

Academic Paper

A Parallel Journey: The varied roles of coaching in an elite athlete's transition to a second career

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Abstract

The one truth all athletes share is that their playing career will end, often before retirement age. While research into non-linear career journeys and work identity abounds, little exists into the plight of athletes, despite many having a sense of identity closely linked to what they do. Ten non-technical coaches, from two distinct groups, all of whom work with elite athletes were interviewed, and constructivist grounded theory methodology used to build an evidence-based model of how coaching can support an elite athlete's transition to a second career. The findings show a role for coaching throughout the journey, delivered via different formats along the way.

Keywords

elite athlete, transition, liminality, identity, constructivist grounded theory methodology,

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Introduction

Over time, careers have become increasingly fragmented, no longer following a linear path, with people less likely to remain in the employment of one company for the entirety of their working life (Burns, 2015; Tolentino, Garcia, Lu, Restubog, Bordia, & Plewa, 2013) and models of career change have gained traction (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). The question of how to cope with transition from one career to another has been well-documented, not least through Bridge's (1980) more general work around coping with change, and the corresponding development in coaching practices and techniques to help clients through such a transition (Parker, 2017), often with much apparent success. However, while life and career coaching are becoming increasingly prevalent within the corporate sector, in the world of sport, the idea of coaching for personal development over and above that required for performance improvement is still in its infancy.

And yet, despite discipline, ability or success, the one truth that all athletes share is that at some point their playing career will come to an end, either through retirement, personal choice, injury or

inability to continue to meet the standards set, and often well before pensionable age (Maseko and Surujlal, 2011; Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). Other than the exceptional few, at this point most are neither in a position to maintain their lifestyle from earnings accrued, or to continue to fund themselves by remaining in their sport without some form of re-training or career change. Coupled with this, the ending of an elite sports career often brings with it a significant loss of identity and yet most athletes are currently left to their own devices (Smith and McManus, 2008) at what can be an isolating and scary time, particularly if it comes earlier than hoped. Like others whose work is indistinguishable from their identity, the idea of no longer doing the thing you love as your main occupation often constitutes a loss or disruption of self, and many have not really considered the impact before this moment comes, failing to plan for this unavoidable moment, caught up in their careers and focusing on next Saturday as opposed to what will happen when they stop being picked.

The resulting feeling of loss and ending that often comes with this point of transition makes identification of the new beginning harder still (Bridges, 1980) and yet many do not know where to turn for formal support. This void is reflected by a corresponding gap in the academic literature on how coaching could specifically help athletes on their personal journey through their sporting career and to whatever is next.

This research looks to start to fill this gap, understanding how coaching can help elite athletes prepare for their transition to a second career, via a focus on identity and skills, and by providing the right form of support at the necessary moments on this journey. The key findings are brought to life in this article and presented in the form of a consolidated evidence-based model built via constructivist grounded theory methodology. In accordance with this methodology, it first looks briefly at the literature reviewed to create a boundary for the research (Charmaz, 2006) before outlining what the methodology entailed, ethics and limitations. The remainder of the article is given to a discussion of the findings and consolidating model. It ends with implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

Literature and Definitions

While literature can be found concerning athlete retirement (Smith and McManus, 2008; Lavalley and Wylleman, 2000), with particular reference to thanatological and social gerontological models, little exists regarding athlete transition to a second career. Time was therefore spent reviewing the literature surrounding career change theory, given it provides the theoretical framework for the research, as well as the key themes of liminality and transition. While much is written on these topics, less has been done to apply them to elite sport environments or transitioning athletes, thereby highlighting a gap within the current literature. To gain a better understanding of the environment, the most recent peer-reviewed articles surrounding coaching within elite sport were also reviewed including those covering mentoring. For the purposes of this article, a brief overview of this literature is included with the definitions below.

