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# Leisure Tennis as a Socially Embedded Sport Practice: Meaning-Making and Professional Self-Understanding Among Managers

Research Article

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**Abstract:** This article examines how leisure tennis becomes meaningful as an adult leisure practice situated within social relations and club life, and how Hungarian managers relate experiences of play to their professional roles. It addresses a question at the intersection of leisure studies and managerial identity research: how experiences from a specific sport become relevant to the way managers understand themselves in their professional roles. Using an interpretive qualitative design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with eight Budapest-based managers who regularly played leisure tennis. A Censydiam-informed projective elicitation task provided supplementary material on associations with tennis, managerial roles, and self-description. Thematic analysis showed that participants narrated tennis through enjoyment, challenge, emotional balance, social connection, and sustained engagement. Participants drew on experiences of individual responsibility, persistence, concentration, patience, self-regulation, tactical adjustment, and social conduct when reflecting on managerial work. The projective material added a symbolic layer, suggesting that explicit meanings of enjoyment, challenge, and recovery may coexist with less directly articulated associations of vitality, power, recognition, and social presence. The article contributes to sport and leisure studies by developing retrospective interpretive alignment as an empirically grounded concept for analysing how sport-specific experiences are selectively related to valued professional meanings.

**Keywords:** *Identity work • Retrospective interpretive alignment • Serious leisure • Symbolic capital • Work-leisure interface*

## 1. Introduction

Tennis has historically been associated with upper-class lifestyles and forms of social distinction. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1978, 1984) analysis of sport and social class, it may be understood as a leisure practice shaped by economic resources, temporal flexibility, access to selective social spaces, club membership, coaching, and specialised equipment. Although participation has broadened over time, tennis continues to carry cultural associations with lifestyle, recognition, distinction, and identity. In the present study, these historically accumulated associations provide a cultural context for considering how recognition, belonging, respectability, and social positioning may coexist with experiential and recreational meanings, while participants' own motives and interpretations remain open to empirical analysis. Adult leisure sport offers a particularly useful context for such analysis because it cannot be reduced to either health behaviour or work-related performance. It is an embodied and social setting in which participants may attach meaning to recurring experiences of effort, competition, sociability, frustration, and improvement. A sport-sociological perspective therefore enables tennis to be examined not only as physical activity, but also as a practice shaped by sporting histories, club cultures, social relations, and participants' self-understandings. This interpretive process is scientifically important because work-leisure connections are often described in terms of outcomes or skill transfer, while the narrative work through which sport experiences

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acquire relevance for professional identity remains less visible. Meanings do not pass automatically from court to workplace; participants retrospectively select, translate, and align experiences with culturally available accounts of who they are (Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Weick et al., 2005).

Despite the symbolic associations, managers' own interpretations of leisure tennis remain underexplored. Existing studies have shown that sport may be valuable for managers in relation to wellbeing, recovery, leadership, identity, failure, resilience, and personal resources (Bunea, 2020; Knoppers, 2011; Riera et al., 2024; Szabó, 2012; Warhurst & Black, 2024; Winwood et al., 2007). Research on managerial athleticism also shows that sport-related self-understandings can reproduce culturally preferred images of discipline, stamina, control, and the fit managerial body (Johansson et al., 2017). Existing research provides substantial insight into sport involvement, sport trajectories, executive serious leisure, and recovery, but gives less attention to the interpretive process through which experiences within one specific leisure sport become relevant to how managers understand and present themselves in their professional roles. Less is known about how managers retrospectively construct these connections around concrete experiences of play.

Tennis is a particularly informative case for exploring these processes. Research on tennis psychology has highlighted the relevance of concentration, resilience, mental toughness, and emotional regulation in tennis performance (Cowden et al., 2014, 2016). As an individual, open-skilled sport, tennis exposes players to changing situations in which they must make autonomous decisions, adapt tactically, regulate their responses, and recover from mistakes without the continuous support of teammates. It also combines voluntary leisure participation and continued skill development within a competitively structured activity (Heo et al., 2012; Legg et al., 2017). At the same time, tennis is embedded in club networks, social relationships, and lifestyle meanings, which may connect the sport to broader issues of social positioning and symbolic capital (Lim et al., 2022). Together, these characteristics make tennis a useful empirical context for examining how managers relate the cognitive, emotional, tactical, social, and symbolic dimensions of leisure sport to professional life.

The study is situated in Hungary and offers an empirical case from a Budapest-based managerial sample. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and a projective elicitation task with eight managers from different sectors, the analysis focuses on participants' narratives and interpretations. The study addresses the following research questions: RQ1: How do managers make sense of their participation in leisure tennis as a sustained adult sport practice? RQ2: How do managers retrospectively relate leisure tennis experiences to professional self-understanding and informal learning?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to sport and leisure research by examining leisure tennis as a sport-specific setting for meaning-making. Based on the analysis, the article develops retrospective interpretive alignment as an empirically grounded concept for explaining how concrete episodes of play become relevant to managers' professional narratives.

## 2. Literature Review

This section reviews empirical research on adult leisure sport, managerial sport participation, serious leisure, and the social meanings of tennis. It establishes what previous studies show about sport-based identities and work-leisure connections before the separate theoretical framework specifies the concepts used to interpret the present material.

### 2.1 Leisure Sport as a Context of Meaning-Making

Leisure sport can be understood as a social practice in which embodied experience, voluntary engagement, shared norms, social relationships, and symbolic meanings intersect. From this perspective, sport is not only a physical activity, but also a context in which individuals interpret experiences, negotiate identities, and construct meanings across life domains. Sport and leisure studies suggest that leisure practices are shaped by communities, routines, boundaries, and forms of belonging, while sustained participation may contribute to identity negotiation and shared meaning-making within specific leisure worlds (Blackshaw, 2010; Pedersen et al., 2018; Rojek, 2000; Wheaton, 2004, 2010).

This perspective is particularly relevant for adult leisure sport, where participation is often embedded in biographies, work-life arrangements, social networks, and lifestyle practices (Blackshaw, 2010; Rojek, 2000; Wheaton, 2004). Adults may engage in sport for enjoyment, health, recovery, challenge, social connection, self-expression, or identity-related reasons, and these motives may coexist rather than operate separately (Allender et al., 2006; Davey et al., 2009; Neulinger, 2007; Szabó, 2012). Leisure sport may therefore become part of how individuals

organise everyday life, experience the body, relate to others, and reflect on themselves.

