



The Team Behind the Team

Why the next performance edge lives in the people who deliver it

Professional sport has spent three decades building extraordinary support structures around its athletes and the returns from that investment have reshaped how every elite programme prepares, develops and protects its players. The people who design and deliver those structures have rarely been given the same attention, even though the science that governs how athletes absorb stress and adapt applies to them with equal force. This piece brings together the evidence, the examples and the practical conditions which suggest that the next leading edge in elite sport sits with the staff who make the whole system work.

01

Every Era Added a Layer Around the Athlete

Professional sport has progressed through a series of identifiable inflection points, with each one adding a new layer of infrastructure around the athlete that lifted the standard of preparation, development and performance. The earliest investment went almost entirely into player payments as sport moved from amateur to professional, before coaching, talent identification and long term athlete development became the priority of the early professional era. The modern training era then brought strength and conditioning into the mainstream alongside structured coach development and the first collective agreements that set minimum standards for travel, facilities, staffing and nutrition.

Sports science followed with workload monitoring, athlete management systems and the pursuit of a clear return on injury risk reduction, while the multidisciplinary era that most professional organisations now occupy has focused on integrating medicine and science with coaching and analysis to provide collaborative support for every player. Each of these steps produced a genuine competitive advantage for the organisations that moved first, yet every one of them has since become standard practice across the leading leagues and competitions. Strength and conditioning departments and performance analysts now sit alongside monitoring platforms, medical teams, nutrition support and psychological services as the ordinary shape of a professional environment.

	ERA	WHERE THE INVESTMENT WENT
BEFORE	Amateur to professional	Player payments
BEFORE	Early professional	Coaching, talent identification and long term athlete development
BEFORE	Modern training	Strength and conditioning, coach development and minimum standards for players
BEFORE	Sports science	Monitoring, analytics, athlete management systems and injury risk reduction
NOW	Multidisciplinary	Integrated support across medicine, science, coaching and analysis
NEXT	Support maximisation	Role clarity, staff continuity, fair reward, growth pathways and environments built around people

As those margins narrow, the organisations looking for the next advantage are turning their attention to the stability, capability and effectiveness of the people and systems responsible for developing athletes, which remains the layer of the performance environment that has received the least deliberate investment.



Where the money has gone

The financial structure of professional sport reflects a clear and reasonable priority on athlete compensation, because supporters come to watch players and the product on the field belongs to them. The Premier League offers the starkest illustration, with average player pay rising from around £75,000 when the league formed in 1992 to a figure now measured in millions of pounds as broadcast and commercial revenues expanded the scale of the game. Pay and conditions for the wider workforce that prepares those players have not moved at anything like the same rate, which leaves many performance staff carrying elite expectations on terms that were set for a far smaller industry.

What raising the floor did for players

Minor League Baseball offers a clear case of what happens when a sport raises the minimum standard of the environment around developing athletes. For decades minor league players earned very low wages and many lived in unstable housing, until the first collective bargaining agreement for minor league players was ratified in 2023 and introduced substantially higher salaries alongside mandatory housing provisions and improved welfare conditions.

LEVEL	PREVIOUS MINIMUM SALARY	MINIMUM SALARY FROM 2023
Complex League	\$4,800	\$19,800
Low A	\$11,000	\$26,200
High A	\$11,000	\$27,300
Double A	\$13,800	\$30,250
Triple A	\$17,500	\$35,800

The reform removed a set of external pressure points that had been drawing attention away from development, which allowed players to give more of their focus to the work that actually improves them. That is the foundational principle behind this piece, because when barriers are removed and support structures are added around players their focus on development and the quality of their output both improve. The same lens can be applied one layer out to the staff wrapped around the player system, where people carrying contract insecurity, uncertain living arrangements and unsustainable workloads spend part of their capacity managing those pressures when it could be spent on the athlete in front of them. Supporting that layer multiplies the environment and support every player receives as a result.

02

The Team Behind the Team

Modern elite sport relies on multidisciplinary performance support teams that bring strength and conditioning and sport science together with medicine, psychology, nutrition and performance analysis. A 2024 narrative review by Stewart, Fletcher, Arnold and McEwan describes these groups as multiteam systems in which specialists from different disciplines must coordinate their work to optimise the performance and wellbeing of athletes. The review is clear that the effectiveness of such a group depends on how well it operates as a coordinated system as much as on the expertise each individual brings to it.