Coaching: a sports context

Within the world of sport, the term 'coaching' is often synonymous with technical and tactical improvement around a given sport, and the prevalence of the term 'coach' within sports environments complicates discussion of other forms of coaching, such as 'life' or 'career' in this context. This is echoed in the literature, where much is written about technical and tactical sports coaching within an elite context, but which is largely focused on improving athletic performance, and a tension remains between development and goal-orientated coaching in this field (Ives, 2008). The literature that does exist concerning personal development within elite sports tends to focus on youth transitioning into sport (Strachan, Côté, & Deakin, 2011; Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008), those who chose to become sports coaches (Blackett, Evans & Piggott, 2020), more

general wellbeing (Taylor, Huml & Dixon, 2019; Bruening & Dixon 2007) or mentoring (Crisp, 2018; Taylor & Groom, 2016). It is therefore necessary to clarify what is meant by coaching for the purposes of this study and to distinguish its meaning from the aforementioned technical and tactical sports coaching. I have used the International Coach Federation definition (2020) of coaching as 'partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential' (International Coach Federation, 2020).

Elite athletes

The term 'elite athlete' is also hard to define (Williams, Day, Stebbings & Erskine, 2017) and researchers have previously looked at themes including competitive level, professionalism and training time in order to provide a usable definition (Swann, Moran & Piggott, 2015). However, this study required the inclusion of those working in, and with, Category 1 football academies and foundation stage programmes to understand how these coaches work with those who have begun the journey to becoming 'elite', even if they have not yet competed at the highest level. I therefore used an adapted definition: those 'playing at an international or national level, including top level national professional leagues, and therefore training or competing at least five times a week'.

Second career

The meaning of 'career' has evolved through the years with Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989) providing an often used definition: 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time'. I have added 'second' as a prefix given that, for elite athletes, their next line of work is often a significant departure from what went before. This updated definition is reflected across recent career change theories, and while each carries its own nuance and considers different variables, common themes of flexibility, adaptability and versatility, as well as seeing the individual as taking greater control over their own path, can be found (Feldman, 2007; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Arthur and Sullivan's (2006) update to the boundaryless career model is of particular relevance, creating as it does a two-by-two matrix of career mobility, with one 'physical' axis looking at the ability to transition across industry boundaries, and the other at 'psychological mobility', and a person's perceived ability to make such changes.

Identity is another theme found within career change literature and is central to work by Brown (2014), Burns (2015) and Ibarra (2004) who use the term career 'reframing', 'reimaging' or 'reinvention' respectively when focusing the types of significant career changes this study set out to consider, although none expressly cover elite sport in their work. A gap therefore exists among these career change theories, in terms of understanding how new narratives are created across major transitions within non-linear careers in general, and for athletes moving to a second career in a different sector, in particular.

Whether the moment of transition for an elite athlete comes by choice or force, Bridges' (1980) three-stage model argues that it represents a journey through an ending, period in-between, and a new beginning often accompanied by a psychological shift, a concept echoed by Ibarra (2004). This period in-between, or void, corresponds with the specific moment of transition from one career to another and includes the concept of liminality, derived from the Latin 'limen', meaning 'threshold' and defined in coaching terms as 'the sense of ambiguity or disorientation when making a transition from one stage or phase to another' (Liminal Coaching, 2020).

Ibarra and Obodaru's (2016) redefinition of liminality within career change theory recognises that moves to the unknown present a greater challenge than other forms of change (Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018) and much research can be found which seeks to understand how people both create new identities and cope with this state during career change (Söderlund & Borg, 2018). As such, liminality is seen as a process (Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018; Söderlund & Borg 2018), also with three stages similar to Bridges' (1980) model.

Methodology

Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory methodology (GTM) was chosen to enable a research-led theory to be developed via an in-depth exploration of how coaches work with athletes before, and during, their transition. This exploratory, and process-orientated, qualitative approach enable patterns and common themes to emerge, thereby contributing to the knowledge base in this area. Charmaz's (2006) social-constructivist approach is in keeping with the concept of building something new and allows for conceptualisation by encouraging the creation of a theoretical framework surrounding the phenomenon being studied. While sometimes associated with a postmodernist approach (Creswell, 2007), Charmaz's (2006) update to the original GTM is more flexible, whilst remaining systematic, grounding the theory in the views of individuals (Charmaz, 2014), and is considered to be a suitable methodology when there is an "obvious gap" in research to be filled (Kenealy, 2012, p. 410).