Empirical studies further show how sustained sport participation becomes embedded in participants' identities, relationships, and wider lives. In their qualitative study of 19 women climbers, Dilley and Scraton (2010) critically examined serious leisure from a gender perspective and argued that participation should be situated within the social, cultural, and political contexts that frame experience. Their findings highlighted the significance of physicality, social relationships, work, gender identity, and motherhood in shaping commitment to climbing and the meanings attached to it. Research on serious leisure and sport tourism likewise shows how sustained participation can confirm social identity, create belonging, and mark progress within a leisure career (Green & Jones, 2005). Together, these studies support an understanding of adult sport as an embodied and socially situated practice through which identities are negotiated across different domains of life.

## 2.2 Sport Participation and Managerial Self-Understanding

Research on sport participation and managerial life suggests that sport may enter professional narratives of identity, responsibility, resilience, and self-regulation (Knoppers, 2011; Riera et al., 2024; Warhurst & Black, 2024). Knoppers (2011) showed how managers used sport to give meaning to winning, responsibility, and work. Johansson et al. (2017) developed a more critical perspective by conceptualising managerial athleticism as a regulative regime through which the healthy, fit, and athletic body becomes associated with legitimate managerial identity. They identified three discursive practices through which this regime operated: perfecting the body, advocating against non-fit bodies, and presenting oneself as a role model. Their analysis demonstrates that athletic involvement may not only contribute positively to professional self-understanding, but may also reproduce gendered and exclusionary norms concerning what a credible and competent manager should look like and embody. Together, these studies show both the appeal and the critical ambiguity of sport-based managerial self-understandings.

Costas et al. (2016) provided a closely related qualitative account of the interplay between sport, professional selfhood, and work. Drawing on research in two international management consulting firms, they showed how professionals used sport both to construct and enact themselves as autonomous and ambitious and to create distance from frustrations arising in everyday work. Their study therefore positions sport as both a resource for professional self-construction and a response to tensions within demanding work environments.

Serious leisure research also suggests that non-work activities may become relevant to leaders' self-understanding beyond recovery. Bunea (2020) examined how CEOs used serious leisure to cope with work demands, while Bunea et al. (2023) used the concept of "leisureship" to describe links between serious leisure, spillover, compensation, and positive leader identity construction. These studies establish that leisure can become professionally meaningful, while the present analysis focuses on how participants construct this connection around specific experiences of play.

Sport may also provide an embodied setting in which responsibility, frustration, failure, adaptation, and emotional regulation become visible. Warhurst and Black's (2024) study of running managers is particularly relevant because it frames sport as a context for identity work, failure, resilience, and learning to live with imperfection. Their findings demonstrate the value of analysing the experiential structure of a specific sport.

## 2.3 Competition Within Leisure Sport

Leisure participation does not require the absence of competition. Empirical studies of older adults in competitive sport show that perseverance, effort, improvement, identification, and personal fulfilment can be central features of serious leisure (Dionigi, 2002; Heo et al., 2012). Research on amateur triathletes similarly demonstrates that serious leisure careers involve costs, setbacks, and perseverance alongside intrinsic rewards (Lamont et al., 2014).

These studies distinguish the institutional status of participation from the experiential logic of play. Adults may participate voluntarily and outside professional sport while the activity remains organised through opponents, comparison, achievement, and the desire to improve. In tennis, scores, momentum, winning, and losing can therefore intensify leisure meaning rather than remove the activity from the leisure domain.

## 2.4 Tennis as an Experiential, Social, and Symbolic Leisure Practice

Tennis provides the sport-specific context of the study because it combines individual play, tactical adjustment,

emotional regulation, club-based sociability, and symbolic associations. Tennis-specific literature has linked the sport not only to physical activity, but also to wellness, cognitive performance, and wellbeing (Kovács, 2016; Yazici et al., 2016). As an open-skilled sport, tennis requires players to respond to changing situations, opponents, mistakes, and shifting momentum (Cowden et al., 2014, 2016; Wang et al., 2013). These features help explain why participants may interpret tennis as valuable beyond physical activity alone.

Practitioner and business-media accounts sometimes circulate metaphorical associations between tennis and professional conduct (Bridges, 2017; Hornbuckle, 2023; Kalanj, 2021). Classic tennis coaching literature has also framed tennis as a context of attention, self-observation, and the management of inner interference (Gallwey, 1974). Together with tennis and sport psychology research on concentration, emotional regulation, resilience, and coping with pressure (Cowden et al., 2014, 2016; Den Hartigh et al., 2024; Hufton et al., 2024; Nieri, 2006), this literature contextualises why tennis may be experienced as cognitively and emotionally demanding.

Tennis also carries social and symbolic meanings. Research on adult recreational tennis further demonstrates that competition and sociability need not be opposing dimensions of leisure participation. Based on interviews with 21 intermediate adult league players, Legg et al. (2017) found that a sense of community was expressed through social spaces, perceptions of fairness, competition, and commitment. Their findings indicate that the competitive organisation of recreational tennis may contribute to, rather than undermine, its relational and community meanings. Lim et al. (2022) showed how women's tennis-club participants constructed identity through respect, pride, belonging, and distinction. This empirical evidence complements Bourdieu's broader account of symbolic capital by showing how recognition and social positioning can be lived within club participation. Such meanings may coexist with experiential and recreational motives rather than functioning as their alternative.

Taken together, these studies position tennis as a leisure practice in which embodied, social, competitive, and symbolic meanings intersect.

# 3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is organised around four groups of sensitising concepts. Serious leisure and self-determination theory contextualise sustained and intrinsically meaningful engagement; symbolic capital situates tennis within wider relations of access, recognition, and distinction; professional self-understanding and informal learning focus attention on retrospective reflection; and identity-work and sensemaking research support the concept of retrospective interpretive alignment.

## 3.1 Serious Leisure and Self-Determination Theory

The serious leisure perspective helps contextualise why regular tennis participation may become more than casual recreation. Sustained engagement in a skill-based leisure activity may involve effort, improvement, perseverance, identity-related meanings, and participation in a distinctive social world (Sritanyarat et al., 2023; Stebbins, 2007, 2016; Veal, 2017). In the present study, this perspective sensitises the analysis to the ways in which repeated tennis participation became meaningful over time.

