration amongst the players to help each other.”
17 The captain was reported to be a source of motivation for some players, rallying the team around
18 “the 5% and 10% weight loss” targets (Paul, P14).

19 **Team WhatsApp groups**

20 Players were encouraged to engage during the week in team WhatsApp groups. These groups
21 contained all members of each team, accentuating camaraderie, accountability, and men sharing
22 issues with other men. Whatsapp groups allowed for open communication because, “although it’s not
23 private, it is in a way because it’s all people [players] know and people they can trust and then build
24 friendships with and that is a go-to group for people that struggle” (Coach Brian, C9). A wide variety
25 of issues were raised, and support provided for, in these chats, from “people losing weight” to

1 “people going through divorce”. In light of perceptions that men rarely disclose personal issues,
2 Brian highlighted that the added social connectivity provided by the league supported the
3 development of an environment where men feel able to disclose personal issues, which is “not a very
4 ‘Man thing’ to do, to reach out when a guy’s divorced...to have this group of guys that understand
5 and are now ready to talk to you...just puts them in a better state of mind.” The WhatsApp groups
6 facilitated this disclosure, as Brian continued: “...you can be open and honest. With the WhatsApp
7 groups, there’s no criticism, and whatever you’ve been through, someone else has been through as
8 well.” Further, the WhatsApp groups served to remind players of the outcome of the league, as Alex
9 (P17) explained: “...when it gets to Friday night, which would normally be take away night, but then
10 they would see 20 messages on their phones from their team members...They would almost go “I
11 can’t eat take away when the rest of the team are doing so well”. So that really helped.”

12 **Online forums**

13 Finally, an optional resource players reported making use of were the online forums,
14 primarily as a tool for finding information, and connection to a broader online community, as coach
15 and previous player Liam (C8) explained: “The forum is really useful, it has guys from all walks of
16 life, and it’s great to read their stories. It’s another way of supporting guys when they’re going
17 through struggles to look at what other people are doing. Not just from the UK but from all over the
18 world”.

19 **Discussion**

20 The purpose of this study was to use MVFF to provide insight into how men experience a
21 sport-based, male-only weight loss program. By examining player and coach experiences in the
22 program, our results shed light on the factors that may motivate men to engage in weight loss efforts
23 and with their health more broadly. More specifically, the results provided insight into how salient
24 issues such as identity, gender-sensitization, and male communication make MVFF an attractive
25 alternative to ‘traditional’ weight loss programs. Players and coaches also highlighted how online

1 spaces, self-monitoring strategies, and leadership roles (e.g., team captains, coaches) are intervention
2 characteristics that can be opted-in-to, and accentuate other intervention characteristics. In the
3 material that follows, and without wishing to ‘finalize’ the participants in this study (i.e., by claiming
4 to have the ‘final word’ on their or others’ experiences in the program) we present what we consider
5 to be the most salient overarching conclusions that can be drawn from these results.

6 **Masculine capital**

7 Our results indicate that the popularity of MVFF stems from the pragmatic, competitive
8 approach toward weight loss. Dieting and weight loss are typically seen as feminized activities
9 (Gough, Seymour-Smith, & Matthews, 2016), and for many men in the program, the prospect of
10 joining traditional weight loss programs was unattractive, due to expectations or prior experiences
11 that the conversations and settings (and demographics) would tend toward ‘feminine’ issues. Further,
12 many players had previous experience playing football or other sports during their youth, and the
13 appeal of sport and team membership were common factors attracting these men to join MVFF. Sport
14 is a common socializing force in the lives of many men: preadolescent boys are often embedded in a
15 sporting culture by the age of 8, and performance (i.e., in sport) is important in the display and
16 maintenance of masculine identities (Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2013). For men who have, over the
17 years, allowed a process of bodily inattention (Malik, Grogan, Cole, & Gough, 2019) to lead to
18 gradual weight gain and fitness loss, re-entering into exercise environments can be daunting. Gyms
19 are unappealing for many, and the prospect of joining social sport leagues can also be unattractive
20 due to the perceived need to be fit to keep up. These two broad issues pose a problem for men
21 seeking to lose weight.