Theoretical Sampling

GTM actively encourages more than one universe, using theoretical sampling to bring together perspectives of different stakeholders and constant comparison to evolve theory. It also allows for the triangulation of results – in this case with elite athletes themselves.

A deductive approach to finding participants was taken (Kenealy, 2012), using purposive non-probability sampling techniques, with new participants identified through learnings from the data collected and emerging codes and categories (Saunders, 2012). This bespoke approach allowed the sample size to be kept relatively small whilst still reaching theoretical sufficiency.

Participants

Two distinct populations were identified for interview, separated according to their different experiences in terms of client access, environment, and the point on the journey at which they had been engaged.

1. **Coaches employed by elite sport organisations** to work with athletes on all aspects of their non-sporting life, including identity, career development and transition.
2. **Coaches working either for themselves or independent companies**, and not part of an elite sports organisation, but whose client base includes elite athletes.

Ten participants, four men and six women, were interviewed, with one initially selected from each of the two universes as a pilot. All were coaches working in paid employment with elite athletes and either in receipt of a recognised coaching qualification or in the process of obtaining one. All had experience of coaching those transitioning from a playing to a second career, albeit at different points along the journey, and against different goals and objectives.

After seven interviews had taken place, and with three further arranged, it was clear it would be possible to build theory in response to the research question and grounded in the data, so new participant outreach was stopped at this point.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

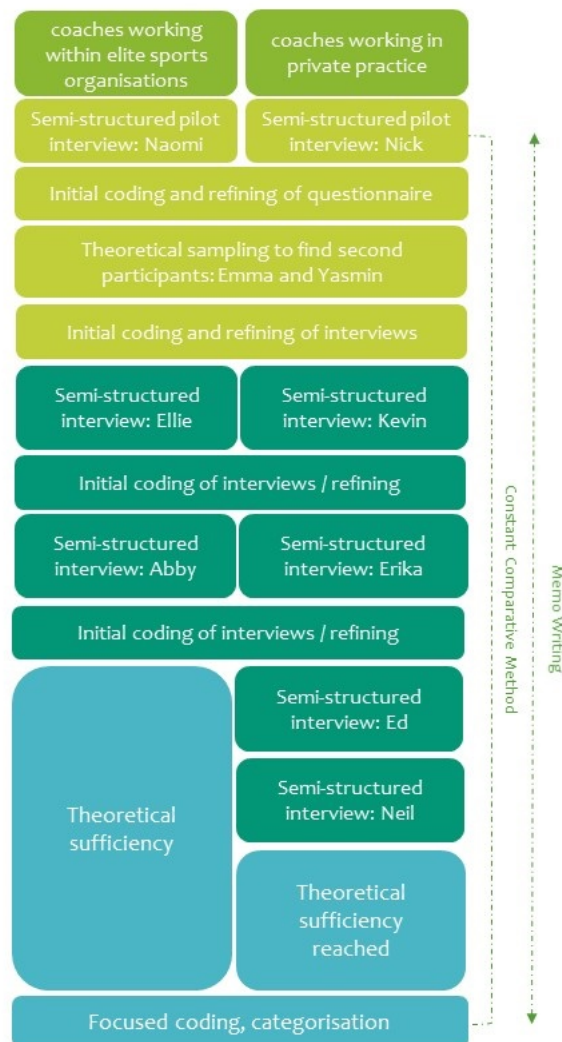
Semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom video technology to maximise the knowledge gained within each session whilst still allowing for an open-ended discussion. Face-to-

face interviews would have been preferable however the pandemic-induced travel ban across the UK during the research period meant this was not possible. No standard interview length was specified to allow participants to continue until they had reached the end of their story (Kenealy, 2012). Summary field notes were completed at the end of each interview to inform theoretical sampling, with transcripts from the recordings then created for the purpose of coding. Participants were offered the opportunity to view and amend the transcripts for confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began after the pilot interviews to allow for constant comparison and an iterative process. Four levels of analysis took place: open and selective initial coding aimed at the creation of as many codes as possible; focused coding leading towards the creation of categories via a process of reduction; identification of themes through clustering and the integration of memos, and finally the formulation of a theory, as shown in Fig. 1 below.