Self-determination theory provides a supporting lens for interpreting participants' accounts of enjoyment, autonomy, competence, improvement, and social connection (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Together, these perspectives suggest that regular tennis may offer not only relaxation and recovery, but also a context for effort, progress, frustration, social connection, and self-reflection over time.

## 3.2 Symbolic Capital and Social Distinction

Bourdieu's (1978, 1984) analysis of sport and social class situates tennis within historically accumulated relations of economic access, cultural taste, recognition, belonging, and distinction. Symbolic capital is used here as a contextual lens for examining how these wider associations may coexist with participants' explicit experiences of enjoyment, challenge, sociability, and improvement. It draws attention to the cultural location of tennis without predetermining participants' motives.

## 3.3 Professional Self-Understanding and Informal Learning

Here, professional self-understanding refers to the accounts through which participants describe who they are and how they act in managerial roles. Informal learning refers here to the retrospective noticing, interpretation, and reframing of experience (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Together, these concepts direct attention to how

experiences of tennis become reference points in participants' accounts of managerial work.

### 3.4 Retrospective Interpretive Alignment

Research on identity work and sensemaking emphasises that self-narratives are selective, retrospective, and oriented towards coherence (Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Weick et al., 2005). Serious-leisure research similarly shows that participants construct identities through personally meaningful narratives about their leisure occupations. Taylor and Kay (2015), for example, identified located, active, and changing dimensions of the self, demonstrating how leisure experiences may become both personally meaningful and socially situated identity resources.

Building on these insights, the study uses retrospective interpretive alignment to organise recurring patterns in how participants selected memorable tennis episodes, translated them into professional categories, and related them to valued understandings of managerial conduct. These operations are analytical distinctions, not a fixed sequence or a tested causal mechanism.

## 4. Material and Methods

### 4.1 Research Design

This study used an interpretive qualitative design to examine how participants constructed meaning around lived sport experiences. Such an approach is well suited to exploratory research concerned with experiential and identity-related processes, particularly where predefined answer categories are limited (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Semi-structured interviews combined thematic focus with sufficient openness for participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own terms. The interviews addressed topics derived from the research questions and relevant literature while allowing comparisons, metaphors, and associations to emerge during the conversation. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to support trust and openness, which were considered important given the reflexive nature of the topics discussed.

### 4.2 Participants

The sample included eight Hungarian managers, two women and six men, aged between 41 and 51. Participants worked in Budapest and represented different sectors, including sport, advertising, law, marketing, real estate, hospitality, technology, and transport. Participants were eligible for inclusion if they met three criteria: (a) they held a managerial position with responsibility for at least five employees; (b) they had at least 5 years of managerial experience; and (c) they had sustained experience of leisure tennis participation, defined as regular participation for at least 2 years and, at the time of the study or in their most active period, at least once per week.

Five participants began playing tennis in their 20s, two during childhood or adolescence, and one in their late 30s. The findings therefore reflect the experiences and interpretations of these eight managers, who held substantial managerial responsibilities and had a history of sustained recreational tennis participation. An overview of participant characteristics is provided in Table 1.

| | Age | Gender | Professional sector | Professional position | Age at onset of tennis participation | Regular tennis participation pattern |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | 50 | Male | Sport | Sales manager | 20 | 1–3 times per week |
| P2 | 44 | Male | Advertising and media | Owner, CEO | 39 | Twice per week |
| P3 | 43 | Female | Law | Legal director | 22 | Previously 3 times per week; lower frequency at the time of interview |
| P4 | 51 | Male | Marketing | Owner, CEO | 8 | 1–2 times per week |
| P5 | 44 | Male | Real estate | Managing director | 24 | Twice per week |
| P6 | 47 | Male | Hospitality | CEO | 20 | 3–4 times per week |
| P7 | 41 | Female | Technology | Pricing manager | 12 | 2–3 times per week |
| P8 | 48 | Male | Transport | Deputy managing director | 21 | Once per week |

**Table 1.** Characteristics of interview participants.
Source: Authors' contribution.

Participants were selected as information-rich cases relevant to the research questions. The small, context-specific sample supports interpretive depth rather than statistical generalisation. Although the sample included participants from different sectors and tennis clubs, its gender composition and small size are acknowledged as limitations. Efforts were made to broaden the sample in terms of gender; however, the available networks of managers who regularly played tennis were male-dominated, which resulted in a sample of six men and two women. This limits the extent to which the study can explore gendered differences in how participants interpreted tennis, club culture, and their professional roles.

The Hungarian context is relevant because adult leisure sport participation, access to sport facilities, and club-based sport cultures are shaped by local histories, infrastructures, and social inequalities. In Budapest, recreational tennis is accessible to a range of adult players, yet it remains relatively resource-intensive compared with many other leisure sports because it often involves court fees, coaching, equipment, club access, and time flexibility. For this reason, tennis may still carry associations with middle-class or professional lifestyles, social networks, and respectability. Accordingly, the analysis uses a Budapest-based managerial sample to examine how participants themselves interpreted leisure tennis within their own social and professional contexts.

## 4.3 Sampling

Snowball sampling was employed due to the limited accessibility of the target population, namely, managers who regularly participate in tennis as a leisure activity. Initial contacts were identified through tennis clubs and tennis-related networks, after which participants were invited to recommend others who met the inclusion criteria.

As is inherent to snowball sampling, recruitment partly relied on peer networks and may therefore involve selection bias. To address this, participants' professional roles, responsibilities, leadership experience, and managerial trajectories were discussed prior to inclusion. Eligibility was verified during initial contact by phone or email. Efforts were also made to broaden the sample by avoiding repeated interviews within the same industry and recruiting participants from different tennis clubs.

Sample adequacy was assessed in terms of information richness, relevance to the research questions, and thematic sufficiency rather than statistical representativeness. By the eighth interview, the dataset contained recurring accounts and interpretations relevant to both research questions. The study therefore provided sufficient depth for an exploratory interpretive analysis, while not claiming exhaustive saturation across managers who play tennis.

## 4.4 Data Collection

Data were collected in 2024 in Budapest, Hungary. Each interview lasted approximately 50–60 min. All interviews were conducted in Hungarian, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was shared with participants in advance to enhance transparency and allow them to reflect on the topics before the interview.