22 These concerns around the feminine nature of weight loss and the daunting prospect of re-
23 engaging in sport reflect the way men often appear to approach health; men appear to view their
24 bodies as ‘machines or tools’ for getting work done (Gough et al., 2016), reflecting pragmatic and
25 normative embodiment concerns that appear to predominate and shape men’s discussions of health

1 practice (Robertson, Sheikh, & Moore, 2010; Watson, 2000). Experiences in health-related contexts
2 that undermine men's feelings of physical competence (i.e., being able to keep up), or fail to address
3 how men often view their bodies (i.e., as functional tools) present a dilemma for men seeking to re-
4 engage with healthful behaviours. MVFF, by allowing men to participate in sport on a level playing
5 field, circumvents this problem. Men (and women) exist in social contexts that reflect certain norms
6 regarding the expression of gender identity – in other words, how they ought and ought not to
7 behave. Certain expressions of masculinity are more desirable or idealized over others (Connell,
8 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and the link between masculinities and health practices
9 appears complex. Traditional researchers in sport and health psychology, leveraging Connell's (1995)
10 model of hegemonic masculinity, for instance, proposed a negative relationship between subscription
11 to masculine ideals and health (e.g., those who endorse such masculine ideals are more likely to
12 engage in excessive alcohol consumption). This model may be too simplistic, however; recent
13 research challenges a direct link between health and masculinity (De Visser & McDonnell, 2013; De
14 Visser, Smith, & McDonnell, 2009). Linked with the notion that men take a pragmatic (i.e.,
15 functional) view of health practices, sport (or physical prowess) is one domain where men are able to
16 offset, or compensate for, non-masculine behaviours such as abstaining from drinking (De Visser et
17 al., 2009), and a parallel exists in MVFF between a player holding up expectations (i.e.,
18 accountability) to teammates, and accruing 'masculine capital'. 'Masculine capital' (De Visser et al.,
19 2009) refers to the notion that men trade capital earned by engaging in certain health-related
20 masculine behaviours (i.e., demonstrating skill on the pitch, or scoring points by losing weight) to
21 compensate for other non-masculine behaviours required to succeed in the program, that may
22 undermine masculinity (e.g., abstaining from drinking, eating healthy, low-calorie foods). We suggest
23 that the reason for the success of the program, with this particular population of men, is in its ability
24 to circumvent the 'masculinity' problem certain men face when attempting to lose weight, through
25 competition and sport on a level playing field. These results suggest that interventions aiming to

1 target men may be more successful working *with*, rather than *against*, formulations of identity such
2 as masculinities.

3 **Group identification processes**

4 Consistent with previous research (Beauchamp, 2019; Beauchamp & O'Rourke, in press), our
5 results also indicate that group identification processes contribute to the success of the MVFF
6 program. Namely, players described perceptions of homogeneity (i.e., body-type and gender), like-
7 mindedness (i.e., purpose for joining, goals), social support (i.e., camaraderie, men sharing issues
8 with other men), and homo-sociality (i.e., gender-sensitization) as appraisal aspects of the program
9 that drove retention and effectiveness within the program. Evidence for the management of obesity
10 among men suggests men may benefit from group-based weight loss programs (Robertson et al.,
11 2014), and interventions that are men-only, explicitly target weight loss, and include the provision of
12 feedback are significantly associated with effectiveness (Borek, Abraham, Greaves, & Tarrant, 2018).
13 Indeed, men-only interventions have been shown, on average, to be twice as effective as women-only
14 interventions (Robertson et al., 2014; Young et al., 2012). Group-based behaviour change
15 interventions are cost-effective, can drive psychological and behaviour change in ways individual or
16 self-delivered interventions cannot, through provision of social support, establishment of group
17 norms and trust, and group identification processes (Borek & Abraham, 2018).

18 The importance of shared characteristics (e.g., body type or goals) for driving group
19 identification processes have been previously acknowledged in a similar men-only, community-based
20 weight loss management intervention (Lozano-Sufrategui, Pringle, McKenna, & Carless, 2019).
21 According to Lozano-Sufrategui and colleagues, participants in this program described perceptions
22 of being in a 'shared safe place', encompassed by feelings that everybody in the program was 'in the
23 same boat'. In our study, players experiencing settings with men of a similar body type and gender
24 offset expectations of negative social comparison, on the basis of shared ground. One area of tension
25 in the MVFF program is reconciling mindsets prioritizing football or weight loss. Teams that

1 internalize weight loss goals appear to adopt clearer group roles and discuss weight loss more
2 frequently. When these mindsets clash, as evident in accounts of excessive competition, this may
3 undermine some players' motivation to stay enrolled in the program.