Fig. 1: Research Design Process Flow (Source: adapted from Charmaz, 2002 & 2006)



As opposed to aiming for the more traditional GTM aspiration of data saturation, this study aimed for the “theoretical sufficiency” suggested by Dey (1999, p. 257) given it recognises that the

categories have been suggested by the data rather than established by it. This sufficiency was achieved after four interviews with the more homogenous of the two participant groups, those working within elite sports organisation, among whom strong patterns emerged irrespective of whether they had worked with individuals in the Olympic and Paralympic system or inside professional teams or clubs. For Group 2, coaches working in private practice, two further interviews were required, largely due to the emergence of two unexpected topics: the importance of the coaches having been either athletes or sports coaches themselves earlier in their careers; and the impact of working with youth or foundation stage athletes before they become elite.

Ethics and Limitations

The study followed the Oxford Brookes University *Code of Practice Ethical Standards for Research involving Human Participants*, with Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) also used as an ethical guide, given the reliance on interviews for data collection. All participants consented to the interviews, and to being recorded, all names were anonymised, and all appropriate permissions were given. Any confidential information given by the participants was removed during the field note phase and no athlete, nor participant, can be recognised from the interviews or this study. All participants were explicitly notified that the sessions would be recorded, with data stored and transcribed but anonymised when reported. Access to participants for the pilot interviews was initially gained through my professional network although, for ethical reasons, I selected participants who I have not worked with directly. From here, a deductive approach to finding participants was taken (Kenealy, 2012) whilst ensuring there was no-conflict via a previous working relationship or likely future one.

The relatively small sample size could be considered a limitation to this research. However, theoretical sampling enabled the selection of informative participants, which went some way to mitigate this. The two groups, while distinct, were largely homogenous (professional coaches working with elite athletes) meaning this study leans towards the upper end of Saunders' guidance for new researchers of between four and twelve interviewees (2012).

Findings

In setting out to understand the role of coaching in an elite athlete's transition from playing for a club, team or their country, to whatever career comes next for them, I believed I would be looking at a certain moment in time, in and around the point of transition, and at the end of their sporting career. The main contribution of this study, however, is finding that the role of coaching changes with athletes as they go on their journey: it has a place earlier, from the moment they are identified as having potential and brought into an academy or foundation stage, and continues through their elite status to the inevitable end of this part of their life and the corresponding transition back into the wider world, either by choice or force. As the athletes change and grow, so does the role of coaching.

This research-led theory was developed from four themes that emerged during the interviews with participants. These themes are discussed below before the model, and its implications for practice, are discussed in full.

What - Part 1: Identity Work

According to participants, the primary role of coaching in an elite athlete's transition to a second career is identity work: aiding athletes, at various points on their journeys, including before they even become 'elite', to gain a greater understanding of their possible selves over and above their sporting identity, thereby enabling them to move on from their playing career when the time comes.

This represented the core theme from the research and was the focal part of each interview (Kenealy, 2012) with all the coaches interviewed speaking of the importance of understanding broader identity as being the key to a successful transition to a next career.

This was true irrespective of the age or stage of the athletes in question; or whether the coaches worked inside an elite sports environment, or independently outside of them. Understanding you are more than your sport emerged as the most important first step in a successful transition, whether this was done during the foundation or youth stages, when the athletes were not yet elite but rather preparing for selection, or towards the end of their sporting careers when they were beginning to consider 'what next'. This was equally observed by the coaches who did not undertake any identity work with their clients themselves, but who still recognised that it was crucial that they had completed this piece prior to seriously considering how to move into a different working world.

This theme of 'identity work' evolved from three of the categories that emerged during data analysis: 'person beyond the athlete'; 'there's a lot more to life', and 'liminality'.

Person Beyond the Athlete

While many people identify themselves through what they do, sport is unique in creating job labels that start to define a person's entire being. Irrespective of the discipline, the coaches recognised that the athletes with whom they worked identified as 'footballer', 'pole-vaulter', 'trampolinist', 'Paralympian'. In doing so, they limited themselves to one label, and focused on "what they do" as opposed to "who they are". Given the early age at which many sports select their up-and-coming talent, this can lead to young athletes defining themselves solely by this experience before they even know if they will succeed.

