



# Risk and Protective Factors for Bullying in Sport: A Scoping Review

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## Abstract

The aim of the current study was to examine risk and protective factors related to bullying in sport. Adopting the methodological approach outlined by Arksey and O’Malley (*International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 8(1):19–32, 2005), 37 articles met the inclusion criteria. A consistent definition of bullying could not be identified in the publications examined, and several articles ( $n = 8$ ) did not explicitly define bullying. The most frequent risk factor identified was an individual’s social background ( $n = 9$ ). Negative influence of coaches ( $n = 5$ ), level of competition ( $n = 5$ ), lack of supportive club culture ( $n = 5$ ) and issues in locker rooms ( $n = 4$ ) were among the most commonly cited risk factors for bullying in sport settings. Preventative policies were cited as the most common method to reduce the incidence of bullying ( $n = 13$ ). Contextually tailored intervention programmes ( $n = 5$ ) were also noted as a key protective factor, particularly for marginalised groups, including athletes with disabilities or members of the LGBTQ+ community. The need for sport-specific bullying prevention education was highlighted by 10 of the articles reviewed. In summary, the current review accentuates the range of risk and protective factors associated with sport participation. Furthermore, the need for educational training programmes to support coaches in addressing and preventing bullying within sport settings is emphasised.

**Keywords** Bullying prevention · Coaches · Athletes · Education

Bullying is a complex and multi-layered issue that crosses from childhood to adulthood and is a continuing challenge in education, workplace and recreation settings (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017). Although there remains considerable debate regarding the definition of the concept, Olweus’ (1993) definition has retained some support (Jewett et al., 2020). Olweus (1993, p. 8) defines bullying as an ‘intentional, negative action which inflicts injury and discomfort on another’. According to Olweus (1993), bullying is characterised by an imbalance of power between victim and perpetrator as well as by repeated bullying behaviours. The phenomenon of bullying in education and workplace settings has received extensive scholarly attention (Campbell & Bauman, 2018;

Jimerson et al., 2009; Zapf et al., 2020). However, research on bullying outside school and workplace settings is relatively scarce (Evans et al., 2016). One such context is sport settings, and researchers have suggested bullying in such contexts may present its own unique features (Kerr et al., 2016). Kerr et al. (2016) suggest that bullying can occur due to teasing behaviours carried out for ‘entertainment purposes’, which may not carry a clear intent to harm, such as ‘banter’ or ‘locker room talk’. Recent high-profile cases of bullying in elite sport (see CNN, 2022, 2023) have demonstrated that, even at an elite level, sporting organisations are not prepared to cope with issues such as marginalisation and exclusion that may be considered both precursors and sources of bullying. Indeed, bullying on sports teams may have particular implications for participants, given the importance of interconnectedness and interdependence of team members for a sense of cohesion and performance outcomes (Kleinert et al., 2012). Bullying research and the widespread adoption of practical approaches are scarce (Newman et al., 2022). Fekkes et al. (2005) reported that almost one-third of bullying experiences occur beyond school and workplace settings, indicating a need to broaden the scope of research and consider bullying in recreation and sport contexts.

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Sports, particularly team sports, often involve competition and aggressive interaction and some research has highlighted higher levels of bullying within the team sport context (MacPherson, 2018; Marracho et al., 2021; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2020). At times, in the heat of competition, it can be challenging for participants to distinguish between deliberately hurtful actions and those inherent to the competitive nature of the game (Nery et al., 2019). As a consequence, bullying in terms of hurtful behaviours, both physical and verbal, can end up becoming an accepted and expected norm that is intrinsic to particular sports, and such behaviour is often informed by coaches (Vveinhardt et al., 2019). Furthermore, the source of bullying behaviour is not always restricted to participants in an opposing team. Emerging evidence indicates that the source is often from participants on the same team or even a coach (Evans et al., 2016). As such, coaches in particular play a crucial role in reducing or addressing bullying. Sport coaches are not only expected to support sport development, but also to provide a fun, positive and safe team environment while also actively fostering personal (life skill) development (Čujko et al., 2020; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Nonetheless, despite the growing awareness of bullying in sport and recreation settings, there remains limited programmes for coaches aimed at heightening sensitivity about bullying, preventing and identifying bullying situations and intervening effectively (Shannon, 2013; Stefaniuk & Bridel, 2018).

The prevalence of bullying appears to differ significantly across countries (Modecki et al., 2014), and estimates regarding its prevalence vary greatly depending on the context and the measurement tool used to gather the data (Evans et al., 2016). For instance, data from the USA indicate that about one out of every four school children has experienced bullying (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In a European context, Craig et al. (2009) reported differences in prevalence ranged from lows of 8.6% and 4.8% in Sweden to highs of 45.2% and 35.8% in Lithuania, among boys and girls, respectively. However, the assessment of this phenomenon among participants in different contexts and countries, using measurement tools that lack validity and reliability, emphasises the need for caution when making such comparisons (Vveinhardt et al., 2019). As noted by Bachand (2017), many researchers have used one-item measures of bullying, which may be insufficient given the intricacy of bullying-related behaviours. Despite concerns regarding the accuracy of tools to measure prevalence, it is abundantly clear that bullying is commonplace in sporting contexts, with a range of adverse health and psychosocial consequences going far beyond the context within which the sport occurs (Shannon, 2013). Via a sample of 1440 Lithuanian sport participants between 16 and 29 years old, the prevalence of bullying within different types of sports was measured by Vveinhardt and Fominiene (2020) in individual sports (9.8%), combat

sports (8.5%) and team sports (7.3%). In their analysis, athletes experienced most bullying actions in combat sports (20%) while almost half less in team sports (10.8%) as well as in individual sports (10.1%). Notwithstanding challenges with measurement and contextual factors, the disparity in rates between countries indicates that contrasting cultural and social norms, and varying approaches in the implementation of bullying-related policies or programmes, may significantly influence the prevalence of bullying behaviour (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017). For instance, higher conformity to hegemonic masculinity norms may enhance the perceived acceptability of bullying (Steinfeldt et al., 2012).

