

Elite Coaches' Role in Athletes' Retirement Transitions: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to understand how prominent socio-cultural discourses influenced how coaches construct athletes' transition out of sport and position themselves within the process of retirement. Interviews with eight male elite coaches were analysed using a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Coaches' talk about athletes' transitions out of sport was constructed within the dominant 'performance' discourse in sport. This suggests years of adhering to disciplinary practices of elite sport left athletes underprepared for the next steps in their life. Even when constructing retirement in more positive terms this was done in ways that drew on ideas of high performance and objective success. Coaches' own positions within transitions were discussed by drawing on ideas from a patriarchal construction of the coach athlete-relationship. Here, coaches are positioned as father figures with responsibility for guiding athletes through their careers and transitions out of sport. However, coaches suggested that the policies, procedures, and processes within wider networks of power inside sport often restricted their capacity to support athletes during their transitions. Future research and practice are aimed at helping coaches to navigate the power dynamics of sporting structures and organisations.

Key words: Retirement from sport, Coach-Athlete Relationship, Power, Discipline, Governmentality, Foucault

27 **Elite coaches' role in athletes' retirement transitions: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis**

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The transition out of sport, commonly referred to as 'retirement', can present significant challenges as athletes attempt to deal with a range of complex emotions, negotiate a shift in their identity, and deal with disruption in their social networks (Epic et al., 2004). The process of adjusting to these changes can unfold over several months and years and, in the most challenging cases, difficulties adjusting develop into longer-term mental health issues (Park, et al., 2013). Existing theoretical models (e.g., Taylor, Ogilvie, & Lavallee, 2006) outline the complex interrelated factors that influence the quality of an individual's transition, including the factors that initiate the process of transition (e.g., age, injury); the personal and contextual factors related to adjustment (e.g., perceptions of control and social identity); and the resources that athletes have available to help them to manage the process (e.g., planning, social support). One aspect of the transition process that has recently received attention (e.g., Brown et al., 2018) is the importance that an athlete's social network plays in the process of transition to retirement (e.g., by providing social support). However, there is little research that has directly involved members of athletes' social networks to explore their role in the process of transitions.

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Athletes often share a close relationship with their coach throughout their careers and coaches are seen as vital supporters in the quest for sporting success (Park, et al., 2012). Through the 'ups and downs' of competition an athlete and coach often develop a strong sense of trust, interdependence and even reliance (Jones et al., 2005; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). The competitive, results-driven nature of sport means that once an athlete retires, the coach-athlete relationship must be renegotiated (Park et al., 2013; Stephan, 2003). Coaches often need to orientate to and develop relationships with new athletes; often under pressure from sporting organisations to achieve and maintain challenging goals (Fortunato & Merchant, 1999). Given this pressure to perform, it is unsurprising that the time and energy a

53 coach can devote to a retiring athlete is limited. Without the presence and support from their
54 coach, the transition to retirement can be a daunting and difficult experience and athletes have
55 reported feeling detached from, abandoned, and even let-down by their (former) coach
56 (Brown et al., 2018). Athletes' reports from existing research suggests that the renegotiation
57 of power-laden coach-athlete relationships during retirement is a complex and challenging
58 process. Coaches' accounts of athletes' retirement are sparse, however, and there is little
59 research that has directly engaged with coaches on this issue. Questions remain on the way
60 that coaches understand athletes' retirement, how they construct their role within this
61 transition, and what this means for their own subjectivity as the coach-athlete relationship
62 inevitably changes once athletes retire. To address these questions, the present study utilises a
63 Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis to illuminate the prominent sociocultural
64 discourses and dispersed systems of power within elite sport that influence coaches talk,
65 experiences, and social practices around athletes transition out of sport.

66
67 **Foucault, sport, and the coach-athlete relationship.**

68 The central questions of this paper are to ask how coaches construct athletes'
69 retirement, how they construct their role in athletes' transitions, and what it means for
70 coaches' own subjectivity and relational identity. From a Foucauldian perspective, it is not
71 possible to engage with these questions without considering wider discourses and power
72 relations within elite sport. Discourse has been described as social practices and systems of
73 knowledge that form objects (e.g., the transition out of sport) and subjects (e.g., athletes,
74 coaches) (Willig, 2013). When people think about and talk about objects and subjects, their
75 language is shaped and given meaning by discourse (Parker, 1992). Elite sport is shaped by
76 several prominent discourses, for example, the pursuit of performance excellence,
77 competition and rivalry, and the need for discipline and sacrifice (John, & Johns, 2000).

78 These discourses shape social practice and have an impact on athletes' and coaches'
79 subjectivity and the way they perceive themselves, their identities, and their roles within the
80 world; both during and after a career in sport. In describing discourse, Foucault aimed to
81 highlight the processes behind the production of knowledge and truth, and the mechanisms
82 that govern his concept of 'power/knowledge' (Foucault's, 1980). For Foucault, the
83 production of 'truth' is a discursive process in which knowledge and power are inseparable,
84 and power/knowledge coexist to shape, promote, and normalise discourse, or to seclude and
85 exclude it from circulation (Markkula, 2003). Thus, power can create 'regimes of truth' that
86 often go unquestioned or unchallenged. Regimes of truth are produced and reproduced
87 through social processes where dominate groups can seek to shape human behaviour through
88 discipline and control techniques.