When a kid is good at sport, then suddenly they are put on the roulette table, especially a sport which is potentially an income generator for the whole family. It's like, I'm going to put that on red 10, you are a footballer.

Conversely, having a "broader identity gives you a level of robustness and resilience" and helps to bring "the confidence in who you are outside of what you do".

There's More to Life

The result of this need to uncover the person beyond the athlete led many of the coaches to discuss the importance of showing elite athletes that sport is only one part of life. The fact that the path to elite athlete can start so young in some sports was again a factor, and seen as one reason Premier League football clubs are starting to introduce identity work into their academies, in recognition that:

One percent of footballers become professional, so we need to make sure we've got different options and they understand who they are as well as a footballer.

In the early stages, this is as much about helping people understand their broader interests and the other labels they can give themselves, over and above their sport.

OK, outside of being a footballer, who am I? I realised when I came up with the list in my head, I was about 20 or 30 different things, so that was just a title. Once I realised I was more than just that, it made it easier for me to be something else.

How open athletes are to their life beyond sport depends in part on age and gender, with women often needing to pursue dual careers to support themselves financially.

Liminality

Without this broader identity piece seeded early and allowed to grow, the coaches described how athletes, including themselves, can end up feeling lost at the point of transition, and in a void. Whether leaving an individual or team sport, by choice, or by force, athletes have, until then, been part of a bigger system and training squad who will not all leave at the same time.

I had my death of my identity as an athlete. I knew sports ended by choice or by force, but I never thought it would happen to me.

How long the void lasts depends on the circumstances in which you left, the work done to prepare, and whether you have the self-awareness to recognise you are there.

You determine how long you are in there as an athlete. The longer we wait, the longer it hurts, the longer you got people walking through life without an aim, purposelessly, because they don't know who they are outside of what they do.

Interestingly, a former career as an elite athlete was not a pre-requisite for participation in the research, and yet it became apparent during the interviews that seven out of the ten coaches had previously pursued careers as sportspeople, and the majority of these referred to their journey through this limbo state as a reason for now working in this space.

What - Part 2: Preparing for What Next

While identity work emerged as the primary role for coaching in an elite athlete's transition to a second career, the interviews highlighted that it also had a secondary role to play once this initial work had been done. This centred on the practical elements of transitioning to a new career, akin to careers coaching. While this role was more prevalent in discussions with coaches working outside of elite sports organisations than within them, and with older athletes nearer the point of transition than those at the beginning of their careers, all the interviewees touched on the importance of storytelling, as well as the coaching practices, tools and techniques used to facilitate the realities of transition. They also recognised that financial concerns needed to be addressed for some, particularly those whose sporting career had made them less famous, and less well remunerated, than their contemporaries in different sports.

The three categories from which this theme was created contained less rich data than those concerning identity, which is unsurprising given that they do not represent what those interviewed considered to be their primary role. Nonetheless, they are important when looking to understand the role of coaching in an elite athlete's transition to a second career.

Storytelling

In discussing how the coaches worked with athletes over and above the identity piece, it became clear that it was a mixed process, combining coaching tools, mind maps and 'effective questioning'. This resulted in "a combination of coaching, mentoring, and directing them into what they might do". Part of this was about building confidence around their abilities in a new world, and part involved helping the athletes craft the right story, over and above the identity piece, especially at the point of transition: "one of the things I do with most people is help them to tell their story in a more appreciative and useful way". Once the story piece was complete, the focus often turned to networking and finding suitable audiences for the athletes in their new lives.

Practicalities

According to the participants, the elite athletes most likely to need a second career, because of lower salaries and/or fame levels, appeared to receive coaching support earlier, usually driven by

their organisation. While the support given varied by player, coach, and sport, much of it included raising awareness of the qualifications that could help them achieve whatever they wanted to do next. Coaching therefore has a role not just working with an athlete to understand their broader “interests, passions, values” but also to help them consider how these “meet up with their behavioural skills and strengths”. This includes working more practically to give advice on CV writing, networking and thinking about future career options.

