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Reflective Cycles of Learning: Methods of Measuring, Monitoring, and Evaluation Within Sport-for-Development

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ABSTRACT
This article explores how community sport teams intentionally strive to improve members' emotional wellbeing through evaluative practices. The findings reveal that evaluative systems sustainability relies on democratic, deliberate, and participative processes prioritizing connection and relationship building across organizational ecosystems. Systems must be delivered in alignment with participants' individual and collective needs. Within, evaluation practices require holistic approaches involving short- and long-term reflective cycles of learning which use participant information to develop intentional, person-centered, tailored practices to address people's needs. Results necessitate shifting from traditional short-term focuses of programs toward recognizing that interventions require ongoing commitments throughout people's life cycle.

KEYWORDS
Basketball; emotional wellbeing; measuring, monitoring and evaluative practices; social impact; sport-for-development

Introduction

Sport-for-development (SFD) involves using sport to exert positive influences upon people's lives and achieve non-sporting outcomes such as economic development, education, health and wellbeing, intercultural exchange, social inclusion, and social development (Darnell et al., 2016; Kidd, 2008; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Walker, 2026). Underpinning SFD programs effectiveness are well-structured, user-friendly evaluation strategies (Burnett, 2008; Coalter, 2013; Kay, 2016). Despite measuring, monitoring, and evaluation (hereafter called evaluation) helping generate outcomes, they are criticized for insufficiency (Gaillard, 2023; Levermore, 2011), often entailing overly positivist accounts (Darnell et al., 2016; O'Byrne et al., 2024). This stems from existing evaluations predominantly focusing on reputable programs alongside outcomes rather than evaluative processes generating outcomes whilst also lacking transparency about organizational practices (Kay, 2016; Levermore, 2011; Svensson et al., 2023, 2025). Furthermore, SFD decision-makers and practitioners do not always care about evaluations, meaning limited funds are provided to undertake steps required to deliver impactful initiatives such as monitoring program and participant progress (Engelhardt, 2018). Subsequently, a misunderstanding around practical evaluative strategies in SFD prevails with sizable gaps between applications and their legitimacy existing (Nicholls et al., 2010; Walker, 2023). Thus, further research openly sharing successful and honest evaluations helps improve SFD

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programming and scholarship by guiding the sector toward heightened social impact through deeper understandings of effective strategies (Whitley et al., 2020). However, there is no one way to conduct evaluations (Halsall & Forneris, 2016). Rather, as Dao (2020) and Walker's (2026) work highlights, all SFD projects require proper evaluation processes that fit their organizational goals, reflect their individual contexts, and support their respective member's needs.

SFD's current lacuna remains its lack of qualitative research, adequate evaluative practices, and understanding of evaluation processes which resultantly generate insufficient evidence bases (Levermore, 2011; Walker, 2025; Whitley et al., 2020). Another key weakness entails traditional evaluative approaches performative nature which produce inaccurate results poorly reflecting people and community's lived realities (O'Byrne et al., 2024). Thus, more altruistic evaluations are required today (Darnell et al., 2016). Given evaluative practices complexity alongside different social problems' diverse nature, more critically grounded investigations focusing on specific real-life contexts, social issues, strategies, and systems are needed to advance SFD (Svensson et al., 2023, 2025). Ongoing calls for research necessitate practical-based studies outlining nuanced, relational, and embodied day-to-day processes employed by organizations and practitioners that can render social impact in local communities (Walker, 2026). These studies must descriptively document real-life strategies, mainly what works for respective groups in different settings and why (Sherry et al., 2024) whilst incorporating people's motivations and reflections on evaluative methods (Oatley & Harris, 2021) to help understand sport and its development implications (Darnell et al., 2016). With SFD currently constrained by limited funding and resources, more simplified, cost-effective and proven, transferable strategies advancing SFD are required, ones entailing innovative models for building inclusive environments and organizational capacities (Svensson et al., 2023, 2025). Subsequently, this research addresses an important issue within SFD literature, mainly current evaluation practices' limitations, emphasizing the need to forgo surface-level, outcome-driven metrics and consider more process-oriented, person-centered, and context-specific approaches.

To address the aforementioned gaps, this study documents Blaze Basketball Club, an Edinburgh-based community sport organization using basketball to support participant's emotional wellbeing (hereafter called wellbeing). In undertaking this research, the study is guided by the following research questions: How does Blaze Basketball Club measure, monitor, and evaluate people's emotional wellbeing?; What are Blaze Basketball Club's emotional wellbeing measuring, monitoring, and evaluative strategies main tenets? Drawing on real-life strategies and the club's rationale alongside stakeholder responses, the research explores how the team intentionally works toward improving members' wellbeing, ultimately considering what works and why. Thus, research question one is answered through outlining applied approaches such as conversations and surveys, whereas research question two is addressed through highlighting nuances underpinning and enabling the approaches and outcomes such as interpersonal relationship building. Subsequently, the study's contribution is practical and entails establishing qualitative insights into components which can form the foundations of and underpin SFD approaches for undertaking effective and intended evaluations. In this case, the overarching tenets entail an intentional, holistic, pragmatic, democratic, individual and collective needs-based, person-centered approach focusing on building connections and relationships to target wellbeing. Thus, the practical implications offer guidance to help sport-based entities develop and

implement purposeful evaluative practices for optimizing social impact. These insights are conceptualized through SFD literature (Burnett, 2008; Coalter, 2013; Dao, 2020; Levermore, 2011; Wegner et al., 2023). Through outlining and explaining Blaze's evaluative methods, this can help advance SFD by generating more intentional social impact rather than outcomes manifesting as participatory byproducts (Walker, 2025).

