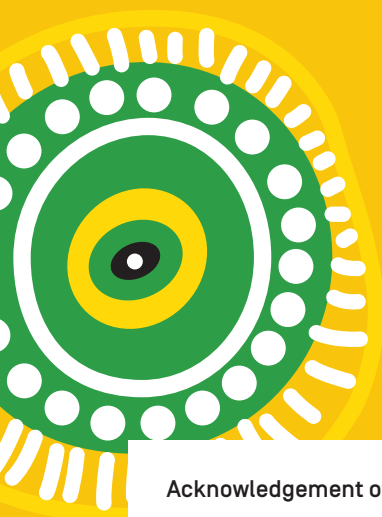
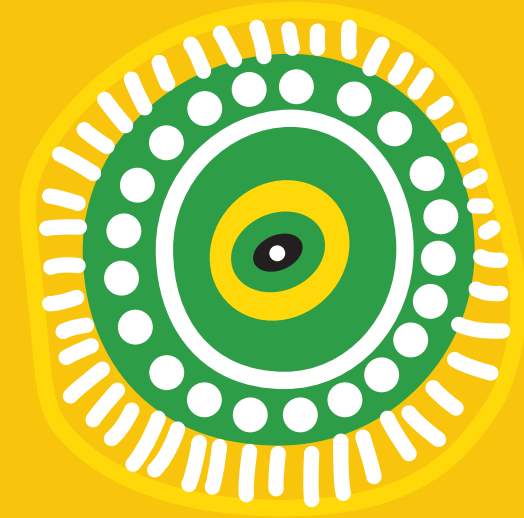




WOMEN IN HIGH
PERFORMANCE COACHING

BUILDING, SCALING & SUSTAINING ALLYSHIP IN HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT





Glossary of Terms

Ecological Systems Theory: This is a theory developed by American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner that seeks to explain how human development and behaviour is influenced by different types of environmental systems. It states that in aiming to understand how an individual acts and behaviours, one must seek to understand not just the individual, but the systems in which they interact, starting from their immediate surroundings and extending into broader society.

National Gender Equity in Sports Governance Policy: This is a policy developed by the Australian Sports Commission in collaboration with the State and Territory Agencies for Sport and Recreation and aims to improve gender equity in leadership and governance in Australian sport. Specifically, it states that by 1st July 2027:

- 50% of all board directors should be women and/or gender diverse
- 50% of chairs deputy chairs should be women and/or gender diverse
- 50% of specified sub-committee members should be women and/or gender diverse

Abbreviations

DEI Diversity, equity, and belonging

HP High performance

PA Potential ally

WiHPC Women in High Performance Coaching

Acknowledgements

Synapsing would like to acknowledge and thank Michelle De Highden who has been a driving force behind the Women in High Performance Coaching project. Her will to see this space change for the betterment not just of women coaches, but for all of Australian sport has been a true inspiration.

Special thanks are also extended to both Patrick Sharry, Bill Davoren, and Pip Taylor whose continued wisdom, guidance and insights have been invaluable to the entire project. Finally, thanks to the male allies who generously gave of their time in service of this project. Their selflessness in this contribution is yet another example of allyship in action and is very much appreciated.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where its offices are located: the Ngunnawal people, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation, the people of the Yugambah Nation and the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

The ASC extends this acknowledgment to all the Traditional Custodians of the lands and First Nations Peoples throughout Australia and would like to pay its respects to all Elders past, present and emerging.

The ASC recognises the outstanding contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make to society and sport in Australia and celebrates the power of sport to promote reconciliation and reduce inequality.

It is with pleasure that Synapsing submits this report that examines the research and opportunities to build, scale, and sustain allyship behaviours in Australian high-performance sport.

It is widely acknowledged that the representation and experiences of women in high-performance coaching falls well short of what it should be. Whilst often viewed as a problem for women, this framing is not just insufficient, it is counterproductive.

This is an issue that requires men to step up and act as allies. It is unlikely that the progress that needs to be made can be made unless we have key voices in the majority advocating for the minority.

This is not a unique Australian issue, nor is it simply a sport issue – it's a societal issue, and much can be learned from progressed made in other areas. This lies at the heart of the research undertaken as the first step in this process of building, scaling and sustaining allyship behaviours within Australian high-performance coaching.