The interview guide was developed specifically for this study and was informed by the research questions and the conceptual background outlined in the literature review, particularly research on leisure sport meaning-making, sustained sport participation, the symbolic meanings of tennis, and informal learning. In line with the two research questions, the guide explored participants' pathways into leisure tennis, their experiences of sustained tennis participation, their interpretations of managerial work, and the ways in which they related tennis experiences to their professional roles and informal learning.

Example interview questions included among others: "How did tennis become part of your leisure life?", "What makes tennis different from other leisure activities for you?", "Can you recall a tennis situation that stayed with you or made you reflect on yourself?", "Do you see any connection between experiences in tennis and how you understand yourself professionally?", and "How would you describe the social meanings of tennis in your own environment?" Follow-up questions were used flexibly to explore participants' examples, comparisons and interpretations in greater depth.

A Censydiam-informed projective elicitation task (Callebaut et al., 2002) was used as a supplementary interview technique to elicit participant-generated metaphors, associations, and less explicitly articulated meanings that might not have emerged through direct questioning alone. Participants were asked to select animal images associated with three domains: leisure tennis, their managerial role, and themselves. They were then invited to explain each selection in their own words. The analysis focused on these verbal explanations, and the task therefore enriched the interview material without independently structuring the analysis.

## 4.5 Data Analysis

Methodological coherence was supported by aligning the research questions, sampling strategy, data collection, and analysis (Morse et al., 2002). Data collection and analysis

proceeded concurrently. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Hungarian and checked against the audio recordings. Coding was conducted manually.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurrent patterns of meaning across the interview material, following the logic of familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, and refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis proceeded in six stages. First, both researchers read the Hungarian transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Second, initial codes were generated inductively, using participants' own wording where possible, while remaining sensitised to the concepts discussed in the literature review. Third, codes were compared across cases and grouped into candidate themes related to leisure meanings, sport-specific experiences, symbolic associations, and professional self-understanding. Fourth, candidate themes were reviewed against the full transcripts to check whether they were sufficiently supported by the data. Fifth, themes were refined, named, and organised in relation to the two research questions. Finally, selected quotations were translated into English and checked against the Hungarian originals to preserve meaning rather than literal wording. Retrospective interpretive alignment was developed during the later interpretive synthesis of recurrent cross-case patterns; it was not used as an *a priori* coding category or predefined analytical scheme. Disagreements between researchers were resolved through discussion and analytic memoing rather than through inter-rater reliability, which was not appropriate for the interpretive design.

The projective task was analysed as supplementary qualitative material. Participants' selected images were recorded for the three domains of tennis, managerial role, and self-description. Their verbal explanations were coded together with the interview transcripts and compared with the broader themes to identify convergences, contrasts, metaphors, and less explicitly articulated symbolic associations. The task was used to enrich interpretation rather than to produce separate categories, motivational types or quantitative results.

The researchers approached the analysis with prior knowledge of sport management and leisure sport research. This background not only supported theoretical sensitivity but also created a risk of over-interpreting tennis experiences as managerial learning. To address this, particular attention was paid during theme development to distinguish between participants' explicit interpretations, sport-specific descriptions, and the researchers' theoretical interpretations, especially where tennis experiences appeared to resemble professional categories such as responsibility, adaptation, or self-regulation. The analysis therefore avoided inferring causal transfer from tennis to managerial competence unless participants themselves made such connections.

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, and transferability.

Credibility was supported by repeated engagement with the interview material, verbatim transcription, transcript checking, and the use of participant quotations to ground the analysis. Dependability was strengthened through analytic memoing, researcher discussion, and the continuous comparison of candidate themes with the full data corpus. Transferability is limited by the small, context-specific sample; however, contextual detail on the Budapest-based managerial and leisure tennis setting is provided to help readers assess the relevance of the findings to other adult leisure sport contexts.

### 4.6 Ethical Considerations

No formal institutional ethics approval was obtained at the time of data collection. This is acknowledged as a procedural limitation of the study. The research involved adult volunteers who discussed their leisure sport participation, working lives, and professional roles in a non-interventional interview setting. Standard ethical procedures were nevertheless followed throughout the research process.

Participants received information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the use of audio-recording, anonymisation, confidential data handling, the intended academic use of the material and their right to withdraw. Participation was based on informed consent. Interview transcripts were anonymised, and identifying organisational, biographical, sectoral, and club-related details were removed or generalised to reduce the risk of deductive identification. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team.

Participants are referred to by participant codes throughout the manuscript. This was particularly important given the small sample size and the possibility that participants could otherwise be identifiable through combinations of sector, gender, managerial role, and tennis-related networks.

## 5. Results

The findings are presented in relation to the two research questions. First, the section examines how participants

narrated leisure tennis as a sustained adult sport practice. It then explores how participants retrospectively aligned tennis experiences with professional self-understanding and informal learning. The projective elicitation material is reported later as supplementary evidence because it was used to enrich, rather than structure, the interview-based thematic analysis.

## 5.1 Entering and Sustaining Leisure Tennis

Participants described different pathways into tennis, although the available accounts were more detailed about continued engagement than about early socialisation. This variation is important because tennis was not narrated as a uniform managerial lifestyle choice. Continued engagement was most often linked to enjoyment, challenge, emotional balance, social interaction, and the specific experience of play.

Leisure sport was frequently described as a counterbalance to work-related demands. In these accounts, sport appeared not only as physical activity, but also as a means of restoring emotional balance and creating distance from managerial responsibilities.

> "Given my work, I inevitably need some way to relieve stress, and sport serves that purpose." (P1)

Similarly, another participant emphasised the immediate affective value of tennis.

> "At the moment, I play because it feels good, helps me relieve stress and makes me happy." (P2)

Participants therefore associated tennis primarily with pleasure, relaxation, emotional regulation, and personal reward rather than with professional image-building, instrumental networking, or the deliberate acquisition of managerial competencies. This distinction is important because tennis was initially framed as a leisure practice with its own experiential value, rather than as an extension of work.

> "For me, tennis is a kind of Jolly Joker, it gives enjoyment and challenge at the same time." (P7)

Early socialisation also appeared in several narratives. Some participants referred to parents, family members, or earlier sport experiences as shaping their openness to tennis. However, these early influences were not usually presented as the main reason for continued engagement. Rather, participants emphasised repeated play, accumulated experience, enjoyment, challenge, and the specific characteristics of tennis as sustaining their involvement over time.

