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Desperate to quit: A narrative analysis of burnout and recovery in sports coaching

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1 **Desperate to quit: A narrative analysis of burnout and recovery in high performance**
2 **sports coaching.**

3 **Abstract**

4 This study investigated how the experiences of two elite coaches contributed to and shaped
5 their stories of burnout and withdrawal from high performance coaching. The coaches whose
6 narratives we explore were both middle-aged head coaches, one in a major team sport at the
7 highest club level, and one in an individual Olympic sport at international level. Through a
8 thematic narrative analysis, based on in-depth interviews, the stories of the two coaches are
9 presented in four distinct sections: antecedents, experiences of coaching with burnout
10 symptoms, withdrawal from sport, and the process of recovery and personal growth. These
11 narratives have implications for high performance coaching, such as the importance of role
12 clarity, work-home interference, counselling, mentoring, and social support as means to
13 facilitate recovery, and the need for additional research with coaches who have left sport, to
14 gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complete burnout-recovery process.

15

16

Introduction

17 Sports coaching has received an increasing amount of attention in the sport
18 psychology research literature, to some extent a likely response to coaches being labelled and
19 considered as performers in their own right (Gould, Guinan, Geenleaf, & Chung, 2002). In
20 particular, coaches' experiences of stress and burnout have been popular topics for
21 investigation (cf., Fletcher & Scott, 2010; Goodger, Gorely, Lavalley, & Harwood, 2007).
22 Burnout is as "an enduring experiential syndrome" (Maslach & Jackson, 1986, p.1)
23 characterised by emotional and physical exhaustion (feelings of being emotionally depleted
24 by work), depersonalisation (a cynical attitude towards or withdrawal from personal
25 relationships at work), and reduced personal accomplishment (perceived lack of competence
26 and low self-esteem).

27 It is generally accepted that burnout is a result of chronic exposure to stress (e.g.,
28 Smith, 1986). However, as Raedeke (1997) suggested, prolonged experience of stress will not
29 result in burnout in all cases. As such, Raedeke, Granzky and Warren (2000) highlighted
30 commitment as a further factor influencing the incidence of burnout. Specifically, Raedeke et
31 al. suggested that coaches might remain involved in sport either because they *want* to
32 (attraction), or because they feel they *have* to (entrapment), and, in a study involving 295 age-
33 group swimming coaches, those displaying characteristics of 'entrapment' were significantly
34 more emotionally exhausted than coaches displaying characteristics of 'low commitment' or
35 'attraction'. Cresswell and Eklund (2006) also suggested that motivational factors might be
36 important in explaining the burnout phenomenon, finding high levels of self-determined
37 motivation to be negatively associated with burnout, and low levels of self-determined
38 motivation to be positively related to the syndrome (Cresswell & Eklund 2005).

39 Although the theoretical underpinning to burnout research might vary, burnout
40 research to date has tended to focus on the incidence of burnout in coaching populations, and
41 various predictors of burnout. Vealey, Udry, Zimmerman, and Soliday (1992) found that trait
42 anxiety, as well as a variety of cognitive perceptions of the coaching role itself (e.g.,
43 perceived rewards, perceived value of the role, perceived overload and perceived control),
44 predicted burnout in US collegiate-level coaches. In addition, stress appraisals (e.g.,
45 perceived stress, role conflict and 'coaching issues') have been significantly related to all
46 three dimensions of burnout (Kelley, 1994; Kelley & Gill, 1993)

47 Withdrawal from sport is considered to be a defining part of the burnout experience
48 (Smith, 1986), yet the majority of coaching burnout studies have focused on participants who
49 are still active coaches. Thus, the complete experiences of withdrawal from coaching and the
50 need for adequate recovery has received far less attention. Lundkvist, Gustafsson, Hjälm, and
51 Hassmén (2012) carried out one of the few studies to explore the processes of burnout and
52 withdrawal from sports coaching. Based on interviews with eight elite coaches, Lundkvist et
53 al. suggested that coaches might burn out due to the performance culture in elite sport, or
54 overall life situations, and that the processes of recovery and the strategies needed might be
55 different in each case. Unfortunately, the recovery processes were not discussed in great
56 detail. Further research is needed in this area to advance knowledge and to enable
57 practitioners to offer effective professional support to coaches experiencing and recovering
58 from burnout.

59 Coach burnout has been extensively described, but not necessarily understood. While
60 providing valuable insight into burnout in coaching populations, the approach taken in the
61 majority of the burnout research to date has failed to capture the "enduring experience" of
62 burnout, as lived by the coaches themselves. The use of narrative analysis has gained some
63 momentum in sport psychology, but it is still a relatively rare approach in this field (Smith &

64 Sparkes, 2009a). Smith and Sparkes (2009b) suggested that pinning down a precise definition
65 of narrative is difficult, yet it is important to carefully consider the purpose of narrative
66 research. Narrative analysis attempts to locate the properties and dimensions of stories, such
67 as thematic content and structure. Carless and Douglas (2013) highlighted specific benefits of
68 carrying out narrative analysis in sport and exercise psychology. Specifically, that narrative
69 research allows a greater insight into the 'lived experience' of the participants and focuses on
70 the *meaning* of personal experiences. It allows for an understanding of the consequences of
71 actions over time, rather than taking a 'snapshot' at a particular point in time, thus shedding
72 light on the interconnectedness of seemingly unconnected or unrelated factors, and
73 encourages an exploration of social and cultural influences that shape an individual's stories.

74 This research is situated in an interpretivist epistemology. Less concerned with
75 uncovering the 'truth' of the burnout experience, the assumption underpinning this research is
76 that the social 'reality' of the experience is (co)constructed by the perceptions of the social
77 actors involved and the contexts they find themselves in. The unfolding experience of
78 burnout as a whole, and the social, cultural, personal experiences of the coaches that
79 contribute to it remain underexplored. As such, the purpose of this study was to explore the
80 processes involved in coach burnout, the consequences of burning out in sport, and the
81 experience of recovering from burnout. The methods chosen allow for a more holistic
82 understanding of coach burnout. We focus on the detailed stories of two high performance
83 coaches, something seldom examined in previous research.