There is much work to be done, and there is no time like the present to begin.

David Joyce

*Founder and Director
Synapsing*



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Executive Summary

Enhancing the representation and experiences of women in high-performance coaching is an area of significant importance and investment in Australian sport. It is also a key ambition of the HP2032+ strategy.

Whilst much of the work to date has focused on understanding the challenges women face in this domain, there is a need to also gain the perspectives of men. Men represent the incumbent majority of coaches and are key players in both the current and potential future states of gender equity in high-performance coaching.

The aim of this project was to explore the notion of allyship – where a member of an incumbent powerful group defends and promotes the interests of a less powerful group. There are examples of initiatives of male allyship in Australian sport, such as the *Champions of Change Coalition*, but little work has been completed looking specifically at coaching, where female representation lags societal expectations.

This report details some of the background research in sport and in other industries. It defines the term ‘ally’ as it pertains to coaching and examines the positive ramifications of being an ally at the level of the individual, team/sport, and system. It also highlights the significant barriers that may be impeding the prevalence of male allies in coaching.

It also summaries key findings from multiple interviews conducted with identified allies within Australian high-performance coaching, with the aims of better understanding their background, motivations, and challenges.

Finally, possible next steps are discussed throughout this report, aiming to stimulate further thought about interventions that may assist in making progress, not just for women in coaching, but in making Australian high-performance sport a place that fosters a deeper sense of belonging for everyone.



Introduction

There has been undeniable progress made in enhancing the representation and experiences of women in Australian high performance (HP) landscape over the past few years resulting from the concerted efforts of numerous individuals and teams across the system.

Understandably, much of the work to date has focused on the systems and processes that lead to better recruitment, development, and retention of women, alongside targeted initiatives aimed at fast-tracking the knowledge and experience of identified women coaches.

There is still a long way to go, however, and to date little work has been completed looking at the positive roles that males can and do play in enhancing equity outcomes.

The case for allyship

Members of underrepresented and marginalised groups are often asked to perform the onerous task of sharing the experiences of the discrimination that they have faced as part of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. This process is often valid as it helps shine a light on the issues, but the reliving of these experiences is often described as disheartening and exhausting. This is amplified when women are asked to share repeatedly with no tangible improvements following their emotional labour.

This work should not fall upon women to do by themselves. The burden of their desperation, exhaustion and distress needs to be shared more broadly.

As outlined in the 2021 white paper entitled *Increasing the Representation of Women in High performance Coaching*, it is both factually and strategically wrong to address this as issue solely for women.

This is because changing the output of the current system can only occur if the system itself is changed. Change is hard, however, and everyone needs to be involved - men included. For systematic change of sufficient magnitude and velocity to occur, men need to stand on the dais alongside women.

Having influential males making their advocacy public and acting as high-profile change agents is likely to be a powerful lever. It elevates equal opportunities for all coaches above a gender issue and into one of fundamental human rights. That said, allyship is something that can be performed daily and by males at all levels of the social pyramid, from the head of an organisation all the way through to junior members of staff. Acts of allyship need not necessarily be grand, they can be as simple as actions of encouragement and sponsorship.

Throughout the course of multiple Women in HP Coaching (WiHPC) workshops, it has become clear that there exists a collection of men who are driven to stand alongside women in the push for change. They are the allies, and their numbers need to increase so that good practice is modelled to other men and that the process of allyship is de-threatened.

Defining allyship

In the WiHPC context, allyship can perhaps best be considered as the:

Prosocial practice of males supporting, sponsoring, and amplifying the voices and interests of women coaches, and standing up against discrimination.

Whilst this definition is helpful, it is useful to also delineate what allyship is not.

Allyship is not simply a lack of overt sexist behaviours or even merely good intentions. **Rather, it involves intentional and sustained behaviours and actions aimed at enhancing the representation and experiences of women coaches.** Such behaviours and actions may affirm the value of women as coaches but may also be displayed when actively speaking up against behaviours and actions that negatively impact women in the HP coaching landscape. Allyship can be displayed at an individual, team, and system level, all of which are necessary to make demonstrable progress in this domain.