With emotional wellbeing being Blaze's focus, in this study, it entails individuals realizing their own abilities, managing the normal life stresses, working fruitfully and productively, and contributing to their respective community (Walker, 2026). Whereas in SFD, measuring, monitoring, and evaluation have been defined as M&E (monitoring and evaluation) and MEL (monitoring, evaluation, and learning) (Sherry et al., 2024). With this study focusing on the evaluation process (Coalter, 2013), the research adopts the following terms: measuring entails regularly gathering information about core concepts associated with initiative's aims (Walker, 2023); monitoring involves ongoing, systematic collation and reviews of data, highlighting progress relating to program objectives; and evaluation refers to impact of and/or on specific SFD policies and interventions (Whitley et al., 2020). While data gathered through measuring and monitoring contribute to evaluations, evaluations must involve more in-depth, objective assessments at set times and enhance the understanding of program's effectiveness, efficiency, impact, relevance, and sustainability (Whitley et al., 2020). Based on the three separate definitions, the research coins the term MME (measuring, monitoring, and evaluation). While data highlighting improvements to peoples' wellbeing is included, this is a presupposition, requiring Blaze to further evidence how people's life qualities benefit beyond sport in the long term.

Literature review

Issues in measuring, monitoring, and evaluation in sport-for-development

SFD's evaluations' main problem entails that people and organizations do not recognize evaluation's ability to heighten social impact or undertake them unless prompted when relevance, efficiency, and impact are questioned (Engelhardt, 2018). Additionally, SFD organizations have insufficient funding or expertise to undertake external or formal evaluations, relying on cost-effective, internally collected data to document project effectiveness (Gaillard, 2023). Subsequently, evaluative knowledge is based more on belief than evidence with sport's social impact taken for granted than founded on truth (Long, 2013). Yet, SFD projects are still implemented without embedding existing lessons into program development, meaning funds are wasted on ineffective programs that could have been better spent (Engelhardt, 2018). However, the SFD systems' constant struggles, negotiations, and shifts are equally due to new policies and actors causing further problems (Gaillard, 2023). This links to concerns around performance conformity whereby practitioners use evaluations to tick boxes signifying they have met short-term program outcomes and appease funders rather than evaluations intended social purpose to improve programming and social outcomes long-term (Walker, 2023). Such practices emanate from increasing pressure for empirical generalizations which justify sports unilateral application in developmental spaces without considering each respective ecosystems cultural nuances (Levermore, 2011). Resultantly, evaluations within SFD to date have fallen victim to existing knowledge around practical strategies being concealed behind the rhetoric of technical rationality

alongside dominant perspectives over-representation (Gaillard, 2023). Furthermore, the ongoing struggles represent tensions emanating from constant shifts in power and agency between internal and external actors (Dao, 2020), but also broader issues of social reproduction, privilege, and dominance (Darnell, 2014). Collectively, these dynamics subjugate knowledge that could be used to create more nuanced evidence bases (Nicholls et al., 2010).

A need for measuring, monitoring, and evaluation in sport-for-development

Within research, evaluation plays a prominent role, especially regarding the omnipresent demands to prove impact and legitimize SFD (Whitley et al., 2020). Undertaking evaluations helps develop community programs with clear social purposes underpinned by supporting evidence before developing concepts to address the social issue through improved understanding of its meaning, impact, scale, and ensuing sequences of presumed actions, causes, effects, and processes (Coalter, 2013). Furthermore, offering evaluative training alongside establishing success indicators and benchmarks for assessing program-related impact in local contexts contributes to helping deliver purposeful needs-based services (Burnett, 2008). Recurringly repeating these processes helps practitioners ongoingly adapt practices and styles to meet member's needs (Walker, 2026), particularly through using inclusive approaches which provide voices to excluded and marginalized groups (Dao, 2020). Therefore, when evaluations are intentionally designed to work toward intervention aims and implemented within daily management tasks, learning processes emerge faster, leading to practitioners' adapting programs quicker to optimize social impact (Whitley et al., 2020). This stems from evaluations improving organizational systems though documenting program outcomes and outputs whilst influencing practitioner accountability, decision-making, learning, and planning (Kay, 2016; Sherry et al., 2024). Thus, evaluation systems help overcome issues of oversight, responsibility, and transparency which disrupt and negatively impact programs through subtly sabotaging and compromising key governance structures (O'Byrne et al., 2024). Ultimately, evaluations in SFD help pinpoint participants' meaningful experiences, how program's social impact influences people's everyday lives through increased confidence alongside other social skills and also provide practitioners meaningful work (Walker, 2023). Overall, undertaking evaluations provides practical actions for organizations to implement (Dao, 2020).

