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We Know That We Are All Together:**A Case Study of the Communal Coping Process in a Professional Ice Hockey Team**

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24 **Abstract**

25 On the road to success, team members combine efforts to cope with stressful situations they
26 face together. This case study explores communal coping in a professional ice hockey team
27 during the COVID-19 crisis, involving 20 male players (Mage = 28.5). Using template thematic
28 analysis of semi-structured interviews, three shared stressors were identified: the suspension of
29 competitions, uncertainty about logistics and career stability, and the loss of social
30 opportunities. These stressors affected psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships,
31 and team performance. Findings reveal various communal coping strategies, including
32 problem-focused efforts (e.g., effort expenditure), relationship-focused coping (e.g., team
33 days), and communal emotional management (e.g., compassionate conversations). Leaders
34 contribute to the communal coping process by fostering a positive social environment and
35 initiating coping strategies. By introducing the concept of transactional space, this study
36 highlights the importance of communication and group dynamics in coordinating efforts against
37 adversity and suggests that training leaders could enhance team resilience.

38 *Keywords:* communal coping, leadership, group dynamics, COVID-19, professional
39 sports

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41 **We Know That We Are All Together:**

42 **A Case Study of the Communal Coping Process in a Professional Ice Hockey Team**

43 Teamwork and interpersonal coordination are key to success in team sports (Friesen et
44 al., 2015). Team members have to coordinate and combine efforts to effectively cope with the
45 shared challenges and demands of competitive sport environments. This synergistic or
46 collaborative energy of team members used to manage stressful situations is known as
47 communal coping (Afifi et al., 2006). Based on Lyons et al.'s (1998) definition, "communal
48 coping occurs when one or more individuals perceive a stressor as 'our' problem (a social
49 appraisal) vs. 'my' or 'your' problem (an individualistic appraisal) and activate a process of
50 shared or collaborative coping strategies" (p. 583). Accordingly, teams' communal coping
51 responses require that their members appraise a stressful event as jointly owned and develop
52 cooperative actions to collectively deal with it (Lyons et al., 1998; Tamminen & Gaudreau,
53 2014). To date, communal coping has mostly been studied in the fields of health psychology
54 (e.g., Basinger et al., 2021), family psychology (e.g., Afifi et al., 2006), and disaster
55 psychology (e.g., Richardson & Maninger, 2016). Even though "the impact of communal
56 coping is obvious in team sport" (Lyons et al., 1998, p. 592), studies investigating communal
57 coping within sports teams or sports contexts are scarce (see Eckardt & Tamminen, 2023, for
58 a review), and even more so within professional sports teams. Thus, given the inherently
59 social nature of sport (Crocker, Tamminen, & Gaudreau, 2015; Tamminen & Gaudreau,
60 2014), it appears important to further examine the communal coping process within sports
61 teams and the extent to which individuals may influence this process.

62 **Communal Coping in Sport**

63 The theoretical model proposed by Lyons and colleagues (1998) has underpinned
64 much of the research on communal coping in sport (Eckardt & Tamminen, 2023). Communal
65 coping is viewed as a transactional process in which individuals within a group pool their

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66 resources to confront stress and adversity together. It occurs when there is: (a) a communal
67 coping orientation (e.g., it is “our problem” and we believe that joining together to deal with it
68 is beneficial, necessary and/or expected); (b) communication about the stressor (e.g., we
69 communicate verbally, nonverbally, or through actions about the meaning of the situation);
70 and (c) cooperative action to deal with the stressor (e.g., we act together to reduce the impact
71 of the situation). Recently, Afifi et al. (2020) developed the Theoretical Model of Communal
72 Coping (TMCC), building upon the original work by Lyons et al. (1998) to better understand
73 the functionality of communal coping. By highlighting key predictors and moderators, such as
74 communication quality, relationship dynamics, culture, and social structures, the TMCC
75 offers a relevant theoretical framework for examining the communal coping process in sport.
76 Furthermore, Tamminen and Gaudreau (2014) suggested that communal coping can be
77 operationalized in two ways: *coping in a team* and *coping of a team*. On the one hand, coping
78 in a team considers how each individual copes within a team by aggregating the individual
79 coping strategies of each athlete. On the other hand, coping of a team considers how the team
80 copes as a whole. The latter reflects Lyons et al.’s definition of communal coping (1998, p.
81 583), which refers to the coordinated and collaborative coping actions used by teams or
82 groups to deal with common stressful situations and the degree to which individuals within
83 teams or groups have congruent perceptions of their team's coping efforts and actions.
84 Consequently, the coping of a team approach offers a relevant way to explore the communal
85 coping process within sports teams (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014).

86 A number of recent studies have begun to describe communal coping in sport using a
87 qualitative approach (see Eckardt & Tamminen, 2023, for a complete map). Several different
88 communal coping strategies used by athletes in the context of sports teams have been
89 identified by Leprince et al. (2018). They are grouped into four higher-order dimensions of
90 communal coping according to their specific functions: firstly, problem-focused communal

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91 efforts aimed at managing and solving problems faced by several team members in a
92 collective way (e.g., logical analysis, problem solving, increasing efforts, focusing); secondly,
93 relationship-focused coping aimed at managing and maintaining relationships within the team
94 during a stressful episode (e.g., motivational support, compensation, social joining); thirdly,
95 communal management of emotions, which aims to collectively regulate the emotions
96 generated by confrontation with shared stressors (e.g., reassurance, interpersonal regulation of
97 negative emotions); and fourthly, communal goal withdrawal, which refers to the strategies
98 by which a team withdraws from the process of actively striving to achieve desirable
99 outcomes (e.g., venting emotions, disengagement).

100 Furthermore, communal coping orientations appear to be facilitated by
101 communication about the stressor (Neely et al., 2017; Tamminen et al., 2016) and group-
102 based emotions (Tamminen et al., 2016). While these studies represent an initial step in
103 understanding the communal coping process in a sport context, further research is still needed
104 to better understand how social context influences communal coping (Tamminen &
105 Gaudreau, 2014; Tamminen & Neely, 2021). For example, some authors have suggested
106 considering the potential influence of team members who assume leadership roles when
107 members of a team are coping with shared stressors (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014). This
108 echoes Lyons' assertion that communal coping is a “social process” in which the issue of
109 leadership comes under scrutiny because of the recognition that “not all individuals in a
110 network need to be part of the communal coping process or have equal roles in it” (Lyons et
111 al., 1998, p. 585). However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has yet examined the
112 influence of leaders on the development of communal coping responses in sports teams.