Examining other environments

Whilst there has been some work completed in this area in sport, most of the allyship work and research involves other industries (for example, professional services, academia, and medicine), and other traditionally under-represented groups (for example, African American populations, LGBTQIA+). Whilst it would be easy to overlook these efforts as being contextually different to HP sport, there are likely to be more similarities than differences, and adopting an analogical learning approach is favoured in complex environments such as WiHPC. Where appropriate, aspects of the research for this part of the WiHPC project has been gathered from these other contexts.

Positive impacts of allyship

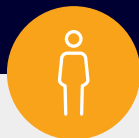
The ultimate goals of allyship are to enhance the representation, experiences, development, career progression, and retention of women coaches within the Australian HP sporting landscape. Whilst there is currently scant evidence that can point to the scalable and systematic impact of allyship [hence the need for further research], there are several theoretical areas of positive impact.

These need to be considered at different levels, which is congruent with the ecological systems theory (EST) model that examines the multiple levels of a system that interact to simultaneously impact an individual.

These are the levels of the:

- individual
- team or sport
- broader Australian sporting system

Positive impact ON THE INDIVIDUAL



The impact of allyship has not been the subject of significant amounts of academic research, although recently it has been shown that when allies are effective, they **enhance the sense of belonging and inclusion of the recipient**, as well as their work engagement and performance. Part of the benefit of allyship to its recipient is thought to be increased motivation and energy levels. It is likely that much of this will be due to the sharing of the advocacy load that mostly falls upon the shoulders of the marginalised group.

It is also intended that **allyship can enhance the career opportunities for women coaches in sport, as well as making the environment more inclusive for women such that their retention is made easier**. In essence, it is about enhancing the employee value proposition for women coaches, something that WiHPC workshops has revealed to be historically low.

Much less attention has been paid to the positive impact on the ally himself. Anecdotally, this centres on conducting oneself in accordance with one's own values and living a work life that is congruent with personal drivers of justice, respect, fairness and equality. There was, however, mention made on a few occasions that the impact that can be had is profound, and this in itself was energy giving. Moreover, watching women who have benefited from allyship flourish was seen as an immense source of personal pride.

"The scale and the velocity of the impact you can have when working with women coaches is exhilarating. It is fun and it makes you feel really appreciated"

Positive impact ON THE TEAM OR SPORT



The 2021 White Paper outlined multiple cases in support of increasing the representation of women in high-performance coaching. Broadly speaking, these cases can be transposed onto the positive impact of allyship on the team or sport. These are:

The performance case

This proposes that having greater female representation in the coaching ranks can increase the diversity of thought and experiences and therefore enhance decision-making. It also proposes that a woman coach may be better equipped to have certain sensitive health and performance conversations with female athletes. In this case, **allies act as positive performance enablers**.

The organisational culture case

This proposes that an environment that nurtures women flourishing may increase the health, wellbeing and collaboration of a team or sport. In this case, **allies act as positive cultural enablers**.

"You can see, almost in real time, the culture change. Women grow from being cautious to empowered, passionate, competent and confident"

The reputational case

This proposes that organisations who do not have allies helping to nurture an inclusive environment for women are vulnerable to short- and long-term talent leakage, culture-related transgressions, and reputational damage. In this case, **allies act as positive reputational enablers**.

Positive impact ON THE BROADER AUSTRALIAN SPORTING SYSTEM



The sporting system in Australia comprises a collection of separately but broadly aligned organisations, most of which receive government funding. The recent launch of the [National Gender Equity in Sport Governance Policy](#) demonstrates the seriousness with which the Commonwealth Government is taking gender equity at the level of the Boardroom, and it is reasonable to assume that this will have downstream impacts into the daily performance environment as well.

"If we live in an all-male environment, it's very monotone"

Allies will be needed to ensure that the ground is fertile for women to flourish throughout the system. Strategically as well, allyship will be necessary to enhance the outcomes of the WiHPC initiative and broader ambitions of the Australian Sports Commission as they relate to improved gender equity in HP sport, and the commitments of the HP2032+ strategy.

Summary and opportunities

There exist several prosocial benefits of allyship. These are likely to be felt by the individual ally and the individual recipient of allyship. It is at this intra-and inter-personal level where impact is going to be most obvious and tangible.