> "I play because it is good for me, that's all." (P8)

These accounts suggest that tennis was sustained less by deliberate career-related motives than by a combination of biographical familiarity, intrinsic enjoyment, challenge, and the perceived restorative value of play.

## 5.2 Tennis as Embodied, Competitive, Tactical, and Emotional Practice

Across interviews, tennis was described as a demanding leisure practice that engages the body, mind, and emotions simultaneously. Participants often distinguished tennis from other forms of physical activity they had experienced, using these comparisons to articulate what they experienced as distinctive about the sport.

> "It does not only move the body, but the mind as well. I do not experience that in the same way in other sports." (P3)

Participants often described tennis as an "intellectual sport," referring to the need to read the opponent, assess changing situations, and adapt strategy during play.

Another recurring theme was individual responsibility. Participants contrasted tennis with team sports by emphasising that responsibility cannot be distributed among teammates. During play, the individual must decide, act, respond, and deal with the consequences of mistakes.

> "Tennis is an individual sport, you have to make your own decisions. Unlike in team sports, there is no bench in tennis." (P1)

The phrase "no bench" recurred as a way of describing exposure, individual responsibility, decision-making under pressure, and the need to continue after mistakes. Participants used this phrase to describe a close connection between action and consequence during play.

Participants made these demands concrete through descriptions of match situations. They referred to losing points, misjudging an opponent, becoming frustrated after an error, or having to change tactics when an initial strategy no longer worked. Such examples helped them present tennis as a sport in which bodily movement, tactical judgement, emotional control, and immediate feedback were closely connected.

Participants also highlighted the unpredictable temporal and emotional structure of tennis. A match does

not end after a fixed duration but continues until a decisive outcome is reached. This was associated with endurance, concentration, patience, and persistence. Several interviewees described how momentum can change quickly during a match, requiring players to regulate frustration, remain attentive, and adjust their strategy.

Competition functioned as a structuring feature of these accounts. Participants referred to scores, losing positions, opponents, the desire to recover, and the need to reach a decisive outcome. Their leisure orientation therefore coexisted with a competitive logic: the activity was voluntarily chosen and intrinsically rewarding, while improvement and winning gave challenge a concrete form. Some participants described tennis as engaging the "whole person," integrating physical effort, mental concentration, emotional control, and, in some accounts, a more existential or reflective dimension.

> "It engages the body, the mind and the emotions at the same time." (P4)

Overall, participants described tennis as an intrinsically valued leisure practice in which bodily effort, tactical adjustment, individual responsibility, emotional regulation, and the desire to improve were closely intertwined.

## 5.3 Managerial Meanings as Interpretive Context

Before examining how participants related tennis experiences to professional life, it is useful to outline the meanings they attached to managerial work. These meanings later provided the vocabulary through which participants interpreted experiences of play. Across interviews, participants associated effective management with responsibility, preparation, communication, attentiveness, trust, flexibility, and adaptation to changing people and situations. Participants described management not only as formal authority but also as a relational and self-regulatory practice, and they emphasised responsibility for others.

> "When it comes to managing people, I think the most important thing is to take responsibility and stand up for others." (P2)

Participants linked managerial work to self-reflection.

> "You constantly have to reflect on yourself and ask what you could do better." (P6)

These accounts show that responsibility, adaptation, self-regulation, patience, and learning from experience formed a professional vocabulary through which tennis experiences could be interpreted.

## 5.4 Retrospective Interpretive Alignment Between Tennis and Work

This section examines how participants connected experiences of tennis with their understanding of managerial work. The concept directs attention to the selective construction of these links and to differences in their strength and explicitness. Some participants made direct parallels between tennis and work, while others described looser analogies or more tentative forms of self-reflection.

The analysis presents five broader interpretive patterns: (1) persistence, responsibility, and recovery from setbacks; (2) concentration, patience, and self-regulation under pressure; (3) tactical awareness, adaptability, and strategic pacing; (4) social conduct and non-instrumental social connection; and (5) learning from experience and self-reflection. These patterns show how participants made tennis experiences relevant and meaningful in relation to work and professional life.

### 5.4.1 Persistence, Responsibility, and Recovery from Setbacks

Persistence emerged as one of the most prominent interpretive patterns. Participants narrated persistence through situations of continuing after setbacks, unfavourable scores or temporary failure. In tennis, this was often linked to the idea that a match is not over until the final point. Participants associated this structure with changing momentum, disappointment, individual responsibility, and the need to restart mentally after mistakes. They connected persistence to the experience of remaining mentally present during a losing situation.

> "Gathering strength and not giving up means that even when I am losing, I have to stay in the match mentally. The score may be unfavourable, but the match is not over, and I have to keep looking for a way back. I experience something similar at work: if something does not go as planned, I cannot remain stuck in the setback. I have to think about the next step and continue." (P5)

The relevance of this account lies in how the participant used the structure of the match to narrate responsibility, recovery, and continued effort.

Another participant connected persistence more explicitly to recovery from disadvantage.

> "It shows how much you can recover from a losing position." (P1)

These accounts suggest that participants interpreted tennis as a setting in which persistence became visible through lost points, unfavourable scores, and temporary failure. Several participants related such experiences to professional situations involving prolonged uncertainty, delayed results or resistance to ideas. Tennis therefore became a recurring setting in which responsibility, recovery from mistakes and continued effort were made available for reflection.

### 5.4.2 Concentration, Patience, and Self-Regulation Under Pressure

A second interpretive pattern concerned attention, concentration, patience, and emotional regulation under pressure. Participants described concentration in tennis as fragile and situational rather than as a stable personal attribute. Lapses of attention were perceived as having immediate consequences during play, because players had to monitor the ball, the opponent, their own positioning, energy level, and tactical options simultaneously.

They also emphasised the need to regain focus after mistakes.

> "Tennis forces me to bring my attention back. Even if I make a mistake, I have to focus on the next ball, not on what has just happened. At work, it is the same." (P4)

This account illustrates the participant's retrospective interpretation of attention and recovery. Across these accounts, tennis was described as a context in which lapses of attention, frustration, and the need to regain focus became immediately visible.