Approaches to measuring, monitoring, and evaluation in sport-for-development

To create an optimal developmental sporting environment, an ongoing cycle of learning is required, one recurringly reviewing people's needs (Walker, 2023). This entails designing and implementing evaluative tools assessing people's holistic development before considering the findings through diverse factors impacting individual's development such as educational, family, or occupational influences (Walker, 2026). Likewise, it requires participatory approaches incorporating practitioners and participants in the design, delivery, and review process of evaluations (Dao, 2020; Halsall & Forneris, 2016). Oatley and Harris (2021) findings support the utility of participatory evaluation within SFD through opportunities to co-produce and implement evaluation frameworks which are contextually relevant to different individuals and groups. The contextual relevance links to respective interests, wants, and desires of different people and communities

based on challenges they are facing in life or prevalent community issues (Walker, 2025). These issues and needs inform an organization's theory of change; a roadmap explaining the program's social purpose, but also outlining relationships between the organization's resources, activities, and expected results (Walker, 2023). Subsequently, collaboration across entire programs is key to successful SFD programming through helping implement the necessary needs-based service delivery approach (Walker, 2026) via everyone contributing to one targeted outcome (Burnett, 2008; Nicholls et al., 2010). Central to this process are various tools for undertaking evaluative practices, but also collecting, storing, and interpreting data (Engelhardt, 2018). For example, Dao (2020) outlined a series of approaches ranging from staff meetings and group discussions to undertaking interviews with parents, fieldnotes during sessions, and internal training involving role-playing scenarios.

Research context

Founded in 1961, Blaze is a community basketball club forming part of We Play Together (WPT) which currently operates as a charity (SC042676). The club's system was established in 2011 following Blaze partnering with basketballscotland and Castle Rock Edinvar Housing Association to procure a £1-per year, twenty-five-year lease from Edinburgh Council for The Crags Community Center (Walker, 2023). The facility is located within Dumbiedykes, Marchmont and Morningside, three areas suffering high alcohol/drugs misuse, income deprivation, and unemployment (Blaze Basketball Club, 2021). While Blaze previously focused on winning the Scottish National Basketball League, since 2012 they adopted a person-first and community-driven approach and started benchmarking participant's collective wellbeing in 2018 (Wright, 2021). To formalize the new ethos, Blaze merged with The Crags Community Center in 2022 and became WPT; a brand advocating community inclusivity. Today, WPT is an open-access wellbeing hub with success defined through making direct positive impacts on people's lives via using purposefully designed basketball programs (We Play Together [WPT], 2022). Within, Blaze offers diverse competitive, recreational and social opportunities to enable people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, and physical capabilities participation from pick-up basketball to female-only and wheelchair sessions (Blaze Basketball Club, 2021). Such endeavors enable Blaze to annually deliver basketball to 1,150 people and facilitate 4,296 hours of community group usage (Blaze Basketball Club, 2021). Directing Blaze are ten trustees and five full-time employees (Actify, 2020e).

Methods, methodology, and processes

Positionality

The author formerly played basketball in Scotland but had no connection to Blaze. Due to the investigator's prior experiences providing an understanding of the research area, to help establish objective interpretations, sensitizing methods, interpretivism, and triangulation, were utilized. Furthermore, materials (audio-visuals/documents) developed by other people and entities such as basketballscotland recorded results to minimize the author's influence on the results. With all sources publicly accessible, no formal agreement was established

with Blaze for completing the research. Blaze's involvement risked skewing outcomes toward more positive outcomes when an impartial study was sought.

Design

This study qualitatively outlines Blaze's evaluative practices. It adopts an interpretivist-qualitative methodology and design as collectively, they enable in-depth interpretations, multi-faceted insights, and focused explanations of people's behaviors and experiences within social settings. Interpretivist-qualitative inquiries also help construct research's cultural and social nature, enabling in-depth investigations of communities and phenomena anchored in real-life contexts. Similarly to Dao's (2020) participatory evaluation research in Vietnam, this study's social nature is developed through accounts from practitioners and participants immersed at Blaze. Thus, given the study's honed focus, the approach could influence procedures and future research through reflecting different people's needs from sport. The challenges of exploring community sport are consistent with prior research into evaluation practices (Walker, 2023).

Profile of Blaze stakeholders

The insights provided amalgamate opinions from forty-three people aged 14–87 with 0–75 years' experience of coaching, governing, observing, participating, volunteering, and working in community, education-based, international, and professional basketball across five countries including the UK and USA. The stakeholders include administrators, coaches, parents, participants, partner organizations, professional basketballers, staff, trustees, and volunteers at or associated with Blaze/WTP such as external personnel from basketballscotland and SportScotland; the national federations for basketball and sport in Scotland. Further participant details are not provided due to the club's small, community ecosystem which reflected people's concerns about identifiability whereby more explicit and individualized details would make them recognizable. Furthermore, due to wellbeing's sensitivity, Blaze has confidentiality agreements with participants to protect members personal information, especially for those from vulnerable groups such as youth under 18 and people with disabilities. To protect people's identity and sustain ethical agreements, stakeholders' anonymity is upheld. Where references are made to individuals, labels representing their role are provided such as coach.