However, we should also consider the impact at scale, both at the team/sport level, and at the level of the Australian sporting system more broadly. These benefits include the allies acting as positive performance, cultural, and reputational enablers. **Further work should be conducted to determine the extent to which these hypotheses are revealed to be true, and in what context(s) this is the case.**



Barriers to allyship

If being an ally was easy, there would be more of them. Clearly, then, there exists barriers to the display of allying behaviours. Barriers to allyship is an area that has received scant academic attention.

Many of these barriers are either based around deep-seated intrapersonal beliefs and/or interpersonal dynamics, and are not necessarily easily amenable to study, let alone legislative 'fixes'. Nonetheless, they must be discussed, because failure to do so is likely to result in initiatives / programs that are ineffective or inefficient at best and harmful at worst.

The limited work that has been completed in this area has used an ecological systems theory framework to map the various barriers to allyship from the perspective of potential allies in their workplace. The EST emphasises the importance of understanding not just an individual person when aiming to understand their actions, but also the environments with which they interact. It is often employed when studying a variety of social justice issues.

Whilst the original EST framework outlined five interconnected systems, more recent work in this area focused on allyship in the workplace examined three key domains:

- 1 Intrapersonal factors**
 A potential ally's (PA) thoughts and emotions, as well as the strength of their motivations and fears [particularly relating to the level of risk the PA feels they are taking when displaying an allyship behaviour].
- 2 Interpersonal**
 The past, present, and potential future relationships the PA has with both the underrepresented group and the dominant group.
- 3 Contextual**
 Relating to the culture of the organisation, and its historical, current and perceived future approach to allyship actions.

In addition to these, it has become apparent throughout the course of this project that there are broader social trends that impact the allyship space, particularly in relation to the negative connotations that some [particularly males] feel are associated with DEI initiatives. At its most extreme, there appears to be a fulminating rejection of many forms of progressive initiatives with the underlying narrative of wokeness and how they may unfairly discriminate against young men – a group who themselves are increasingly feeling marginalised.

This appears to be based on a notion that allyship is 'zero-sum', where female success comes at the expense of male success.

This needs challenging, because a sporting system in which men flounder is unlikely to be one where women flourish.

It is likely that the strength of these social factors will vary according to the background and culture of the other three

systems, as well as the broader narrative of the community in which an individual associates. This highlights the interconnected nature of these systems.

"I learned very early that in order to get cut through, I had to align everything to the strategic goals of the organisation."

It is possible that the term 'ally', as much as its intent is positive, may in fact be contributing to the concept's failure to thrive. It may be that stepping forth as an ally is seen by many to be too risky, drawing parallels to the challenges of being a workplace whistleblower. It is acknowledged that whistleblowing is almost exclusively focused on revealing poor behaviour. Whilst allyship shares an aspect of this, it is also about promoting positive behaviour. Nonetheless, it appears that the barriers may be similar.

"I began to understand that complex systems don't necessarily have solutions, but that we can all have an influence on the direction of travel. I found this realisation liberating because I can accept not having all the answers. This reduces the scale of the problem and gives me permission to act."

Summary and opportunities

In the ambition to be a workplace ally, men are confronted with several barriers. Examining these barriers through a systems lens reveals that there are many reasons for people not to engage in allyship. Many of these boil down to a fear of reprisals, and an internal calculus that the risk outweighs the reward. Whilst this is an individual risk assessment, it does not exist in a vacuum, with interpersonal and cultural aspects weighing heavily.

Clearly, then, any interventions in the allyship space need to seek to make progress in all these domains, seeking to lower both the perceived and actual risk of enhancing the opportunities and experiences of women coaches.

It needs to be acknowledged that resistance to interventions in this space may be encountered from certain members of the sporting system opposed to progressive measure to address current and historic inequities.

Reframing 'allyship' as 'belonging' may be a possible way to encourage the forming of an 'in group', that is larger and more diverse, not just in terms of gender but other areas, and not just in coaching but across the entire sporting system. It is possible that that a notion of belonging will be viewed as 'positive sum' as opposed to allyship, which some may perceive as 'zero sum'.