Several of its structural findings matter for any organisation operating across multiple sites or squads. Teams that are geographically distributed find it significantly harder to communicate, retain context, build trust and coordinate their actions, which makes alignment a matter of deliberate design in any system that cannot rely on proximity. Alfano and Collins found that departmental silos had a detrimental effect on teamwork and created conditions for conflict between disciplines even where individuals were willing to collaborate, which locates the constraint firmly in the structure around people. The review also identifies the need for leaders who can speak across disciplines, coordinate resources and hold a shared vision across environments, describing that capability as central to how distributed support teams function.

The stressors staff carry

Research on organisational stress in elite sport has identified a consistent set of pressures acting on the people who work inside performance systems. Leadership and personnel issues sit alongside strain in team culture, logistical demands from travel and facilities and career pressures that include contract insecurity and limited pathways for growth, while role ambiguity and communication breakdowns between departments recur across studies. These stressors shape how practitioners collaborate and coordinate the preparation of athletes, which means they shape the quality of the development system itself.

STRESSOR	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE
Leadership and personnel	Communication with coaches, unclear role expectations and organisational constraints
Team culture	Trust, cohesion, working relationships and alignment with stated values
Logistics	Facilities, travel schedules, infrastructure, technology and equipment
Career	Selection decisions, contract insecurity, financial pressure and limited growth opportunities

Communication shows up in availability

One of the clearest links between organisational process and athlete outcomes comes from Ekstrand and colleagues, who studied the quality of communication between medical teams and head coaches in elite European football clubs and published their findings in the British Journal of Sports Medicine in 2019. Clubs with lower quality communication between the medical team and the head coach carried a higher injury burden alongside lower training attendance and lower match availability, while clubs with stronger communication kept more of their players available for selection. That finding places the quality of relationships between staff groups directly in the chain that produces player availability, which suggests that role clarity and well designed decision rights are performance variables in their own right.

03

Stress, Rest, Grow

In Peak Performance, Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness distil the mechanism behind elite development into a single equation in which stress plus rest equals growth. Too much stress without enough recovery leads to injury, illness or burnout while too little stress leads to complacency, which means the gain lives in the calibration between the two. Every periodised programme in professional sport is built on this principle, so the question worth asking is why most organisations apply it with such precision to athletes while leaving the staff who design those programmes to find their own balance across a demanding calendar.

Anders Ericsson's research on expert violinists offers a useful reminder of how the best performers actually work. The most accomplished players concentrated their deliberate practice into focused sessions totalling around four hours a day and slept more than their less accomplished peers, including more daytime naps, which suggests their discipline lay in how they structured effort and recovery together. Stulberg and Magness also describe the just manageable challenge, a task sitting slightly beyond current capability that produces growth when it is paired with support, while challenge set too low breeds stagnation and challenge set too high breeds anxiety and eventual disengagement.

Purpose completes the picture, since Stulberg and Magness show that a clear sense of why the work matters reduces the perceived cost of effort and helps people sustain their output through difficulty. That makes purpose a performance input for staff in exactly the way it is for athletes. Most performance staff arrive with that purpose already in place, so the organisational task is to build a rhythm of work that allows it to last across a season, a multi year build and a career.

What accumulated fatigue does to decisions

The sleep research is unambiguous about the cost of the kind of restriction that builds quietly across a long season. Pilcher and Huffcutt's meta analysis found that partial sleep deprivation produced larger performance decrements than short periods of total deprivation. Lim and Dinges later showed that simple attention and vigilance are among the functions most sensitive to lost sleep, with working memory also clearly affected. For performance staff this means the slow accumulation of short nights across travel and compressed fixtures carries a greater cost than any single late night, because the deficit builds without an obvious moment that prompts anyone to act.

A widely discussed study of parole decisions by Danziger and colleagues found that favourable rulings were most likely at the start of a session and declined steadily until judges took a break, after which the rate recovered. The size of that effect has been debated since publication, yet the broader pattern is consistent with a large body of work showing that the quality of repeated judgement deteriorates as cognitive resources are drawn down. In a performance department the data on the screen during an end of week selection meeting or a late load planning conversation may be identical to the data available that morning, while the capacity of the person interpreting it has changed considerably.