113 **Athlete Leadership Within Sports Teams**

114 Athlete leadership is defined as “an athlete who occupies a formal or informal
115 leadership role within a team and influences team members to achieve a common objective”

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116 (Loughead, 2017, p. 1). Leaders (formal or informal) can influence both team functioning and
117 interpersonal relationships within the group (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Crozier et al., 2013).
118 They have particular influence on social processes taking place within the group, such as task
119 and social cohesion (Fransen et al., 2016; Loughead, 2017), team identification and
120 confidence (Fransen et al., 2016), and collective performance (Crozier et al., 2013; Fransen et
121 al., 2018; Mertens et al., 2020). One perspective on leadership that has recently gained
122 increased attention in sport is identity leadership (Schei et al., 2023). According to the Social
123 Identity Approach to Leadership (Haslam et al., 2020), leadership is a recursive and
124 multidimensional process in which leaders are more effective in mobilizing followers to
125 achieve a common goal when leaders and followers see themselves as part of the same group.
126 To develop this sense of 'we', leaders can adopt behaviors that inspire a sense of belonging
127 and emotional attachment to the group. These have been grouped into four identity leadership
128 dimensions: (a) *identity prototypicality*, embodying the distinctive qualities that define the
129 group and what it means to be a member of the group (i.e., 'being one of us'); (b) *identity*
130 *advancement*, championing the common interests of the group rather than personal interests
131 or those of other groups (i.e., 'doing it for us'); (c) *identity entrepreneurship*, creating and
132 promoting a sense of 'we' and 'us' by defining what 'us' does and does not mean for
133 followers (i.e., 'crafting a sense of us'); and (d) *identity impresarioship*, developing and
134 promoting events, activities and structures that create material realities that allow group
135 members to live out their shared identity (i.e., 'making us matter') (Steffens et al., 2014).
136 Recent studies have shown that when leaders (formal and informal) focus on developing a
137 shared social identity (i.e., fostering a shared sense of 'we' and 'us' within the team), they
138 promote team well-being by creating a healthy psychological environment, facilitate team
139 functioning, and improve performance outcomes (Bruner et al., 2022; Fransen, Haslam,
140 Steffens, Mallett, et al., 2020; Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020).

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141 Given the empirical evidence pointing to the benefits of leadership in terms of team
142 functioning, team well-being and the ability to achieve common goals, it would be interesting
143 to understand whether leaders can influence their teammates when the common goal is to
144 cope collectively with shared stressful situations (Lyons et al., 1998; Tamminen & Gaudreau,
145 2014). Such investigation would respond to the need to understand the conditions and social
146 context in which communal coping is embedded in sports teams (Tamminen & Neely, 2021).
147 The present study focuses specifically on athlete leaders, as opposed to coaches or staff
148 members, and examines their role within the team in the communal coping process. This
149 approach was chosen to ensure that the findings reflect peer influence among team members,
150 rather than hierarchical or subordinate dynamics, with the term “leader” used throughout the
151 study to refer exclusively to athlete leaders.

152 A Case Study in a Particular Context: The COVID-19 Outbreak as a Shared Context

153 The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 disrupted the sport community. It has been described
154 as a “crisis transition” (Schinke et al., 2020, p. 410) and a “career development barrier”
155 (Stambulova et al., 2022, p. 93), and resulted in significant psychological and emotional
156 impacts on competitive athletes (e.g., Jia et al., 2022; Schinke et al., 2020; Shukla et al.,
157 2023). Nevertheless, to date, the way in which athletes coped with this stressful period has
158 been examined almost exclusively from an intrapersonal perspective (e.g., di Fronso et al.,
159 2020; Kent et al., 2023; Mehrafar et al., 2020; Szczypińska et al., 2021). To our knowledge,
160 only Kim et al. (2022) and Pété et al. (2021) have investigated the way athletes cope through
161 an interpersonal perspective, focusing on communal coping within communities during the
162 pandemic. In community psychology, Kim et al. (2022) highlighted the role of community
163 identity in supporting communal coping, while in sport psychology, Pété et al. (2021)
164 examined how individual coping profiles are related to interpersonal coping strategies.
165 Although these studies advance our understanding of the communal coping process during

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166 this stressful period, their quantitative approach did not fully capture certain social processes
167 at work. A qualitative case study would therefore allow a deeper exploration of mechanisms
168 such as the communal coping strategies used, and the peer influence involved therein.

169 Case studies can focus on sports teams to investigate processes within a time-bound
170 situation (Keegan et al., 2017). Accordingly, a professional ice hockey team playing at the
171 highest level in France (i.e., Ligue Magnus) was chosen as an appropriate case for studying
172 communal coping in this particular context. This team was selected because it allowed us to
173 study “real-world phenomena” during this crisis, in real time and in a natural setting, in line
174 with case study principles for examining complex entities in their natural context (Cotterill &
175 Schinke, 2017; Yin, 2007, p. 7). In addition, due to their status as professional athletes, these
176 ice hockey players were allowed to continue face-to-face training at their workplace.

177 Although competitions were suspended, they trained twice a day, five days a week, with
178 interactions limited only by the requirement to wear masks in the arena. However, they could
179 not physically meet outside of work or compete with other teams. As such, the players’
180 environment (i.e., confined, controlled, and characterized by daily interactions, shared goals,
181 and common stressors) offered a rich setting for in-depth analysis. This situation created a
182 unique context for better understanding how athletes collectively dealt with this stressful
183 period in a time- and space-bound context. Furthermore, choosing this team presented an
184 opportunity to gain valuable insights into communal coping processes in high-performance
185 sports settings, an environment that remains difficult to access (Eubank et al., 2014).

186 **The Present Study**

187 Drawing on the latest conceptualizations of communal coping (Afifi et al., 2020;
188 Lyons et al., 1998; Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014), this study adopted a case study approach
189 to explore how players in a professional ice hockey team collectively experienced and coped
190 with the challenges associated with the COVID-19 outbreak, and the role leaders played in

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191 this process. The unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak provide a unique
192 environment for understanding how communal coping occurs within a professional sports
193 team and the social processes involved. Specifically, the aims were to explore: (a) the
194 communal strategies used by the players to collectively cope with the shared stressors
195 experienced during the COVID-19 outbreak, and (b) the potential role played by leaders in
196 the communal coping process.

197 **Method**

198 **Philosophical and Methodological Orientation**

199 A qualitative approach using a critical-realist perspective (Byers, 2013) was chosen to
200 explore the communal coping process in a sports context. Critical Realism, as a philosophical
201 stance, bridges the gap between positivism and social constructionism by combining
202 ontological realism with epistemological relativism (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2023;
203 Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021), which, in practice, means “moving beyond describing what
204 can be measured in the social world to explain the deeper causal powers that shape what can
205 be observed” (Emmel et al., 2018, p.5). Given that qualitative methods are particularly
206 recommended when seeking to understand “how” and “why” a social phenomenon occurs
207 (Levitt et al., 2017), this approach is well suited to answering the questions addressed in this
208 study. Furthermore, this study is consistent with researchers' recommendations for
209 “qualitative research of communal coping in naturalistic settings” (Crocker et al., 2015, p.
210 30). The development of this study sought to be methodologically coherent to ensure
211 congruence among philosophical positioning, research perspectives, and methodology.
212 Indeed, framed by these ontological and epistemological assumptions, the researchers
213 assumed a multi-layered ontology of social reality, in which interviews provide a way to
214 access participants' interpretations, while allowing for analysis of both the constraints
215 imposed by the social context and the resources available to actors in that context. Here,

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216 interviews were a way of accessing the collective experience of the team during this
217 particularly challenging and stressful period, from the impact of the situation to the way the
218 teammates coped as a team.

