

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

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

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.

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

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

Foucault, sport, and the coach-athlete relationship.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methods

Philosophical Position

This research is positioned within the tenets of post-structuralism and contends that knowledge and truth “are produced rather than found” (Avner et al., 2014, p. 43), and emphasises the importance of language in the construction of discourse and social practice. This approach conceptualises the participants words as subjective accounts mediated by systems of meaning relative to time, place, and sociocultural context. Post-structural social science rejects grand narratives of human experience, challenges the notion of fixed meanings, and denies the existence of universal truth (Marcela & Silk, 2011). Post-structuralists argue that power plays a fundamental role in shaping social realities and 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;

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

Design

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

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

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

Participants

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

Procedure

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

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

Data Analysis

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

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

Research quality and methodological rigor

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

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

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

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

Results and discussion

Coaches' talk about athletes' transitions out of sport were constructed within the dominant 'performance' discourse in sport. The performance discourse encompasses socio-cultural practices that prioritise complete dedication to sport and a single-minded pursuit of winning above all other areas of life (Whitson & Macintosh, 1990). The performance discourse in elite sport privileges adherence and compliance to the disciplinary techniques used to govern athletes' everyday activities in all aspects of an athlete's life (e.g., use of monitoring, metrics, categorisation) (Jones & Denison, 2017). In the context of the performance discourse, the transition to retirement was positioned as a problematic experience where athletes struggled to manage the process of adapting to life beyond sport. Some transitions were constructed as more successful experiences that gave athletes opportunities to apply valuable skills to other life pursuits, but coaches still drew upon ideas of excellence and winning to shape the way they positioned athletes during retirement. Coaches' positions within athletes' transitions are 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, but findings also highlight how this responsibility was shifted towards athletes as coaches negotiated the disciplinary practices they were subjected to through the structures of elite sport.

Coaches' constructions of athletes' retirement

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

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

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

We are working with people, we’re working with human beings and we’re not just working with people to meet targets, they’re not tools to use to tick a box, yes we’ve got this many medals, well done, you’re amazing. We’re working with actual human beings that have feelings, emotions, and also have a life after sport and out of sport. I 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).

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

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

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

Negotiating subject positions and identities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Future research, implications for practice, and conclusions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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