Little attention has been given to the social, environmental and situational factors in sport contexts that may influence bullying behaviour (Vveinhardt et al., 2019). Therefore, risk factors or protective factors associated with both the perpetrator and victim are not well established. Some authors, such as Shannon (2013), reported that the culture of a sport organisation, as exemplified through the values, attitudes, beliefs and practices of administrators and staff, might serve as an important buffer to bullying. Other studies likewise highlight the potential role of contextual factors or individual relationships (e.g. Evans et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2022). Beyond these first attempts, however, there still remains a need to more systematically identify risk and protective factors, which in turn can directly help tailor and inform the development of awareness or education programmes targeted at sport coaches.

As such, the following scoping review aimed to examine how bullying is defined and measured in sport-related literature and to establish commonalities in both risk and protective factors associated with bullying. This could serve to inform sporting organisations to foster more inclusive environments and limit the negative consequences of bullying. In addition, a specific focus of this review was to examine the role coaches play in preventing or facilitating bullying.

## Methods

The following scoping review took place against the backdrop of the BEFORE project. A four-partner, pan-European action, this project aims to review current policies and practices to develop educational training programmes to support coaches in addressing and preventing bullying within sport settings, funded by Erasmus+ (2021-1-IE01-KA220-VET-000034749). To effectively grasp current understandings and experiences around bullying in sport, and develop evidence-based educational programmes, a scoping review was undertaken to map out crucial information related to the subject. Indeed, scoping reviews can be valuable in identifying evidence around a given topic, documenting trends and clarifying concepts (Munn et al., 2018).

For the following, we adopt the methodological approach outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which is a widely accepted approach for scoping reviews and has been adopted by numerous reviews in the areas of bullying and sport-related social issues more generally (e.g. Clarke et al., 2021; Quinlan et al., 2014). Our scoping review began in March 2022 and took approximately 11 months. The review followed six steps, namely, (1) identifying the research questions; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) study selection; (4) charting the data and (5) collating, summarising and reporting the results. A sixth step, consultation with relevant stakeholders, was also implemented to add rigour and validate findings. In the following sub-sections, we document each of these steps individually.

### Identification of the Research Questions

In line with the educational objectives of the BEFORE project, the authors and project members developed a set of research questions to guide our search strategy. Following recommendations, we ensured that our questions were not so narrow as to limit the analytical process and broad enough to capture all relevant literature. As such, in accordance with the aims of our project, we developed three research questions to direct our review: (1) how is bullying defined in sport-related literature; (2) what risk or protective factors are identified concerning bullying and (3) what role do coaches play in preventing or facilitating bullying?

### Determination of Relevant Studies

A search strategy was developed and reviewed by the authors and all project members, including during the project launch meeting in March 2022. As a result, we selected several multi-disciplinary and thematically relevant databases to conduct our search and agreed on relevant search terms and related inclusion criteria.

A final search string was chosen (TS = (“sport\*” AND “bully\*”)) to balance the extent and relevance of results as well as overall feasibility. Given the more niche nature of the topic, we opted for a simple combination of two broad search terms to obtain a wide range of potentially relevant results. Furthermore, as part of our research question concerned specifically the definition of bullying, we opted to exclude potentially connected terminology such as peer victimisation or harassment. As such, only the two mentioned terms have been included to ensure a feasible number of articles were retrieved from our search for review. Numerous databases, including the Web of Science Core Collection, KCI-Korean Journal Database, MEDLINE®, Russian Science Citation Index, SciELO Citation Index, SportDISCUS, Sociology Source Ultimate and PsyIndex, were used. Via in-built online filters, searches were limited to peer-reviewed journal publications published in English between 2000 and 2022. All searches were conducted on April 12, 2022. Tables 1 and 2 present the search strategy and inclusion criteria, respectively.

### Study Selection

Covidence software was used to manage and streamline the process of abstract and full-text screening. Covidence allows researchers to upload search results, automatically scans for duplicates and coordinates multi-user screening of articles, thus facilitating our work as a multi-national, decentralised research team. Two project members reviewed each abstract and subsequent full text independently. A unanimous decision was required for texts to progress to full-text screening and, later, to full-text inclusion. In situations of conflicting decisions, the authorship group met to discuss and resolve those conflicts. Two key factors drove full-text inclusion.

Firstly, texts were required to make explicit reference to the term bullying. Related concepts, such as violence,

**Table 1** Overview of search strategy

<b>Boolean search terms</b>	“sport*” AND “bully*” (TS = (“sport*” AND “bully*”))
<b>Search area</b>	Topic Search (Title, Abstract, Keyword, Keyword Plus) for WoS Title and Abstract Search for Ebsco
<b>Databases</b>	Web Of Science <i>All databases, including</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Web of Science Core Collection               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED); Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI); Arts &amp; Humanities Citation Index (A&amp;HCI); Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• KCI-Korean Journal Database</li> <li>• MEDLINE®</li> <li>• Russian Science Citation Index</li> <li>• SciELO Citation Index</li> </ul> SportDISCUS Sociology Source Ultimate PsyIndex