THE PRODUCTIVE DOSE

Deliberate, high quality cognitive work appears to have a practical daily ceiling of a few focused hours when it is broken up by genuine recovery, with each additional hour adding less quality than it appears to add. An organisation that counts training load to protect its athletes while leaving the cognitive load of its decision makers unmeasured is applying two different standards to the same underlying science.

The staff are part of the athlete's environment

Staff depletion has a direct path to athlete outcomes because the coach, the clinician and the analyst are all part of the environment in which each athlete trains. Calleja-González and colleagues made this case in 2021 when they argued that the recovery umbrella in elite sport must extend to coaching and performance staff, who experience fatigue comparable to that of their athletes while rarely receiving comparable recovery support. A fatigued clinician has less acuity for the early signal of an injury, a depleted coach gives less precise feedback and a stretched analyst has less capacity to notice the pattern that matters, which is why staff readiness belongs upstream of every athlete protocol an organisation runs. Treating the readiness of those people as part of athlete care is therefore a way of protecting the athlete as much as the staff member.

04

Real Toughness and the Performance of It

High performance culture has a long and imprecise relationship with toughness, a word that usually carries the unspoken assumption that more effort is always better. In *Do Hard Things*, Steve Magness separates a performative version built on grinding, suppression and pressing on regardless from a real version that he describes as the capacity to experience discomfort, pay attention to it and create the space to act thoughtfully. Magness argues that the performative version produces fragility over time, because people who suppress what they are experiencing gradually lose the ability to read their own state accurately and their decisions degrade long before anyone notices.

Professional environments have historically rewarded the visible markers of effort, such as hours in the building, constant availability and rapid responsiveness, because those markers are easy to see and easy to reward. The quality of thinking, teaching and decision making across a full season is harder to observe and considerably more consequential, which is why organisations that confuse the two end up with more fragile staff and a decline in output that stays invisible until it becomes significant.

Challenge stress and hindrance stress

Magness draws on a distinction from organisational psychology that is especially useful for performance leaders. The meta analysis by LePine and colleagues found that challenge stressors such as workload, complexity and responsibility tend to relate positively to motivation and performance, while hindrance stressors such as role ambiguity, organisational politics and job insecurity relate negatively to both. The design goal for a performance department is therefore to keep staff working in the productive band of challenge with recovery built in behind it, while systematically removing the hindrances that drain capacity without producing any growth. In practice that means auditing the sources of friction staff report most often and treating their removal as seriously as any addition to the programme.

SURVIVAL MODE LOOKS LIKE COPING

Practitioners studied by Wagstaff and colleagues described going into a survival mentality during periods of organisational instability, keeping their heads down and avoiding risk in order to protect their positions. That is performative toughness observed in the field, with staff appearing to function while the quality of their work quietly declines. The organisations that close this gap are the ones that deliberately design the conditions in which real performance becomes possible.

05

Five Conditions That Decide Whether Staff Thrive or Survive

The evidence converges on five conditions that determine whether a high demand support team sustains its performance over time or gradually degrades while continuing to look functional. Rest, downtime, flexibility, autonomy and psychological safety each behave like performance infrastructure because each one changes the quality of the decisions that staff make on behalf of athletes. None of them requires a large budget to begin, since each depends first on the choices leaders make about the calendar, the structure of decisions and the behaviour they model. Together they form a practical checklist that any department can use to test whether its environment allows capable staff to keep performing across a full year. The sections that follow take each condition in turn, with practical steps that any department can adapt to its own calendar and structure.

Rest by design

In environments that prize visible effort, rest tends to be treated as a reward that people earn once the work is done. High performing teams reverse that logic by building recovery into the structure of the calendar, because stress without recovery steadily erodes the very capacity the work depends on. For staff working a year round calendar with no natural off season, recovery has to be designed into the plan or it will simply fail to happen. The gaps between the major phases of the year are the obvious place to start, since they are predictable and can be protected well in advance. Recovery that is planned in this way also becomes easier for staff to take without guilt, because it carries the visible endorsement of the organisation.

IN PRACTICE

- Map the annual calendar and mark the predictable peaks in staff workload, such as preseason, selection windows and the close of each competition phase, so they can be planned for.
- Protect explicit recovery windows between major phases and treat those periods as a planned part of the performance year.
- Track staff cognitive load and recovery quality as named operational data in the same way athlete readiness is tracked.