Patience was closely connected to this form of self-regulation. Participants described tennis as requiring delayed reactions, acceptance that results may not come immediately, and resistance to impulsive responses. This was especially visible when participants connected tennis to workplace communication and decision-making.

> "If something makes me angry, I do not reply to that email on the same day. I wait until the next day. Tennis is similar for me, you cannot react impulsively... you have to be able to wait." (P6)

These accounts suggest that participants used tennis to interpret attention, delayed response, emotional regulation, and tolerance of slower processes. Participants used these tennis experiences as analogies for professional situations involving decisions, communication, or conflict.

### 5.4.3 Tactical Awareness, Adaptability, and Strategic Pacing

A third interpretive pattern concerned tactical awareness, adaptability, and strategic pacing. Participants described tennis as a practice in which players must continuously read the situation, respond to changing conditions, and revise their initial plans. Unlike the previous themes of persistence and self-regulation, these accounts focused less on continuing after setbacks and more on the ability to recognise when a strategy is no longer effective and to adjust accordingly.

> "For me, tennis is not only about hitting the ball. It is about noticing when something is not working, changing your approach, and still keeping your composure. I recognise the same thing in negotiations or when managing people." (P5)

This account positioned tennis as a setting of situated judgement rather than mechanical execution. Participants referred to decisions about where to place the ball, when to attack, when to defend, how to respond to the opponent's strategy, and how to change rhythm when an initial plan no longer worked. In their accounts, tactical awareness was not described as a fixed ability, but as something that emerged through attention to the opponent, the score, one's own physical condition, and the changing dynamics of the match. One participant connected this form of tactical judgement to the distribution of energy. Rather than presenting effort as constant intensity, the participant described tennis as requiring selective investment and strategic restraint.

> "You have to distribute your energy. On the court, sometimes you have to let a game go in order to save energy and not wear yourself out. At work, it is similar, you have to decide whether you have strong enough arguments to finish a meeting in 20 minutes, or whether you should save energy and make your point more slowly." (P4)

Participants therefore interpreted tennis not only as a space of effort, persistence, and competition but also as a practice requiring judgement about when immediate investment is worthwhile and when a longer-term approach may be more appropriate. Participants associated this with professional situations in which arguments, conflicts, meetings, or negotiations require timing, patience, and selective use of energy.

Adaptability was also described in relation to the unpredictable nature of tennis matches. Participants explained that a player may enter a match with a plan, but the opponent's style, weather conditions, physical

state, or changing score may require adjustment. In these accounts, the player cannot simply impose a preferred strategy on the situation, but must respond to conditions that are only partly controllable.

> "You can go onto the court with a plan, but after a few games you realise it is not working, and then you have to change. In business, as in tennis, you rarely have perfect conditions. You make decisions with limited information, react to the other side, and try not to lose your head when things do not go as expected." (P6)

This interpretation connected tennis with professional situations characterised by incomplete information, shifting constraints, and the need to respond to other actors. Participants used tennis as an analogy for professional situations in which decisions are made under uncertainty and outcomes cannot be fully controlled.

In this sense, some participants suggested a form of practical humility. This was not presented as a broad moral virtue, but as a situated recognition that players cannot fully control the conditions of play. They can prepare, plan, and compete, but they must also accept the role of the opponent, the rules, changing circumstances, and the possibility that a chosen strategy may fail. Participants extended this insight to work, where outcomes are similarly shaped by other people, organisational constraints, and uncertain conditions.

Tennis was therefore described as a space in which competition and self-control coexist. Players strive to win, but they must also accept rules, opponents, changing conditions, and outcomes beyond their control. These accounts related tennis to professional situations involving negotiation, team management, and decision-making under uncertainty. Overall, participants interpreted tennis as a recurring leisure practice through which strategic adjustment, selective investment, and partial control became available for reflection in relation to their professional lives.

### 5.4.4 Social Conduct and Non-Instrumental Social Connection

A fourth pattern concerned social conduct and non-instrumental social connection. Although networking opportunities were acknowledged, most participants emphasised that tennis was not played primarily for instrumental professional purposes. Social connections were described as emerging organically through shared activity rather than as deliberate career strategies.

> "Of course, you meet people through tennis, but I never went there for business. Relationships emerge naturally from playing together." (P3)

Tennis clubs and playing partnerships were nevertheless described as meaningful social spaces. Participants referred to informal conversations, recurring encounters, and shared experiences as important aspects of the activity. These were usually framed as by-products of engagement rather than as its main purpose. Another participant described the social dimension as part of the experience, but not its primary motivation.

> "The conversations before and after the game are part of it, but for me, the game itself is still the main reason." (P4)

Across these accounts, tennis clubs and playing partnerships appeared as social spaces where relationships could emerge through shared activity, even when networking was not presented as the main motive. This distinction is important because it suggests that the social value of tennis was not reducible to instrumental professional networking. Rather, tennis functioned as a leisure context in which social conduct, belonging, recognition, and shared experience could develop alongside the enjoyment of the game itself.

Status-oriented interpretations were rare; participants more often emphasised enjoyment, play, and social connection than distinction or exclusivity.

### 5.4.5 Learning from Experience and Self-Reflection

Learning from tennis was described less as the acquisition of transferable skills than as a process of noticing recurring patterns in one's own behaviour. Participants reflected on how they responded to mistakes, pressure, frustration, uncertainty, and gradual improvement. In this sense, tennis functioned as a repeated experiential setting in which self-observation became possible.

> "Tennis shows me very quickly how I react to pressure or failure. I can see my own patterns there." (P8)

> "What I learn in tennis is often not about the stroke itself, but about myself." (P7)

These accounts suggest that informal learning operated primarily through retrospective reflection. Tennis appeared as a recurring leisure context through which participants noticed and interpreted their own reactions and behavioural patterns.

## 5.5 Supplementary Projective Associations: Symbolic Meanings Across Tennis, Self-Description, and Managerial Role

The projective material is presented as supplementary qualitative evidence of less explicit symbolic associations.

After the interview-based themes had been identified, the Censydiam-informed projective task was examined as an additional layer of qualitative material. Participants reflected on three domains – leisure tennis, their managerial role, and themselves – by selecting animal images and explaining these choices in their own words. The analysis centred on participants' verbal explanations of their selections.

