

Winning Well: From Research Evidence to Embedded Practice

Transforming Coach Wellbeing in Australian High-Performance Sport



RESEARCH IMPACT STORY

Study context and collaborators

The AIS Coach Performance Wellbeing Research Program was established to provide this evidence base. Beginning in 2021, the program has been led by Dr David Fleischman of the University of the Sunshine Coast^a in partnership with Australian Catholic University (ACU)^b and Griffith University^c and in collaboration with the AIS's High Performance Coach Development and Sport Wellbeing & Engagement teams^d.

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Step 1 | The Problem

High-performance (HP) coaches sit at the centre of Australia's elite sport system, carrying responsibility for athlete performance and welfare while managing significant demands of their own. Historically, athlete wellbeing was prioritised and formally supported, and in the early 2000s a dedicated team was established to support coach welfare in recognition of its growing importance alongside athlete wellbeing. However, HP coaches at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) still needed more than informal, individual support - what was missing was a system-level mechanism for assessing and addressing their wellbeing. Organisational stakeholders including CEOs, performance directors and managers, also lacked evidence on how their own decisions, cultures and policies were enabling or undermining the wellbeing of the people in their care.

The obvious gap was between this strategic commitment and the mechanisms available to deliver it. The AIS's HP2032+ Strategy commits the high-performance system to "Win Well", pursuing international success while treating the wellbeing of athletes, coaches and staff as a driver of sustained performance, not a competing priority. Turning that commitment into practice required a robust evidence base and workable frameworks that, until this program of research, did not exist.

Step 2 | The Research

The AIS Coach Performance Wellbeing Research Program was established in 2021 to build this evidence base. It has been led by Dr David Fleischman (University of the Sunshine Coast) in partnership with Australian Catholic University and Griffith University where I was the Griffith-based co-investigator, and delivered in close collaboration with the AIS's High Performance Coach Development (HPCD) and Sport Wellbeing & Engagement (SWE) teams.

The program comprised three interlinked projects, each targeting a different part of the system:

- Project 1, "Mind the Gap": qualitative interviews with 23 elite athletes and 3 AIS wellbeing practitioners, examining career transition out of elite sport.
- Project 2, "Prioritising Performance Wellbeing for Coaches": an audit of existing AIS resources, a survey of 118 HP coaches, and six co-design workshops with 40 coaches across 29 sports.
- Project 3, organisational stakeholders' perspectives: interviews with 21 senior HP stakeholders, including CEOs and Performance Directors, on how organisational decisions shape coach wellbeing.

Step 3 | What the Research Found

Project 1 found that a dominant athletic identity made career transition feel like a loss of self, while a performance-driven, present-focused approach inhibited athletes' future planning. Coaches themselves emerged as critical "nucleus supports" for transitioning athletes. Yet, their own wellbeing was consistently overlooked in that role.

Project 2's survey found that 75% of HP coaches prioritised athletes' wellbeing above their own, alongside a clear desire for psychologically safe environments, leave and right-to-disconnect guidelines, and mentoring focused on performance wellbeing and capacity development. Workshop analysis surfaced three themes: normalised self-sacrifice and role tension; uneven accountability structures; and a strong demand for structural, rather than tokenistic, support.

Project 3 found that bespoke, organisation-level initiatives were critical to coach retention, and that organisations were beginning to shift from an athlete-only view of wellbeing to a system-wide one.

Step 4 | Translation, Dissemination and Engagement

The program has so far delivered two journal articles and a conference paper, with two further manuscripts in preparation. Co-design was embedded as a standing practice: workshop summaries were returned to the 40 participating coaches for verification before being used further, protecting practitioner voice throughout.

Dissemination has extended well beyond publication. Three AIS LinkedIn posts about the research generated more than 12,000 impressions, leading to invitations to present at two national and one international HP sport-sector conference: the 2026 Hockey Australia Coaching & Officiating Conference (50+ coaches in attendance), the 2025 Sport Ireland/Sport Ireland Institute of Sport High Performance Sport Conference (on the co-existence of high performance and psychological safety), and the HP Coach Development and National Institute Network Meeting in Canberra.

Uptake of this evidence base is continuing to broaden through channels beyond the original program team: the International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE) has established a new research group to explore Winning Well and safe coaching practices; the AIS's own Coach Wellbeing Hub course materials reference the underpinning research; and an AIS HP Coach role Position Statement drawing on the same evidence base is expected to follow.

From framework to embedded practice: the SASI pilot

The clearest demonstration of translation into practice is the four-month Performance Wellbeing Lead (PWL) pilot at the South Australian Sports Institute (SASI), run February to June 2026 and reviewed in a dedicated report commissioned by the AIS. The pilot report is explicit that the Fleischman et al. (2026) research confirms what many in the system have long observed and that its three co-design themes (identity and role tension, uneven accountability, and demand for embedded rather than tokenistic support) "directly informed the design of the Performance Wellbeing Lead pilot"

The pilot placed one practitioner alongside a small cohort of elite coaches as a trusted, credible peer resource, deliberately introduced through performance-enablement language rather than a welfare or compliance frame, a design choice drawn straight from the research findings. Even at this small scale, the pilot generated substantive coach engagements that its review concludes "would not have been addressed without this role".