4 **Self-disclosure, humour, and camaraderie**

5 Self-disclosure is risky, because it opens the self to external negative judgement, but may also
6 be rewarding – group members may validate and affirm one's issues or challenges by acknowledging
7 their similar beliefs, problems, or experiences (Jourard, 1971). These are validating experiences—
8 potentially for both the receiver and giver of social support (Liang, Krause, & Bennett, 2001)—and
9 provide a basis for group identification, cohesiveness, and future social support, and are important
10 for driving personal change (Abraham & Gardner, 2009). The gender-sensitized environment, sense
11 of camaraderie with teammates, and perceptions of like-mindedness and similarity between players
12 in the MVFF program were reported to create an environment where some, but not all, players felt
13 comfortable disclosing personal issues with other men involved in the program.

14 The sense of a male or gender-sensitized environment in the program is clearly linked to a
15 shared understanding that players were there for the same reasons, could engage in banter, share
16 light-hearted jokes, and be competitive. Other qualitative research, for instance on the effects of
17 surfing and the natural environment on combat veterans' well-being (Caddick, Smith, & Phoenix,
18 2015), has shed light on the importance of 'laddish' and masculine forms of banter, and how these
19 are linked to providing a comfortable context where men are able to engage in traditionally
20 masculine behaviours and relationships. Such forms of communication may be constrained by the
21 demands of regular, 'civilian' life – and finding a format through which to express these masculine
22 identities, reinforced by military experience, appears crucial for helping veterans engage with
23 surfing, and drawing benefits for their subjective well-being. Further, Oliffe and colleagues' (2009)
24 qualitative investigation of men's health practices in the context of prostate survivor groups suggest
25 that the benefits of humour include promoting inclusiveness, marking boundaries for providing and

1 receiving mutual help, and allowing men to develop masculine group norms around their developing
2 sense of sexuality. As noted by Borek and Abraham (Borek & Abraham, 2018), using humour within
3 the restraints of established group norms may encourage engagement, contribution, manage
4 disruptive behaviour, and ultimately create a positive group climate. Researchers would be well
5 served to consider examining how players experience and use humour within weight loss contexts.

6 **Online spaces, behaviour change theory, and leadership in health.**

7 Our results corroborate previous findings that suggest that online spaces, self-monitoring, and
8 leadership roles accentuate positive weight loss outcomes. Online spaces such as the WhatsApp
9 groups and online forums add a dimension of communication to the program, and accentuate (and
10 reinforce) perceptions of camaraderie, accountability, social support, ‘male communication’, and
11 banter. At the same time, people promoting health by using online spaces such as WhatsApp groups,
12 ought to consider the accessibility of such digital means of health promotion. Certain groups (e.g.,
13 working class, people with disability; Smith & Wightman, 2019) may have relatively limited access
14 to smart phones or other digital devices, particularly during times of austerity. Promoting health
15 through such digital means has the potential of exasperating the digital divide.

16 Further, the use of self-monitoring in weight loss interventions has a strong theoretical
17 foundation. Frequent self-monitoring has been shown to predict weight loss (Burke, Wang, & Sevick,
18 2011), and is one of the most effective intervention components for increasing physical activity and
19 eating behaviour in healthy populations (Michie, Abraham, Whittington, McAteer, & Gupta, 2009).
20 Finally, coaches and captains in MVFF can act as ‘ambassadors’ of healthy attitudes, taking a hands-
21 on approach, emphasizing self-monitoring, providing social support, and setting team challenges.
22 Alternatively, they can take a more hands-off approach, setting the direction and tone of the league to
23 players. In future, researchers might investigate the characteristics of effective leadership in such a
24 male health environment, by observing *in situ* interactions and discourse exchanged between players,
25 captains, and coaches.

1 **Limitations**

2 There are certain influences that we were not able to consider in this study, such as how
3 socio-cultural, socio-economic, or cultural influences affected men's experiences in the program.
4 Future research could explore in depth how such influences (e.g., ethnicity, cultural background, and
5 social class) impact overweight and obese men's experiences in competitive, sport-based weight loss
6 programs.