89 Foucauldian scholars have argued that sport, at all levels, is shaped by a 'performance
90 discourse' that prioritises the systematic, rigorous, and persistent pursuit of high-performance
91 goals and achievement (Whitson & Macintosh, 1990). This has often been with diminishing
92 regard for sport as a means for education, personal development, and growth of those
93 involved (Rankin-Wright et al., 2017). The performance discourse is underpinned by
94 scientific functionalism where the body is viewed as a machine that can be designed,
95 developed, and enhanced with training programmes of ever-increasing complexity and
96 demand (John & Johns, 2000). In institutional settings (for example sporting organisations),
97 disciplinary power operates to objectify, categorise, and control individuals (Denison, Mills,
98 & Konoval, 2017). Sporting organisations regularly deploy disciplinary power through
99 various techniques related to the control of time (e.g., when to train), space (e.g., where to
100 train), and activities (e.g., how to train) to shape athletes' bodies in the pursuit of sporting
101 performance (Denison, & Mills, 2014). These techniques often come in the form of subtle
102 and normalised disciplinary practices, like the use of hierarchical power structures (e.g., team

103 captains, leadership groups within teams and clubs), regimented diet and nutrition
104 programmes, and the use of psychological support to manage thoughts, emotions, and
105 behaviours (Jones, & Denison, 2017; Lee Sinden, 2013; Manley, Palmer, & Roderick, 2012;
106 McMahon, & Penney, 2013). Athletes are expected to conform to these disciplinary practices
107 and their compliance renders their bodies ‘docile’, to be used to facilitate and maximise
108 productivity (i.e., to maximise sporting performance). Indeed, athletes have reported that
109 practices employed by sporting organisation and coaches within the performance discourses
110 have the power to shape their whole identity around achieving sporting goals, often to the
111 detriment of their relationships outside sport, personal development, and wellbeing (Carless
112 & Douglas, 2013).

113 For coaches, the high-performance discourse that governs elite sport positions them as
114 a crucial means for developing, monitoring, and controlling athletes (Bartholomew et al.,
115 2009; Schofield et al., 2022). The coach-athlete relationship is hierarchical with the coach as
116 leader and athlete as follower. This can take away or reduce athletes’ agency to shape their
117 own experiences in sport and they are often encouraged to take instruction with an
118 unquestioning respect for the coach’s greater knowledge and experience (Stirling & Kerr,
119 2009). This patriarchal view of the coach-athlete relationship emphasises unequal power
120 dynamic in the relationship, and may offer the coach the position of protector, guide, and
121 mentor. This is reflected in athletes experience of the coach-athletes relationship, and they
122 talk of coaches as people they respect, admire, and trust (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

123 The respect and fondness within coach-athlete relationships is often reciprocated by
124 coaches, and they report a desire to develop closeness with athletes and help them to develop
125 wider life skills and support their wellbeing (McShan, & Moore, 2023). However, the power
126 structures within sport that act to discipline and control athletes also do the same to coaches.
127 Coaching in high performance sport is a precarious occupation and coaches have reported

128 feeling monitored, judged, and disciplined based on their performance. Failure to meet
129 sporting goals, which relies heavily on the performance of their athletes, means that coaches
130 are at risk of sanction via demotion or removal from their position (Roderick, Smith, &
131 Potrac, 2017). Thus, coach must balance a desire to support and care for athletes in a holistic
132 way, with a responsibility to focus on athletes' performance.

133 Current research highlights the complex, interrelated systems of organisational and
134 relational power that effect coaches and athletes, and the development of the coach-athlete
135 relationship. In the present paper, these systems are positioned within Foucault's (1979)
136 concept of 'governmentality'. Governmentality has been described as the way that
137 knowledge/power is directed through diffused systems of regulations, governance, and
138 structures, and is conceptualised as the "fields upon which one might locate all investigations
139 of power/knowledge" (Rose, 1999, p.22). In this way, governmentality acts as the macro-
140 level concept that links interrelated ideas around bio-power (e.g., regulation and control of
141 populations through things like healthcare, education, and social welfare), discourses of
142 expertise (e.g., the proliferation of various forms of 'expert' knowledge in professions like
143 psychology, economics, and science), and neo-liberalism (e.g., the role of 'market forces' as
144 a mechanism of directing human behaviour) with the "micro-physics" of power (e.g., how
145 power manifests in everyday situations). In sport, the concept of governmentality has helped
146 to highlight how sporting organisations produce and reproduce the discourse of performance,
147 with such things as national sporting strategies, performance targets, and athlete selection
148 policies (Grix & Harris, 2016). Within this framework, the role of a coach may be cast as
149 'cog in the machine', whose job it is to monitor and discipline athletes to keep them in line
150 with the performance expectations of the organisation.

151 One of Foucault's central ideas related to the micro-physics of power is 'panoptic
152 surveillance' (Foucault, 1979). Here, a coach's involvement in all aspects of an athlete's life

153 creates a sense of perpetual visibility and an awareness that their coach's eyes are always on
154 them. Knowing this, athletes may begin to internalise the coach's (organisation's)
155 expectations and self-regulate their behaviour in a desire to meet performance expectations
156 and avoid consequences of non-adherence. Foucault's ideas around power, discipline, and
157 control have been used to highlight problematic practices in elite sport, and the negative
158 consequences these can have for athletes, including developing eating disorders, difficulties
159 with mental health, relationship issues, and career development challenges (John, & Johns,
160 2000; Barker-Ruchti, & Tinning, 2010). Scholarship on athletes' retirement from sport
161 suggests these issues extend well beyond the point when athletes retire, and often centre on
162 athletes' struggles to understand their sense of self and subjectivity (Park, et al., 2013). Years
163 of compliance to disciplinary practices can lead to athletes feeling 'lost' without the
164 structures and routines of sport. On the other hand, athletes have reported a sense of 'rebirth'
165 after retirement as they become free of the restrictive and punitive practices of sport
166 (Coakley, 1983).

167 A growing body of work has also stressed that transitions within and out of sport are
168 largely relational processes, such that sporting careers and transitions are often understood in
169 the context of changes in social relationships and social networks. Recently, Stamp and
170 colleagues' (Stamp, Potrac, & Nelson, 2021) study of retired male professional footballers
171 showed these athletes made sense of their time in sport and transitions by understanding their
172 multiple relational identities (e.g., as father, son, friend). In concluding, Stamp argued further
173 study into the relational dynamics of transitions are needed, including from the perspective of
174 people in wider social groups in sport, like coaches.