Downtime protected in the open

Most leaders understand that reflective time supports creative problem solving, yet far fewer protect it for their teams, largely because unstructured time can look like a lack of focus in cultures that reward visible activity. Individual development planning is creative work that depends on honest appraisal and a willingness to depart from the standard template, which requires cognitive space that a continuous workload never provides. What leaders visibly protect becomes what teams treat as legitimate, so downtime that is managed privately and apologetically sends a signal that no policy document can reverse.

The value of downtime is easy to underestimate because its product is rarely visible in the moment it is created. The insight that reshapes a struggling athlete's programme, the question that exposes a flaw in a plan and the connection between two apparently unrelated observations all tend to arrive when the mind has room to wander, which is why a department that fills every hour with delivery quietly limits the quality of its own thinking. Protecting that space is therefore one of the cheapest investments a leadership group can make in the quality of every plan its department produces.

IN PRACTICE

- Build structured debriefs after each major phase of the year as standard practice across the department.
- Have leaders model protected reflection time openly so the behaviour carries permission at every level.
- Name the difference between idle time and intentional recovery in staff communication, keeping work ethic as the foundation while pointing it at what produces consistent performance.

Flexibility grounded in trust

The common organisational fear is that flexibility erodes output, yet the most rigorous evidence points the other way. A randomised controlled trial led by Phyllis Moen and Erin Kelly at a Fortune 500 company found that employees in a flexibility and support initiative reported greater control over their schedules, higher job satisfaction and lower levels of burnout and distress than colleagues who stayed on existing policies. In elite sport, where experienced practitioners are scarce and expensive to replace, the relationship between flexibility, satisfaction and retention is an operational matter. Losing one experienced practitioner can undo years of relationship building with athletes and colleagues, a cost that rarely appears in any budget line.

Most performance calendars are fixed in their broad structure, since competition dates and camp windows are rarely negotiable, yet within that structure there are many places where flexibility has been removed by habit with no operational reason behind it. Consistency matters as much as the amount of flexibility on offer, because expectations around location, travel and living arrangements that vary across similar roles for reasons unrelated to performance erode the sense of fairness that keeps good people engaged. Flexibility of this kind sits comfortably alongside accountability, since staff who are trusted to manage their workload within clear expectations tend to manage it well and stay longer. The energy they would otherwise spend negotiating their circumstances goes straight back into the work itself.

IN PRACTICE

- Audit which scheduling constraints are operationally required and which exist by default, then remove the defaults.
- Align expectations for location, travel and camp involvement across comparable roles, basing any difference on the demands of the role.
- Give staff at every site a formal route to flag workload concerns and treat what they report as performance data.
- Track staff retention as a department level performance measure alongside athlete progression.

Autonomy inside clear outcomes

Self determination theory, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, holds that motivation sustains itself when the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met. Magness applies the same lens to performance environments, arguing that when those needs are satisfied the drive comes from within and fear stops consuming the capacity people need for good work. Teams given genuine decision authority within clearly defined outcomes develop a sense of ownership that shows up most clearly under pressure. Ownership of this kind changes how people respond when a plan goes wrong, because staff who feel responsible for an outcome look for solutions while staff who feel closely supervised look for cover.

A strength coach who can modify a session based on what they are seeing, or escalate a readiness concern without waiting for approval at every level, is the mechanism through which individual expertise becomes system performance. When that judgement is routinely overridden from above, people gradually stop exercising it and the organisation loses the very expertise it went to the trouble of hiring. Autonomy therefore needs to be designed into roles deliberately, with clear boundaries that make it safe for people to use their judgement when it matters most. Leaders who get this balance right tend to find that their own workload falls as well, because fewer routine decisions travel up the line for approval.

IN PRACTICE

- Define roles by outcome standards and professional boundaries, then give real freedom in how those standards are met.
- Remove approval layers from day to day decisions that already sit inside established protocols.
- Recognise staff led problem solving openly so independent judgement becomes a cultural norm.

Psychological safety as a performance driver

Amy Edmondson introduced team psychological safety in 1999 as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking, which covers raising a concern, admitting a mistake, challenging a plan or asking an obvious question without first calculating how it will land. Her research found that it predicted learning behaviour in teams, a finding that a quarter of a century of subsequent work has reinforced. Google's Project Aristotle concluded that how team members interacted mattered more than who was on the team and identified psychological safety as the most important of the dynamics it studied. McKinsey's work on team effectiveness points in the same direction, reporting that three in four cross functional teams underperform on key metrics and that teams displaying the right behaviours are more productive and more innovative.