219 Participants and Recruitment Procedure**220 *Sample: A Professional Ice Hockey Team***

221 The study was conducted with a professional ice hockey team from France's top
222 league, selected for its daily (though limited) interactions during the COVID-19 outbreak,
223 which provided a relevant environment for examining how professional players collectively
224 managed this challenging period as a team. The team comprised 20 professional male athletes
225 aged from 21 to 35 years ($M_{age} = 27.15$, $SD_{age} = 4.67$), representing two nationalities (French
226 = 11, French-speaking Canadian = 4, and English-speaking Canadian = 5) and having
227 between two and 16 years of professional experience ($M_{Exp} = 9.14$, $SD_{Exp} = 2.92$). At the time
228 of the study, they trained for an average of 15.5 hours per week. The team had one captain (a
229 French-speaking Canadian aged 34) and two alternate captains (both French, aged 29 and 28).
230 The role of these captains during the regular season included acting as liaison between the
231 players and the coach, between the players and the manager, and representing the team in
232 dealings with officials and the media. Their role in the situation studied was to act as a link
233 between the team and the staff. As a funding recipient of an Industrial Agreement for
234 Formation through Research from the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and
235 Innovation, the first author is conducting his doctoral project in collaboration with both an
236 academic laboratory and a professional ice hockey organization, enabling the research team to
237 contact the general manager and the president of the team's club. To recruit the players, the
238 first author presented the purpose and protocol of the study to the general manager and the
239 coach. After obtaining their agreement, the players were contacted and informed about the
240 study. In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, players completed an informed consent

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241 form prior to the start of the study, which ensured free participation, and confidentiality of
242 responses.

243 ***Case Overview: A Particular Context***

244 Their professional status granted participants the right to go to their workplace (the ice
245 rink) and train face-to-face five days a week, on condition that they wore a mask and only met
246 in the workplace. The hockey players' days were organized as follows: around 8:30 a.m., they
247 arrived at the ice rink, had a coffee break, did strength training, practiced on the ice, did strength
248 training again (if they had not done it before going on the ice), had another coffee break, and
249 then went home around 1:30 p.m. At the time of the interviews, the athletes were still practicing
250 every day, but they did not know when they would return to competition.

251 **Data Collection**

252 Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain participants' views. This method
253 made it possible to explore "participants' thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a particular
254 topic" (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p.1). Designed to elicit clarification and deeper
255 insights (Patton, 2002), this method allowed the mechanisms underlying communal coping
256 processes to be revealed. The research team had previously developed an interview guide
257 based on theoretical frameworks of communal coping (Afifi et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 1998),
258 Leprince et al. (2018)'s categorization of shared stressors and communal coping strategies in
259 team sports, and theoretical frameworks of leadership (Fransen et al., 2018; Fransen, Haslam,
260 Steffens, Peters, et al., 2020; Haslam et al., 2021). A pilot version of the guide was tested with
261 sport science students (N = 4, two football and two basketball players). The final version of
262 the interview guide included an introduction that presented the first and second authors, who
263 handled the interviews, as well as the framework in which this research was conducted. The
264 interview guide comprised two parts. The first part concerned the shared sources of stress
265 encountered by the team during this period and the consequences for team functioning. This

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266 section provided valuable context for the participants and introduced the shared stressors and
267 their consequences for team functioning, before addressing questions related to the communal
268 coping process (the results are available in supplementary materials). The second part focused
269 on the communal coping strategies used by the players to deal with the shared stressors as a
270 team, and the role played by the leaders in implementing a communal coping orientation.
271 Here, for example, athletes were asked: “What were the strategies and actions used by the
272 team when collectively experiencing this common stressor? Do you think that certain players
273 had a particular role in the collective management of the stressor? If so, can you identify
274 them? Did the leaders behave or talk in ways that enabled the team to initiate or sustain these
275 strategies? If so, can you describe them?”

276 The participants were interviewed on-site, in the ice rink's press room. This
277 windowless room ensured the confidentiality of the exchanges. No specific order was
278 followed for conducting the interviews; participants were called at random during their free
279 time. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder (Olympus WS-853) (M_{duration}
280 = 53.45 min, $SD_{\text{duration}} = 7.52$ min) and conducted face-to-face by the first and second authors.
281 A native English-speaking translator was present during the interviews with the English-
282 speaking players to ensure that no subtleties were missed. The content of the interviews
283 conducted in French was transcribed verbatim by the first author in the days following the
284 interviews. The translator transcribed the interviews conducted in English.

285 Data Analysis

286 A template analysis (Ide & Beddoe, 2023) clustered as a codebook approach to a
287 thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 242) was used to process the data.
288 Given the confirmatory and exploratory objectives of this study, and considering that template
289 analysis is “structured-but-flexible” in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 242), the raw data
290 were analyzed using a deductive process. The codebook was developed in two steps. Firstly,

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291 ahead of the analysis, the research team developed the theory-driven codebook serving as a
292 tool for data coding, based on existing literature about communal coping (Leprince et al.,
293 2018) and leadership (e.g., Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Notwithstanding this, we aimed to
294 maintain a certain degree of openness. Consequently, after reviewing a portion of the
295 interviews, we recognized that the leadership codebook was not entirely aligned with the
296 interview data. Therefore, we refined the codebook so that it drew upon literature related to
297 identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2014). The analysis was carried out
298 using the six-phase stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). In the first stage, the first
299 and second authors familiarized themselves with the data by listening to the recordings,
300 writing them down verbatim and then re-reading them. Secondly, the first and second authors
301 individually read the transcripts in full, noting recurring patterns of information about shared
302 stressors, potential new stressors, the impacts of the situation on team functioning, the
303 communal coping strategies, and players' perceptions of the role of leaders in the communal
304 coping process. The first two authors met and compared their codes, retaining the “good
305 codes” on which they agreed. A “good code” is one that captures the qualitative essence and
306 richness of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1). The first and second authors then
307 independently coded all the transcripts using the codebook. In the third stage, the authors
308 generated initial themes that allowed the interpretation of the overall meaning and
309 significance of the dataset. In stage four, the authors used Patton's (1990) “dual criteria” to
310 ensure that internal homogeneity within themes and external heterogeneity among themes was
311 observed. During the fifth stage, the authors defined and refined themes and potential
312 subthemes. This step occurred in the course of bi-monthly meetings during which the first,
313 third and fourth authors sought to define themes that offered a lucid, coherent reading of the
314 dataset, and helped answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Although the
315 phases of analysis are sequentially arranged, the research team kept in mind that analysis is

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316 not a linear process, but rather a recursive and iterative one that may require moving back and
317 forth between the phases as needed (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

318 Methodological Integrity

319 To maintain methodological coherence, the authors sought to ensure methodological
320 integrity and rigor consistent with the critical-realist perspective philosophical positioning
321 (Mayan, 2016). From a critical realism perspective, the role of the researcher as an interpreter
322 of data is assumed, as is the importance of reflexivity in research practice (Ide & Beddoe,
323 2023). This reflexive practice involved keeping a diary of notes and impressions from the
324 interview period and throughout the six phases of thematic analysis. Reflexive practice was
325 also carried out on the researcher's positions. In fact, the first author possessed detailed
326 knowledge of professional hockey, both in terms of context and specific terminology. This
327 knowledge made it easy to engage with participants, who may be more willing to share their
328 experiences when there is an assumption of shared understanding and knowledge (Dwyer &
329 Buckle, 2009). This allowed for greater depth of data collection and provided the research
330 team with the opportunity to acquire in-depth understanding of the cultural environment in
331 which the research was being conducted (Douglas & Carless, 2012). However, this is not
332 without implications for the relationship between the researcher and participants. For
333 example, this assumption of shared knowledge could lead to unspoken information. To
334 mitigate potential biases arising from pre-existing relationships, we conducted two-voice
335 interviews with a researcher unfamiliar with the hockey team. Interviews were thus conducted
336 jointly with the second author, who had excellent knowledge of communal coping in sport,
337 but was inexperienced in the world of professional hockey. She asked questions that may
338 sometimes have appeared naïve to the participants, to ensure that the participants were always
339 explicit. To maintain methodological coherence, instead of considering inter-rater reliability
340 as a demonstration of rigor and the quality of research, the authors chose to pursue reflective