175 Athletes from a variety of sporting backgrounds have reported that they look to
176 coaches for help during their transitions and suggested that the support they received often
177 helped them to better manage their transitions (Park et al., 2012; Stephan, 2003). Athletes

178 have also described the changing nature of their relationship with their coach during
179 retirement as a ‘transition within a transition’, especially for those who build up a strong
180 relationship with their coach over many years. In this respect, athletes have said that their
181 coaches are often willing to offer support, but the nature of elite sport means that coaches
182 must ‘move on’ much quicker than they did (Brown et al, 2018). These reports give strong
183 support for the idea that transitions are relational processes, but this understanding comes
184 from athletes’ perspectives, and more can be learned by engaging with coaches’ experiences.
185 The aim of this research is, therefore, to understand how coaches construct athletes’
186 transitions out of sport and position themselves within the process of retirement. In doing so,
187 a Foucauldian lens is used to explore how prominent socio-cultural discourses within elite
188 sport influenced coaches’ constructions of retirement, drawing on concepts of
189 governmentality, power/knowledge, and discipline to explore the complex dynamics of the
190 coaches’ relational identity.

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Methods

Philosophical Position

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196 This research is positioned within the tenets of post-structuralism and contends that
197 knowledge and truth “are produced rather than found” (Avner et al., 2014, p. 43), and
198 emphasises the importance of language in the construction of discourse and social practice.
199 This approach conceptualises the participants words as subjective accounts mediated by
200 systems of meaning relative to time, place, and sociocultural context. Post-structural social
201 science rejects grand narratives of human experience, challenges the notion of fixed
202 meanings, and denies the existence of universal truth (Marcela & Silk, 2011). Post-
203 structuralists argue that power plays a fundamental role in shaping social realities and
204 subjectivity. Mills et al., (2022, p. 201) suggested “power is anything that has an effect on
someone else, anything at all”. It is, therefore, both subtle and overt; diffused and structured;

205 innocent and oppressive. Omnipresent power structures and discourse work in infinitely
206 complex ways such that people are continually constructed by power. At the same time as
207 being effected, people produce power to construct and reproduce social objects, subjects, and
208 phenomena. This ever-evolving interplay and network of power shapes what can be
209 considered ‘real’ or ‘legitimate’, and thus gives rise to an ontology of multiple possible
210 realities and an epistemology of subjective truth.

211 212 **Design**

213 Willig’s (2013) approach to Foucauldian discourse analysis was used to guide the
214 design and delivery of the study. Discourse in this study is conceptualised as sets of
215 statements, unwritten rules, regulations, social practice, and value structures that draw on
216 historically contingent knowledge systems and meaning to construct objects and subjects
217 (Foucault, 1972, 1981; Van Dijk, 1997). Because discourses are contingent on existing and
218 socially mediated knowledge they enable and constrain “what can be said by whom, where
219 and when” (Willig, 2013, p.130). The availability of discursive resources (concepts, phrases,
220 or other linguistic devices) in a culture shapes the way discursive objects (e.g., the transition
221 out of sport) are constructed, presented, and discussed. In turn, these constructions make
222 ‘subject’ positions possible, in that they locate potential ways of thinking about,
223 experiencing, and acting in the world (Willig., 2013). Thus, exploring dominant discourses in
224 sport and resulting discursive constructions of the transition out of sport has implications for
225 subjectivity, and the ways that athletes and coaches manage their identities and relationships.

226 Foucault (1991) was critical of rigid theoretical and methodological frameworks and
227 advocated for a flexible and context driven approach to research. At the same time there is a
228 need to develop clear practices relevant for the qualitative approach being used and the
229 research questions being addressed. As such, the use of Willig’s (2013) approach to

230 Foucauldian Discourse Analysis aims to strike a balance between flexibility and structure;
231 helping to develop a systematic and rigorous analysis that specifically addresses issues
232 around subjectivity, identity, and practice – while offering a flexible way of engaging with
233 wider Foucauldian concepts of governmentality, power/knowledge, and discipline.

234

235 **Participants**

236

237 Eight current, male, high-performance coaches from the UK aged between 38 and 61
238 years ($M=50.12$, $SD=7.49$) volunteered to take part in the research. All of the participants
239 were coaches at the highest level of their sport and had taken part in multiple major
240 championships, including World and Olympic Games. Six participants were focussed on
241 individual sports and two were coaches of international team sports. They had been involved
242 at an international level of sport for between 10 and 31 years ($M=18.50$, $SD=7.82$) and all
243 eight participants were full-time, professional coaches during this time. Coaches were invited
244 to take part if they had a minimum of 10 years' experience at the highest level of their sport,
245 and self-identified as being involved in multiple retirement transitions of athletes they had
246 coached.

247

248 **Procedure**

249 After obtaining institutional ethical approval, the purposive sample was recruited
250 through existing contacts, and snowball sampling. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by
251 the first author. The interviews were semi-structured, but flexible such that participants were
252 able to lead the conversation in ways that were meaningful to them. Discussions included
253 coaches' perceptions of how athletes' transitions are managed by elite sport organisations,
254 their specific experiences with individual athletes, and reflection on how being part of
255 transition impacted their own coaching practice and relationships. Questions and probes were
256 developed based on key analytical concepts in Foucauldian analysis, for example the

257 discursive construction of the transition out of sport (e.g., Can you tell me about how you
258 think athletes experience the transition out of sport?), the participants' subjection positions
259 (e.g., Can you tell me about the role you have played in athletes transitions?), and the
260 relationship between discourse and practice (e.g., Can you tell me about anything you might
261 have done to support athletes during their transition?). Participants were interviewed for
262 between one and two hours (M=76 mins, SD=19.19). All of the interviews were transcribed
263 verbatim, and participants were given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

264

265 **Data Analysis**

266 The transcripts were read several times to promote familiarity with the data, get an
267 overall sense of the how the accounts progressed, and a holistic picture of the data. Initial
268 notes were made in the margins of the text to capture initial ideas, concepts, and relationships
269 within the data. Segments of data were identified across the transcripts to highlight the ways
270 that participants discussed the process and consequences of athletes' transitions, along with
271 references to the experiences of athletes that they were personally involved with. These
272 discursive constructions were then located within wider socio-cultural discourses prevalent in
273 elite sport, for example the pursuit of performance excellence, and dominant bio-scientific
274 discourses. The analysis then identified how coaches positioned themselves with these
275 constructions of athletes' transitions, how this facilitated and/or constrained the way they
276 managed the coach-athlete relationship (e.g., what they could do to support athletes during
277 transition), and what this meant for coaches' own sense of self. Throughout the analysis, data
278 were scrutinised using wider Foucauldian concepts described in the introduction. For
279 example, ideas around macro systems of power/knowledge (i.e., governmentality) were used
280 to understand the complex network of organisational power structures and practices that acted
281 on coaches and were reproduced by them through everyday disciplinary techniques. The

282 consequence of these practices within an athlete's career were explored as the coach-athlete
283 relationship was renegotiated by coaches as athletes retired from sport.