The projective material not only partly resonated with the interview findings but also added a symbolic layer. In the interviews, tennis was most often described through enjoyment, stress relief, challenge, emotional balance, social connection, and sustained engagement. In the projective task, however, associations with tennis were more strongly linked to vitality and power, represented through the horse and the lion. These associations suggest that tennis was not only experienced as restorative or enjoyable but also as energetic, intense, and connected to controlled competitiveness.

> "I play tennis because I enjoy it and it clears my head. But when I look at the lion and the horse I chose, I realise that tennis also represents strength, power, passion, dynamism and vitality for me." (P5)

The projective material therefore added associations of energy and strength to participants' explicit accounts of enjoyment and recovery, while status and power remained secondary, less directly articulated meanings.

> "Tennis relaxes me, but not in a passive way. It is not like switching off completely. It gives me energy because I have to move, fight, decide and stay focused." (P3)

Self-descriptions and representations of the managerial role showed partial overlap with these associations, especially around vitality, sociability, power, and recognition. This overlap suggests that participants' interpretations of tennis were not entirely separate from how they understood themselves or their professional roles. At the same time, the three domains were not identical. Tennis was more strongly associated with vitality and controlled force, while the managerial role added associations of recognition, visibility, and social presence. These findings therefore suggest a layered relationship between leisure tennis, self-description, and the ways participants made sense of their professional roles.

Overall, the projective task complemented the interview findings by revealing overlapping metaphorical meanings across leisure tennis, self-perception, and managerial work.

# 6. Discussion

This study examined how Hungarian managers made sense of leisure tennis and related experiences of play to their professional roles and informal learning. The findings suggest that leisure tennis became meaningful as a voluntary, embodied, socially situated, and competitively structured practice encompassing enjoyment, recovery, challenge, and social connection. Participants also used experiences from the court as reflective reference points for making sense of their professional roles. The article contributes to sport and leisure studies by conceptualising this process as retrospective interpretive alignment. The contribution lies in explaining how meanings are constructed around a particular leisure sport and why certain episodes become available for identity work across domains.

## 6.1 Leisure Tennis as Sport-Specific Meaning-Making

The findings suggest that the meanings attached to adult leisure sport are shaped not only by participants' biographies, motives, and professional roles but also by the experiential and symbolic characteristics of the sport itself. Participants did not interpret tennis as a generic form of physical activity, but through a particular configuration of individual responsibility, point-by-point competition, tactical adjustment, embodied concentration, opponent interaction, club-based sociability, and symbolic associations. This supports a sport-specific approach to leisure research: different sports may provide different experiential, relational, and symbolic resources for meaning-making within adult leisure lives (Blackshaw, 2010; Rojek, 2000; Wheaton, 2004, 2010).

The findings also confirm earlier research showing that sport participation can enter narratives of identity, responsibility, resilience, self-regulation, and learning (Knoppers, 2011; Riera et al., 2024; Warhurst & Black, 2024). They qualify this literature by showing that the professional relevance of sport was neither uniform nor self-evident, but depended on how participants retrospectively selected and interpreted particular experiences of play. Some participants constructed direct parallels between tennis and work, whereas others described looser analogies or more tentative forms of self-reflection. These differences temper broad claims about the professional benefits of sport.

The serious leisure perspective contextualises the sustained, effortful, and identity-relevant character of participants' tennis engagement (Stebbins, 2007, 2016; Veal, 2017), while informal learning directs attention to reflection on repeated experience (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Tennis therefore offered recurring situations in which

participants could notice, narrate, and reinterpret their responses to challenge, frustration, uncertainty, and social interaction.

The findings also resonate with Dilley and Scraton's (2010) study of women climbers, which showed how serious leisure acquires meaning through its relationships with work, social relationships, gender identity, and family circumstances. Whereas their study foregrounded these wider gendered and relational contexts, the present participants connected embodied, competitive, and tactical tennis experiences primarily with their professional self-understanding. The tennis-specific contribution also lies in connecting participants' accounts with tennis and sport psychology research while maintaining an interpretive focus on leisure meaning-making. Previous research has examined concentration, emotional regulation, resilience, coping with pressure, and performance in changing situations in tennis and sport more broadly (Cowden et al., 2014, 2016; Den Hartigh et al., 2024; Hufton et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2013). The present findings show how similar features of play were interpreted by leisure tennis participants as meaningful beyond the court. The sport-specific structure made persistence, responsibility, recovery from mistakes, patience, self-regulation, and tactical adjustment especially visible as objects of reflection.

## 6.2 Retrospective Interpretive Alignment

Retrospective interpretive alignment is used here as an empirically grounded interpretive concept for describing how participants connected concrete experiences of leisure tennis with valued understandings of themselves as managers. It builds on Taylor and Kay's (2015) account of identity construction in serious-leisure narratives by specifying three recurring interpretive operations: selecting sport episodes, translating them into professional categories, and aligning them with valued self-understandings across domains.

Participants used tennis situations primarily as reflective reference points for interpreting emotional control, tactical judgement, and social conduct. The study therefore shifts the analytical focus from presumed performance outcomes to the meanings participants constructed around their experiences. It complements Knoppers' (2011) account of managers who associated sport with winning and responsibility and extends Warhurst and Black's (2024) analysis of running managers. Whereas both studies show sport becoming a resource for professional self-understanding, the present study highlights tennis-specific features, including direct opposition, point-by-point scoring, shifting momentum, and tactical interaction with another actor. The findings also extend Costas et al.'s (2016) analysis of sport and the professional self. Whereas professionals in their study used sport to enact autonomy and ambition and create distance from workplace frustrations, participants in the present study connected concrete tennis episodes with professional meanings of persistence, responsibility, self-regulation, and tactical adaptation.

Recovery and emotional balance echo Bunea's (2020) account of serious leisure as coping, while participants' positive work-related narratives resonate with Bunea et al.'s (2023) concept of leisureship. The present findings add that such connections are constructed both retrospectively and selectively: participants foregrounded persistence, control, adaptability, and responsibility, all of which are qualities already valued in dominant managerial discourse.