This has a specific texture in a performance department, where a clinician who notices an athlete responding poorly to a prescribed load but follows the protocol without raising the concern has been trained by the culture to put compliance ahead of athlete welfare. A coach who sees a flaw in a development plan and stays silent has already become a retention risk, long before any departure shows up in a report. Both behaviours are rational responses to the environment people work in, which is why the solution has to be found in that environment as well.

IN PRACTICE

- Audit how error reporting and disagreement function at every site and level of the department.
- Model safety from the top through open acknowledgement of mistakes and a genuine invitation of contrary views.
- Build low stakes forums such as phase debriefs, peer reviews and annual retrospectives where candour is the standard format, following each one with visible action.
- Measure psychological safety alongside operational indicators so it is managed with the same seriousness.

What Practitioners Tell Us

The most direct evidence for this argument comes from the people who have lived it. Wagstaff, Gilmore and Thelwell followed twenty sport medicine and sport science practitioners across three organisations in the top tiers of English football and cricket for two years, conducting forty nine interviews as organisational change unfolded in real time. Their findings document poor employment practices alongside direct and indirect consequences for performance on the field, which is the same pathway this piece has been tracing from the other direction. Because the study followed the same people through change as it happened, its findings carry a weight that retrospective accounts rarely achieve.

The first lesson is how quickly institutional capability can disappear. In one organisation, sport science and medicine practices refined over seven years were dismantled within months of a single leadership change, with practitioners describing the loss of rapport, relationships and trust that had taken years to build. Another organisation needed around six months to return to its previous level of effectiveness, which represents half a year of diminished support for athletes caused by the conditions surrounding capable staff. Neither organisation lacked talented people, which places the loss squarely in the structure and leadership decisions around them.

It takes years and years to build up and just days to destroy.

Practitioner, Wagstaff, Gilmore and Thelwell (2015)

The second lesson is a ripple effect in which the emotional and attitudinal responses of staff to instability flow into the quality of the medical, rehabilitation, recovery and analysis support they provide. The third is the survival mentality that practitioners described, keeping their heads down until things settled and avoiding anything that might expose them, at which point proactive practice and innovation stop while the appearance of functioning continues. Leaders looking only at attendance and effort would see nothing wrong during this phase, which is precisely what makes it so costly.

The fourth lesson concerns the psychological contract between practitioners and their employers, which becomes more brittle with each cycle of change. Participants described every episode as costing them trust and a larger share of their loyalty, with the most experienced practitioners the most likely to leave because they have the networks to move and have learned that organisations rarely protect the investment made in their roles. When those people leave they take years of institutional knowledge with them, a cost that no recruitment process can recover, which is why the authors point towards embedding and protecting support departments within the architecture of the organisation so their practices can survive the natural volatility of leadership change.

Engagement at scale

Gallup's meta analysis of its Q12 engagement research, drawing on hundreds of studies and well over one hundred thousand business units, provides a population level view that sits beneath the practitioner evidence. Teams in the top quartile of engagement outperform those in the bottom quartile with around 23 percent higher profitability and 18 percent higher productivity alongside substantially lower turnover, while Gallup's wider research attributes at least 70 percent of the variance in team engagement to the manager. Engagement is therefore largely a product of how people are led, developed and protected by the structure around them, which is exactly where deliberate organisational investment makes its difference.

For performance departments the implication is direct, because the leaders of medical, science, coaching and analysis groups shape the daily experience of their staff more than any policy can. Developing those leaders is therefore one of the highest leverage investments an organisation can make in the people who serve its athletes, with returns that compound as those leaders go on to develop others in turn. Investment in leadership capability is therefore an investment in every person those leaders influence across a season, from the newest intern to the most senior practitioner.

The Organisations That Moved First

Every so often an organisation identifies a variable that others have overlooked and acts on it before the wider field has validated the idea. The organisations that move first gain an advantage over their contemporaries and go on to define the standard that everyone else is eventually measured against, which is a pattern elite sport has already repeated with load management, biomechanics and physiological monitoring.

The organisations that have acted on this idea have done so through three models, which this piece ranks by how reliably they create the conditions described above. The ultimate model combines an organisational audit, a driving philosophy and a targeted role at performance level, the second places a dedicated staff development role inside the club and the third builds a system held by everyone, which is the strongest of all where the culture to support it already exists.