Background of allies

Throughout the course of this project, the backgrounds, views, and motivations of several males who have been identified or self-selected as allies were surfaced in a semi-structured motivational-style interview. Examples of the questions posed can be found in Appendix I.

Despite there being a disparity in the way allyship behaviours are being displayed, there was an almost unanimous feeling that promoting the interests of women in HP coaching was not only the 'right' thing to do from a human rights perspective, but that it is also **a requirement of being a good manager**.

Interestingly, many of the allies felt that the work they do coaching and sponsoring women, and curating a positive culture that allows everyone to thrive was less anchored to being an ally for women, and more anchored to being the best leader they could be. This provides an interesting insight into the motivations that need to be tapped when looking to scale these sorts of prosocial behaviours more widely.

"I want to keep women in the game, and I could see so few of them wanting to stay involved after they retired as players. It also provided me with skill development in a different style of [inclusive] leadership."

There were multiple case examples of communities of practice being established to help support and foster a sense of belonging for women coaches, and many also took on a mentoring role, encouraging and advocating for them to seek greater challenges. These allies never seemed to take on this role for their own self-promotion, their efforts very clearly focused on the individual coach in front of them.

Several of the allies spoke to a sense of being motivated by the root values of fairness and justice, values which are congruent with the basic tenants of sport itself.

"I don't see allyship as much other than a case of 'the right thing to do'"

Most were somewhat at a loss to explain why their allyship was an exception rather than the rule across the sector, but interestingly, **many identified their family history as playing a significant role in their drive for gender equity**. Many were raised in households that contained strong female role models, and/or were now a part of a household with strong female protagonists¹. Again, this may prove helpful when seeking to uncover males who could be PAs.

This project found it somewhat difficult to surface people who were allies that stood up for women at a potential cost to their own career or reputation.

It is possible that the scope needs to be narrowed to people who display actions that promote belonging, rather than a permanent identity of being an ally.

It is also possible that being able to absorb these potential career and/or reputational risks is a 'luxury' only truly afforded to those males who have already 'made it'.

Summary and opportunities

In many cases, allies interviewed felt that their actions were not part of a deliberate strategy to be an ally of women per se, and more to do with a more global intolerance of injustice or inequality. This sense could be easily transposed onto any marginalised group, not just women. It was interesting that what is perceived to be an allyship action may be viewed by the ally as less to do with support for women, and more to do with what they perceive as good leadership and management. **This is known as inclusive leadership and could form a key pillar of future coach development work across the system.**

Allies described a drive to foster a culture whereby the women coaches with whom they work feel like they belong in that environment. Critically, many expressed their desire for these women to feel both competent and confident when exploring other environments that were more challenging (such as a promotion to a more senior level of coaching). This likely is a motivating factor behind sponsorship and advocacy behaviours.

It appears that males with close relationships to women outside of sport (especially wives or daughters) may be more predisposed to acting as an ally of other women inside of sport. Further work could be undertaken to explore the motivations of the allies for other areas within the Australian sporting system outside of coaching, and outside of women. **These allies are effectively acting as champions of belonging, a concept that should be expanded to all.**

Finally, **celebrating allyship actions** rather than simply people who have allyship as a strong part of their identity may prove beneficial as we seek to nurture and scale environments that foster a sense of belonging for all typically marginalised groups. Indeed, it is possible that the definition of being an ally used in this project is too high a barrier, and that future work may capture a wider array of allies if smaller or less sustained behaviours were captured.

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¹ This finding is in alignment with research suggesting that male lawmakers in the USA may be more likely to support policies that enhance women's rights and freedoms if they themselves have close female relatives. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the 'daughter effect' and has shown to be in evidence when voting for feminist issues such as reproductive rights and workplace equality. It should be noted, however, that whilst this pattern holds in some cases, it is not universal and so we should exercise caution about extrapolating too widely.

Possible next steps

In keeping with much of the design of the WiHPC program, next steps should be thought of as ‘pilot’ experiments to both gather more information and nudge the system in a positive direction, whilst paying close attention to secondary impacts, both positive and negative.