**Table 2** Inclusion and exclusion criteria for bullying in sport scoping review

	<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>
<b>Topic</b>	Texts concerning the prevalence, experience or prevention of bullying in the club, community or extracurricular sport context (including university or college sports). Thus, these texts focus on target groups such as athletes or coaches Texts including the term bully or bullying directly in the title, abstract or keywords	Texts concerning bullying in curriculum-based physical education or online sporting environments Texts not using the term 'bullying' in the title, abstract or keywords Texts using related terms like 'abuse' or 'violence' should also be excluded Texts focusing on media narratives or portrayals around bullying in sport Texts presenting legal perspectives or position papers Historical accounts of bullying
<b>Document type</b>	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Theses/dissertations Position papers Proceedings Monographs Books Grey literature
<b>Article format</b>	Empirical studies using quantitative and/or qualitative methods Conceptual or theoretical papers	Review articles (e.g. systematic reviews, meta-analyses, scoping reviews) Position papers or editorials
<b>Population/target group</b>	Target groups of all ages and backgrounds within the club, community or extracurricular sport context, including coaches, volunteers, athletes, youth and adults	Target groups outside of the club, community or extracurricular sport context, including fans or spectators
<b>Setting</b>	Bullying within sport clubs, community clubs or organisations, as well as school sport teams located outside of the formal school setting (including college or university sport)	Bullying within curriculum-based physical education (e.g. physical education delivered as a part of the regular primary or secondary school programme) Bullying within online or e-sport environments
<b>Language</b>	English	Documents not in English
<b>Geographic scope</b>	Worldwide	None
<b>Timeframe</b>	2000–2022	Documents outside of the defined range

maltreatment or abuse, were excluded. Though admittedly connected, including these concepts would have inflated the review and included behaviours and perspectives that, arguably, go beyond what is typically associated with bullying. Secondly, only texts concerning the prevalence, experience or prevention of bullying in the club, community or extra-curricular sport context were included. Though we recognise that bullying and sport frequently occur within educational contexts, most coaches targeted by the BEFORE project work within community or club contexts. Those contexts likely face different dynamics than formal educational settings (Kerr et al., 2016), and it was necessary for the project that those contexts be adequately and fully reflected in our results.

### Charting the Data

The next stage of the process involved charting and data extraction from the included studies. Each project partner was responsible for charting a segment of the included studies, and the authorship group reviewed the final data table. We used Google Sheets and charted bibliographic, methodological and bullying-specific information for the included studies. Regarding bibliographic and methodological information, we collated titles, author(s), year, journal name, country of study, study design, sample descriptions, data collection methods and theories employed. As it relates to bullying, we documented the definition employed within the article, the setting in which the bullying took place, the bullying relationship (i.e. athlete-athlete, coach-athlete) and the risk and protective factors documented in the study.

### Collating and Reporting Results

Both frequency analysis and deductive coding were used to collate and report the results. The variables extracted for the frequency analysis included publication year, data origin (country), journal, methodology, study population and sport. Deductive coding allowed us to identify and summarise the relationships and protective and risk factors highlighted by the texts. Based on the coding results, we then conducted a frequency analysis to document the occurrence of these relationships and factors.

### Consultation

Though consultation is presented here as the final step, consultation took place throughout this research. The entire project consortium, which includes an anti-bullying NGO, a pan-European organisation and two universities, was engaged in the review's design, implementation and analysis. Multiple members from each project partner contributed to designing,

reviewing and implementing the proposed search strategy and inclusion criteria. Following the collation and writing of the results, these partners reviewed the extracted data and critically appraised the overall analysis in this text.

## Findings

In total, 391 studies were identified, 61 duplicates were removed, and 330 studies were screened. After screening, 231 studies were excluded, with 99 studies being assessed for eligibility. Of these 99, 62 studies were excluded for the reasons noted in Fig. 1, including wrong publication format ( $n=25$ ), wrong setting ( $n=20$ ) and lack of bullying focus ( $n=8$ ). After our inclusion criteria were applied, 37 articles examining bullying in sport met all criteria for inclusion in this study. An overview of the retained articles is provided in Table 3.

### Publication Year

Though our search parameters extended back to 2000, no texts were included before 2012. As evidenced in Fig. 2, articles on bullying in sports have increased since 2019, with 26 out of 37 publications published from 2019 to 2022.

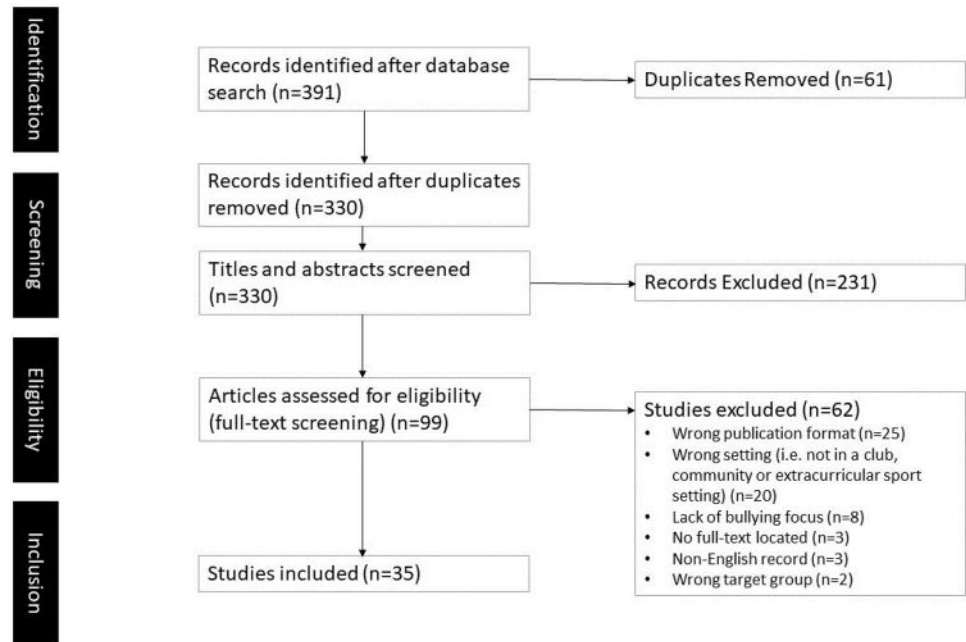
### Journals

In total, 31 different journals were included in the scoping review. Three publications were included in the journals *Frontiers in Psychology*, and a further two publications each were included in the journals *Motricidade*, *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* and *Journal of Human Sport & Exercise* as well as the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