84 **Method**

85 **Participants**

86 Two elite Swedish coaches volunteered to take part in the study, henceforth referred
87 to as Sven and Henrik (pseudonyms). Contact with the coaches was made possible through

88 the authors' network within the community of high performance sport. At the time of
89 interview both Sven and Henrik were head coaches, Henrik in classic team sports at the
90 highest club level, and Sven in a classic individual Olympic sport at international level.
91 Henrik lived with his partner and two boys (10 and 12 years). He had participated in the
92 highest non-academic coach education in his sport and had a coaching background of 20
93 years. Sven lived with his partner and two boys (12 and 7 years) and a daughter (14). Sven
94 also earned the highest non-academic coach education in his sport and had a coaching
95 background of about 10 years.

96 **Procedure**

97 With ethics approval, informed consent was given by both coaches before their
98 participation in face-to-face interviews. Coaches were fully briefed on the purpose of the
99 research and interviews were conducted by a researcher with training in qualitative interview
100 methods. The interview schedule could be described as loosely-structured in that questions
101 and probes offered each participant the opportunity to discuss their entire burnout experience,
102 from antecedents to recovery. However, it was made clear that there were no expectations on
103 participants to respond in a certain way. Indeed, the interviewer encouraged participants to
104 tell their own stories in their own words and took on the role of 'active listener' (Smith &
105 Sparkes, 2005) during the interview process. Participants were also reminded that they were
106 free to withdraw from the study and terminate the interview at any time, without prejudice. In
107 addition, to supplement and triangulate the interview data, and clarify participant responses,
108 the research team maintained contact with the participants post-interview¹.

109 **Data Analysis**

¹ To clarify, the two interviews were not the sole data sources collected throughout the duration of the project. Numerous informal electronic and face to face communications were held between the authors and the coaches. The interviews (and their subsequent analyses) were selected for inclusion in this paper to represent the overall experiences of burnout.

110 The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were subjected to a thematic
111 narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Specifically, following procedures outlined by Riessman,
112 the researchers read and re-read each transcript to ensure familiarity with the texts. During
113 this stage, researchers noted their initial thoughts regarding each coach's data. According to
114 Riessman, the focus of thematic narrative analysis is on what is said, rather than on how, to
115 whom, or for what purposes it is said. As such, blocks of text or quotes representing a
116 meaningful point or thought relating to the burnout experience were identified in each
117 transcript and labelled as raw-data themes. The goal of the thematic narrative analysis,
118 however, is to preserve the sequencing of events and, in effect, the "whole story" being told.
119 As such, to make sense of the coaches' stories and provide some chronological order, these
120 raw-data themes were abstracted into wider themes, reflecting temporal elements of the
121 burnout experience (i.e., antecedents, experiences of coaching with burnout symptoms,
122 withdrawal from sport, and the process of recovery and personal growth). For example, one
123 coach discussed the isolation of the coaching role and, through discussion amongst the
124 research team, and consideration of the context in which the coach explained his story,
125 isolation was deemed, in this case, to be an antecedent factor in his overall burnout
126 experience. These wider themes representing each coach's narrative were formulated into
127 narrative accounts, again with care taken to preserve the coaches' voices, and the sequence of
128 events relating to their burnout stories. Finally the two stories were compared and contrasted
129 with each other and represented in rich and layered detail, using extensive quotes.

130 **Research Quality.**

131 In judging the quality of our research, we refer to what Sparkes and Smith (2014)
132 described as time-and-place contingent characteristics. From a non-foundational perspective,
133 we deemed the most appropriate criteria for evaluating the quality of our research to be
134 contribution (worthy topic), credibility, and resonance (Tracy, 2010). To provide a brief

135 explanation, we feel our research makes a worthy and timely contribution to the current
136 coaching burnout literature, which is limited in its exploration of high-performance coaching
137 and the enduring experience of burnout. Credibility was enhanced through processes of
138 analyst triangulation (described above) and member checking. Sparkes and Smith (2014)
139 suggest that member checking might have value, but only under certain conditions (p.192).
140 We found the process useful in this setting, not to verify the 'truth' of our interpretation of the
141 coaches' stories, but rather to provide an opportunity for further participant reflection and
142 elaboration. Finally, we hoped that by providing thick descriptive quotes throughout to
143 illuminate our coaches stories, that our research might resonate with coaches (or, indeed,
144 other support staff, managers, or sport psychology consultants) operating in high-
145 performance sports.

146 **Findings**

147 Based on previous coach burnout literature (e.g., Lundkvist et al., 2012; Raedeke et al. 2000)
148 and the nature of the research question (i.e., to gain a deeper understanding of the entire
149 burnout experience), data are presented in four main sections (antecedents, experiences of
150 coaching with burnout symptoms, withdrawal from sport, and the process of recovery and
151 personal growth) that reflect the apparent chronology of the burnout experience (See Table 1).
152 While there were differences between the two coaches' overall experiences of burnout,
153 withdrawal, and recovery, there were also a number of common themes that became apparent
154 during data analysis. These common themes will be highlighted, but with respect to
155 showcasing the idiosyncrasies in Sven and Henrik's stories, they will be presented separately
156 under each section.

157 **Antecedents/Situational Factors**

158 **Internal and external expectation.** Sven felt stress from the moment he took on the
159 coaching role in the autumn as the competitive season had just finished, describing the "many
160 external pressures" and the role of the Olympic Committee being very much results-focused.
161 Because Sven was also given financial and decision-making responsibility "to plan the whole
162 season," he felt further pressure to bring success. He placed a lot of the pressure to do well on
163 himself, feeling the need to live up to his ideal perception of what a coach *should* be:

164 "There were more expectations on myself, high standards to live up to
165 something, some ideal image that does not really exist but that you fantasized
166 about... you should be able to handle everything in a proper professional
167 manner. I think my own image of myself that I can be a certain way, is not
168 really true. To be strong, not to be vulnerable, able to handle any situation."

169 Sven, related this pressure and the expectation to perform to the high performance
170 environment in which he was now working:

171 "I think it got too serious for me. For many at that level, the sport is their life.
172 There is almost never an end to it... I think that maybe when you are a junior
173 coach and step up to the senior level, you get overwhelmed and think now I
174 have to do so damn much more... new team members and new conditions, yet
175 you have your own way of being. I didn't manage it. I was lost and I never
176 found my way back."