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341 practices (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This took the form, at the start of the process (i.e., up
342 to phase 4 of the data analysis) of setting up ‘critical friends’ meetings, where guests (i.e.,
343 PhD students from the laboratory) were instructed to reflect, explore alternative explanations
344 and interpretations of the protocol, and offer a range of reflections on the findings and their
345 analysis (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Finally, since critical realism recognizes both “the
346 existence of knowledge independent of humans, but also the socially embedded and fallible
347 nature of scientific research” (Given, 2008 p. 168), we fostered opportunities for collective
348 dialogue throughout this study (i.e., bi-monthly meetings) based on stage 5 of the data
349 analysis. These encouraged dialogue and reflection during the research process, allowing for
350 deeper interpretation and analyses that contributed to understanding the communal coping
351 process within sports teams. This discussion stage enabled us to ensure that the results were
352 “adequately supported by data (empirical adequacy), accurately describe factual information
353 (descriptive validity) and closely represent participants’ experiences (interpretive validity)”
354 (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021).

Results

356 Analysis of the data enabled us to identify the team’s experience of the COVID-19
357 outbreak as a collective stressful situation, with players sharing perspectives on shared
358 stressors. These shared stressors affected team functioning. To cope with these challenges,
359 players engaged in various communal coping strategies (problem-focused efforts,
360 relationship-focused coping, and communal management of emotions), categorized in this
361 study under the theme “We know that we are all in this together.” Additionally, the role of
362 leaders in the communal coping process was highlighted, organized under the theme
363 “Keeping the mood going in the right direction, keeping the ship going in the right direction.”
364 Participants also outlined the roles played by (or expected of) leaders in the communal coping

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365 process. Both formal and informal leaders played crucial roles, guiding the team through
366 behaviors and communication aligned with the identity leadership dimensions.

367 **Shared Stressors and Consequences on Team Functioning**

368 As a preamble, we asked participants about the shared sources of stress experienced by
369 the team during this period and the consequences for team functioning. Players identified
370 three main shared stressors: the period of standstill, the uncertainty, and the loss of social
371 opportunities, all of which hindered team cohesion. The suspension of competitions and
372 changes in training routines left players feeling directionless, as Christophe explained: “We
373 train, but we don't have any goals. We're training just to train.” The uncertainty about logistics
374 and career stability added to the shared stressors, with Gregory noting: “The ups and downs
375 were hard to deal with.” Finally, the obstructed opportunities for socialization were identified
376 as a shared stressor. The loss of social interactions, such as team dinners or bus trips, further
377 strained relationships, with Guillaume remarking: “We're not as close as we could be.”

378 These stressors had consequences for team functioning in three main areas:
379 psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships, and performance. Psychological well-
380 being was affected by demotivation and a loss of meaning, with Mathieu commenting: “We
381 sometimes see guys who arrive, they're about to explode, they're fed up with the situation.”
382 Interpersonal relationships were affected, leading to changes in teammate and coach-athletes'
383 relationships. Antoine observed: “It strengthens the bonds with the players I was already
384 closer to... but overall, we're less cohesive as a team.” Finally, team performance declined,
385 with Fabien noting: “We're less ready now than we were in September.” Despite these
386 setbacks, the team maintained confidence, with Julien affirming: “I think we'll deliver
387 something good... I'm not worried about the future.”

388 **“We Know That We Are All Together”: The Team's Communal Coping Strategies**

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389 As the COVID-19 outbreak reshaped the season, it also forced the team to adapt in
390 unprecedented ways. The following section explores the communal coping strategies
391 employed by the team to navigate the challenges imposed by the outbreak. Through a
392 combination of communal strategies focused on problem solving, managing emotions, and
393 maintaining relationships within the team, the players demonstrated adaptability in managing
394 the shared stressors and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic.

395 ***“It Wouldn't Be a Free for All”: Problem-Focused Communal Efforts***

396 This subtheme refers to communal coping strategies aimed at managing and solving
397 problems. These strategies mobilized the team's resources to act directly on the shared
398 stressor, and in this case, the lack of competition and its consequences (e.g., psychological
399 well-being, interpersonal relationships, and subjective performance). Continuing with the
400 classification framework proposed by Leprince et al. (2018), we observed that participants
401 implemented two types of strategies; the first was focused on analysis, action planning, and
402 information sharing, while the second was aimed at exerting efforts.

403 **Analysis, Action Planning, and Information-Sharing Strategies.** Participants
404 collectively analyzed the disruption caused by the pandemic (e.g., disruption to normal
405 schedules, lack of intensity and competitiveness) and organized action plans to adapt their
406 schedules and maintain training intensity. Early communal strategies focused first on filling
407 gaps in routines. As Julien noted about the organization of training sessions, the intention was
408 to “occupy our time as best possible.” The second early goal was to maintain physical
409 sensations through structured, game-like activities. As Anthony described it: “So our strategy,
410 at the start of the COVID-19 phase, was to keep in contact with the ice, but more in the form
411 of games to maintain sensations—it was fun.” Then, the planning shifted from a relatively
412 light practice regime to strategies increasingly oriented towards more intensive practices as
413 the return to official competitions appeared more imminent. Guillaume declared: “So, we’ve

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414 been trying to keep it light and fun for now, and then slowly ramping it back up to when we
415 start playing. So, that's the big strategy, I guess." Anthony, who initially spoke about having
416 fun during the early stages of the period, confirmed that the intra-team competitions organized
417 in later weeks allowed the team to gradually shift: "towards more intense work, transitioning
418 into a phase where we are preparing for competition."

419 Thomas explained that all schedules "were proposed by the team and approved by the
420 coach." They were planned collaboratively to ensure consistency and engagement. Christophe
421 gave further details of this approach:

422 We planned the weeks so that we could know what we were going to do. We collectively
423 planned our workout schedule with one session before the ice and another session after the
424 ice. (...) and we decided that those who wanted to come had to stick to the plan that we had
425 decided on together.

426 Such adjustments not only addressed the immediate logistical challenges posed by the
427 pandemic and supported the team's dynamic, but also helped maintain the athletes' physical
428 condition.

429 **Effort Expenditure Strategies.** Within this collective planning, which shifted from
430 occupational and recreational activities to a focus on returning to competition, strategies
431 centered on collective effort expenditure became increasingly prominent. Participants
432 described employing these strategies through player-organized competitions both on the ice
433 and in the weight room. When asked about the communal coping strategies deployed by the
434 team to maintain intensity and competitiveness during the pandemic, players explained that
435 they organized internal competitions like the Pizza Cup. David explained:

436 We worked on creating a form of competition to keep a certain intensity so that it wouldn't
437 be a "free for all", as we say in the jargon. On the ice, we tried to create competitive weeks
438 to keep smiling, to keep the fun, and for a certain level of intensity.

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439 These efforts helped maintain the team's physical training standards and competitive
440 mentality, ensuring that training remained both rigorous and enjoyable. Frédérique
441 underscored these dual benefits: “We tried to keep this competitiveness that we normally have
442 during the season, by organizing tournaments (...) to keep this adrenalin, these urges during
443 training, this aggressiveness.”