### Research Locations

Research data comes mostly ( $n=35$ ) from countries in the so-called West or 'Global North', characterised as Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. The other two studies come from Iran and Japan. Lithuania appears more frequently than the other Western countries ( $n=8$ ), followed by the USA ( $n=6$ ), Canada, Portugal, Spain and the UK ( $n=4$ ).

In terms of the different sports analysed, most studies focused on multiple sports ( $n=21$ ), including team sports (football/soccer, basketball, rugby) as well as individual sports (swimming, acrobatics, gymnastics or badminton). A total of 11 articles analysed one particular sport, with football/soccer being the most frequent ( $n=6$ ).

**Fig. 1** Flow chart for bullying in sport scoping review

## Definition of Bullying in Sport

A consistent definition of bullying could not be identified in the publications examined. Several journal articles ( $n = 8$ ) did not explicitly define bullying. Most articles used definitions of bullying which included the terms ‘repeated/repeatedly’ ( $n = 11$ ) or ‘intentional’ ( $n = 8$ ). Three main parameters of bullying were identified by Vveinhardt et al. (2019) as bullying is repeated over time, involves an imbalance of power and may be verbal, physical, social or psychological. Concerning the different types of bullying, three journal articles differentiated between physical, verbal, social or cyberbullying. Different relationships between the perpetrator and the victim were identified in terms of bullying in sport. The selected journal articles differentiated between peer-to-peer bullying of athletes ( $n = 17$ ), as well as coach-athlete ( $n = 9$ ) or coach-coach bullying relationships ( $n = 1$ ), with athlete-to-athlete bullying being the most common type of bullying relationship reported. Most papers analysed more than one specific relationship of bullying in their analysis, including athlete-athlete as well as the relationship between athletes and coaches ( $n = 12$ ). A total of eight articles did not define the bullying relationship at all.

## Risk Factors

Multiple risk factors of bullying can be identified in the articles. In general, sports participation increased the likelihood of being bullied for those on the margins. Five out of 37 papers underlined that participation in sports, team sports, interscholastic sports and contact sports increases the risk

of being bullied. The most frequent risk factor identified was individual social backgrounds and how others interact with diverse individuals ( $n = 9$ ). Thus, different identities related to gender, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity or health may lead to more bullying. For example, Ohlert et al. (2020) reported that gender differences were only evident for sexual violence, with female athletes showing higher prevalence estimates than male athletes, while Vveinhardt and Fominiene (2019) reported that male athletes are more aggressive physically, verbally or nonverbally than women.

A total of five articles identified the lack of a supportive culture as another risk factor of bullying, meaning that a lack of support for the individual athlete or/and a culture creating fear, discrimination, silence or conformity within the sport setting increases the risk of bullying (Baiocco et al., 2018; Jewett et al., 2020; Shannon, 2013).

Lack of supervision was identified as another risk factor in four studies. These sorts of risks relate to places or moments within the sporting context where a lack of supervision or structure is seen as creating opportunities for bullying (e.g. unstructured time, changing rooms). Locker rooms were identified by several studies ( $n = 4$ ) as the most conflict-prone place. Due to the intimate atmosphere and the absence of adult surveillance, locker rooms can foster a climate of fear and competition (Nikolaou & Crispin, 2022).

In the sport and bullying context, five papers found that the negative influence of coaches present a risk of bullying, as coaches have a high influence on the individual athlete as well as the negative, sometimes even toxic, atmosphere in the sport setting (e.g. Driessens, 2015; Rios et al., 2022; Vveinhardt et al., 2017; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019; Weuve et al.,

Table 3 Overview of retained articles

Title	Author(s)	Year	Journal name	Country of study	Sport	Sample	Bullying relationship
Elite athletes' experiences of interpersonal violence in organised sport in Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium	Ohlert, Jeannine; Vertommen, Tine; Rulofs, Bettina; Rau, Thea; Allroggen, Marc	2020	<i>European Journal of Sport Science</i>	Germany	Multiple	N = 1665 (63% female) Age = 18–59 y.o	Athlete-athlete; coach-athlete
Extracurricular activities and bullying among children and adolescents with disabilities	Haeghele, Justin A.; Aigner, Carrie; Healy, Sean	2020	<i>Maternal and Child Health Journal</i>	USA	Multiple	N = 35,474 Age = 6–17 y.o	Not specified
Perceptions of workplace bullying among athletic trainers in the collegiate setting	Weuve, Celest; Pitney, William A.; Martin, Malissa; Mazerolle, Stephanie M	2014	<i>Journal of Athletic Training</i>	USA	Not specified	N = 15 (46.7% female) Age = 28–56 y.o	Workplace bullying Coach-coach
Estimating the effects of sports and physical exercise on bullying	Nikolaou, Dimitrios; Crispin, Laura M	2022	<i>Contemporary Economic Policy</i>	USA	Multiple	N = 359,747 Age = 12–17 y.o	Athlete-athlete
Extracurricular activity participation moderates impact of family and school factors on adolescents' disruptive behavioural problems	Driessens, Corine M. E. F	2015	<i>BMC Public Health</i>	UK	Not specified	N = 11,868 to 13,085 (across four waves) Age = 13–16 y.o	Peer-peer
'Game to play?': barriers and facilitators to sexuality and gender diverse young people's participation in sport and physical activity	Storr, R.; Nicholas, L.; Robinson, K.; Davies, C	2022	<i>Sport, Education, Society</i>	Australia	Not specified	N = 13 (76.9% gender-diverse) Age = 18–24 y.o	Peer-peer
Sports as education: is this a stereotype too? A national research on the relationship between sports practice, bullying, racism and stereotypes among Italian students	Tintori, Antonio; Ciancimino, Giulia; Vismara, Alfredo; Cerbara, Loredana	2021	<i>Cogent Education</i>	Italy	Not specified	N = 4011 Age = 14–16 y.o	Peer-peer
Bullying in recreation and sport settings: exploring risk factors, prevention efforts, and intervention strategies	Shannon, Charlene S	2013	<i>Journal of Park and Recreation Administration</i>	Canada	Multiple-sport	N = 71	Admin staff/coach-participant; peer to Peer