177 Henrik also experienced a great deal of stress, again, immediately upon taking on his
178 coaching job in February. This was around the mid-point of the competitive season, a full
179 year before he withdrew from the coaching role. He described "wanting to do well," but
180 explained that the pressure and expectation he felt was largely from external, as opposed to
181 internal, sources. These high expectations were coupled with a string of poor performances

182 that autumn, at the start of his first full season in charge. The team "didn't have a brilliant
183 start of the season" and Henrik described it as "a pretty rough time" during which the team
184 experienced several injuries, leaving the squad depleted. Henrik mentioned that they had
185 "barely begun the season" when the history of success at the club began to weigh heavily
186 upon him:

187 "We were fourth in the middle of the season, which any other team would be
188 very happy about, but not this team in this city. No bastard is satisfied here if
189 you are a close second. To win silver is a fucking defeat! Being in such an
190 organization where you never can surprise positively requires a hell of a lot. If
191 you won 3-1, they said, why the hell didn't you win 5-0? You're evaluated
192 each day... you have to be on top, so absolutely, both the club's goal setting
193 and tradition makes you feel stress constantly."

194 Henrik, like Sven, suggested that "the high performance environment in his specific
195 situation obviously makes it really hard," specifically referring to one game where the team
196 "won 1-0 and it was almost a funeral... and sooner or later, that depletes you."

197 **Role overload and work-home interference.** In addition to high levels of
198 expectation and the almost self-imposed pressure, Sven also discussed the role overload that
199 he experienced as a coach and how that was related to work-home interference. Again from
200 taking on the role, and linked to his perceptions of what a coach should be, Sven discussed
201 that,

202 "...as a coach, you should take care of everything. Everything from bookings
203 and transportation, travel, education. You should take care of the athlete, you
204 should follow up training development, technology development. It becomes a
205 lot and somewhere you're forced to choose."

206 Sven suggested that role overload was a crucial issue at particular times of the season.
207 In the autumn, there weren't as many demands on his time, "but then it starts sometime in
208 early January, February. Planning, travel, transportation. It's like the whole summer just
209 grows with activities and it's just gone."

210 The multiple roles that Sven had to take on were only part of the situation that he felt
211 led to his experience of burnout. His job roles began to significantly overlap and interfere
212 with his home life, and those conflicting demands, as well as the time away from home and
213 relentless travel, were sources of constant strain. Sven described himself as "a family man
214 with three children and committed to family expectations," but explained that he "began to
215 lose balance in life," that the "demands grew on all sides," and that he "gradually began to
216 feel that it's not quite right."

217 "...it was training camps, it was going abroad a lot and this may sound rather
218 glamorous, in Florida for a month and in California, and Spain... But behind
219 all this, there was a bit of insecurity. It came later, but being forced to leave
220 the family when you feel that there is a poor work-life balance and there is
221 really no harmony... Deep down I wanted to work a lot more with the athletes,
222 ensuring their needs, but I was so fragmented and torn apart and it felt like I
223 made a good job of neither."

224 Henrik painted a similar picture. Again, from the start of the season in October, he
225 was aware of his increased workload, "more jobs... more individual conversations, it takes
226 more time." Rather than the demands of the job alone, again the conflicting work-life balance
227 became the more pressing issue early in the season:

228 "I had some other concerns at the same time. I had previously decided to build
229 the family a new home, and the combination of building the house and

230 coaching a team where there was increasing external concern about the really
231 high expectations that existed... I had a pretty rough time quite early... it was
232 too much work. In many other jobs, you are there, you do the job and then you
233 can go home and relax. But it is a little different as a head coach when you
234 have to please everyone and be the one who always inspires, gives energy and
235 positivity to others, and the one who's always happy and can put things right.
236 All of that requires you to be right on top all the time. It's pretty tough,
237 especially since you have a family situation where you have no energy at
238 home either because you are too damn grumpy and tired. We had barely
239 begun the season, and it was about then when I moved into my new house, in
240 the middle of October. For a while I had to deal with costs for two houses,
241 until I was able to sell my old house... and then had to move a big family into
242 a temporary apartment for a while... so you know already there I didn't really
243 have enough time."

244 **Isolation and fear of showing vulnerability.** Another theme running across both
245 coaches' stories was the isolation they experienced and their inability or lack of willingness to
246 ask for help when challenged with multiple and often conflicting demands. Linked closely to
247 the self-expectation discussed above, Sven explained that,

248 "You make the decision by yourself, although there are great desires to say 'no
249 stop, stop, stop, it's not working,' and 'if you want someone who can handle it,
250 I'm not the right man.' But instead it was the opposite. 'I'll try, okay, I'll try,'
251 and then I was there again, somewhat lost. There is a small but strong rule of
252 life that impacts on all of my behaviours. If you're strong and able then you
253 don't ask for help, you're not looking for help. And if you do, what happens
254 then? Then you're worthless."

255 Henrik also discussed the need to be a 'Superman,' and that, for him, this was just
256 another part of the coaching role. Furthermore, he also felt pressure not to bring issues from
257 work into his home life:

258 "That's the coaching role, the one that doesn't get dragged down, doesn't show
259 any vulnerability among the guys. So that autumn was quite tough. You try
260 your best and put on your professional face. I didn't say anything at home
261 either. Back home you wanna be pretty normal since you feel that you should
262 not bring work issues home."

263 **Uncertainty.** Both coaches described the uncertainty they felt about taking on their
264 coaching roles. Sven explained that "right from the beginning, almost after I had started with
265 my assignment, I was a little unsure. I was happy I got it, but is it really what I want?"
266 Similarly, Henrik described a situation where the club was keen to have him there as coach,
267 yet there was a certain amount of trepidation on his part:

268 "I felt the vibe of the club that they wanted me to continue in the head coach
269 position. But deep down I didn't want it myself, because I had my prime time
270 with the team and I felt that I was done with that role. Why in the hell would I
271 put myself in this situation? I chided myself a little. I wondered whether
272 maybe I should have said 'stop'. At times in my previous [sport] career, I
273 didn't have any choice. But I was currently in a situation where I had another
274 job as an assistant sports director so I really had a choice, and I felt now like I
275 wasn't spending enough time coaching, or at home, or anywhere. Why would
276 I do this?"