284

285 **Research quality and methodological rigor**

286 Tracy's (2010) 'big tent' criteria were use in a pluralistic and flexible approach to
287 research quality and methodological rigor, rather than a predefined, universal 'checklist'
288 (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The criteria chosen were 'worthy topic', 'rich rigor', 'sincerity',
289 'credibility' and 'significant contribution'. The prevalence of adverse outcome within
290 athletes' population during and after retirement was seen as an important motivation for the
291 'worthiness' of the study. As was the need to understand the coach-athletes relationship
292 during this time, for which athletes have said can play an important role in contributing to
293 successful transitions (Brown et al., 2018). 'Rich rigor' was supported by the application of
294 Foucauldian concepts to provide the theoretical and methodological lens to study the topic,
295 while the involvement of experienced coaches contributed to the depth and richness of the
296 data. 'Sincerity' was linked to research reflexivity and focused on how subjective values and
297 knowledge influenced the research process, with questioning/dialogue about the theoretical
298 and methodological approaches used. Reflexivity was promoted with the use of a research
299 diary and use of critical friends to capture and discuss thoughts, feelings, questions, and
300 decisions when engaging with the data and using Foucauldian discourse analysis (Marshall &
301 Rossman, 2006). More specifically, two colleagues (one with extensive experience of high-
302 performance coaching, and another with knowledge of discursive approaches in psychology)
303 were engaged in discussions about challenging aspects of the study. Thick description and
304 participant reflections were used to promote 'credibility' (Ponterotto, 2006).

305 All the participants were invited to take part in informal conversations about the
306 developing findings of the study and provide thoughts and feedback. Three coaches engaged

307 in this process and suggested that the findings of the study reflected the challenges they
308 experienced when engaging with issues around athletes' transitions, particularly around the
309 changing nature of their relationship with athletes, and the difficulties of providing guidance
310 and support to athletes during their transitions. Coaches recognised the constraints that
311 sporting structures placed on their ability to support athletes, but conversations about how
312 coaches may place expectations on athletes to take responsibility for planning retirement
313 were more challenging for participant to engage with. These conversations involved more in-
314 depth discussion of some of the theoretical aspects of Foucauldian theory, and it may have
315 been that these aspects of the study's methodology were outside of the coaches' expertise and
316 understanding. It is important to note that this may have been affected by my ability to
317 explain these aspects of the study in a clear and accessible way. Coaches may also have
318 experienced a type of identity threat (Steele et al, 2022) if they felt the findings of the study
319 in some way questioned the practices of the social group they feel part of. At the end of these
320 conversations, coaches reasserted their desire to do more to support athletes, but they needed
321 to be supported by their organisations to do so.

322 Although difficult to ascertain, coaches' reflection suggests the study's findings have
323 a degree of 'resonance'. It was hoped that resonance can also be achieved through analytical
324 and naturalistic generalisation, for example, by presenting new conceptual insights, and
325 aligning with the personal experiences or understandings of people outside of the participant
326 group (e.g., athlete and coaches) (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The study also seeks to make a
327 'significant contribution' by providing unique insights, provoking new discussions, and
328 offering practical suggestions for theory and practice within the field of career transitions in
329 sport.

330

Results and discussion

331 Coaches' talk about athletes' transitions out of sport were constructed within the
332 dominant 'performance' discourse in sport. The performance discourse encompasses socio-
333 cultural practices that prioritise complete dedication to sport and a single-minded pursuit of
334 winning above all other areas of life (Whitson & Macintosh, 1990). The performance
335 discourse in elite sport privileges adherence and compliance to the disciplinary techniques
336 used to govern athletes' everyday activities in all aspects of an athlete's life (e.g., use of
337 monitoring, metrics, categorisation) (Jones & Denison, 2017). In the context of the
338 performance discourse, the transition to retirement was positioned as a problematic
339 experience where athletes struggled to manage the process of adapting to life beyond sport.
340 Some transitions were constructed as more successful experiences that gave athletes
341 opportunities to apply valuable skills to other life pursuits, but coaches still drew upon ideas
342 of excellence and winning to shape the way they positioned athletes during retirement.
343 Coaches' positions within athletes' transitions are discussed by drawing on ideas from a
344 patriarchal construction of the coach athlete-relationship. Here, coaches are positioned as
345 father figures with responsibility for guiding athletes through their careers and transitions out
346 of sport, but findings also highlight how this responsibility was shifted towards athletes as
347 coaches negotiated the disciplinary practices they were subjected to through the structures of
348 elite sport.

349

350 **Coaches' constructions of athletes' retirement**

351 The participants consistently described the difficulties athletes had experienced when
352 transitioning out of sport. Many of these difficulties were discussed in the context of athletes
353 losing their sense of self after many years of being defined by their participation and
354 successes in sport:

355 There's lots of iconic sports people that I've certainly been involved with and known
356 over a period of time that, unfortunately, have become so engulfed and encompassed
357 within the game that, whether that be football, whether that be hockey, whether that
358 be cricket. So, they're defined by what they've done as a sportsman so, when they
359 leave the game, all they've ever known is sport, and being the captain of England, or
360 being, the goal-scorer for England, or whatever that might be. So, when they leave the
361 game, who are they? What do they stand for? So, the sport they've played defines
362 their identity (Alan).