444 Participants described the introduction of tangible rewards (e.g., buying pizza) for
445 winning internal games as a strategy to enhance players' motivation and stimulate
446 competitiveness. Mathieu elaborates on this concept: “It was necessary to created stakes;
447 otherwise, it’s resembles playing poker without money; it’s pointless. Even if the stakes aren't
448 huge, having something to win motivates everyone. It adds seriousness to the game.” This
449 method was designed to simulate the real pressure of official matches, encouraging a
450 competitive atmosphere, even during training sessions.

451 ***“The Changing Room Became Our Shelter”*: Relationship-Focused Coping**

452 This theme refers to the communal coping strategies the team used to collectively
453 manage and sustain relationships and face the challenges imposed by the pandemic. With the
454 closure of the usual social venues, such as bars and restaurants, and the absence of typical
455 bonding activities like bus trips, relationship quality was affected. The team adapted by
456 reappropriating communal spaces at the rink, in particular the changing room, to foster social
457 interactions and maintain team cohesion. Participants described how the changing room,
458 kitchen, gym, and video room, traditionally used for performance routines, were transformed
459 into social hubs where the team organized activities like team-building days. As Romain
460 noted, “On Friday, we organized a sort of team-building day. We did it in the changing room.
461 It marked the end of a week of (simulated) competition.” This repurposing of spaces provided
462 a much-needed venue for socialization, allowing players to connect and communicate freely

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463 in a private and familiar setting. As Jeremy explained, “What we normally did outside the
464 rink, we've now moved into the locker room.”

465 Daily communal activities, such as shared breakfasts, became a strategy to reinforce
466 these bonds. Anthony specified that “Our strategy was to optimize the time we spent in the
467 changing room to create a community (...). It involved sharing breakfast: everyone brought
468 cakes, things they made at home.” The locker room, once a place dedicated to work and
469 preparation, became what David described as “a little clubhouse”, symbolizing the shift
470 towards a space of camaraderie and social support. The locker room and kitchen were often
471 referred to as a “refuge” or “shelter” by participants. For example, Anthony used the term
472 “shelter” to express the significance of these spaces for the team, saying “The changing room
473 became our shelter. We told ourselves that when we came to the changing room, it was a time
474 for sharing, not just a time for working.” This quote underscores the newfound significance of
475 communal spaces in fostering strong social, or even familial bonds within the team. Anthony
476 emphasized that strong bonds were forged in this locker room: “Our strategy has been to
477 optimize the moments we have in the locker room to create a cohesive group so that when
478 competitions resume, the second-family bonds we've created among the team can be
479 translated onto the ice.”

480 Additionally, the players collectively reappropriated time to extend their interactions,
481 compensating for the loss of other socialization opportunities. Romain observed that after
482 workouts, compared to past seasons, “Now, guys are hanging out for almost an hour.”
483 Benjamin echoed this, noting that players stayed longer in the locker room “just because, you
484 know, it’s somewhere to hang out, (...) just get closer.”

485 These extended periods of interaction were identified as a deliberate communal coping
486 strategy to deal with solitude and strengthen bonds. Jerome confirmed: “Yes, it’s definitely a
487 strategy to combat loneliness. We chat; it’s indeed a strategy.” He elaborated on the benefits:

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488 “It gives us time to create more bonds (...) we stay longer in the locker room to talk because
489 it takes up part of the day and helps pass the time. Instead of going home and playing video
490 games, we stay together.”

491 ***“Overall, Everyone Takes Care of Each Other”*: Communal Management of Emotions**

492 This theme refers to communal coping strategies aimed at regulating team emotions
493 associated with the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. This was seen in actions such as
494 staying longer in the changing room to chat with colleagues or using the group chat to
495 regulate the emotions of teammates or themselves. Thomas explained that these strategies led
496 to supportive conversations where players discussed not only sports-related topics, as is
497 typical during the regular season, but also personal concerns, experiences, and feelings,
498 saying, “Overall, everyone takes care of each other by talking to those who seem to be a bit
499 down. We try to find out why a guy is not doing so well.” This open dialogue about well-
500 being and mental health was actively encouraged among the players, as Christophe noted,
501 “We all said that those guys who need help should talk to each other.”

502 The careful reorganization of communal spaces facilitated the implementation of these
503 emotional management strategies. These areas were transformed into social hubs which
504 allowed for comfortable interactions where meaningful conversations could take place, as
505 Mathieu explained, “In the changing room, there's always someone to lend an ear.” Marc
506 added, “We take the time to talk to each other in the kitchen. (...) For us, having time for
507 each other is a collective strategy, encouraging these moments together.”

508 It was not only the changing room that was used to regulate the team’s emotions.
509 Participants explained that they also used virtual spaces (e.g., WhatsApp) to implement
510 strategies for communal management of emotions. These virtual spaces, which had previously
511 been used to share information related to performance, became places where athletes could
512 engage in interpersonal emotion regulation strategies. Jerome described the use of these

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513 group-chats, “We have a group where we chat (...). We try to keep in touch with each other
514 outside of hockey. In the evenings, we try to talk about things other than hockey, catch up on
515 news and support each other.” Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the shared space initially
516 dedicated to game preparation or general organization, became a space for collective emotion
517 regulation and a sanctuary from pandemic-related concerns. Mathieu underlined that the
518 collective reorganization also provided much-needed respite during the period, “It’s in these
519 moments when you talk with others about anything and everything... These spaces for
520 discussion and these collective spaces among us, they create a space outside of COVID.”
521 Mathieu continued: “Now we know that we are all together, that when we are at the rink this
522 is our time to escape the crisis. When we go back to the rink, COVID stays outside.”

523 **“Keeping the Mood Going in The Right Direction, Keeping the Ship Going in The Right**
524 **Direction”**: The Role Of Leaders in The Communal Coping Process

525 When participants were asked if certain players played significant roles in the team's
526 crisis management and could be considered leaders in developing communal coping
527 strategies, their responses were affirmative. Identified leaders included both formal (i.e.,
528 captain, alternate captains) and informal roles. Participants noted that these leaders were
529 crucial in maintaining relationships, team identity, and group values, thus fostering a “sense
530 of us.” Leaders used actions, behaviors, and communication (verbal or non-verbal) to create a
531 shared social context for communal coping. This contributed to building a shared social
532 context conducive to communal coping process. The understanding of leadership in this
533 process was based on the Social Identity Approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2020;
534 Steffens et al., 2014). This states that leaders can help people to cope as a team through four
535 principles of identity leadership, wherein leaders need to be perceived by their followers as
536 in-group prototypes (i.e., Being One of Us), in-group champions (i.e., Doing It For Us),
537 entrepreneurs of identity (i.e., Crafting a Sense of Us), and embedders of identity (i.e.,

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538 Making Us Matter). Each of these dimensions has been considered as a sub-theme and their
539 definitions are presented in Table 1.