Johansson et al. (2017) offer a stronger critical interpretation by conceptualising managerial athleticism as a regulative regime in which the healthy and athletic body becomes associated with legitimate managerial identity. Although the present participants did not explicitly advocate against non-fit bodies or describe physical fitness as a prerequisite for managerial competence, their repeated emphasis on persistence, control, vitality, adaptability, and responsibility may partly resonate with the broader cultural ideal of the disciplined and capable athletic manager. Their accounts can therefore be read not only as individual reflections on tennis, but also as narratives shaped by culturally available norms concerning credible managerial conduct. Playfulness, vulnerability, dependency, exclusion, and unsuccessful sport-work alignments were less visible in the narratives. Taken together, this critical reading situates participants' accounts within culturally available vocabularies of competent management and marks an important boundary of the concept.

## 6.3 Competition Within Leisure Tennis

The findings indicate that adult tennis may be experienced simultaneously as leisure and as a competitively structured activity. Participation was voluntary and non-occupational, yet opponents, scores, improvement, and tactical adjustment shaped how the activity was experienced. The analysis further shows how these situations became reference points through which participants reflected on work, responsibility, and professional conduct. This interpretation complements Legg et al.'s (2017) study of adult recreational tennis, in which competition, fairness, commitment, and social spaces jointly contributed to participants' sense

of community. It is also consistent with serious-leisure research showing that perseverance, effort, improvement, identification, and fulfilment may coexist with intrinsic rewards in competitive adult sport (Dionigi, 2002; Heo et al., 2012; Lamont et al., 2014). Competition was nevertheless narrated as controlled and relational: participants valued winning and improvement alongside patience, respect for opponents, strategic restraint, and acceptance of partial control.

### 6.4 Intrinsic and Symbolic Meanings of Leisure Tennis

The findings suggest that intrinsic and symbolic meanings may coexist within the same leisure sport. Participants most often emphasised enjoyment, challenge, recovery, emotional balance, social connection and sustained engagement. At the same time, the projective material pointed to less explicit symbolic associations of vitality, power, sociability, and recognition. This supports a layered interpretation of adult leisure tennis as a practice that may be experienced simultaneously as enjoyable, demanding, socially connective, and symbolically charged.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital is useful in this study as a contextual lens for these less explicit meanings. Tennis may carry associations of distinction and status alongside participants' more explicit and experience-based interpretations of the sport. This interpretation is consistent with research linking tennis-club participation to belonging, identity construction, recognition, pride, and symbolic capital (Lim et al., 2022).

This interpretation places personal well-being, intrinsic enjoyment, social connection, classed access, and status meanings within the same analytical field without reducing adult tennis participation to any one of them.

### 6.5 Practical Implications

The findings are most relevant for adult sport providers, tennis clubs, and coaches. Recreational tennis may be communicated not only as physical activity or competition, but also as a socially rich leisure practice that supports enjoyment, gradual improvement, recovery, self-reflection, and belonging. Adult coaching formats, mixed-level play, and club events may support sustained participation when they preserve the intrinsic value of the game rather than reducing tennis to performance, status, or networking.

Organisational implications are indirect: voluntary leisure tennis may stimulate professional reflection, but sport participation should not be treated as evidence of managerial competence or as a normative expectation. Reflective use is most credible when unequal access, alternative leisure meanings, and the possibility of weak or absent sport-work connections remain visible.

### 6.6 Limitations and Future Research

The findings should be interpreted within the limits of the study design. The sample consisted of eight Budapest-based Hungarian managers recruited through tennis-related networks and may reflect the views of participants already positively disposed towards tennis. Its gender imbalance limits exploration of how gender may shape the meanings attached to tennis, club culture, and managerial roles. Retrospective self-reports may favour coherent and culturally valued managerial narratives of persistence, self-control, and adaptability. Because the interview guide explicitly invited reflection on possible tennis-work connections, the design may also have made alignment more visible than non-alignment, contradiction, or indifference. The projective elicitation task enriched the interview material as supplementary symbolic evidence, while the analysis cannot separate the influence of tennis from work experience, earlier sport biographies, or pre-existing dispositions.

Future research could examine larger and more diverse samples, including more women, managers from different career stages, participants who discontinued tennis, and people from different national and class contexts. Comparative studies could examine how different leisure sports support different forms of meaning-making and when sport-work alignments remain weak, contradictory, or absent. Longitudinal and observational designs could also explore when retrospective alignments emerge and change. Tennis, golf, team sports, and other leisure activities may all provide opportunities for reflection, but they do so through different embodied, social, temporal, and symbolic arrangements.

## 7. Conclusion

This study examined leisure tennis as an adult sport practice shaped by social relations and cultural meanings. The findings show that participants interpreted tennis as an intrinsically meaningful, socially situated, and competitively structured practice and related experiences from

the court to their understandings of work, responsibility, adjustment, and social conduct. The projective material further indicated that these explicit meanings may coexist with less directly articulated symbolic associations attached to tennis as a culturally resonant sport.

The article offers retrospective interpretive alignment as an empirically grounded interpretive concept. The concept captures how participants selectively connect experiences of play with valued professional meanings. Leisure tennis provided an embodied, social, and symbolically meaningful practice through which participants reflected on how they act, adjust, and relate to others across leisure and work. The study therefore contributes to sport and leisure research by showing that adult leisure sport may matter beyond the immediate context of participation precisely because it remains voluntary, experiential, relational, and open to interpretation.

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## Author contributions

Ágnes Szabó: conception and design of the study, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation of data, manuscript preparation; Emília Katalin Czár: conception and design of the study, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation of data, manuscript preparation.

## Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Ethical approval

Formal institutional ethics approval was not obtained at the time of data collection. This is acknowledged as a procedural limitation of the study. The study involved adult participants and non-interventional interviews concerning leisure tennis participation, working lives, and professional roles. The study followed established ethical principles for qualitative research. Participants received information about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, audio-recording, confidentiality, anonymisation, secure data handling, the intended academic use of the material, and their right to withdraw before providing informed consent. All interview transcripts were anonymised, and identifying organisational, biographical, sectoral, and club-related details were removed or generalised to reduce the risk of deductive identification.

## AI tools usage disclosure

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely for language editing and stylistic refinement of author-written text. The tool did not contribute to data generation, coding, analysis, or interpretation. The authors reviewed and approved all AI-assisted edits and take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

## Data availability statement

The interview data generated and analysed during this study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality and the potential risk of deductive identification in a small, context-specific sample. Selected anonymised quotations supporting the findings are included in the article.

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