363
364 In Foucauldian terms, power operates by privileging and promoting specific forms of
365 knowledge/practice, and restricting others, to the effect that this has significant effects on
366 how athletes' identities are constructed, regulated, and understood (Barker et al., 2014).
367 Coaches in the current study seemed to have a strong awareness that sport can impinge on the
368 typical development trajectory of a young person. In this respect, the coaches drew upon a
369 performance discourse to frame the way they constructed transitions as problematic. This
370 discourse often placed the importance of training, sporting goals, and physical development
371 in a privileged position, over and above anything else:

372 If you think about it, if all your spare time is taken up training, you have very little life
373 outside of that and I guess the kind of reference points that we have as individuals in
374 the real world as to what's really out there, they don't have. Because they don't have
375 time to watch telly, they don't have time to watch news, they don't have time to hang
376 around on street corners, they've got no sense of all that type of thing. It's really
377 interesting when you speak to an athlete, maybe 18 years of age, they're very, very
378 naïve compared to a normal person that's maybe gone through a normal childhood
379 progression (Matt).

380
381 Drawing heavily on the performance discourse to frame transitions has implication for
382 the way that athletes are constructed. In the extract above, athletes are positioned as different
383 from other young people, lacking the reference points that “we all have as individuals in the
384 real world”. The idea here is sport is unable to provide athletes with the common
385 developmental experiences that grounds a “normal childhood”. Often, the coaches talk
386 implied athletes were childlike and naïve; their agency, control and power diminished by the
387 sporting environment in which they were developing and negotiating their identity. Coaches
388 often discussed how this childlike naivety extended into their transitions to retirement:

389 They’re so used to having instructions, so they know that at four o’clock I’m going to
390 tell them what they need to do and that their next three hours of their lives is going to
391 be planned out by somebody else. And so, their whole day is like that, everything
392 revolves around needing to do things to be able to perform at half past five in a
393 morning, four o’clock in the night...everything is laid out for them like that and I
394 think a lot of them struggle with the fact that there’s nothing like that (outside of
395 sport), there’s no order, there’s no structure and so all of a sudden it’s like a real sense
396 of what’s my purpose, what am I meant to do? I had a conversation with one of my
397 ex-Olympians and she just rang me up and she’d been retired for about three months
398 and she just said, “Matt, can’t you just tell me what to do?” And it’s almost like, it’s
399 quite emotional at the time because you think to yourself, ‘God’, they’ve become so,
400 not institutionalised, but so regimented and so cossetted by the environment that
401 they’re in, that I think it’s hard for them to initially make that switch from that into the
402 absolute opposite of that (Matt).

403
404 Here Matt acknowledges the problematic consequences that disciplinary practices in
405 elite sport have for athletes when they retire. References to the “environment” and being

406 “institutionalised” positions the responsibility for these consequences within an
407 organisational context. Interestingly, there seems to be little acknowledgment of the role
408 coaches play in reproducing institutional power and Matt’s control over athletes’ time and
409 space seems to be taken for granted. Matt shows how the power dynamic in the coach-athlete
410 relationship then extends into retirement. Power clearly lies with the coach to “tell them what
411 they need to do”, and the athlete is positioned almost helpless in the face of an unfamiliar
412 way of being once they retire. The performance discourse in sport is said to produce ‘docile
413 bodies’ where athletes conform to regimented, extremely challenging, and (some might say)
414 harsh training and life-style regimes (Chase, 2006). Even outside of the coach’s direct
415 oversight, athletes often self-regulate their diet, physical training, and relationship activities
416 and athletes may discipline and police themselves in line with their perceptions of the coach’s
417 expectations. This is consistent with Foucault’s ideas about ‘panoptic surveillance’ (Foucault,
418 1979), such that the coach is ‘all-seeing’, and athletes are constantly aware of being visible.
419 However, when an athlete retires, and they no longer feel the ‘gaze’ of culturally defined
420 exceptions they may not know how to behave. In the extract above, the athlete’s only option
421 was to refer to the coach in the hope that they could once again “tell me what to do”.

422 In contrast to the somewhat negative framing of transitions as problematic, coaches
423 also constructed athletes’ transitions to retirement in a much more positive, optimistic way.
424 The quote below from Harry shows coaches drew on ‘whole person’ and ‘life skills’
425 discourses to describe how they work with athletes:

426 We are working with people, we’re working with human beings and we’re not just
427 working with people to meet targets, they’re not tools to use to tick a box, yes we’ve
428 got this many medals, well done, you’re amazing. We’re working with actual human
429 beings that have feelings, emotions, and also have a life after sport and out of sport. I
430 was always telling them to plan ahead, so think about where you’re going, so when

431 you get there where do you go after that. I think we have a responsibility to them as
432 an individual, as a person.

433
434 Harry's account positioned retirement not as the ending of a career, but as a move on
435 to the next stage of an athlete's life and personal development. Participants were often keen
436 to suggest that successful transitions did not start at the point of retirement and should be
437 thought of as an ongoing process across an athlete's career. Here Mike talks about the
438 importance of encouraging athletes to think about their education:

439 As a coach, as a sport mechanism, it's not just delivering the (sport) skills, you've got
440 to be thinking about, so education, it's like, okay, are your studies up to date because
441 you need a decent degree because that's probably what you're going to fall back
442 on...as a coach, I think you've got to call that. I've planned for you to be doing
443 studies, because you need to get that (degree), because that's going to lead you to a
444 career after.

445
446 The discussions above are concordant with the way that career development and
447 transitions in sport have moved toward a more holistic, whole person discourse that aims to
448 think about the challenges and opportunities that athletes face as the move along their
449 development pathway (Wylleman et al., 2011). Positioning athletic careers in this way
450 allowed coaches to draw attention to the experiences, attributes, and skills that athletes
451 possess that can be applied to vocational pursuits after their sporting careers come to an end:

452 A lot of athletes get to the top end of whatever they do after sport. Once they're in the
453 door (of a job/career), people recognise, these people are different, they never get ill,
454 they can work within a team because they've trained in a squad for the last 15 years,
455 they love pressure, they don't crumble, they love pressure, good communicators, so
456 they've got the kind of skills that you, as a boss would want (Mike).