Table 3 (continued)

Title	Author(s)	Year	Journal name	Country of study	Sport	Sample	Bullying relationship
The effectiveness of assertiveness training on bullying, competitive state anxiety and performance under pressure in futsal players	Najafabadi, Reza Aliyar; Meshkati, Zohreh; Badami, Rokhsareh	2020	<i>Journal of Research &amp; Health</i>	Iran	Futsal	N = 94 Age = 15–17 y.o	Peer-peer
Sports as a risk environment: homophobia and bullying in a sample of gay and heterosexual men	Baiocco, Roberto; Pistella, Jessica; Salvati, Marco; Lucidi, Fabio; Ioverno, Salvatore	2018	<i>Journal of Gay &amp; Lesbian Mental Health</i>	Italy	Not specified	N = 208 (0% female) Age = 18–35 y.o	Peer-peer
Bullying among adolescent football players: role of masculinity and moral atmosphere	Steinfeldt, Jesse A.; Vaughan, Ellen L.; LaFollette, Julie R.; Steinfeldt, Matthew C	2012	<i>Psychology of Men &amp; Masculinity</i>	USA	American football	N = 206 (0% female) Age = 14–18 y.o	Peer-peer
Gender and age variables of bullying in organised sport: is bullying “grown out of”?	Vveinhardt, Jolita; Fominiene, Viliija Bite	2020	<i>Journal of Human Sport &amp; Exercise</i>	Lithuania	Multiple	N = 382 (50% female) Age = 16–29 y.o	Athlete-athlete; coach-athlete
Bullying and harassment prevention in youth basketball teams	Vveinhardt, Jolita; Komskiene, Diana; Romero, Zasha	2017	<i>Transformations in Business and Economics</i>	Lithuania	Basketball	N = 746 (0% female) Age = 14–18 y.o	Athlete-athlete; coach-athlete
The meaning of youth physical activity experiences among individuals with psoriasis: a retrospective inquiry	Haegele, Justin A.; Wilson, Patrick B.; Zhu, Xihe; Kirk, T. Nicole	2019	<i>European Physical Education Review</i>	USA	Not specified	N = 6 (66.7% female) Age = 20–46 y.o	School daily life
When it is no longer a bit of banter: coaches' perspectives of bullying in professional soccer	Newman, James A.; Eccles, Stephen; Rumbold, James L.; Rhind, Daniel J. A	2021	<i>International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology</i>	England	Football	N = 5 (0% female) Age = 22–41 y.o	Athlete-athlete
Anti-vilification programs in adolescent sport	Mattey, Emma; McCloughan, Lana J.; Hanrahan, Stephanie J	2014	<i>Journal of Sport Psychology in Action</i>	Australia	Volleyball	N = N/A Age = 15–23 y.o	Athlete-athlete
Bullying in youth sport training: a nationwide exploratory and descriptive research in Portugal	Nery, Miguel; Neto, Carlos; Rosado, Antonio; Smith, Peter K	2019	<i>European Journal of Developmental Psychology</i>	Portugal	Multiple	N = 1458 (0% female) Age = 6+ y.o	Athlete-athlete; coach-athlete



Table 3 (continued)