Step 5 | The Research Impact

Stakeholders

The research and its downstream translation have reached stakeholders across the Australian high-performance system and internationally:

- The AIS's National HP Coach Development and Sport Wellbeing & Engagement teams, who co-designed and now apply the resulting frameworks.
- 40 coaches across 29 sports and 118 coach survey respondents nationally, plus the SASI coaches directly supported through the PWL pilot.
- 21 senior organisational stakeholders (CEOs, Performance Directors) whose decision-making the research directly informs.
- National Sporting Organisations and the National Institute Network, through whom the resulting framework and strategy are now being embedded.
- International peers, including Sport Ireland and the ICCE's new Winning Well research group.

Impact indicators

The research findings and the eight collective co-design recommendations from Project 2 have been embedded in the Australian Sports Commission's Coach Development Strategy. They were also central to the development of the AIS Coach Performance Wellbeing Framework, comprising four resource areas - referral networks, wellbeing modules, organisational support and personal support - now delivered through the AIS's Coach Wellbeing Hub.

Beyond the framework, the research has directly shaped operational tools: it informed the AIS's Guidelines on Optimising Athlete Transition and the Athlete Transition Journey (published via the Australian Sport Clearinghouse), and the HP Coach Development Capability System Tool, which established coach performance wellbeing as a recognised area of support within the broader sports system.

Most concretely, the research seeded the SASI Performance Wellbeing Lead pilot, on the evidence gathered internationally for that review, the only example currently identified anywhere of a dedicated practitioner embedded directly within a high-performance coaching environment to provide relationship-based wellbeing support, ahead of comparable systems in the UK, New Zealand, Canada and France, which rely on programs, EAP services or professional bodies rather than an embedded peer role. The SASI review has enabled an extension of the role, expanding the pilot to 6–8 coaches across two sports and resourcing two to three further pilots across the National Institute Network, a direct, second-generation translation pathway back into the system.

Evidence of impact

The AIS's own account of the program's value is direct. As Bill Davoren, AIS HP Coach Development Manager, put it of the resulting Coach Wellbeing Hub:

"The Coach Wellbeing Hub has been designed to support and empower our HP coaching community to manage their personal wellbeing by equipping them with the support, knowledge, and personal development opportunities to navigate their personal and professional lives as they coach."

— Bill Davoren, AIS HP Coach Development Manager

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A letter from the AIS confirms this improved alignment across National Sporting Organisations, National Institute Networks, coach development teams and system partners, describing the research outcomes as "world-leading," "co-designed, applied, and capable of system-wide impact at a global standard." Christine Higgs, AIS Learning Pathways Consultant, credited the collaboration for its direct bearing on strategy:

"Engaging in formal education and career management is a challenge for athletes due to the rigours of preparing for international sporting success... The ability to partner with institutions such as the University of the Sunshine Coast to better understand the career management barriers elite athletes experience in the Australian context has a direct impact on the AIS's strategic objectives and aligns with our National High Performance Research Agenda."

— Christine Higgs, AIS Learning Pathways Consultant

The SASI pilot review, commissioned to independently assess this translation of the research into practice, drew similarly strong reactions. An external senior sport leadership consultant who reviewed the report wrote:

"I spent some time reading the report and genuinely thought it was a very strong piece of work... what stood out was how honestly it captured the lived reality of high-performance coaching... There's a lot in the report that I think leaders across sport, and frankly beyond sport, would benefit from reflecting on."

— External senior sport leadership consultant, feedback to the AIS

Coaches directly supported through the pilot reported comparable value. One de-identified coach reflected on the shift from working through challenges alone to having dedicated support:

"I feel very fortunate to have access to this support through SASI. It has had a positive impact not only on my own wellbeing but also on my ability to be a better coach, colleague, and leader within the program."

— Coach #1, SASI Performance Wellbeing Lead pilot

The research's influence has also travelled internationally. Findings on co-designing the high-performance contract, embedding psychological safety, and defining clear roles and boundaries were shared at the Sport Ireland/Sport Ireland Institute of Sport High Performance Sport Conference. Bill Davoren described the effect of the program's co-design approach on international uptake:

"Their co-design approach, involving coaches, organisational leaders, and sport system stakeholders, has enabled a shared language, increased internal traction and adoption, and the practical application of findings across programs. The AIS recognises this work as internationally significant."

— Bill Davoren, AIS HP Coach Development Manager

Looking Ahead

The research program continues to advance all partner universities' research focus and the AIS's HP2032+ strategy. Its evidence base is now generating a second wave of translation: an extended and broadened SASI pilot, two to three further National Institute Network pilots, a forthcoming AIS HP Coach role Position Statement, and uptake by the ICCE's new international Winning Well research group. Each of these extensions creates further opportunities to strengthen the evidence base and further impact the evidence through ongoing academic and industry dissemination.