Data collection

Blaze was chosen because through innovative approaches, the club is leading a step-change for community sport programming via leading SportScotland's (2019a) Sport for Life and Changing Lives policy which seeks to improve life qualities through sport. Thus, Blaze offers value around what evaluative practices work and why in a specific setting. Data was collected through documenting Blaze over two years (June 2021–2023). The study's duration ensured data's sufficient depth, accuracy, and saturation whilst observing short- and long-term results. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, government restrictions, and vulnerable groups (youth/disabled) that Blaze works with, the research was conducted online; hence, the decision to

document the club through secondary materials. Secondary materials were also chosen as they align with and support the research's community-level, qualitative enquiry, providing a broader scope through more extensive data alongside an ability to document community development, longitudinal changes, and trends over time (Andrew & Pedersen, 2026; Jarvie et al., 2026). Furthermore, through embedding the research methods, particularly audio-visuals which are a less used form of data collection, it builds on Darnell et al. (2016) assertions about the need for SFD research to be more innovative to help expand the fields boundaries. While the studies reliance on secondary data remains a limitation, it was the most optimal and ethical approach to gleaning insights from the relevant stakeholders. Through employing these methods, data collection processes were subsequently informed by, are congruent with and expand SFD research from Walker (2025) which uses similar materials.

The first method embedded documents analysis, gathering preliminary data to contextualize the research and understand topics discussed in audio-visuals. Documents were publicly available, accessible online through search engines including Google and WPT's website. Records were found through searching "basketball" and "Scotland" with one of the following keywords: "Boroughmuir," "Blaze," "Edinburgh," and "We Play Together." Search engine dates were refined to help hone results to specific periods to coincide with organizational developments such as 2012 and 2022. With searches returning 146 materials, the researcher consulted every relevant document relating to Blaze/WTP before either including or discarding based on the material's relevancy to Blaze's evaluations. The consultation process also screened materials for personal bias to avoid only including documents published by Blaze entailing overly positive club representations. Subsequently, documents produced by external personnel such as SportScotland were prioritized to mitigate concerns. Through this process, two organizational reviews from Blaze/WPT, one newspaper and eight government/organizational reports were integrated in the study and results.

The second method consulted audio-visuals (online interviews/podcasts/webinars). Similarly to documents, audio-visuals were publicly available and discovered, evaluated, and screened through the same search criteria. However, audio-visuals were accessed through alternative online platforms, mainly the club's social media accounts, Actify, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and YouTube. Having listened to the audio-visual to determine its relevance and inclusion, Microsoft 365's automatic transcription software transcribed its content. Afterwards, the author replayed the source with subtitles, reading the content whilst making necessary changes to ensure accuracy. While searches discovered forty-four audio-visuals, data was extracted from only nineteen as not all were relevant. However, the remaining twenty-five provided context around Blaze's broader club ecosystem. Among those embedded (see reference list), they predominantly comprised sport coaching podcasts such as *The Sports Initiative Podcast*. These podcasters, often sport coaches, interviewed Blaze's staff due to their creative ideas. Conversations covered Blaze's evaluative strategies, experiences, and rationale for approaches. Similarly, public webinars through Actify were led by staff to educate other practitioners on club strategies. Given the club's voluntary nature, audio-visuals enabled wider viewpoints consideration from those directly and indirectly involved alongside people past and present.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis as per Braun and Clarke (2021) synthesized data following its collection and involved the following process: familiarization with data; coding data; generating themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and writing up research. Themes were established by reading through the data and systematically labeling consistent themes across audio-visuals and documents with examples reflecting individual measuring, monitoring, and evaluative practices and within, concepts outlining participant needs and staff motivations. Identifying these themes helped develop the final three themes (measuring/monitoring/evaluation) through grouping coded data under the relevant heading. It also assisted with linking the data to SFD literature. One example found the rationale for Blaze's surveys was underpinned by Walker's (2025) necessity of democracy in SFD, subsequently linking to concepts of choice. This principle was strengthened by Dao (2020) and Wegner et al. (2023) who stressed actively engaging participants in programming processes.

To ensure information's creditability, consistency, and address concerns of bias, the research followed Smith and McGannon (2017) guidance for developing rigor in qualitative research. Subsequently, triangulation was enacted and involved analyzing data from audio-visuals and documents separately before comparing information across data sets alongside different people's opinions to ensure information was congruous. Once analyzed, the data sets were merged and embedded insights from both methods. Triangulation helped prevent results being skewed by a single method, participant, or the researcher's input. To remove any uncertainties in the data, discrepancies which arose, particularly relating to the club context and operations, led to information or individual sources removal. However, some discrepant data outlining different people's perspectives were included because this helped address concerns around superficial results, balancing potentially promotional accounts with critical opinions.