Model one: the hybrid lead

The most complete expression of this idea combines an organisational audit, a clearly stated driving philosophy and a targeted role that sits at performance level while staying connected to people and culture. McLaren Racing advertised exactly this model in 2026 with a Head of People Engineering for its endurance racing and business performance functions, a role based in Woking that partners around 200 staff and serves as a trusted strategic partner to their leaders.

The philosophy behind the role is what sets it apart. McLaren is explicit that the role sits outside traditional HR, describing it as hands on collaboration and people engineering that connects people initiatives directly to car performance. The team deliberately invites candidates from performance psychology, coaching and sport based people development who can bring a different perspective to the people function, which signals that the role is judged by what it contributes to performance as much as by what it administers.

Its brief spans organisational design, change management, workforce planning and talent management, all delivered through a local people plan built on stakeholder engagement. The role holds no direct reports and draws on a people advisor and a people coordinator, which keeps it close to the work and focused on influence across the organisation. That combination of audit, philosophy and a targeted role closes the gap the wider benchmark exposes, because it carries the methods of the people function into the performance environment and ties every people initiative to the outcome the organisation competes for.

THE THREE ELEMENTS OF THE HYBRID

- An organisational audit that maps how people, structures and decision rights currently shape performance before any initiative is designed
- A clearly stated philosophy that connects every people initiative to the performance outcome the organisation competes for
- A targeted role at performance level that works with leaders day to day while holding a direct line into people and culture

In a sporting organisation the equivalent role would sit alongside the head of performance and the senior coaching staff while holding a direct line into people and culture. Its measures would be the same ones this piece has argued for throughout, including staff retention, decision quality, psychological safety and ultimately the availability and development of the athletes that the whole system exists to serve. Judged against those measures, the role earns its place in the same way any other performance investment does.

Model two: a dedicated development role

The second best option is the dedicated staff development role, which has now appeared on club organisation charts across North American sport. A 2026 ST Performance Global benchmark of roughly 150 clubs across the five major North American leagues identified only six club roles built specifically to recruit, develop and retain the staff who surround the players. No example surfaced in the NHL or MLS, while only one of the six sits at vice president level with the performance of staff as its entire brief.

CLUB	ROLE	YEAR	WHERE IT SITS	WHAT IT COVERS
Arizona Cardinals NFL	Vice President, Organizational Performance	2024	People function, reporting to the Chief People Officer	Leadership development, performance management, succession planning and engagement across the club
Pittsburgh Pirates MLB	Director, Talent Development	2026	Baseball Operations, partnered with People and Culture	Talent pipelines, selection and career pathways for staff across major league, minor league and international sites
Tampa Bay Rays MLB	Assistant Director, Staff Development and Research	2024	Baseball Operations	Staff development programmes across Baseball Operations and the club's team assistance programme
Boston Celtics NBA	Director, Organizational Growth and Team Development	Not public	Basketball operations	A practitioner led role held by Art Horne, formerly director of performance and head athletic trainer
Tennessee Titans NFL	Director of Talent and Development	Not public	People and Culture	Staff development built around a draft, develop and retain philosophy
Green Bay Packers NFL	Director of Organizational Development	2023	Business side, announced by the President and CEO	Learning and development programmes that help staff grow and excel

The Cardinals role offers the clearest statement of intent so far, having been created in July 2024 and filled through a retained executive search that presented it as the first role of its kind in the NFL. Its incumbent, Dr Gina Phelps Thobes, holds a doctorate in industrial and organisational psychology and came from leadership development research at Cleveland Clinic, where her work asked whether leadership approaches built for business hold up when applied to technical experts such as physicians. That is the same question a sporting club faces with coaches, scouts and performance staff who were promoted for their expertise long before anyone set out to develop them as leaders.

Baseball has since followed with a version anchored in the sporting department. In September 2026 the Pittsburgh Pirates posted a newly created Director of Talent Development inside Baseball Operations, partnered with People and Culture and responsible for talent pipelines, career pathways and leadership capability for staff across every site in the system. The Tampa Bay Rays had already built a staff development function inside Baseball Operations, which a 2020 analysis of club structures identified as the only dedicated staff development department in the league at the time.

The Boston Celtics show a practitioner led version of the same role, with Art Horne moving from head athletic trainer and director of performance into a position he describes as supporting the people who support the players. The Tennessee Titans framed their Director of Talent and Development around a draft, develop and retain philosophy, applying to staff the same logic every club already applies to its playing roster.