277 **Media scrutiny.** Only Henrik reported the media scrutiny as a factor that was present
278 in the build up to his burnout experience. Because the team had been used to success, their

279 poor start in the season drew negative media coverage, but Henrik suggested that it was not
280 any worse than normal. The real issue was that the accumulation of demands made him more
281 sensitive to the negative news coverage:

282 "We are used to living under that stressor. Everything is like a soap opera,
283 which has stressed me maybe these last four or five years. I've never liked
284 how the media attention moved away from the sport to focus more on other
285 things unrelated to the game itself... And it has stressed me a lot, particularly
286 all the fucking stupid questions coming, and all negative articles, given that
287 they have been accustomed to success. So all of a sudden it becomes like a
288 negative spiral. It's definitely a stress factor in this job there is no doubt about
289 it."

290 Interviewer: "But there was nothing that was worse than usual?"

291 "What was worse than usual was that I was more sensitive during this period,
292 especially since we didn't play well, so all of these negative things were
293 written, and then you get more negativity and more stupid questions, which of
294 course becomes a vicious stress spiral."

295 **Summary.** Both coaches discussed the pressure and expectation that they felt from
296 the moment they took on their respective coaching roles, from internal and external sources.
297 This pressure and expectation was, in both cases, coupled with role overload and difficulties
298 maintaining an acceptable work-life balance. Both Sven and Henrik felt that they could not
299 ask for help or admit that they were struggling as this would be sign of vulnerability. Only
300 Henrik talked about media scrutiny as a contributing stressor. However, he described his
301 appraisal and responses to the stressor as the more salient issue.

302 **Experiences of Coaching with Burnout Symptoms**

303 **Physical impact.** For Sven, a lack of energy was one of the major physical symptoms
304 that characterised his burnout experience, and this exhausted state, in turn, had an impact on
305 his ability to make decisions at work:

306 "I'd get to the race centre and have no energy. You have no power to take
307 simple decisions. When I'm in a good mood, or in balance, I feel it's 'just do
308 this'... but understand, when you are feeling down, it's difficult to take simple
309 decisions."

310 Exhaustion wasn't the only physical experience that Sven discussed during the
311 interview. Indeed, the stressful environment impacted upon his physical wellbeing in a
312 variety of ways including getting "less sleep during certain periods," issues with his appetite,
313 "palpitations, during some periods when [he] was in those environments," and an ever present
314 muscle tension, "more than [he] normally experienced."

315 Within this theme, Henrik also discussed the physical exhaustion that characterised
316 his experience of burnout. Again, for Henrik, this seemed to occur early in the season:

317 "Dwelling on it took a hell of a lot of energy. The fact is that I knew what was
318 needed, but I didn't feel that I could mobilize that energy. I also knew that I
319 wasn't giving 100%... I felt completely exhausted when I went home every
320 day."

321 Furthermore, Henrik suggested that once problems with exhaustion and lack of sleep
322 became apparent, they only got worse:

323 "Once it had begun, it just got worse. If we had an early match, I lay down on
324 the couch until almost 9.30 am at home and I did not go [to work] until five to

325 ten. When you are on top, then you go there at 8.00 am and drink coffee with
326 the guys... it was not good, you know, everything got a little crazy. So I mean,
327 if we had the meeting at 11.00, I went down at 10.55. If we had a meeting at
328 9.00 then I went there 8.55. I couldn't sleep, so I had no energy."

329 This physical exhaustion had an impact on Henrik's work too, as he became "too tired
330 to argue" and explained that "you're not fresh enough to fight for your views... because your
331 strength, sparkle, and glow is limited. It's stressful."

332 **The 'downward spiral' into depression.** Both coaches discussed how their thoughts
333 were affected during this difficult period in their careers. Sven discussed the fear, anxiety,
334 and doubt that were all related to thoughts about quitting his role. He was "afraid of what will
335 happen if [he said] no again (authors comment: Sven resigned once a year before, but was
336 talked into continuing)," but there were also thoughts of wanting "to run away" or escape
337 from the situation.

338 "There were many negative thoughts. You look very blackly on yourself.
339 Your environment and the future are not so bright either... there's anxiety
340 about what will happen. Escape thoughts and avoidant thoughts. I just wanted
341 to escape and get away and didn't know where to go. And then there were
342 clear signs of anxiety, a lot of anxiety, catastrophizing, and shortness of breath,
343 tunnel vision... I had like almost no contact with myself.

344 Sven discussed becoming "quite lost" and described a downward spiral and "a
345 worthless feeling... I'm not good enough and I can't handle it." This negative thinking
346 seemed, in Sven's eyes, to develop into symptoms of depression:

347 "It's hard just to get up from bed. It's just a hassle, everything is just crap. It
348 was dark, black, hard. I couldn't get up. I'm lying here with the covers over
349 my head... and it may be hard to imagine... you are really low in your mood.
350 A period where it's completely like, hell, I can't manage anything, I'll stay
351 here in bed."

352 While, at times, Sven tried to convince himself that everything was okay, and told
353 himself that "it might not be so damn bad at all," he also did not feel mentally strong enough
354 to cope with his situation at work. Sven felt like he "had no good prospects in the place from
355 the beginning," and that he "was not strong enough to work with people in sport. I'm afraid of
356 conflicts... this was all the time."

357 Henrik developed patterns of negative thinking, very similar to those experienced by
358 Sven. Specifically, Henrik described "the feeling of not being good enough," and explained
359 that he was "not as able to go home and feel quite finished with the job." Furthermore, he was
360 already withdrawing from social interactions with colleagues at work, explaining that while
361 he and his colleagues always had "good interaction," he no longer felt like he had the time or
362 the opportunity and would often rush off: "I was not able to stay present as I wanted and I felt
363 bad about it." At this point, Henrik's reduced sense of personal accomplishment and
364 depressed mood were clear, and he was discussing the possibility of withdrawing from sport:

365 "When one is so down, so to speak, the days are long and heavy. I started
366 speaking about [withdrawal from sport] ... maybe it was already three or four
367 weeks before the Olympic break. Now we need to have a plan, we need to put
368 a plan into action! It was simply that I could not manage even a couple of
369 weeks until the Olympic break, six, seven games left... I felt a little bit like I
370 had nothing to contribute. I had already more or less hit the wall."