540 [Insert Table 1 here]

541 ***“He Doesn't Deviate From Our Rules and Our Values”: Being One of Us***

542 Leaders recognized as crucial in the collective management of this challenging period
543 were primarily those who embodied in-group prototypes, serving as role models and setting
544 an example for the team. These leaders demonstrated what it meant to be a dedicated team
545 member, particularly through routine, consistency, and strict adherence to rules. Their
546 behaviors became benchmarks for the rest of the team, reinforcing the team's core values,
547 such as “Compete First - Intensity - Work Hard - Family.” The captain, in particular, stood
548 out as a paragon of discipline and professionalism. Julien emphasized that leadership was
549 expressed through actions rather than words, “I think P is a leader by example. He doesn't
550 necessarily give speeches to the players... but just his professionalism gives you an example
551 to follow (...). From the moment you do as he does; you know you're doing things right.”
552 Similarly, Damien highlighted the captain's consistent behavior, noting, “P, he does his thing,
553 it's always the same; he arrives in the morning, he's always in the same mindset, regardless of
554 the situation, COVID or no COVID, he wants to compete.” This consistency provided
555 stability and clarity for the team, showing them how to maintain focus despite external
556 challenges.

557 In addition to routine and consistency, adherence to rules was another critical aspect of
558 leadership. Mathieu explained that the captain embodied the team's values through his strict
559 observance of the rules, saying “He doesn't deviate from our rules and our values. He does
560 everything right to be ready (...) he keeps telling us that it's by respecting our values that we
561 will get through this together.” His adherence to rules and routines reinforced a sense of
562 stability and reliability, further solidifying his role as a leader who embodied the “sense of

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563 us.” Other players also recognized the impact of this leadership. Jerome noted that the
564 captain’s attitude on the ice set the tone for the team: “His attitude on the ice gives us the
565 feeling that we're in season. He is always intense and always gives his all, he sets an
566 example.” Ludovic described how this example created a cascade of behaviors within the
567 team, explaining “When you see a guy doing that, you think 'OK, I need to do that too.' (...)
568 I'll give it my all. And I know that it will also influence others.” Thomas echoed this
569 sentiment, noting how another player’s competitive drive pulled the entire team forward:
570 “He’s always going full throttle. You know he's going to pull everyone up, keep us on the
571 right track because he’s a competitor and so are we.” In this way, leaders who adhered to
572 routines, rules, and values became the embodiment of the team’s ethos, motivating others
573 through their actions and creating a shared commitment to engage in communal coping
574 strategies.

575 ***“Negotiate Christmas Leave”: Doing It for Us***

576 Participants explained that leaders acted as in-group champions by defending team
577 interests and negotiating material conditions to prevent team failure and allow communal
578 coping strategies to be enacted. By doing so, they acted as in-group champions. For example,
579 as Damien explained, they negotiated salaries despite the suspension of competitions: “They
580 made sure we got our salary; they make sure we come here and have fun.” Thomas discussed
581 another negotiation point for the common good, explaining that the role of leaders at this time
582 is also to “Negotiate Christmas leave.” Marc noted that the salary issue was also a key point:

583 I think that really helped the guys. The financial aspect was really important (...) when
584 you see that salaries were paid even in advance, I think it lifted a weight off all the players. (...
585) I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a sort of strategy to appease the locker room.

586 Being a leader in helping the communal coping process also meant overcoming
587 obstacles to negotiate arrangements for spaces and schedules where they could implement

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588 communal coping strategies. As Arnaud said, “They (i.e., the identified leaders) went to the
589 coach and GM to negotiate schedules and ask them to let us organize our activities in the
590 changing rooms. Without that we wouldn't have been able to do anything together.” If this
591 access had not been arranged, the desire to organize communal coping strategies aimed at
592 investing effort or maintaining relationships would have remained merely wishful thinking.

593 ***“The Guys Must Stay on Board”: Crafting a Sense of Us***

594 In addition to defending the team's material and logistical needs, leaders also focused
595 on the emotional and social fabric of the team. Participants described how, despite the social
596 restrictions, the leaders worked to “keep everybody in the team boat” (e.g., making speeches
597 in the changing room or informal discussions about what the team stood for in order to “keep
598 the ship going in the right direction”). They also fostered inclusiveness by ensuring the mental
599 health and well-being of their teammates. This sense of “we” ensured that the group's values,
600 norms and ideals were kept alive, and fostered strong bonds between the players.

601 When asked about the role of leaders in helping the team cope collectively, Alexandre
602 replied, “We’re not looking for the same kind of leaders. At the moment, we’re looking for
603 leaders who can create a bond between us.” Leaders also ensured that training remained
604 enjoyable and that a positive atmosphere was maintained, as Christophe explained, “Their
605 role is to maintain this positive atmosphere and cultivate the desire to come [to training].”
606 Jerome emphasized that leaders were responsible for ensuring that everyone stayed aligned
607 with the team’s vision, saying “The role of a leader is to make sure that everyone stays on the
608 right track. (...) The guys must stay on board.” This was not only about keeping the team
609 together but also about safeguarding the well-being of each member. Participants highlighted
610 the importance of leaders being aware of how their teammates were doing and taking action if
611 someone was struggling.

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612 When Gregory and Christophe were asked “What is the role of leaders in helping the
613 team to collectively manage the situation?”, they emphasized “Making sure everyone's doing
614 well” and “Listening, especially to those struggling.” Romain added that acting as a leader in
615 the communal coping process involves being aware of the emotional states of other people
616 and taking action when necessary: “Being aware and being able to act on (...) Keeping the
617 mood going in the right direction, keeping the ship going in the right direction.” Thomas
618 elaborated, pointing out that leaders recognize when someone is struggling and step in to help,
619 saying “he's able to recognize people who are fed up and then go and see them, talk to them.
620 That's where he helps us, that's his form of leadership.” Anthony, who saw himself as a
621 leader, highlighted the importance of listening to his teammates, ensuring that they felt
622 supported, and leading by example. He said, “Listen to the people who are doing well and the
623 people who aren't. (They) need to feel that you're there for them (...) that you're going to try
624 to help them. The second role is to set an example.”

625 ***“Two Leaders Did It at the Beginning and Then Everyone Else Joined In”: Making Us***
626 ***Matter***

627 While keeping the team cohesive and onboard was crucial, leaders also took proactive
628 steps to embed the team's identity through structured activities and engagements. Participants
629 mentioned that the leaders developed events (e.g., social activities inside the changing room)
630 that helped to support the group's existence. This allowed team members to feel they belonged
631 to the group and facilitated a shared understanding of the situation and coordinated response to
632 meet the challenges. The leaders helped the communal coping process through their actions.
633 For example, they developed collective activities, or ways of acting that were then taken up
634 collectively. Damien described how the leaders organized a collective day, saying “(they)
635 organized the team day, which allowed us to think about something else, get together and have
636 a good time. They're important in this situation to keep the boys going. Otherwise...” This led

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662 during such a stressful period. This study also introduced the concept of “transactional
663 spaces” in describing the communal coping process. These spaces, whether virtual or
664 physical, were highlighted as potentially important for the team to make sense of the stressful
665 situation and for the implementation of various communal coping strategies. In addition, this
666 study provides some initial empirical evidence on the role of athlete leaders in the communal
667 coping process. By initiating communal coping strategies and creating a conducive shared
668 social environment, the leaders appeared to play an active role in helping the team to come
669 together.

670 **Communal Coping Strategies and Transactional Spaces: Ways to Better Understand the**
671 **Communal Coping Process**

672 Our study on the process of communal coping during the COVID-19 pandemic offers
673 significant contributions to the existing body of literature. This study responds to a gap
674 identified in the literature, which lacks a study that “reflects the exploration of a shared stress
675 reality” (Eckardt & Tamminen, 2023, p. 19). By focusing on a collective stress situation that
676 was both unique in its intensity and prolonged duration, this study offers new insights into
677 how professional athletes manage communal stress outside the typical competitive contexts.