Whilst there appear to be many avenues that could be explored, the most salient extensions of this project in the near-term appear to be:

- Undertake workshops and further motivational interviews with allies, PAs and women you have experienced positive impacts from allyship to further build out the positive supporting case. This could be extended across all aspects of the HP system beyond coaching.
- Create a series of allyship archetypes (promoting allyship and inhibiting it) that encapsulate all levels of the system.
- Further explore opportunities to promote and incentivise cultures of inclusive leadership.
- Build a network of allies, both across the sector and potentially within targeted sports or organisations.



Concluding comments

This project has sought to break ground on understanding the need for, and presence of, allies of women in high-performance coaching. It has also sought to understand the barriers that are / may be in place that challenge the prevalence of greater levels of allyship in the Australian high-performance sporting system.

Whilst it is evident that there is much activity in the space of enhancing the representation and experiences of women in sport, it is also clear that there has been a drive for these outcomes for many years. And yet, we still see an underrepresentation of women in these roles. This tells us, then, that a different approach must be considered.

The notion that this is an issue for women to address is flawed. Sport is a microcosm of society, and as such, what we are seeing is echoed across multiple other sectors. Indeed, it is not simply related to issues of gender. **Whilst the focus of this particular project has been on women in coaching, its relevance extends far beyond these boundaries. It relates to women in other areas of the sporting system, and indeed, other underrepresented groups outside of gender.**

It is for this reason that it can be framed as an issue of ‘belonging’. More broadly, we need to answer the question of “how do we make Australian sport a place where everyone feels like they can belong if they can provide a positive impact?”.

Whilst it would be surprising if this vision was not shared by the majority, at least in principle, the major task is to create a sense that **it is everyone’s problem, and everyone is part of the solution.**

Clearly, being an ally is challenged by many barriers, some intrapersonal, some interpersonal, some systematic, and some societal. The value proposition for allyship, therefore needs to be more compelling than these barriers. Further work should be completed to build a network of allies and more clearly articulate the case for change. Workshops with identified allies, potential allies, women whose journey has been positively impacted by an ally (or whose progress has been stymied by a lack of an ally) is a worthy next step for this project.

Sustaining the momentum that has been generated by the outstanding work of the WiHPC team is vital. Involving more men in this is a necessary extension.

Appendix 1: Examples of motivational interview questions

1. Exploration of Motivations and Values

- "What initially motivated you to become an ally for women in coaching?"
- "Can you share any personal values or beliefs that drive your commitment to supporting gender equality?"

2. Personal Experiences and Influences

- "Were there any specific experiences or people in your life that influenced your decision to become an ally?"
- "How have your personal experiences shaped your understanding of the challenges women face as coaches in HP sport?"

3. Perceived Impact and Benefits

- "What positive changes have you noticed in your sport as a result of your allyship?"
- "How do you think your actions as an ally have impacted your colleagues and the overall performance environment?"

4. Challenges and Overcoming Barriers

- "What challenges have you faced in your journey as an ally, and how have you overcome them?"
- "Have you ever encountered resistance to your efforts as an ally? How did you handle it?"
- "Were these challenges intrapersonal / interpersonal / systemic (or a combination)?"

5. Role and Responsibilities

- "What do you see as your main responsibilities as a workplace ally?"
- "How do you balance your allyship efforts with other professional responsibilities?"

6. Support and Resources

- "What resources or support have been most helpful to you in your role as an ally?"
- "What advice would you give to other men who want to become allies but are unsure where to start?"

7. Future Goals and Aspirations

- "What are your future goals as an ally in the workplace?"
- "How do you envision the future of gender equality in your sport, and what role do you see yourself playing in that future?"

Appendix 2: Review author

David Joyce is the founder of Synapsing, a global strategy and decision-making advisory firm with a diverse portfolio of high-performing corporate clients across international sport, education, finance, and technology. As part of his work in these fields, he has conducted multiple strategic reviews of organisations in elite sport, performing arts, and business around the world. He was the author of the white paper entitled *Increasing the Representation of Women in High Performance Coaching*, written for the Australian Institute of Sport in 2021.

David has over two decades of leadership, strategic and operational experience in elite and professional sport in Australia, Great Britain, Europe, and China. He holds an MBA, a Masters in Sports Physiotherapy, and a Masters in Exercise Science.

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