Title	Author(s)	Year	Journal name	Country of study	Sport	Sample	Bullying relationship
Bullying experiences of individuals with visual impairment: the mitigating role of sport participation	Dane-Staples, Emily; Lieberman, Lauren; Ratcliff, Jennifer; Rounds, Kala	2013	<i>Journal of Sport Behaviour</i>	USA	Goalball	N = 49 (51% female) Age = 18–63 y.o	Athlete-athlete; student-student
'I was always made fun of for being fat': first-hand accounts of bullying in children's football	Flores Aguilar, Gonzalo; Prat Grau, Maria; Ventura Vall-Llovera, Carles; Rios, Xenia	2021	<i>Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy</i>	Spain	Football	N = 107 Age = 8+y.o	Athlete-athlete, athlete-coach
Conceptualising bullying in adult professional football: a phenomenological exploration	Newman, James A.; Warburton, Victoria E.; Russell, Kate	2021	<i>Psychology of Sport &amp; Exercise</i>	UK	Football	N = 18 (0% female) Age = 18–31 y.o	Not defined
Bullying victimisation and perpetration among adolescent sport teammates	Evans, Blair; Adler, Ashley; MacDonald, Dany; Côté, Jean	2016	<i>Pediatric Exercise Science</i>	Canada	Multiple	N = 359 (64% female) Age = 13–17 y.o	Athlete-athlete, athlete-coach
Is young athletes' bullying behaviour different in team, combat, or individual sports?	Marracho, Philippe; Pereira, Antonino Manuel; Almeida, Nery; Miguel Venda da Graca; Rosado, Antonio Fernando; Boleto, Coelho; Eduarda Maria Rocha Teles de Castro	2021	<i>Motricidade</i>	Portugal	Team, individual, combat sports	N = 664 (58.7% female) Age = 13–18 y.o	Not defined
Student athletes' experiences of bullying in intercollegiate sport	Mishna, Faye; Kerr, Gretchen; McInroy, Lauren B.; MacPherson, Ellen	2019	<i>Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education</i>	Canada	Multiple	N = 122 (64% female) Age = 18–40 y.o	Athlete-athlete
Encounter with bullying in sport and its consequences for youth: amateur athletes' approach	Vveinhardt, Jolita; Fominiene, Vilija Bite; Andriukaitiene, Regina	2019	<i>International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health</i>	Lithuania	Multiple	N = 7 (57.1% female) Age = 19–29 y.o	Athlete-athlete, athlete-coach
Prevalence of bullying in grassroots soccer in Spain: victims, bullies, and bystanders	Rios, Xenia; Ventura, Carles; Lleixa, Teresa; Prat, Maria; Flores, Gonzalo	2022	<i>Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research</i>	Spain	Football	N = 1980 (11.8% female) Age = 8–13 y.o	Athlete-athlete
Experiences of bullying victimisation in female interuniversity athletes	Jewett, Rachel; Kerr, Gretchen; MacPherson, Ellen; Stirling, Ashley	2019	<i>International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology</i>	Canada	Multiple	N = 11 (100% female) Age = 19–23 y.o	Not defined

Table 3 (continued)

Title	Author(s)	Year	Journal name	Country of study	Sport	Sample	Bullying relationship
Gender and age variables of bullying in organised sport: is bullying “grown out of”?	Vveinhardt, Jolita; Fominiene, Vilija B	2020	<i>Journal of Human Sport &amp; Exercise</i>	Lithuania	Not specified	N = 382 (50% female) Age = 16–29 y.o	Not defined
Bullying trends inside sport: when organised sport does not attract but intimidates	Vveinhardt, Jolita; Fominiene, Vilija B	2020	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	Lithuania	Team, combat and individual sports	N = 8 (37.5% female) Age = 23–65 y.o	Not defined
It can be a “very fine line”: professional footballers’ perceptions of the conceptual divide between bullying and banter	Newman, James A.; Warburton, Victoria E.; Russell, Kate	2022	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	UK	Football	18 (0% female) Age = 18–31 y.o	Athlete-athlete
Characteristics of parents who feel a lack of communication with coaches of youth sports	Yabe, Yutaka; Hagiwara, Yoshihiro; Sekiguchi, Takuya; Momma, Haruki; Tsuchiya, Masahiro; Kanazawa, Kenji; Yoshida, Shinichirou; Itoi, Eiji; Nagatomi, Ryoichi	2021	<i>Tohoku University Medical Press</i>	Japan	Multiple	N = 6641 (76.3% female) Age = 40.1 y.o average	–
The dark side of sport: managerial bullying and harassment challenges in different types of sports	Vveinhardt, Jolita; Fominiene, Vilija Bite; Andriukaitiene, Regina	2020	<i>Journal of Business Economics and Management</i>	Lithuania	Individual, combat and team sports	N = 1440 (30% female) Age = 16–29 y.o	Athlete interrelationships
“Omerta” in organised sport: bullying and harassment as determinants of threats of social sustainability at the individual level	Vveinhardt, Jolita; Fominiene, Vilija Bite; Andriukaitiene, Regina	2019	<i>Sustainability</i>	Lithuania	Team, dual and individual sports	N = 8 (37.5% female) Age = 23–65 y.o	Athlete-athlete and coach-athlete
Evaluation of happy sport, an emotional education program for assertive conflict resolution in sports	Ros-Morente, Agnes; Farre, Miriam; Quesada-Pallares, Carla; Filella, Gemma	2022	<i>International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health</i>	Spain	Football	194 (8.7% female) Age = 11–12 y.o	Athlete-athlete
Young people and bullying in sports: exploratory research in an inland northern region of Portugal	Marracho, Philippe; Coelho, Eduarda; Pereira, Antonino; Nery, Miguel; Rosado, Antonio	2021	<i>Journal of Physical Education and Sport</i>	Portugal	Multiple	N = 642 (42.2% female) Age = 13–18 y.o	Athlete-athlete

Table 3 (continued)

Title	Author(s)	Year	Journal name	Country of study	Sport	Sample	Bullying relationship
"I gave up football and I had no intention of ever going back": retrospective experiences of victims of bullying in youth sport	Rios, Xenia; Ventura, Carles; Mateu, Pau	2022	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	Spain	Football, basketball, swimming, athletics	N = 11 (36.6% female) Age = 17–27 y.o	Athlete-athlete
Relationship between 12–16-year-old athletes' self-esteem, self-confidence and bullying	Tilindienė, Ilona; Judita, Giedrė; Gažauskienė, Aida; Stupuris, Tomas	2012	<i>SPORTAS</i>	Lithuania	Multiple	N = 1036 Age = 12–16 y.o	Athlete-athlete

2014). However, some authors argued that the role of team managers and coaches is not yet fully understood as it relates to bullying prevention (Newman et al., 2022; Vveinhardt et al., 2019). In addition to coaches, external influences such as parents or family members were described as another risk. As Yabe et al. (2021, p. 191) state, 'it is necessary that parents are aware of their roles in youth sport to make appropriate mutual communication between parents and coaches, which could lead to a more comfortable atmosphere for young athletes'. Table 4 provides a frequency count overview of the most commonly reported risk factors identified during the review.