7 Further, a growing body of literature suggests that utilizing sport as a weight loss strategy
8 may incur certain psychological detriments, such as undermining enjoyment or intrinsic motivation
9 for, and adherence to, physical activity (e.g., Pickett & Cunningham, 2017). Tylka and colleagues
10 (2014), for instance, question the use of weight-normative approaches (i.e., prescribing weight loss),
11 favouring weight-neutral approaches. Placing an emphasis on weight loss may lead to weight
12 cycling, and Tylka and colleagues draw a link between weight stigma associated with such weight-
13 normative approaches and adverse health and well-being outcomes. Although many players cited the
14 appeal of sport as a lure for joining the program, and one of the programs' strengths, tensions arose
15 around the emphasis on competition – particularly when players personally focus on one element of
16 competition (e.g., weight loss) but feel that others place too much emphasis on the other (e.g.,
17 performance on the pitch). Future research ought to examine the perspectives, in further depth, of
18 players who have negative or disconfirming experiences in the program. How do they experience
19 self-identifying as fat, or do they position themselves in opposition to fat (as the name of the program
20 would suggest)? Do either of these processes of self-identification drive positive or negative
21 outcomes for health and well-being, long-term adherence to physical activity, or weight loss? Future
22 research should also examine how inclusive these kinds of competitive, sport-based programs are.
23 This is not to suggest that they are not (or do not have the potential to be) inclusive: for instance, are
24 men who relate to masculinity in non-traditional ways comfortable in, or attracted to this type of
25 program? Do men experiencing various forms of disability find the program accessible?

1 A limitation that affected our potential sample reflects the BMI cut-off criterion for the
2 program. The criterion for joining the MVFF program requires that participants have a BMI equal to,
3 or greater than 27.5. This cut-off restricts entry into the program for men who qualify as overweight
4 (i.e., BMI of 25+) but do not meet this (what might be considered arbitrary) criterion. This places
5 limits on the conclusions we can reach in terms of the efficacy of the program for overweight men. It
6 is notable that the average starting and end BMI of our recruited sample is markedly higher than the
7 cut-off, suggesting our results speak more predominantly to a sample of obese (rather than
8 overweight) men. Finally, researchers may in the future want to consider the naturalistic
9 generalizability of this program. The ‘active ingredients’ of the program are relatively
10 straightforward: leveraging competition to drive health behaviours by ‘rewarding’ weight loss. In
11 terms of naturalistic generalizability, future research could explore instances where this mechanism
12 has emerged ‘naturally’ in local exercise groups (e.g., group fitness classes), in other communities, or
13 other countries.

14 **Conclusion**

15 In this study, we explored player and coach experiences in a case study exemplar of a male-
16 only, sport-based weight loss program that is attractive to men, with the aim of deriving broader
17 insights into intervention characteristics that may be appealing to this population. Interventions that
18 aim to target this population may be more successful attracting and retaining this population by
19 working *with*, rather than *against*, formulations of identity such as masculinities; this can be achieved
20 by tailoring program content (e.g., messaging), settings (e.g., among men who share similar
21 characteristics such as body type, goals, or intentions), mode of delivery (e.g., through organized
22 sports, or activities that allow men to ‘indirectly’ address health while engaging in enjoyable
23 activities), and leveraging competition to drive healthy behaviours. Future research could examine
24 whether competition-based programs facilitate health behaviour change in other populations (e.g.,
25 women), or in other health behaviours in similar hard-to-reach populations.

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Journal Pre-proof

Overweight and obese men's experiences in a sport-based weight loss intervention for men

Highlights:

- We explored men's experiences of a male-only competitive sport-based weight loss program
- Men highlighted competition, accountability, and camaraderie as driving positive outcomes
- Being around likeminded and similar men makes the program attractive to overweight and obese men
- Sport and competition allows men to offset 'un-masculine' behaviours (e.g., non-drinking)
- Highlights the potential of leveraging competition / masculinity to drive healthy behaviour



Prof. McGannon
Associate Editor, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*

Article title: "Overweight and obese men's experiences in a sport-based weight loss intervention for men"

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Dear Professor McGannon,

As an authorship team, we do not believe we have any competing interests that might be interpreted as influencing this research. This project involved an evaluation of the MAN v FAT Football program. We do note that the findings produced from this research have supported the development of a similar program in Australia (i.e., MAN v FAT Soccer). However, there was no bias or interest in reporting this work – no restrictions or expectations were placed on us by MAN v FAT Football UK. Further, we deliberately recruited researchers (co-authors Mark Beauchamp, Michael Rosenberg, and Brett Smith) who were not close to, nor involved in the subsequent Australian program development on this study. Further, no funding was provided or sought for this research from the MAN v FAT Football program.

Kind regards,

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