371 **Family.** Another of the shared themes within this wider theme of Experiences of
372 Coaching with Burnout Symptoms was related to Family. Both coaches discussed the fact
373 that their feelings extended and spilled over into their home lives. For example, Sven
374 described having "a worse relationship, me and my partner, then. When I got home, I found it
375 hard to cool down, and there were expectations, but I was not the Sven I usually am..." It was
376 also clear that his children were affected by, and, in turn, further contributed to, his
377 experience of burnout. Sven's daughter "became more closed off," but the impact on his
378 youngest son was noticed outside of the home:

379 "...it was noticed in school. He was sad... when I called home he just cried...
380 like that feels right into the pit of my stomach. And to have that kind of
381 conversation and then be in [another country], how fun is it to be there then? I
382 just hung my head. They were influenced for sure, in school and at home."

383 Henrik's sense of reduced personal accomplishment extended beyond work.
384 Specifically, he became "pretty irritable at home, even socially" and suggested that,

385 "...it didn't work too well in family life, which is stress itself, and then it's
386 reflected back on the job and... it becomes an treadmill, actually... you take
387 much of the irritation home. You have no patience with the children and
388 indirectly it impacts on your wife or partner. It becomes 'wrong' at home."

389 **Summary.** Both of our coaches identified the emotional and physical exhaustion that
390 characterised their experiences of coaching with burnout. Furthermore, Sven and Henrik both
391 discussed the sleep disturbances that they experienced, and the further negative influence that
392 had on their burnout experiences. Interestingly, both coaches used similar language when
393 describing the downward spiral into depression, characterised by a pattern of negative
394 thinking and thoughts of 'avoidance' from their respective situations. Finally, there were also

395 stark similarities in the coaches' personal lives, as both described burnout at home as well as
396 at work, and that there was an impact on significant others as a result.

397 **Withdrawing from Sport**

398 The stories of the two coaches, having been similar to this point, now diverge. The
399 differences lie chiefly in the way that their withdrawal from sport was managed. After the
400 competitive season, a full year after taking on the role, Sven took the decision to speak to a
401 psychotherapist about the issues he was experiencing, and this decision turned out to
402 influence his withdrawal from coaching.

403 "I finally took the help of a psychotherapist when the competitive season was
404 over, to sort out thoughts and feelings, what I really want, and how I should
405 handle it further. After a few sessions, I came to the decision what I would
406 choose... and then I simply resigned only a few weeks after the season
407 ended."

408 Sven described his withdrawal from coaching as "a messy process," and there were
409 "mixed feelings" associated with completely leaving his coaching role. This was half way
410 through the Olympic cycle (i.e., two years prior the Olympic Games).

411 "Yes there were mixed feelings. One was relief. Damn, how nice to be able to
412 avoid all of this [stress], but also disappointment in myself not to have
413 managed it in some way. Failure. I called it a failure"

414 Henrik's withdrawal from sport was an entirely different experience as he played an
415 active role in managing the withdrawal process. During the first few months of the season,
416 Henrik met with the club doctor about his stress. The doctor recommended medication, "not

417 happy pills, just something to help me open up easier." As mentioned earlier, it was just prior
418 to the Olympic break that Henrik took the final decision to step away from his coaching job:

419 "We had a Christmas break and I involved some significant others in my
420 thinking and I thought a little more... At this time, I'd already had some
421 discussions with the sporting director that we would make a few changes. We
422 thought that perhaps it was possible for me to try just a little bit longer,
423 because there was a three week Olympic break coming up after about six or
424 seven more matches. We discussed and agreed how it would be a good time
425 for change in coaching during the Olympic break. I tried for a few weeks, but
426 I could just not make it that much longer. I needed to quit right now."

427 Once the decision had been made though, Henrik began having discussions with the
428 people he worked closely with and then "it was a case of trying to work out a smooth exit for
429 me, to do as well as possible until then, since it was only three to four weeks left to the longer
430 break because of the upcoming Olympics."

431 "February. It all went pretty quickly. It was a game before the Olympic break,
432 it was three games a week or something at the time. So we played against
433 [team] home here, got beat up. That's when I stopped. And a lot of people
434 thought it was because we lost then, because we had lost the game before too.
435 But I had already decided, before the match, and then we'd already had an
436 internal meeting. The sports director knew about it. It felt like a freedom. I got
437 dressed and went home afterwards..."

438 Henrik described how the following days were quite "dramatic, with both the media
439 and the phone ringing and so on," but also described sticking to his decision. "I recorded a
440 message on my voicemail and mentioned briefly why... I knew why everyone was going to

441 call." Henrik chose not to speak to the players before or after the game about his resignation.
442 He explained that it had "become a bit of circus," so he "let [the sports director] do that the
443 day after." He knew that there would be "some buzz later on," but that he had his version of
444 events. "The only contact I had with the players during that period was when I called the
445 team captain before the last game. I thought that at least he could convey certain things as I
446 wanted." Ultimately, Henrik felt that taking an active role in his withdrawal from coaching
447 was important for the following process of recovery from burnout:

448 "At the end we had one day where we planned all the events related to my exit.
449 In the club we always talk about strategies for different scenarios; media
450 strategies to deal with losses or wins. The different patterns have already been
451 figured out, so that there isn't too much spontaneity in responding to different
452 outcomes. I think it helped my recovery that since the ending was pretty
453 painless; I am actually pretty pleased with how we managed the ending. We
454 had our media manager in the club who could support this. He was also on
455 board, so to speak. He did read the text that would be sent out as a press
456 release and he was involved in the whole process, unlike if maybe someone
457 gets fired. But in this case, I felt that I got to be a part the process. And it was
458 probably really good for my recovery in some way."