Findings

Measuring: intentional, democratic, person-centered approaches

Blaze's measuring practices are underpinned by three core tenets: intentional application and desire to achieve specific outcomes; democratic involvement from participants in the processes; and person-centered approaches. Surveys form Blaze's wellbeing measuring foundations. With member's increasing wellbeing needs during the coronavirus pandemic (2020–2023), surveys became compulsorily undertaken every three-four months to measure wellbeing (Actify, 2020c). The surveys baseline utilizes the Warwick – Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, constituting fourteen standardized questions enquiring about how participants have been feeling about various social bases ranging from confidence and energetic to interests in trying new activities. Additional open-ended questions surrounding "what do you look for in a good coach?" are included to gather more in-depth data to underpin basketball practices as members' wellbeing requirements regularly change (Wright, 2021). While informative, one podcast interview with a coach discussed two weaknesses: ineffective for people lacking emotional maturity (youth under fourteen); and

isolating basketball's impact on people's lives when external factors (family/education) are active is difficult (Wright, 2021). Completed by participants and guardians, all members receive opportunities to confidentially disclose concerns, allowing greater organizational proactivity whilst cementing a culture of emotional care (Actify, 2020c). The broader caring ecosystem which is generated is reflected in one participants' experience who stated during an interview with basketballscotland (2022) that Blaze is "really supportive and a good community-based environment."

Blaze's internal, in-person wellbeing measuring strategy uses ping-pong balls. One senior coach explained the process on a podcast (Wright, 2021). Prior to sessions beginning, staff place three buckets labeled, "I'm happy," "I'm sad," and "I'm neutral," at the court's entrance. When participants arrive, everyone receives a ball and places it in the bucket reflecting their feelings (Wright, 2021). Once all balls are submitted, coaches count the number in each bucket to gain baseline information before using the data to inform practices. Blaze staff conduct the same process at the session's end to see how people's wellbeing changed and determine the practice's effectiveness (Wright, 2021). Upon trialing, coaches discovered total balls post-sessions in the happy and sad bucket increased while neutral decreased (Wright, 2021). These reviews reflect Blaze Basketball Club (2021) members' feedback from internal club surveys: participants, especially children ranked basketball sessions 9.4/10 for fun; 76.4% increase friendships; 66% improve self-compassion; 94% feel comfortable communicating with coaches; 100% said coaches are friendly to very friendly. Through staff observations and coach-participant conversations, staff learned that "being with friends," "fun," "having a sense of progress" and "play" were valued above winning (Blaze Basketball Club, 2021, p. 7).

Recognizing people's wellbeing alterations, coaches discussed on podcasts how they react to insights from participant feedback by modifying entire practices, changing activities, or providing positive reinforcement and technical input (Krikorian & Carney, 2022). Commenting on Blaze's approach in an online webinar, one external sport practitioner stated that the club are "proactively and intentionally deciding to substitute a physical skill for a social skill . . . So, more opportunities to get people talking and talking about how they feel, rather than just simply developing these skills in silence" (Actify, 2020c). Blaze coaches reported that to provide participant's wellbeing support, they match high challenges with high support, involving constant feedback to counteract any member or staff perceived setbacks. Using "positive touches" (fist pumps/high-fives), coaches in podcasts stated that they establish positive connections leaving participants not feeling criticized or instructed with feedback emphasizing positivity (Nerbun & Sanderson, 2019). In contrast, the same coaches reported how low support produces arbitrary outcomes, meaning participants become increasingly susceptible to negativity, causing decreasing satisfaction and increasing dropout rates due to challenging landscapes alongside inadequate support (Wright, 2021). Talking about the low support approach, senior coaches expressed that only early basketball developers or system survivors experience success with late adopters struggling, losing interest and often dropping-out because supply does not meet demand, nor the approaches meeting member's needs (Wright, 2021).

Monitoring: connections and relationships alongside individual and collective desires

To supplement data collection, Blaze ongoingly monitor participant's progress in-between the different measuring and evaluation stages as part of a proactive approach to supporting people's wellbeing. The monitoring technique entails open coach-participant communication to inform reasoning (Wright, 2021). In discussing the approach in an interview with Blaze Basketball Club (2018), a former member stated, "I definitely think that the social side of playing basketball is something that people forget about." During a podcast, one head coach noted that coaches reap value when they ask people questions such as "What are you seeing? What are you noticing?," "Have you got anything to share?" (Gromer, 2022). The same coach reported that through this inclusive and democratic style of coaching, coaches better inform their practices through learning about and from participants (Gromer, 2022). Coaches also simultaneously improve the cohesive community culture and members' psychological safety to publicly share their thoughts and freely express their emotions and feelings (Gromer, 2022). Through these inter-personal processes, two coaches discussed on a podcast how staff develop deep coach-participant relationships and can identify and discuss each person's wellbeing needs and challenges through having established a basis of trust and understanding (Krikorian & Carney, 2022). This process is central to informing Blaze's individual (people) and collective (groups) needs-based approach. For example, one coach mentioned how individual coach-participants conversations revealed that some people struggle with anxiety, anger, and arrogance (Krikorian & Carney, 2022). Subsequently, Blaze coaches started tailoring sessions to these issues and directly working with each person to turn negative facets constraining wellbeing into progressive, positive skills like resilience or self-efficacy which underpin development (Krikorian & Carney, 2022). During the same podcast, the coach reported that through this approach, staff noticed improvements in people's wellbeing through coaches intentionally targeting areas participants specified (Krikorian & Carney, 2022). Doing so subsequently helped create a meaningful experience for both participants and coaches alike.