457
458 The majority of people that I've ever coached that have reached a good level have
459 ended up reaching a good level at whatever they do afterwards as well. I think the
460 character traits that make them successful in sport are the same character traits that
461 make you successful in life. I don't think it's necessarily a sporting thing. I think it's
462 resilience and discipline and communication skills and that type of thing and they
463 often go on to be quite successful at whatever they do (Matt).

464
465 While the coaches' talk in the above extracts champions the role that sport can play in
466 the lives of athletes when they retire, and constructs transitions in a somewhat positive way,
467 this is still done by drawing on aspects of a performance discourse. The coaches draw on
468 ideas of objective excellence and achievement ("getting to the top end", "reaching a good
469 level") to position what a successful transition looks like. It appears that years of framing
470 sporting success in this way, extends to the way that coaches see athletes' 'performance'
471 when they leave sport. Athletes are again constructed as being different from others and the
472 coaches talk about the "traits" that have been learned in sport. From a Foucauldian
473 perspective, attributes related to teamwork, resilience and discipline are developed because of
474 the institutional space, power relations, and disciplinary practices that athletes experience
475 (Jones & Denison, 2017). Such attributes are needed to be 'productive', and it could be
476 argued that athletes are simply redeploying these attributes to meet the demands and
477 expectations of other disciplinary environments when they leave sport. This example of the
478 docility-utility relationship is closely linked to Foucault's broader analysis of biopower and
479 governmentality. It highlights how athletes are moulded by organisational practices and
480 governance in elite sport that feed into broader neoliberal and capitalist values around work
481 of individualism, competition, and rationality (Andrews & Silk, 2018).

482 Athletes often perform traits like discipline and resilience because they must meet
483 performance expectations and avoid the punitive consequence of failing to adhere (e.g.,
484 deselection, loss of social status) (Øydna, & Bjørndal, 2023). When coaches talk about
485 athletes being successful in other careers after sport, athletes may not see this as success and
486 may simply be reproducing disciplinary norms around scrutiny, judgement, and achievement.
487 Moreover, the coaches' constructions of what success looks like can be different to how
488 athletes experience retirement. Athletes have described how they wanted to escape the need
489 to perform when they retire from sport, and articulated feelings of relief that come with
490 escaping the constant monitoring and surveillance they experienced as athletes (Jones, &
491 Denison, 2017).

492
493 **Negotiating subject positions and identities**

494 Drawing on discourses of 'performance', 'whole person', and 'life skills' in
495 constructing retirement from sport served to construct athletes in particular ways, but also
496 worked to position coaches themselves within experiences of retirement. For the male
497 coaches in this study, acknowledging the importance of the athletes' personal development
498 during their career is consistent with a patriarchal discourse and the image of a concerned,
499 and compassionate father figure. This subject position allows coaches to use their knowledge
500 and life experiences to play a positive role as an empowered expert in athletes transitions.
501 Coaches were keen to show that support was available to athletes to explore their personal
502 development and plan for their life after sport. Coaches often had long-lasting, deep,
503 emotional relationships with their athletes, particularly coaches of athletes from individual
504 sports where relationships were formed over many years. Coaches talked fondly of the
505 athletes and wanted the best for them as athletes and as people.

506 Coaches spend hours and hours a day with the athletes, you spend all your weekends
507 with them, so somebody that you've coached from (age) 12 to (age) 24, you've spent
508 more time with that person than they have with their father, let's say, so it's an
509 important role that you're playing...and that's why you have to support them in all
510 aspects, in my opinion, because you're almost playing that role (father) and giving
511 guidance in life (Peter).

512
513 In the above extract, there is a strong sense of the responsibility that coaches have
514 toward athletes' development. If athletes' agency has been reduced by their involvement in
515 sport and they begin the process of retirement, it can place great responsibility on the
516 coaches' shoulders to continue to offer support. Participants did feel a sense of duty to
517 support athletes beyond the end of their careers but felt restricted by the focus on
518 performance and the rigid disciplinary structures and practice to which coaches were
519 themselves subjected. This places emphasis on coaches' responsibilities to their current
520 athletes not their 'old' ones. Thus, coaches felt restricted in the time and energy they could
521 devote to support athletes when they had retired because they could face disciplinary
522 consequences should their new athletes not perform to expectations.

523 Coaches found themselves in a difficult position within athletes' transitions. On one
524 hand they wanted to 'be there' for their athletes, but on the other they do not have time and/or
525 space to do this. As a result, their talk often carefully managed the issue of responsibility for
526 planning and preparing athletes for retirement, shifting this towards athletes themselves. In
527 the quote below, Peter suggests athletes should take ownership of their own activities when
528 planning life after sport. This mirrors the father-child relationship in developmental terms in
529 which it is the father's role to encourage offspring to become open to the world and to
530 facilitate ever increasing autonomy (Paquette, 2004).

531 The ones that have transitioned out well are the ones that have embraced it and have
532 got a career plan from five years before they've finished...they've already got it
533 planned out. They are already exploring the environments they need to go in, they are
534 already beginning to hook up with people that have been in those environments, that
535 have got the roles that they want to have. Those types of people that are forward-
536 thinking, that, you know, there's life beyond the sport, are the ones that tap into the
537 support more and more (Peter).

538
539 In coaches' talk about the success of athletes' retirements, they were keen to suggest
540 that support was available but responsibility for accessing that support was the athletes', as
541 Peter says they must "tap into" support. This implies that athletes need to use their agency to
542 formulate and act on a plan for retirement. However, previous research suggests athletes'
543 agency is shaped by the performance discourse and disciplinary environment of sport by
544 directing their choices and actions towards developing, optimising, and maintaining
545 performance (Blackett, Evans & Piggott, 2019). Thus, coaches' expectations for athletes to
546 take responsibility for planning retirement could be difficult for athletes to manage in
547 practice. Placing responsibility on athletes may serve a specific function within coaches talk
548 in that it allows them to manage the challenges surrounding the provision of support.