Dedicated roles like these are a strong option because they give the work a named owner, a budget and a visible place on the organisation chart. What they rarely provide on their own is the combination of audit, philosophy and performance level reach that defines the hybrid, which is why they sit second in this ranking even though they represent a significant step beyond what most clubs currently offer their staff.

Where the role sits

The six roles sit in one of two clear homes, with the Cardinals, Titans and Packers anchoring the function in the people or business side of the club while the Celtics, Rays and Pirates build it inside basketball or baseball operations. Each home carries a characteristic blind spot, because roles anchored in the people function tend to hold the methods of organisational development without reaching coaches, scouts and performance staff during the season. Roles anchored in the sporting department reach those staff every day, although they seldom carry tools such as succession planning, calibrated performance management or programme evaluation. The choice matters most in large and distributed organisations, which cannot rely on proximity to create alignment and have to rely on structure instead.

The benchmark also shows how fragile these roles become when they depend on one person. The Packers created a director of organisational development role in 2023 for former player Rob Davis to lead learning and development for staff, although the role lasted two seasons before Davis moved to the Raiders with no successor publicly confirmed since. The design the evidence points towards combines the rigour of the first home with the in season reach of the second and embeds the work in structures that outlast any individual appointment, which is exactly the combination the hybrid model at McLaren is built around.

Model three: a system held by everyone

The shared model is in many ways the strongest of the three, because a standard held by every coach, practitioner and leader is far harder to lose than one held by a single appointment. Organisations taking this route audit their culture on a regular rhythm and hold the environment around performance collectively, so that responsibility for it sits with everyone who works inside it.

Its limitation lies in the starting point, since the model relies on a cultural norm that many organisations do not yet have. That norm never appears by default simply because it has been identified, stated and encouraged, while ownership that belongs to everyone can quietly become ownership that belongs to no one once pressure rises. The first two models therefore often serve as the way an organisation builds a culture that can eventually be held by everyone, with the examples below showing the shared model working where that culture already existed or was deliberately rebuilt.

Crusaders

The most successful franchise in Super Rugby history has sustained its record across several coaching generations, with a lineage running through Wayne Smith, Robbie Deans, Todd Blackadder and Scott Robertson in which each era inherited the infrastructure left by the one before. Treating coaching quality as an output of the system allowed the club to keep performing through changes of personnel that would have unsettled a less deliberate environment.

All Blacks

After 2004 the All Blacks rebuilt their culture around the principle that better people make better All Blacks and applied it to every role in the organisation, investing in mental skills through Gilbert Enoka and in the leadership infrastructure around the playing group. The environment that followed produced consecutive Rugby World Cup titles in 2011 and 2015, which has made it one of the most studied cultures in professional sport.

UK high performance system

In 2025 UK Sport worked with the University of Bath to explore the mental health, wellbeing and burnout of athlete support personnel across the British high performance system, building on staff burnout guidance the English Institute of Sport had already produced for its own workforce. National systems are beginning to treat the support workforce as a population worth studying and protecting in its own right.

Scuderia Ferrari HP

In January 2026 Ferrari announced a partnership with WHOOP that makes wearable devices available to members of the team, with the Ferrari medical team working alongside the WHOOP performance science group on sleep, stress and recovery. The team framed the move as extending its data driven approach beyond the car to the human factor across the whole organisation.

Questions Worth Sitting With

FOR THE LEADERSHIP GROUP

These questions are written for any leadership group responsible for a performance department, with the most value coming from answers that have been tested against the lived experience of staff at every site.

- 01** Where does our culture default to intensity and visibility when honest observation suggests that recovery and efficiency would produce better results across the full calendar?
- 02** Is the signal our decision making structure sends to staff about trust in their judgement the signal we actually intend to send?
- 03** How would we detect a decline in psychological safety within our staff group early enough to act before it appeared in athlete outcomes?
- 04** Which of the five conditions in this piece represents the most actionable single opportunity for our organisation over the coming year?

Continuity compounds expertise.

Athletes are better supported today than at any point in the history of professional sport, while investment in the people and systems that deliver that support has not kept pace. The organisations that close that gap by investing in the stability, capability and effectiveness of their staff with the rigour they already bring to their players are the ones most likely to define the next standard.



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