A key tenet of Blaze's approach entails increasing connections and relationship building between coaches and participants alongside coaches-participants which is and remains Blaze's key wellbeing objective (Kaufman & Pineau, 2021). Blaze staff on a webinar discussed how the organization's role is to question, listen, and understand members (Actify, 2020c). As per Blaze Basketball Club (2021) report, one strategy sees older members converse with younger participants, fostering cross-age-group friendships whilst training aspiring coaches and increasing developmental outcomes for both parties involved in the exchange. Reflecting on the experience, one participant during an online interview with basketballscotland (2022) stated: "It was really fun because I got to meet people from different age groups and to know them." Another practice implemented at Blaze's school holiday camps involves staff on opening days spending five minutes individually with each attendee, asking questions such as "Is there anything you are worried about taking part here?" (Wright, 2021). While one coach relayed how most participants reply, "no," some people reveal concerns affecting subjective temporary wellbeing (Wright, 2021). During an online webinar, the same coach discussed how these concerns commonly surround worries about making friends or injuries, but also entail private affairs such as suitable bathroom facilities for non-binary people with said participant unsure about the broader group's

reactions to their circumstance (Actify, 2020c). According to Blaze Basketball Club's (2021) organizational report, conducting this process helps build rapport, allows participants to be themselves and be better understood by everyone, and resultantly, staff to operate more purposefully. Such approaches help establish a culture of care within the club.

Blaze's monitoring process culminates in spreadsheets comprising individual members' wellbeing which reflects the club's person-first philosophy. Utilizing a traffic light system (red/yellow/green), participants' wellbeing is graded accordingly and reinforced by notes documenting the rationale for the associated color label (Wright, 2021). When assigning people codes, Blaze's lead Coach Developer explained in a podcast that staff look for emotional balance alongside behavioral changes such as eating habit alterations, reduced attendance or tiredness as indications for wellbeing declinations (Latif, 2020). During an interview, one staff member mentioned that coaches also take notes before, during and after sessions to gather participant information and evaluate their emotions throughout the entire process (Wright, 2021). Another coach during a podcast elaborated on the process, outlining that jottings stem from staff members' conversations and subjective observations of individuals within Blaze's controlled environment (club activities/games/training sessions) to offset dependencies on people's openness in discussions and surveys (Wright, 2021). To resolve issues and monitor spreadsheets, contracted staff review spreadsheets monthly, assessing the "reds" and "yellows" alongside people digressing (Wright, 2021). If multiple adults observe similar negativities, staff hold conversations with participants to ascertain answers before consulting guardians or professionals to acquire further insights about the issue and resolutions (Wright, 2021).

From analyzing WPT's (2022) organizational report, WTP's system concentrates on overcoming development's two main challenges, mainly eliminating persistent, endemic deprivation and preventing sudden or severe destitution. If situations escalate, one coach mentioned on a podcast that Blaze have a referral system to safeguard participants wellbeing from declining. Beginning with team meetings, staff devise documents with all necessary community leaders' contact information (addresses/e-mails/telephone numbers) (Wright, 2021). During a webinar, one coach stated that this progresses to putting paid and voluntary staff through mental health, first aid, and safeguarding courses to help people better understand the issues they are trying to support whilst also deciphering new ways to use basketball to target wellbeing more intentionally and proactively (Actify, 2020a). When encountering issues, staff flag wellbeing concerns requiring interventions to the Wellbeing Manager who appropriately signposts people (Wright, 2021). Staff determine solutions based on individual's needs ranging from conversations with parents, professionals, schools, or social services (Wright, 2021). If the club cannot provide the necessary assistance, Blaze offers free counseling (Wright, 2021). During an online interview with Places for People Scotland (2019), Blaze's Wellbeing Manager explained that the onus prompting these additional support mechanisms reflects how "We are most proud when we see how what we do here impacts on individual lives."

Evaluation: holistic and pragmatic insights

To evaluate Blaze's impact, they assess short- and long-term wellbeing outcomes as part of their overarching approach which prioritizes holistic evaluations of wellbeing. Describing the process on a podcast, a trustee explained that short-term data is gathered

through conducting conversations or interviews with three-four external personnel who regularly interact with members (Nerbun & Sanderson, 2020b). With participants predominantly aged between 5–18, staff engage community leaders (employers/teachers/youth workers) (Nerbun & Sanderson, 2020b). At minimum, anecdotal feedback from externals is collated to form holistic perspectives (Nerbun & Sanderson, 2020b). Without learning, club practices become redundant because staff only coach converted followers. This perpetuates core problems, reinforcing coach-centered mechanisms over participant-driven (Nerbun & Sanderson, 2020b). Whereas to evaluate participants' wellbeing requires tracking participant's self-growth beyond club parameters and involves longitudinal tracking studies. This entails staying connected with former members via alumni networks (e-mail/social media). Having left Blaze, questionnaires are distributed to ascertain people's current life's positionality (Nerbun & Sanderson, 2020b). However, from the data analysis, Blaze recognizes that feedback is partially flawed because it is commonly attained from survivors and not drop-outs. Resultantly, Blaze now seeks information to help turn fringe members into committed participants, preventing unnecessary emotional harm through negative experiences catalyzation (Nerbun & Sanderson, 2020b).