678 Our findings differ from and expand upon previous studies on communal coping
679 during the COVID-19 outbreak. While Kim et al. (2022) emphasized the role of community
680 identity in communal coping, and Pété et al. (2021) explored individual coping profiles in the
681 context of sport psychology, our study differs by examining a broader range of communal
682 coping strategies and the role of leaders in this process. This expands the understanding of
683 communal coping beyond what has previously been established in both community and sport
684 psychology. Our study extends these insights by demonstrating that communal coping
685 strategies can be effectively applied beyond the immediate competitive stressors typically
686 faced by athletes and can be crucial in managing more intense and prolonged stressors such as

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687 those presented by the pandemic. Our results show that the team employed a range of
688 communal coping strategies, including those focused on effort expenditure, relationship
689 maintenance, and emotional management. So far, work on communal coping in sport has
690 shown that these strategies were used to cope with game-related stressful situations such as
691 teammate relationship issues, referee errors, or score issues (Leprince et al., 2018). Our results
692 extend the usefulness of these strategies by demonstrating that they can be applied outside of
693 competitive stressors, and in our case, in a situation of intense stress. These strategies evolved
694 over time, reflecting the dynamic nature of communal coping as the team adapted to the
695 changing circumstances of the pandemic. Initially, the team's strategies were centered on
696 filling the gaps left by the suspension of competitions and maintaining a sense of normalcy.
697 As the situation progressed and the resumption of official competition became imminent, the
698 focus shifted towards intensifying preparations. The team placed a strong emphasis on
699 simultaneously sustaining and enhancing interpersonal relationships, transforming communal
700 spaces into key hubs for social interaction and emotional support. These efforts were crucial
701 in countering the isolation imposed by external restrictions. Our findings align with previous
702 research indicating that communal coping strategies focused on maintaining relationships are
703 particularly effective in severe and intense stress situations, such as natural disasters
704 (Wlodarczyk et al., 2016). Our findings are also consistent with Lyons et al. (1998), who
705 argue that communal coping is essential for managing stress, but also fundamental for
706 fostering social integration, interdependence, and the maintenance of close relationships. In
707 the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where social interactions were limited, our findings
708 suggest that communal coping strategies did not only address immediate concerns, but also
709 fostered a close-knit and supportive environment that remains crucial for maintaining team
710 functioning and collective bonds. By highlighting the use of various communal coping
711 strategies, the present study emphasizes the flexible and dynamic nature of the communal

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712 coping process, aligning with previous research that considers communal coping a dynamic
713 phenomenon (Milne & Neely, 2022; Neely et al., 2017).

714 Additionally, this study introduces the concept of “transactional spaces” as critical
715 spaces that facilitate communal coping. Athletes re-organized spaces that would ordinarily
716 have been used to share information related to performance for the implementation of
717 communal coping strategies. Transactional spaces became a resource for communal coping
718 strategies focused on maintaining relationships by providing places for socializing. These
719 spaces, whether physical (e.g., the changing room, kitchen) or virtual (e.g., WhatsApp group
720 chats), became essential resources where athletes could interact, share experiences, and
721 support each other emotionally. The reorganization and repurposing of these spaces allowed
722 for continuous communication and social interactions, which were important for the
723 development of communal coping strategies.

724 By emphasizing the role of these transactional spaces, our findings align with and
725 build upon existing research that underscores the importance of communication in the
726 communal coping process (e.g., Lyons et al., 1998; Eckardt & Tamminen, 2023; Neely et al.,
727 2017). However, our study adds to this body of knowledge by demonstrating that
728 communication alone is insufficient; it must be supported by the availability of appropriate
729 spaces—both physical and virtual—where such interactions can occur. Through ongoing
730 interactions and discussions within transactional spaces, team members collectively shared
731 the signification of the stressors they faced. This meaning-making process enabled the team to
732 share a sense of purpose, align their collaborative actions/efforts and establish a communal
733 coping approach to shared stressors.

734 **Building a Reservoir of Cognitive and Behavioral Resources: The Role of Leaders in the**
735 **Communal Coping Process**

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736 Our case study methodology provides a perspective that captures the intricate process
737 of communal coping in the context of a professional sports team, allowing us to provide
738 evidence on the role of leaders in this process. This extends theoretical assumptions about the
739 role of leaders in the communal coping process (Lyons et al., 1998; Tamminen & Gaudreau,
740 2014). This insight underscores the importance of leadership in facilitating communal coping.
741 Players endorsing an identity-oriented leadership guided the direction of communal coping
742 efforts by fostering communication, aligning team goals or core values, and ensuring that
743 each member's contributions were valued and coordinated. Leaders' behaviors in the
744 communal coping process exhibited consistency and reliability with respect to the Social
745 Identity Approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2020). Indeed, the athletes recognized as
746 leaders developed social structures conducive to the communal coping process. They were
747 able to initiate and sustain the communal coping process, engaging in the four dimensions of
748 identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2014). By emphasizing the distinctive
749 qualities and shared values of the team and encouraging team members to identify with these
750 qualities, they fostered a sense of "us-ness" (Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Peters, et al., 2020).
751 In doing so, they created a favorable social environment that was beneficial to the team
752 because it promoted a shared appraisal of the situation and a communal orientation to face
753 stress. This shared identity served as the reservoir of cognitive and behavioral resources
754 required for group members to consider that, when faced with a shared stressor, it is "our"
755 problem, "our" responsibility, and "we" engage in collective actions to deal with it. These
756 findings are consistent with the importance of social identity related to stress management
757 (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; van Dick et al., 2018).

758 Furthermore, by providing a range of psychological resources, social identity can
759 provide the basis for a 'social cure', which appears crucial for stress appraisal (Haslam et al.,
760 2005; Rees et al., 2015) and can help address a range of psychosocial challenges (Bruner et al.

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761 2022; Haslam et al., 2020). In this study, those perceived as leaders in the communal coping
762 process were individuals who facilitated identification with others, fostered strong bonds
763 within the group, considered the well-being of group members and developed a shared
764 identity, factors that have been recognized as beneficial for communal coping in domains
765 other than sport (e.g., Afifi et al., 2020). Our results are also consistent with research outside
766 the field of sport. They echo the findings of Kim et al. (2022) who showed, in the context of
767 the COVID-19 pandemic, that the extent to which an individual identified with the
768 community was positively related to communal coping orientations. Similarly, Haslam et al.
769 (2021) demonstrated that leaders who represented and advanced the shared interests of group
770 members and created a sense of shared social identity, could mobilize the population to act
771 effectively to manage stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present findings are
772 consistent with the importance of displaying identity leadership related to sport contexts.
773 Through this leadership, leaders are able to foster team confidence (Fransen et al., 2020),
774 team resilience (Morgan et al., 2015), team performance (Fransen et al., 2016) and a
775 psychologically safe environment (Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020). These results could help
776 identify new predictors involved in the communal coping process in sports teams.