459 Like Sven, there was a sense of relief for Henrik. "I felt it as a relief. I got dressed and
460 went home afterwards. And because I had been involved a little bit, it felt pretty good with
461 the mutual respect that still existed." However, there was also a sense of anxiety at this time.
462 Despite the feeling that it was "better than what [he] had expected," Henrik also mentioned
463 that "you have anxiety... What happens then? What will the players say, and what are they
464 thinking? It becomes like this, it's in people's nature."

465 **Recovery and Personal Growth**

466 Within this wider theme of recovery and personal growth, both Sven and Henrik
467 highlighted the importance of time away from the sport and of social support. After Sven
468 withdrew from his coaching role at the end of the season, he "took the rest of the year
469 completely off." Rather than returning to sport, Sven called a previous employer and agreed
470 to start back at his old job (not sport-related) "sometime in mid-January." This was important
471 for him as it allowed him to "be somewhere where I recognised myself." However, while
472 Sven described feelings of relief at his eventual withdrawal from sport, he also described the
473 shame he felt. Since not having been able to handle the situation, and that these feelings
474 "went on for a while."

475 Sven also described several sources of support that were incredibly important to him
476 during his recovery from burnout:

477 "I talked with my assistant coach. He was around a lot even after I resigned,
478 and I talked to him. In hindsight I can see that I was taking everything on
479 myself. I should have just done the opposite and just dropped everything and
480 got out of it. But that's stuff that you can see now."

481 Sven was also supported by his partner with whom he "talked it through several
482 times," and, importantly, he sought advice from other coaches with similar experiences:

483 "I tried listening to advice from other national coaches who had been in the
484 same situation. They've described it, but it's difficult to know how it's going to
485 affect you. How will I be able to handle it? But that support was vital."

486 This period of recovery was also a time of personal growth and a change in life
487 direction for Sven:

488 "After some time I studied a course in cognitive psychotherapy, which is very
489 much about communication. It also included 50 hours of self-therapy, which
490 is a hell of a lot of time to work on yourself. And I can look back and see how
491 I was. My way of being, behaviourally and emotionally, how I used to get
492 carried away and think in terms of 'the rules of life' and what I should live up
493 to. I look back to how I was then and it's very different from how I feel now."

494 Sven also noted: "It's an experience to have gone through this journey and to be able
495 to use my experience now as I sit and try to support other people who are maybe in somewhat
496 similar situations."

497 Henrik's recovery took some time. It took around two months to gradually regain a
498 functional recovery (i.e., for sleep to return to normal):

499 "It took a good bit of time to slow down. So it was not like dropping it, and
500 then I can go to bed and sleep it all away. When I got off here in February, it
501 was a pretty wonderful feeling, losing the weight on your shoulders, but it
502 wasn't automatic that I could start sleeping again. It took maybe about a
503 month or two before I started to think that I was sleeping well."

504 For him, getting away from the high performance environment was vital in his ability
505 to recover from burnout:

506 "If you're coaching an elite league team, hell, you can't breathe until May. It's
507 just constant, and you never feel that you're really free. It's 24 hours a day.
508 You take it with you everywhere, you can never be 100% free..."

509 ...I wasn't interested in [sport] at all when I finished the job. I didn't watch
510 [sport], didn't read newspapers. I felt that I wanted to completely disappear
511 and didn't want to get involved. Uninterested! I wanted to get away!"

512 As with Sven, the support that Henrik received from his family during this period was
513 of vital importance. Interestingly, his children playing sport helped him to reconnect with
514 sport and through this he was also exposed to his previous work-place. Sven thought that
515 being exposed to the work-place through his children played an important role in the recovery
516 process.

517 "I had the family during my 'rehabilitation' time. It's been of huge importance.
518 Both boys playing [sport], I could even go and see tournaments at the end of
519 the season. I was with my 12 year old son at a cup in Stockholm as they won.
520 It was like medicine that you never could find somewhere else... At the end
521 of the season, there are a lot of youth cups, and I was able to go with my
522 youngest son. I even helped out a little. Their coach couldn't make it
523 sometimes and I coached. It was almost like a new world. It felt really good
524 though, just being a parent."

525 **Recommendations**

526 Both coaches shared the experiences of burnout leading to complete withdrawal from
527 coaching. Having been through it, taken time away from sport, and considered themselves
528 recovered, both coaches also gave recommendations for other coaches who might experience
529 similarly stressful situations. Sven, for example, felt strongly that counselling support should
530 be available for coaches, but it is important that coaches themselves want to take this
531 opportunity to acknowledge the vulnerability and let someone in:

532 "I think many times that coaches could benefit from having counselling or at
533 least someone who sits objectively on the side, someone I can go to and let go
534 of everything. Not someone who'll explain how to do this or that, more
535 'receive only' and someone who will ask questions and help coaches to find
536 their own strength. But it's also about wanting to do it yourself. I dared to let
537 someone in in the end."

538 Indeed, Sven felt that coaches should pay more attention to themselves, take a more
539 reflective stance, and work to develop their self-awareness. Specifically, he suggested that
540 "when you reach a head coach position including responsibility, you become quite lonely,"
541 and,

542 "...if you should work with anything, you should probably work with yourself
543 first and foremost. It is the first step. What do I want? How do I look at
544 things? Be a little philosophical. Find your own model... understand yourself,
545 who you are, your strengths and vulnerabilities."

546 Sven also described the need to have a good social support network and explained that
547 an important factor in limiting the likelihood of burning out was having "support around so
548 you can reflect and get some distance and perspective... it's not life and death!" Finally, he
549 felt that that coaches should make far better use of the support networks that they do have,
550 and that "it is okay to say that I can't fix that" and ask for help when it is needed.

551 Henrik shared similar recommendations for coaches. Specifically, he felt that
552 mentoring and having someone for coaches to be able to talk to was essential for reducing the
553 likelihood of coaches burning out, preferably a coach from outside of the organisation or a
554 different sport:

555 "It would have been good to have had a mentor or someone not attached to
556 your sport, a person to have that I could have talked with... and I think most
557 people in this high performance environment lack that. It's pretty lonely. I
558 think, as it was in my case, when it gets so serious, you probably don't want to
559 expose yourself fully, or chat among colleagues."