Evaluative practices enhance Blaze's social impact. During a podcast, coaches stated that they undertake regular tasks in holistic self-reflection to ensure they are improving provisions and support whilst holding themselves and others accountable (Nerbun & Sanderson, 2020b). Staff on a podcast described feedback from members as being "eye-opening" because people regularly divulge personal, meaningful, and private information (Wright, 2021). For example, due to Blaze's system, internal club participant feedback found one member "started seeing myself as worthy and enjoyed proving myself," rating Blaze 5/5 for how they improved their wellbeing (Blaze Basketball Club, 2021). Through evidencing outcomes, one coach during an online interview spoke of how they noticed real growth compared to previously using personal assumptions (Upshot, 2022). WTP (2022) aim to create a complete support system around members whereby further developments are ongoingly discussed such as quiet rooms for personal reflection and resolution outlets. According to insights gathered by WPT (2022) through conversations and observations, members were initially wary of the club's evaluative approaches due to lacking emotional readiness and educational preparedness, preferring coaching, or playing. Participant reflections in WPT (2022) organizational report showcase how Blaze's members now recognize that evaluative concepts add value through providing insights and resolutions into problems. This stems from putting data behind basketball's rationale, preventing subjective views and futile efforts to optimize outcomes for everyone. One senior staff member during a webinar discussed how this socially driven focus underpinned the club's recruitment of key personnel: "We've picked up some amazing trustees . . . and it was really because they bought into our [reasons] why [and] our social purpose" (Actify, 2020d).

The data underpinning Blaze's system emanates from academic studies and member feedback. This information is used to inform the next step in the development process which entails the coaches intentional and effective practice planning (Nerbun & Sanderson, 2020a). Through combining these insights, it provides guidance for developing more proactive approaches toward supporting members with pragmatism existing as a cornerstone of Blaze's philosophy. Once participant insights are collated, this helps select academic frameworks to direct wellbeing practices. From twenty-two participants'

perspectives given during interviews conducted by basketballscotland (2019, 2020a, 2021, 2022), Blaze Basketball Club (2018, 2021) and SportScotland (2020), the main themes describing Blaze's approach in ranking order; fun; supportive environment; learning through basketball; friendships; inclusive/equality; physical/mental health benefits; communitarianism; competition; opportunities; and socialization. These findings are reinforced by twenty parents, partner organizations, and Blaze staff opinions extracted from audio-visuals and documents about the club's approach: community; equality/inclusivity; enjoyment; learning through basketball; socialization; social good; external club wellbeing connections; lifelong participatory opportunities; and member-staff relationships (Actify, 2020b, 2020d; basketballscotland, 2019, 2020b, 2022; Blaze Basketball Club, 2016, 2021; Latif, 2020; SportScotland, 2019b, 2020). These themes currently reflect Blaze's wellbeing practices. For example, from the data analysis, Blaze believes having fun and making progress links to improved wellbeing. Subsequently, Blaze staff purposefully adapt sessions to focus on these components rather than upholding and reinforcing traditional approaches to community-level sport which centre around concepts of competition and winning, and can be detrimental to people's wellbeing.

Discussion

Akin to Levermore (2011), this research highlights evaluative approaches importance within the development process. Furthermore, it evidences Burnett's (2008) assertions that programs developed from the ground-level up through incorporating evaluative practices positively influence the ability to implement initiatives and support program sustainability. Overall, the research necessitates shifting from traditional short-term focuses of programs toward recognizing that wellbeing interventions require ongoing commitments throughout people's life cycle. To understand development and sport's challenge (Darnell et al., 2016), desired outcomes must be formulated within appraisals reflecting what contexts can realistically achieve within organizational capacities and capabilities, considering factors such as knowledge, resources, and time (Walker, 2026). As the results reveal, evaluations must be considered beyond cause-and-effect of participation on desired outcomes. This stems from people simultaneously progressing through different life stages, influenced by diverse factors which can increase or decrease wellbeing from both within and outwith sporting ecosystems (Walker, 2023). Thus, the findings represent how interventions are not one dimensional but embed several implicit mechanisms for action. This requires shifting analysis from families of programs (sport and wellbeing) to families of mechanisms (processes/relationships/experiences) that achieve outcomes (Coalter, 2013).

Drawing on the research, Blaze's evaluative practices key tenets entail that MME is intentionally undertaken and works toward a specific outcome such as wellbeing. Furthermore, approaches must be person-centered, prioritizing attendees' individual needs alongside the collective group desires based on their developmental stage in life (Walker, 2026). To help identify more optimal approaches, practitioners might focus on developing interpersonal connections and relationships with participants to better understand the individual before democratically involving them in evaluations design and delivery. Such an approach entails more participative evaluations (Dao, 2020; Halsall & Forneris, 2016; Oatley & Harris, 2021). This helps ensure practices remain relevant and are tailored to people's lives and needs (Wegner et al., 2023). From this case, the democratic,

person-first approach assists with adapting provisions to best serve people's constantly changing emotions whilst optimizing organizational efforts towards generating improved levels of social impact. Alongside engaging individuals, communicating with broader stakeholders (Burnett, 2008; Nicholls et al., 2010) with knowledge of and who influence participants helps provide comprehensive insights. As Blaze highlights, this entails pre-established local community partnerships with schools and social services, aiding reflection and learning processes. Embedding these principles helps ensure evaluative practices are holistically informed and pragmatic. Overall, due to wellbeing's sliding scale nature (Walker, 2026), adaptability and flexibility are key to supporting participants (Darnell et al., 2016).