### Protective Factors

Overall, 27 out of 37 articles reported on protective factors in their studies. Protective measures or policies within the sport or club setting are the most common factor in preventing bullying ( $n = 13$ ). Studies with contextually tailored intervention programmes reduced the likelihood of experiencing bullying victimisation and created more positive sport experiences for all participants (Driessens, 2015; Haegele et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2022; Storr et al., 2022). The papers showed that especially marginalised groups, e.g. athletes with disabilities (Haegele et al., 2020) or members of the LGBT+ community (Baiocco et al., 2018), benefit from these types of programmes.

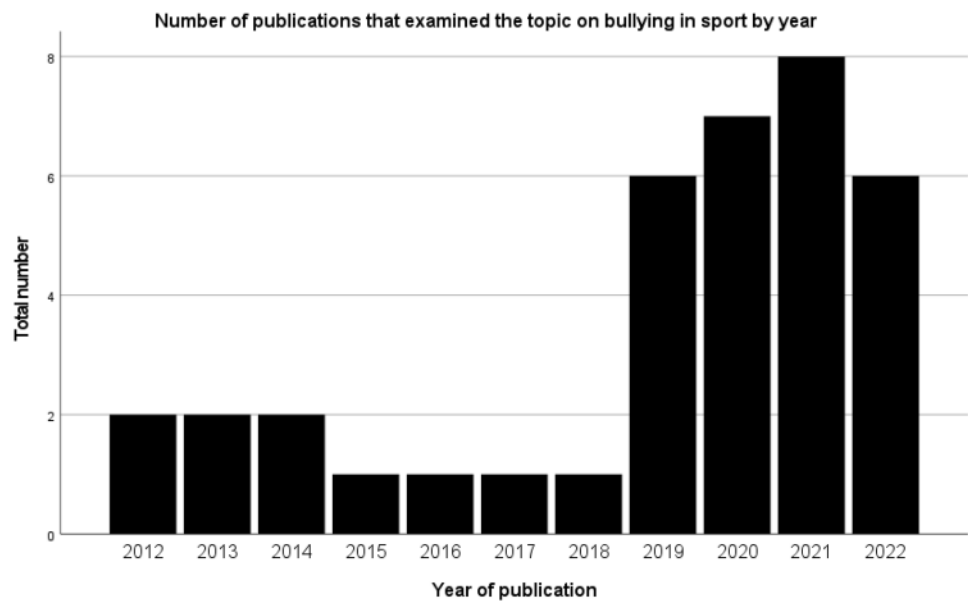
Besides programmes targeting the athletes, the need for educational programmes (e.g. coach development workshops and educational programmes for teachers and parents) has been identified by multiple papers ( $n = 10$ ). The education of coaches, parents and stakeholders is one key factor in addressing and preventing bullying (Mattey et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2022). According to Mattey et al. (2014), educational workshops can increase awareness of the effects of bullying and help athletes, coaches and other stakeholders to create safe, bullying-free environments. Furthermore, some papers ( $n = 5$ ) underlined that access to extracurricular or sports activities helps develop participants' confidence and skills and, subsequently, reduces the risk of disruptive behaviour (Haegele et al., 2020; Storr et al., 2022).

In addition, building up internal skills or characteristics of individuals such as resilience or emotional competence have been identified to foster anti-bullying behaviour (Baiocco et al., 2018; Storr et al., 2022; Weuve et al., 2014). Table 5 provides a frequency count overview of the most prominent protective factors identified during the review.

### Discussion, Limitations and Implications

Through a scoping review of 37 articles, we have aimed to expose the current status of research regarding bullying in sport. In particular, we have sought to highlight the

**Fig. 2** Number of publications that examined bullying in sport, by year



understanding of bullying within the existing research, as well as document the relationships, risks and protective factors related to bullying in sport. Before discussing the implications of our findings, it is worth pausing on some of the limitations associated with our work. Firstly, though not a limitation per se, it is crucial to remember that our review focuses exclusively on sport in the club, community, recreational and extracurricular settings. We do not focus on bullying in the context of formal physical education, though we suspect this is a further area of worthwhile inquiry. Secondly, our review focused only on peer-reviewed, English-language journal articles. These restrictions limit the potential results, and a multi-lingual and multi-format review may have yielded different outcomes. Having said that, we can nonetheless establish a few clear trends and potential future directions based on the results presented here.

Conceptually, the body of literature presented here does not use one specific definition of bullying, with numerous studies even taking the term somewhat for granted and failing to provide any form of working definition. This ambiguity around a standard definition is perhaps unsurprising given the ‘ongoing definitional issues of the word bullying’ (Hellström et al., 2021, p. 4). When the term is defined, however, there is a fairly clear trend towards understanding bullying as something both repeated and intentional, and that can take the form of verbal, physical or emotionally abusive behaviour. Seismic developments in information and communication technology have resulted in the forms and platforms of bullying inevitably changing (Hellström et al., 2021). Indeed, while discrimination has always been a problem in sport, the growth of social media has exacerbated the issue (Kearns et al., 2023) and is an area in need of further research based on the studies examined in the current review.