560 Both coaches reported uncertainty about taking on their coaching roles, and Henrik
561 reiterated this when discussing recommendations for avoiding burnout. He felt that coaches
562 need to be a little bit selfish, and that he was "too loyal" and "didn't listen to [his] heart, but
563 was more concerned about what others wanted... Only go in if you're 100% ready." For
564 Henrik, though, the need to maintain a work-life balance and avoid role overload was
565 arguably the most important factor in preventing burnout. As he described, "be selective,
566 prioritise work with the team. Don't try to do everything, instead prioritise what's important.
567 For example, prioritise the family when you're at home."

568 **Discussion**

569 The major purpose of this study was to explore the processes involved in coach
570 burnout, the consequences of living through burnout, and the experiences of recovering from
571 burnout after complete withdrawal. Employing a thematic narrative analysis, we focused on
572 the stories of two high performance coaches, Sven and Henrik, and their experiences of
573 burnout from onset to recovery.

574 The stories of Sven and Henrik lend strong support to more traditional stress-based
575 explanations of burnout (e.g., Smith, 1986), and more recent explanations based on work-
576 home inference and lack of recovery (Bentzen, Lemyre & Kenttä, 2016; Kellman, Altfeld, &
577 Mallett, 2015). Both coaches discussed numerous stressors associated with the high
578 performance environment (e.g., pressure and expectation to produce results) that have been

579 previously highlighted in research with high-level coaches (e.g., Olusoga, Butt, Hays, &
580 Maynard, 2009; Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008). Lundkvist et al. (2012)
581 suggested that burnout in coaching might be a result of the performance culture in elite sport
582 or overall life situations, and described this as resulting in two separate recovery needs.
583 Importantly, the stress that our two coaches experienced did not emanate solely from
584 competitive and organisational sources; there were clear examples of work-home inference
585 when personal stressors, related to their overall life situations, seemed to contribute to their
586 burnout experiences. Sven, for example, highlighted conflict between home and family
587 demands, and Henrik discussed "other concerns" around "building houses and coaching a
588 team" at the same time. The links between role conflict and coaching stress have been
589 outlined in detail elsewhere (e.g., Kelley & Gill, 1993; Kelley 1994), but it seemed that the
590 conflicting demands of home and family life, rather than merely conflicting job demands,
591 were, key factors in Sven and Henrik's stress and eventual burnout. Altogether, these results
592 resonate with recent research that reported significant correlations between high levels of
593 work-home-inference and higher levels of burnout, and between being high in recovery and
594 lower levels of burnout (Bentzen et al., 2016).

595 It is perhaps important to note here, that not only did the cumulative effects of
596 stressors contribute to Sven and Henrik's constant battle against stress, but also to the lack of
597 time and capacity to adequately recover. It is entirely plausible that Sven and Henrik both had
598 a negative recovery-stress balance (Kellman, et al., 2015) and that lack of recovery time,
599 rather than just levels of stress, might have made a significant contribution to their burnout.
600 Future longitudinal research is needed in this area, to explore relationships between coaches'
601 levels of burnout, recovery, and stress, perhaps spanning beyond a single season. From a
602 practical perspective, effective monitoring of coaches stress/recovery throughout the

603 competitive season might provide the means for early intervention, or, at the very least,
604 indicate when support might be best used.

605 Radaeke (1997) suggested that stress alone was not sufficient to cause burnout, and
606 that commitment in the form of entrapment was another significant factor. Again, both
607 coaches' stories lend support to the idea that entrapment in addition to stress, was a
608 precipitating factor in their burnout experiences. While discussing the isolation of the
609 coaching role, Sven suggested he had "great desires to say 'no, stop'", but was unable to take
610 that decision. Henrik also beat himself up over his decision to take the job and wondered
611 about saying stop, yet both coaches indicated a high cost/low benefit work-life balance, and
612 both felt that others wanted them to continue (i.e., both demonstrated an entrapment
613 commitment profile, Raedeke et al. 2000). Perhaps related to the feeling of entrapment, was
614 the coaches' perceptions that they were not living up to their imagined ideal selves. Koivula,
615 Hassmén, and Fallby (2002) suggested that "frequent cognitions about attaining ideal,
616 perfectionistic standards" might lead to higher levels of anxiety and negative emotions.
617 Indeed disassociation between future goals and plans and an individual's current situation has
618 been linked to anxiety, worry, and depression (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998).

619 One theme that ran throughout our coaches' stories was the need to be perceived as
620 'Superman' (Henrik), and not to show any sign of vulnerability by asking for support or help.
621 Both coaches felt that seeking support (tangible or emotional) was a sign of weakness, and
622 had a clear picture of what a coach *should* be. In fact, suppressing any signs of vulnerability
623 can be regarded as an antecedent to burnout. Sven and Henrik, throughout their interviews,
624 referred to "high standards to live up to," "ideal image... you should be able to handle
625 everything," "able to handle any situation," "you have to be on top," "the club's goal setting
626 and tradition," "you should take care of everything," "you have to please everyone," "you
627 don't show any weakness," "you don't ask for help," "I felt like I wasn't spending enough time

628 here, at home, anywhere." Perfectionism has extensively been linked with burnout in the
629 population of athletes (e.g., Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2009; Hill, Hall, & Appleton, 2010).
630 However, Tashman, Tenenbaum, and Eklund (2010) conducted one of the few studies to
631 explore this link within the coaching profession, suggesting that coaches high in maladaptive
632 perfectionism might experience more intense appraisals of stress. It hardly seems a great leap
633 to suggest that Sven and Henrik's thoughts might represent "recurrent and frequent cognitions
634 about attaining perfectionistic standards." Moreover, these perfectionistic tendencies, might
635 be related to their experiences of burnout, as the perceived discrepancy between ideal and
636 actual self is maintained, perhaps even widened, by coaches' stress experiences. Again, from
637 a practical standpoint, sport psychology consultants, sports organisations, and coaches
638 themselves, should be aware of and highlight especially difficult periods during a competitive
639 season (i.e., injuries, several poor results in a row), so that effective support can be put in
640 place Interestingly, Gould et al. (2002) found that perfectionism was associated with being an
641 Olympic champion. It may well be that the maladaptive perfectionism described here is
642 associated with burnout, while more adaptive forms of perfectionism might be associated
643 with more effective stress management skills. Future research might consider the role of
644 perfectionism in coaches' stress, burnout, and coping skills further.