As the results highlight, open-communication and purposeful socialization underpin evaluation's effectiveness through enabling social relationships successfulness (Walker, 2025). Discussion and engagement establish heightened understanding (coach-participant/participant-coach) surrounding personal beliefs, morals, and values, but also shared commitments and mutual obligation whilst advancing individuals' development through staff's ongoing support (Burnett, 2008; Oatley & Harris, 2021). Workable solutions are subsequently based on people's needs alongside available provisions without requiring complete unanimity which makes providing individualistic experiences challenging (Burnett, 2008; Walker, 2025). Open-communication allows people to be coached in alignment with personal preferences, to understand how participants can buy-in and why buying-in enhances their developmental success. Conversations enable wellbeing issues to be identified upfront, meaning through increased awareness, staff operate proactively to aid attendees (Coalter, 2013). Thus, this process provides an improved understanding of people to better direct and optimize actions toward participants best interests (Wegner et al., 2023), but ultimately, the overall objective of helping people achieve an improved quality of life that they place value on and seek for themselves. Based on Blaze, the social structure suggested adds another layer to coaching and participants' needs through providing emotional labor to help people channel and overcome factors negatively impacting their wellbeing.

The findings reflect how development systems and evaluative approaches must create environments using rationale behavior to proactively prepare for potential and predictable wellbeing setbacks. These entail social safety nets (preventative measures) for people whose interests are or could be directly or indirectly harmed either through sporting environments or externally from issues which controllably or uncontrollably arise in their life. Thus, Blaze's holistic wellbeing mechanisms beyond club parameters showcase why non-sporting support mechanisms are crucial: assessments must be done primarily through considering if participant's progress is enhanced via collecting information from external environments; and achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on people's free agency to enact the non-sporting outcomes. While Blaze attempts to provide members with the necessary support and skills to navigate wellbeing-related issues, the club's approach does well by not mollycoddling participants (Coalter, 2013). Instead, Blaze takes the middle-ground, showcasing that people must assume some responsibility and develop voluntarily through their own actions without depending on practitioners because they cannot always rely on others in broader life. This necessitates developing deeper interpersonal relationships across entire organizations, not just between practitioners-participants, based on respect, trust, and reciprocity

as foundations for social impact (Coalter, 2013). However, this process of learning from failure chimes with neoliberal thinking and must be monitored to ensure altruism is maintained (Walker, 2023).

Overall, the findings reflect broader issues within evaluations. While in this case, ongoing short- and long-term evaluations are being conducted, similar to different SFD projects (O'Byrne et al., 2024), evaluations from those who left, or participants' lived realities outside of program participation is limited. The club's success stories thus need supplementation from participant drop-outs and negative experiences, otherwise information gathered will not reflect lived realities of entire cohorts and systemic failures (Engelhardt, 2018; Levermore, 2011). Without diverse input, programs are unlikely to generate non-sporting outcomes due to practitioners lacking knowledge of participant needs and the processes necessary to fulfil those needs (Walker, 2026; Wegner et al., 2023). Furthermore, despite the person/needs-centered development approach, unintended consequences dominate results with Blaze's evaluation's weakness being dependencies on people's authenticity and willingness. Drawing on this case, a resolution entails open-access models whereby participants have ongoing drop-in contact with staff alongside access to as little or many opportunities to partake in different sessions.

Conclusion

The findings develop insights around applied MME practices concerning wellbeing, ones prioritizing several key tenets: intentionality; democracy; person-centered (needs-based); connections; relationships; holism; pragmatism. They also reflect how people and participants of sport today require more personalized approaches consisting of tailored elements specific to individual needs rather than one-dimensional notions of sport. Within this practical approach, development is about providing growth opportunities and preventative measures purposefully safeguarding people from developmentally reclining. This is achieved through offering diverse opportunities safeguarding people experiencing inequalities, neglection and suffering from further deprivations such as poor wellbeing, lack of learning or social exclusion. Determining individual or groups' circumstances starts practical applications because ongoing environments determine people's development; hence, setting short-, medium-, and long-term goals. However, improved wellbeing and life progression are never guaranteed. Rather, they are based on emotional and cognitive gains that become social and vocational skills which are transferred to key developmental areas within people's lives such as careers or education. Subsequently, evaluations must be regularly implemented to ensure sporting environments are continually adapting to meet people's evolving needs and stages in life. Without undertaking evaluations, entire sport communities risk making themselves redundant. Overall, the research necessitates shifting from traditional short-term focuses of programs toward recognizing that wellbeing interventions require ongoing commitments throughout people's life cycle. Thus, the key message put forth entails that MME is always happening and should be focused in real time.

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