549 In some cases, there was discord in coaches' relationships with retired athletes,
550 particularly around the inability of coaches to provide support for athletes when they retired.
551 This conflict often came at considerable cost to the coaches own emotional wellbeing:

552 I have had situations where people that I had a really good close relationship with
553 have left the sport and have been quite bitter about it because they feel like they
554 haven't had that support and you're 50% to blame in that and it guts me....it almost
555 feels like when you split up with a partner or something like that, a girlfriend or a

556 boyfriend or whatever, obviously not the physical side, but the emotional link side, it
557 feels like that's broken. It really, really hurts me, really hurts me, even to this day,
558 after 25 years, some of the biggest regrets I've got in the sport are broken
559 relationships.

560
561 When thinking about how coaches negotiate their positions within athletes' transitions
562 it is important to recognise that coaches are also subjected to similar surveillance and
563 discipline practice as athletes (Gearity & Mills, 2012). Coaches' talk suggests they were
564 constrained in their ability to support retiring athletes by the sporting structures in which they
565 were embedded. Coaches were often critical of sporting organisations and governing bodies
566 for the way that they contribute to the framing of athletes as 'disposable', often cut from
567 programs once their performances had waned. There was wide recognition that organisational
568 support programmes to support athletes' transition could be effective, but some coaches were
569 critical of this as "ticking a box" to signify the organisation was meeting athletes' welfare
570 commitments. Furthermore, by centralising the responsibility for supporting athletes sporting
571 organisations assert control over the process, which, as Alan discusses below, may
572 disempower coaches.

573 I think the risk with there being personal development and welfare coaches, of which
574 I'm a massive fan of, but the risk of that is that the coach purely leaves it to them.
575 Often what we see is, the coach goes like that (places palm of hand up to signal 'no' /
576 'stop') and focuses on the sport...so, I think that there's a risk. As I said, I am a fan of
577 that, personal development and welfare coaches, but it has to be integrated, otherwise
578 the coach can detach and think, 'Oh, that's been taken care of', when they come and
579 see me, it's purely game and tactics, or technique'.

580

581 A consistent finding in the data was that the coaches' philosophy and focus on
582 athletes' development and wellbeing was often compromised by the sporting organisations in
583 which they were operating:

584 It's cut throat and people within the organisations that fund national governing bodies,
585 that funding is for investment into achievement, so they want success. So, it's like if
586 you look at an investment banker, what do they do? They invest money to make a
587 return on it. That's the culture that we've got into...we've now got a focus on
588 performance and with that comes hard decisions. They have to look at facts and
589 figures, there's no way around it. Because the people that are funding look at facts and
590 figures. Well, the athletes that I work with aren't facts and figures, they're people and
591 that's where it can be quite difficult. I also think that once that investment is done,
592 that's it, it's done, what about afterwards? What are we doing to keep them in the
593 sport or direct them afterwards? (Harry).

594 The discursive resources that Harry draws on here relate to the wider cultural milieu,
595 structures, and practices of elite sport that can reproduce the performance discourse and
596 constructs athletes as commodities, reducing them to "facts and figures", something to be
597 monitored and measured, and something for which a 'return on investment' is expected.
598 According to Foucault, 'governmentality' can be described as a network of dispersed
599 structures of power through which conditions of control are mediated and directed (Foucault,
600 1983). When applied to sporting contexts 'governmentality' can be described as the policies,
601 procedures, and processes that allow for the regulation and exertion of power by government
602 (e.g., sporting systems, institutions, and organisation) that creates systems of knowledge to
603 govern a population (e.g., coaches, athletes) (Piggin, Jackson, & Lewis, 2009)
604

605 Grix and Harris (2016) argue that the governance of sport in the UK involves a
606 hierarchy of power and authority where the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS)
607 in central government control of money (i.e 'funding') creates a network of dependence and
608 control. Thus, the scope, capacity, and authority of national-level sporting organisations like
609 UK Sport (the public organisation responsible for investing in Olympic and Paralympic sport)
610 is heavily dependent on the resources it receives from the DCMS. This financial dependence
611 ensures that UK Sport operates in line with the government's aims and objectives. As it
612 became more professional, the overall objective of elite sport in the UK has been an overt 'no
613 compromise' approach to winning medals and major international sporting events (UK Sport,
614 2006). This approach underpins the performance discourse that permeates all levels of sport
615 to the extent that the transition out of sport, which doesn't contribute to performance targets,
616 is not seen as a priority.

617 For several of the coaches the governmentality of elite sport, and its relationship with
618 athletes' transition out of sport, was often tied up in their ideas of self-hood. They were aware
619 that athletes' performance was *their* performance and losing athletes to retirement my impact
620 their own position within their sport:

621 Sometimes we can hold on to athletes because we're frightened as coaches of not
622 having that next one coming through and then we lose our identity as well. Because
623 we'll be forgotten about, because if the next one doesn't come along and win and does
624 well, you're a has been...that's what I said at the start about this conveyor belt of
625 success. One of the biggest fears that I know with coaches is not having something
626 coming through afterwards, because then what do you do? You need your identity as
627 well...in my sport we get a maximum of two athletes into the Olympic games, that's
628 it, two athletes....so I started thinking what else do I want to achieve? I kept thinking
629 about how I would maybe go more into coach development and coach education,

630 yeah, I think about my exit strategy because I've seen other coaches that just again
631 become lost and don't know what to do.

632
633 The quote above starts with the coach's concern for their athletes' transition and a
634 desire to support their decision making around the right time to retire. However, Harry also
635 discusses how his own identity is intertwined with athletes' success in sport. The
636 performance discourse binds the athlete's career and the coach's career together, so they are
637 both dependant on each other for success. If the "conveyor belt" does not but bring along
638 another high achieving athlete, then a coach's own identity is challenged. This may influence
639 athletes transition as coaches "hold on" to previously successful athletes for fear that other
640 are not "coming through". Both athletes and coaches are subject to the disciplinary practices
641 of sport through the performance discourse, and we see here the challenges that coaches can
642 face in negotiating their role with an athlete's career and transitions and constructing their
643 own identity.