645 Regarding Sven and Henrik's experiences of the burnout syndrome, their stories again
646 were extremely similar. Both highlighted symptoms of emotional exhaustion, physical
647 exhaustion, and sleep disturbance that have been previously discussed in the literature (cf.,
648 Goodger, et al., 2007). However, of interest here is the fact that both coaches separately
649 described the gradual onset and "downward spiral" of symptoms that they experienced. Sven,
650 for example, described his lack of energy to make decisions, and less sleep "during certain
651 periods," while Henrik also suggested that "once it had begun, it just got worse." Both also
652 discussed symptoms they described as depression, but again highlighted the "downward

653 spiral" of negative thoughts, feelings of worthlessness (reduced personal accomplishment),
654 withdrawing from colleagues (depersonalization), anxiety, and catastrophizing. The fact that
655 both coaches recognized these symptoms long before their eventual withdrawal from sport,
656 and that they got progressively worse, suggests the importance of early detection and
657 intervention. The challenge for the applied practitioner relates back to the 'Superman
658 problem', and coaches' reluctance to reveal signs of vulnerability and help-seeking.

659 Sven and Henrik's experiences seem to add to our understanding of the patterns of
660 antecedents and symptoms of burnout. However, the process of withdrawal from sport, and
661 coaches' attempts at recovery have been less well examined and, thus, poorly understood. Our
662 two coaches provided an insight into their withdrawal from sport and it is here that the two
663 stories began to differ. There are indications that withdrawal from sport might be more of a
664 gradual process, rather than the end result of experiencing burnout symptoms. Specifically,
665 withdrawal from personal relationships at work (depersonalisation) might be the first stage in
666 a more complete withdrawal. Henrik in particular described having less time and inclination
667 to meet with colleagues, and that at this stage he was already considering complete
668 withdrawal from sport. Our findings indicate that for coaches, having more involvement in
669 the process of withdrawal from sport might be beneficial in terms of their ability to recover
670 adequately. While Sven described his resignation as a "messy process" focused on getting out
671 of the high performance environment, Henrik, in contrast, used his last efforts to manage and
672 coordinate the withdrawal from his coaching role as smoothly as possible, and while
673 minimising the impact on the team.

674 While Lundkvist et al. (2012) unfortunately did not describe the recovery processes of
675 their coaches in detail, our findings provide insight into how coaches were able to recover
676 from their experiences of burnout. It should be noted, however, that it is extremely difficult to
677 pinpoint the time at which complete recovery from burnout occurs. One theme that was clear

678 in both stories was the need for time away from the high-performance environment. Both
679 coaches mentioned the relief that they felt in being able to step away from the stressors of
680 competition. However, negative emotions (e.g., shame due to the inability to cope) and lack
681 of sleep seemed to persist after withdrawal and the period of recovery. Recovery took a long
682 time in both cases. Sven took the whole autumn off and, even then, returned to a non sport-
683 related job as he felt it would help him "find himself" as he used to be before burnout. Henrik
684 explained that it took about four weeks after withdrawing from sport until he began to sleep
685 well again. Social support as a coping strategy for coaches to effectively manage stress has
686 been well documented (e.g., Olusoga, Butt, Maynard, & Hays, 2010), but it also seems vital
687 that coaches are supported both during and long after any withdrawal process. It is also
688 important to note that withdrawal from sport (i.e., leaving the profession or taking time away)
689 might not necessarily be a viable option in cases where, for example, financial constraints
690 might preclude coaches from leaving a job.

691 **Limitations of the Research.**

692 Obviously this study is only concerned with the stories of two elite coaches. The goal
693 of this type of research precludes the ability, or indeed the need, to generalise findings to
694 other settings or populations. However, that is not to say that exploring the experiences of
695 burnout in a wider range of coaches might not help to shed light on whether or not findings
696 are transferrable to other settings. For example, while we hoped that our research resonated
697 with elite level coaches, it should be noted that our two coaches were both products of high-
698 performance sport in Sweden, and that operating within this particular culture might well
699 have influenced the stories being told. Furthermore, female coaches' experiences of burnout
700 and recovery should be considered in future research. In practise, the major challenge lies in
701 identifying coaches who have completely withdrawn from their coaching profession that are
702 willing to participate in research.

703

Conclusion

704 Coaching at the elite level inevitably brings with it a certain amount of stress. The
705 cumulative effect of organizational, competitive, and personal stressors, a significant degree
706 of work-home interference, combined with a lack of coping and/or recovery options certainly
707 seems to be a precursor to Sven and Henrik's experiences of burnout. This is consistent with
708 previous work on stress and burnout in coaching. Importantly, extending previous research,
709 both coaches talked about suppressing their vulnerability despite a perceived discrepancy
710 between current and unobtainable 'Superman-selves' and how this resulted in burnout. Their
711 experiences of burnout were consistent with existing descriptions, but their stories suggest
712 more of a gradual onset and downward spiral, meaning that early recognition and intervention
713 might be possible. This study has provided an insight into some of the important factors
714 characterizing successful recovery, yet the processes of withdrawal from sport and the
715 recovery that is inevitably required are in need of further investigation if we are to provide
716 adequate support for coaches who have burned out.

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795

796 Table 1. Themes representing Sven and Henrik's experiences of burnout.

Wider Themes	Sub-themes	
	Sven	Henrik
Antecedents/ Situational Factors	Role overload and work-home interference Internal and external expectation Isolation and fear of showing vulnerability Uncertainty	Role overload and work-home interference Internal and external expectation Isolation and fear of showing vulnerability Uncertainty Media scrutiny
Experiences of Coaching with Burnout Symptoms	Physical impact. The 'downward spiral' into depression. Family	Physical impact. The 'downward spiral' into depression. Family
Withdrawal From Sport	Sense of relief A messy process Sense of failure	Sense of relief Managed withdrawal Sense of anxiety
Recovery and Personal Growth	Time Away From Sport Family Support Time of Personal Growth	Time Away From Sport Family Support Time of Personal Growth

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