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

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

**Abstract**

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

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, Granzyk 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).

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

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

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

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

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

## **Method**

### **Participants**

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

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

## **Procedure**

With ethics approval, informed consent was given by both coaches before their participation in face-to-face interviews. Coaches were fully briefed on the purpose of the research and interviews were conducted by a researcher with training in qualitative interview methods. The interview schedule could be described as loosely-structured in that questions and probes offered each participant the opportunity to discuss their entire burnout experience, from antecedents to recovery. However, it was made clear that there were no expectations on participants to respond in a certain way. Indeed, the interviewer encouraged participants to tell their own stories in their own words and took on the role of 'active listener' (Smith & Sparkes, 2005) during the interview process. Participants were also reminded that they were free to withdraw from the study and terminate the interview at any time, without prejudice. In addition, to supplement and triangulate the interview data, and clarify participant responses, the research team maintained contact with the participants post-interview<sup>1</sup>.

## **Data Analysis**

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

### **Research Quality.**

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



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

## **Findings**

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

### **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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Limitations of the Research.**

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



## Conclusion

Coaching at the elite level inevitably brings with it a certain amount of stress. The cumulative effect of organizational, competitive, and personal stressors, a significant degree of work-home interference, combined with a lack of coping and/or recovery options certainly seems to be a precursor to Sven and Henrik's experiences of burnout. This is consistent with previous work on stress and burnout in coaching. Importantly, extending previous research, both coaches talked about suppressing their vulnerability despite a perceived discrepancy between current and unobtainable 'Superman-selves' and how this resulted in burnout. Their experiences of burnout were consistent with existing descriptions, but their stories suggest more of a gradual onset and downward spiral, meaning that early recognition and intervention might be possible. This study has provided an insight into some of the important factors characterizing successful recovery, yet the processes of withdrawal from sport and the recovery that is inevitably required are in need of further investigation if we are to provide 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
<b>Antecedents/ Situational Factors</b>	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
<b>Experiences of Coaching with Burnout Symptoms</b>	Physical impact. The 'downward spiral' into depression. Family	Physical impact. The 'downward spiral' into depression. Family
<b>Withdrawal From Sport</b>	Sense of relief A messy process Sense of failure	Sense of relief Managed withdrawal Sense of anxiety
<b>Recovery and Personal Growth</b>	Time Away From Sport Family Support Time of Personal Growth	Time Away From Sport Family Support Time of Personal Growth

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