777 In addition to the results on the process of communal coping, this study also stands out
778 for its method. One of the strengths of our study is the implementation of a comprehensive
779 case study involving an entire professional ice hockey team. Unlike previous studies that
780 often focused on individual members of a team (e.g., team captains in Leprince et al., 2018;
781 one parent-child dyad per family in Neely et al., 2017), our approach provided a holistic
782 perspective on the communal coping processes within a sports team environment. This
783 inclusive methodology allowed us to capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of
784 communal coping as it unfolds in a real-world setting, where team members interact and
785 support each other in managing shared stressors. This case-study approach, which provided an

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786 in-depth exploration of the communal coping process, offered several advantages (Keegan et
787 al., 2017). By involving the entire team, we gathered diverse viewpoints and experiences.
788 This ensured that our findings reflect the collective experience of the team, rather than
789 isolated perspectives, leading to a rich and nuanced understanding of communal coping
790 process. This case study of a population that is difficult for researchers to reach (i.e., a
791 professional team) helps us understand how and why the communal coping process is
792 established using a very specific context: the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach provides a
793 rich, contextually grounded, and nuanced understanding of how leaders influence the
794 communal coping process. It highlights the fact that the role of leaders extends beyond merely
795 initiating strategies (Lyons et al., 1998); they also create a social context that fosters both a
796 shared understanding of the stressful situation and the ability to cope together. These
797 observations relating to communal coping strategies and the roles of leaders add new insights
798 to the understanding of the communal coping process.

799 **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

800 While this study enhances our understanding of the communal coping process within a
801 professional sports team, it also serves as a foundation for further exploration in other
802 contexts. The exceptional environment created by the COVID-19 outbreak provided a unique
803 shared stress experience, offering valuable insights into communal coping. However, future
804 research could extend these findings by addressing the same research questions over the
805 course of a regular sports season to explore how communal coping unfolds in more typical
806 circumstances, such as the stressors experienced during major competitive events like the
807 French ice hockey championship. Additionally, exploring the concept of transactional spaces
808 in regular game situations (e.g., time-outs, half-time) and across a typical season would
809 provide valuable insights into the collective appraisal, communication, and implementation of
810 communal strategies within teams.

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811 Moreover, although our focus on a professional ice hockey team allowed for an in-
812 depth examination of communal coping within a specific sporting culture, it opens the door to
813 studying these dynamics across different sports, levels of expertise, gender, and age groups.
814 This presents an opportunity to understand how diverse contexts may shape the relationship
815 between leadership and communal coping. For instance, adopting longitudinal and
816 quantitative designs with larger sample sizes, and using tools like the Identity Leadership
817 Inventory-Short Form (Steffens et al., 2014) and the Communal Coping Strategies Inventory
818 for Competitive Team Sports-Revised (Pété et al., 2023), could help clarify how leadership
819 behaviors influence communal coping in a broader range of settings. Furthermore, expanding
820 the scope of future research to consider the role of other individuals, such as coaches,
821 managers, or sport psychologists, in the communal coping process would provide a more
822 comprehensive understanding of this dynamic phenomenon.

823 The methodological approach of using individual semi-structured interviews presents
824 certain limitations. While it provides in-depth insights and represents the first study to explore
825 shared stressors and communal coping strategies within a sports team through the
826 perspectives of all members, it primarily reflects individual perceptions rather than collective
827 dynamics. Although individual interviews offer valuable insights into participants' thoughts,
828 perspectives, and experiences, they inherently fall short in capturing the nuances of collective
829 processes. To address this, future research could consider incorporating a mix of methods
830 such as focus groups, observations, network analysis, or surveys. These approaches could
831 offer a more holistic understanding of collective phenomena (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014)
832 as well as ensure greater synchronicity of responses (Doron & Bourbousson, 2017).

833 Beyond the Pandemic: Applied Implications

834 From an applied perspective, these findings support the idea that sports organizations
835 should consider the importance of team coping from a health and performance perspective.

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836 The psychosocial mechanisms that promote a communal coping orientation (e.g.,
837 communication quality, relational quality, leadership quality) could be taught or explained via
838 information sessions at the start of the season. Staff could encourage the creation of
839 “transactional spaces” (physical or virtual, on the field or off the field) in which athletes can
840 freely communicate (verbally or non-verbally) to develop communal strategies to cope with a
841 shared stressful situation. Stress management techniques could be developed in these spaces
842 at team level to enhance communal coping. For example, team-building activities, such as
843 problem-solving games or group challenges, could foster cooperation and communication to
844 build trust and improve the interpersonal dynamics required for effective communal coping.
845 Furthermore, Personal-Disclosure Mutual-Sharing (Holt & Dunn, 2006) could be beneficial
846 by allowing team members to discuss personal and team-related stressors more intimately.
847 This psychological intervention originates from counseling psychology and is typically used
848 to verbally address and resolve specific areas of conflict. The literature suggests that such
849 interventions help to create shared perceptions and meanings among team members, leading
850 to the emergence of collectively shared constructs and understandings (Dunn & Holt, 2004).
851 By using these “transactional spaces” and structured communal coping training sessions,
852 teams could enrich their repertoire of communal coping strategies. Finally, since leaders seem
853 to play a role in enabling the collective to cope as a team, coaches and staff should be
854 encouraged to identify leaders (e.g., through Social Network Analyses), promote shared
855 leadership and train leaders to develop a sense of “we” (Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Peters, et
856 al., 2020).

857 Conclusion

858 Drawing on recent conceptualizations of communal coping (Afifi et al., 2020; Lyons
859 et al., 1998; Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014), the present case study took advantage of the
860 unprecedented, shared challenge of the COVID-19 outbreak to further explore how coping

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861 occurs within a professional sports team as a communal process. This study allowed for the
862 identification of the communal coping strategies used by a professional ice hockey team to
863 cope with this particular period. This study also **explores** the influence of leaders in the
864 communal coping process by highlighting the fact that team members who embody, advance,
865 craft, and embed a sense of “us” are recognized as leaders in the collective management of the
866 situation. In addition to initiating the implementation of communal coping strategies, leaders
867 foster a shared social identity. The latter provides a reservoir of cognitive and behavioral
868 resources for appraising a problem as “ours” and considering that it is “our responsibility” to
869 address it through collaborative action. This study provides initial insightful evidence about
870 the communal coping process from both a theoretical and practical point of view, including
871 the introduction of the concept of transactional space and initial observations regarding the
872 roles of leaders in communal coping. Future studies could fruitfully explore this process
873 further by using methods allowing for qualitative and quantitative understanding of the
874 predictors of communal coping, both in a competitive situation and from a longitudinal
875 perspective.

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Table 1.

Definitions of the Four Identity Leadership Dimensions (Steffens et al., 2014)

Identity prototypicality “Being one of us”	Representing the unique qualities that define the team and what it means to be a member of this team. Embodying those core attributes of the team that make this team special as well as distinct from other teams. Being an exemplary and model member of the team.
Identity advancement “Doing it for us”	Advancing and promoting core interests of the team. Standing up for and, if threatened, defending, team interests (and not personal interests or those of other teams). Championing concerns and ambitions that are key to the team as a whole. Contributing to the realization of team goals. Acting to prevent team failures and to overcome obstacles to the achievement of team objectives.
Identity entrepreneurship “Creating a sense of us”	Bringing people together by creating a shared sense of ‘we’ and ‘us’ within the team. Making different people all feel that they are part of the same team and increasing cohesion and inclusiveness within the team. Clarifying people’s understanding of what the team stands for (and what it does not stand for) by defining core values, norms, and ideals.
Identity impresarioship “Making us matter”	Developing structures, events, and activities that give weight to the team’s existence and allow team members to live out their membership. Promoting structures that facilitate and embed shared understanding, coordination, and success (and not structures that divide or undermine the team).