**Table 4** Frequency counts of risk factors associated with bullying in sport

Name	Description	Count
Social background and interaction	Risks around how the background of individuals (e.g. gender, disability, orientation, ethnicity, health) and attitudes related to those backgrounds may lead to more bullying	9
Coach behaviour	Risk coming from the negative influence of coach(es)	5
Type of sport or sport context	Risks related to certain types (e.g. team or individual) or levels (e.g. recreational or elite) of sport	5
Lack of supportive culture	Risks around a lack of a supportive culture or a culture of fear/discrimination/silence/conformity within the club/organisation	5
Lack of supervision	Risks related to places or moments within the sporting context where a lack of supervision or structure is seen as creating opportunities for bullying (e.g. unstructured time, changing rooms, etc.)	4
Family influence	Risks coming from family influence	3
Power relations	Risks coming from an imbalance of power between victim and perpetrator	2
Lack of strategies or policies	Risks related to a lack of strategies or policies from clubs/organisations relating to preventing or dealing with bullying	2
Sport participation	Risk related to how participation in sport is in itself a risk	1

**Table 5** Frequency counts of protective factors associated with bullying in sport

Name	Description	Count
Protective measures or policies	Protective factors related to developing policies (e.g. reporting, action, etc.) around bullying within the club/organisation context	13
Educational programmes	Protective factors generated by education of coaches, parents and stakeholders	10
Access to extracurricular or sport activities	Protective factor emanating from participation in extracurricular or sport activities and how this participation helps develop participant confidence or skills	5
Life skills/personal traits	Protective factors related to the internal skills or characteristics of individuals (e.g. resilience, emotional competence, etc.)	3
Positive group norms	Protection coming from positive groups norms or culture	2
Coach engagement	Protection through positive engagement of coach(es)	1

Likewise, there is great variety in the risk and protective factors associated with bullying in the retained papers. Most strikingly, the characteristics of the sporting context seem to play a determining role as it relates to the risk of bullying. For one, the type of sport is relevant. Team sports seem to have a higher prevalence of bullying than combat or individual sports. According to the study by Marracho et al. (2021), the prevalence of bullying (victims, bullies and bystanders) was 26.7% in team sports, 19.1% in individual sports and 23.1% in combat sports, with no significant differences between different sports concerning the prevalence of bullying behaviours. Other studies included here echo these findings, though further meta-analysis would be needed to establish deeper insights concerning prevalence statistics (Marracho et al., 2021; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2020). Relatedly, higher levels of competition, especially at elite sport levels, can be identified as another sport-specific risk factor. The unique power of competition as a distinct risk factor in sport settings was highlighted here in only two studies (Marracho et al., 2021; Shannon, 2013), though literature concerning abuse or harassment in sport also confirms this as a risk factor (e.g. Bjørnseth & Szabó, 2018). The pressure to win, as well as the competitive environment in team or individual sport settings, increases the likelihood of bullying behaviours.

Regardless of the type of sport or competition level, it is also clear that the environment plays a crucial role in the prevalence of bullying. Bullying thrives in situations of power imbalances, and these imbalances are often made worse through environments that reinforce various forms of discrimination. Gender, disability and ethnicity have all been identified as risk factors, though we use this term carefully as we do not mean to imply that these differences are the causes of bullying. Rather, the real risk comes from attitudes and environments that enable and condone discriminatory behaviours and bullying. For instance, some authors identify toxic masculinity in team sports such as football/soccer or volleyball as a risk factor (Mattey et al., 2014). Conversely, some articles highlight that participating in sport can increase personal confidence, especially for people

with disabilities, while increasing access to sports may be a lower-cost alternative to many bullying intervention programmes, with the added benefit of increases in health and wellness, human capital and peer network effects already associated with sports participation and physical activity (Nikolaou & Crispin, 2022).

This shows that the sporting context and environment do not emerge independently but are primarily shaped by the individuals organising and delivering sporting activities. This is reflected in the fact that the role of coaches is listed as both a protective and risk factor. For instance, Baiocco et al. (2018) underline that the role of coaches can have a positive influence on preventing bullying. Coaches may provide a positive and supportive environment, partially protecting athletes from the psychological effects of unsupportive, bullying environments.

Given the crucial role of coaches in creating a supportive environment and reducing the risk of bullying, it is essential to consider the kind of resources and education coaches need to fulfil this vital role. Sport psychologists Smith and Smoll (2012) created guidelines to support coaches, including clear examples and real stories to promote leadership behaviour and life skills development as well as coach-parent relationships, aiming to prevent bullying behaviours. In their recent study, Ríos and Ventura (2022) highlight that prevention strategies related to promoting a positive climate among athletes are the most important factor to tackle bullying. As coaches themselves had little knowledge on bullying in general, more specific training is relevant. As toxic and discriminatory attitudes often reinforce bullying behaviours, coaches must be equipped with the tools to understand and tackle discrimination at its roots. To that end, this implies systemically integrating anti-bullying education within coach development curricula, as well as ensuring that coaches obtain adequate training and support to implement safe sport guidelines and principles (see Moustakas et al., 2023). Any such education should also be responsive to the experiences and realities of coaches as it relates to bullying, as the role of coaches in this area is not yet fully understood (Newman et al., 2022; Vveinhardt

et al., 2017). In particular, understanding how coaches may experience, witness and deal with bullying are valuable areas for future exploration. Elsewhere, it is also crucial for any anti-bullying curriculum to consider and develop synergies with educational approaches in other related areas. The goal here is not to overload coaches with new, burdensome training requirements but to help them promote a safe, fun, inclusive sporting environment. As such, anti-bullying education should closely align with and complement educational materials related to areas such as intercultural education (e.g. Moustakas et al., 2022) or anti-discrimination (e.g. Kavoura et al., 2016).

Overall, this is the key message from our findings. Coaches are central to mediating many of the risks present within the sporting context, including establishing an inclusive atmosphere, supervising risk-prone areas and dealing with bullying cases as they arrive. Yet it is also clear that sport coaches do not receive nearly enough training and support to fulfil this crucial role, and future work must urgently address this need by developing relevant curricula and enacting the necessary support structures.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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