644
645 **Future research, implications for practice, and conclusions.**

646 The present research explored the transition out of sport from the perspective of key
647 stakeholders that remain underrepresented in scholarship and practice. For the first time, elite
648 sport coaches had the opportunity to share their perceptions and experiences of athletes'
649 transitions out of sport. Findings suggest, coaches see transitions as problematic experiences
650 for athletes, but successful transitions can and do happen when constructed within a more
651 holistic discourse of athletes' personal development. The coaches often positioned
652 themselves as a father figure within athletes' transitions with responsibility for guiding
653 athletes through their careers and transitions out of sport. However, they suggested that the
654 policies, procedures, and processes within wider networks of power within sport restricted

655 their capacity to support athletes during their transitions, and so they often shifted
656 responsibility for planning and preparing for retirement to athletes themselves.

657 At a theoretical and methodological level, the present findings suggest that research
658 on retirement from sport can be enhanced by exploring the transition process within the
659 complex relational, social, and organisation power structures of elite sport. The present
660 research has provided a novel perspective on how people close to athletes construct and
661 negotiate retirement from sport and this suggests there is a clear benefit in seeing athletes'
662 transitions in the interpersonal context of the coach-athlete relationship. This contrasts with
663 existing theory that locates the process of transitions within individual athletes (Taylor &
664 Ogilvie, 1994). The shared, intertwined nature of athletes' and coaches' careers and
665 transitions suggests there is further need to illuminate the complexity of the interpersonal
666 processes involved in the transition out of sport. In this respect, Foucauldian ideas around
667 governmentality, bio-power, and docility could be used to explore coaching practices around
668 athletes' retirement decision making processes, the practice of 'de-training' when athletes
669 retire from sport, and coaches' involvement in athlete career and mentoring programmes.

670 The novel empirical, theoretical, and methodological findings presented in this paper
671 have several applied implications. At a socio-cultural level, there is a need to challenge
672 unhelpful aspects of the performance discourse that shapes athletes' transitions out of sport.
673 Achieving sporting success is an important part of many athletes' life project, and they
674 should be encouraged to pursue their ambitions in a safe and supportive environment that
675 takes a long-term, holistic view of their development. Recent steps to challenge the myopic
676 focus on sporting goals and open debate about athletes' welfare during and after their careers,
677 for example the report on athletes' welfare in elite sport (Grey-Thompson, 2017), are a
678 welcome step. However, general recommendations regarding changes of policy should be
679 transformed into concrete objectives to support athletes' wellbeing at all levels of their career

680 and beyond. This could include a portion of funding from central government be conditional
681 on sporting organisations meeting certain benchmarks on athletes' welfare, including after
682 they have retired. Doing so could shift the 'governmentality' of elite sport further towards a
683 discourse that can have a tangible impact on the way organisations shape their strategies and
684 everyday practice.

685 In the last decade, athletes career development and transitions in sport *has* moved
686 toward a more holistic, whole person discourse. The holistic athletic career model, for
687 example, positions the transition out of sport in the context of career progression and
688 developmental transitions across a sporting career from initiation to discontinuation
689 (Wylleman et al., 2011). Activities related to this framework are often designed to equip and
690 empower athletes to better manage their careers/transitions and includes pursuing 'dual'
691 sporting and vocational/educational careers to support development of multiple identities
692 and facilitate broad skills and experiences (Cartigny et al., 2021). Moreover, career and
693 personal development activities in elite sport aim to help athletes manage the demands of the
694 education/work, sport, and personal lives to promote holistic wellbeing (Park et al., 2012).
695 While these are welcome endeavours, it is important to highlight that power operates through
696 various structures and practices, including those that are seemingly positive or empowering.
697 Thus, a careful examination of how empowerment discourses function in practice is needed,
698 questioning whether they genuinely challenge existing power structures or inadvertently
699 contribute to new forms of discipline and control (Dowling, Mills, & Stodter, 2020). For
700 example, it is not enough to employ strategies to support athletes' transition simply to cover
701 or mask problematic practices that continue in everyday life. While athletes have reported
702 benefits of engaging in dual careers and personal development activities, they have also
703 reported challenges and costs, which often centre on the miss match between the aims of
704 programmes and support that delivered 'on the ground' (Cartigny, et al., 2021).

705 Building a more holistic discourse of athletes' career development and transitions can
706 only be possible if the complex networks of power in elite sport support practices that
707 promote this. Given the long disciplinary history of sport this is challenging (Denison, Mills,
708 Konoval, 2019), but coaches can play a part in this process. Coaches are often the people that
709 athletes engage with most closely within their careers, they could play an important role in
710 developing and delivering any organisational goals around athletes' welfare and career
711 transitions. As the present research as shown, coaches recognise and welcome the positive
712 role they can play in athletes' development through and beyond sport, but the performance
713 discourse places restrictions on what they can do and how they can do it. Coaches should be
714 supported by organisations to work alongside athletes and, where available, performance
715 lifestyle / athlete welfare coaches to deliver everyday support and long-term planning around
716 athletes' career development and transitions.

717 Clearly, additional research is required to understand more about the role that coaches
718 can play in athletes' transition and how they can contribute to organisational practices that
719 underpin this process. This could include understanding how coaches at different stages of
720 their career negotiate the complex relational issues related to athletes' retirement, research
721 involving both coaches and athletes who have maintained strong relationships after the
722 athletes have retired may help to illuminate the interpersonal strategies that nurtured the
723 relationship and positive consequences of doing so, and 'co production' of interventions and
724 support programme can help to give athletes and coaches a strong voice in any new
725 organisational strategies and support programmes. Future research and practice could draw
726 on recent development in post-structural coaching praxis (Mills et al., 2022). This approach is
727 critical of meta-narratives and singular truth, has a relational understanding of power, and
728 sees the self as ever evolving. This opens possibilities for coaches to play a genuinely
729 positive role in supporting athletes to question and reflect on transition decision making; help

730 them to investigate ambiguity, marginalised knowledge, and judgment around ‘successful’
 731 transitions; and encourages them to exploring multiple identities in the pursuit of
 732 connectedness, learning, and contentment in retirement. In doing so, coaches can facilitate the
 733 development of their own self-development and support constructive coach-athlete
 734 relationships when their athletes retire.

735

736

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