How: Fitting the Environment

The context of elite sport also emerged as an important theme that needed to be understood. Referred to unprompted by nine of the participants as a ‘bubble’, and validated as a concept by the tenth, the research highlighted sport as a unique setting given the particular performance pressures, reality of what it is to be elite, and requirement for laser-focus. Encompassing three of the categories that emerged, this theme recognises the particular environment athletes experience while pursuing a career in elite sport, both on the perimeters of the bubble – as they enter as a young sportsperson with potential, or later as they leave their playing career behind them - and the precious moment in between, when performance is at its peak. In doing so, it acknowledges there is a time, which can vary in length, when all athletes feel the need to focus on a single identity to reach their potential, despite an emerging argument that a broader understanding of self can actually enhance performance.

Sport Trusts Sport

That a high proportion of those interviewed had previously had a playing career themselves, or come up through a parallel avenue, such as sports science, highlighted the importance of coaches not just understanding the environment, but having had some form of lived experience of it.

Working with the players is a really closed shop, it's a really difficult area to break into because you've not played yourself...they go to people they know.

This was as much about being able to make a connection as understanding the finer points of the sport in question. As a result, for those working outside of elite sports organisations, much of their work came through well-known and trusted referrals, with gatekeepers playing an important role, while those inside spoke of the importance of engaging with the athletes in their own environment, often informally, in order to build the relationship.

The Sporting Bubble

This closed world of sport was emphasised by the repeated use of the word ‘bubble’ both to describe the broader context of elite sporting environments and the point of peak performance within them, with participants believing that as athletes turn professional, or enter a World Class Programme, they become:

Surrounded by people who make them feel brilliant, and who make them think they can walk on water, and who want them in this bubble of continuing to play sport.

Tunnel vision was seen by many as a pre-requisite as athletes reached their peak, with a belief that thinking about broader identity could be a distraction since the moment of optimal performance can be short: “you’ve got to be locked into what you do and why you’re doing it.”

Identity Work Can Enhance Performance

A narrative exists within elite sport that thinking about what comes next could hinder performance, causing young players to learn early not to consider their later careers, selves or opportunities.

However, a counterview is growing that identity work is not only not damaging, but can, in fact, help performance.

We know that the science says that an athlete that sees themselves as more than just an athlete, will actually do better, will be better at performing.

This performance benefit is seen as significant by those who subscribe to it and that the result is “not just marginal gains, it's substantial gains”.

When: Throughout the Journey

Transition is often seen as a fixed point in an elite athlete's life, when they make the move from playing and competing in their sport as their primary function, to identifying as something different, and another career, outside of it. However, it became clear during research that this was not the case, and that the earlier coaches began working with athletes, the easier the transition at the end, given the support received and greater sense of identity and possible selves the athletes therefore possessed, irrespective of whether they had also gained additional skills or education along the way. For this reason, theoretical sampling led to a greater number of participants being interviewed who worked with young and developing athletes, identified as having potential but not yet being professional or 'elite', reducing selection bias (Barbour, 2001) and leading to a consideration of the different moments at which coaching can play a role on an athlete's journey. The final theme to surface from the findings therefore considers 'when' and is, again, comprised of three categories. While not the core theme, it is arguably the most significant, given the influence it has on the evidence-based model, and its contribution to practice.

Starting Early

It became clear early in the research that work to ensure a successful transition ideally begins a lot earlier than one might expect, at the start of an athlete's career. Those coaches working with this younger, 'pre-elite' group identified that the dynamic of working with undeveloped athletes, often children, is clearly different, and more informal,

I do a lot of it in the gym with them and join in as it helps build relationships, you get a bit more buy-in. It's not the same kind of environment and that's the difference between the coaching and mentoring piece. It's just a bit different in that sense, they don't really know we're working together but we are'.

A lot of this work is done quite informally. As a result, most of the coaches working inside a club or team, and with younger athletes, did not follow a full coaching process, especially since contracting felt too formal. Instead of holding the athlete's agenda, as a traditional coach might, they saw their role as beginning with exploration, identity, and stories, and then moving on to goals if they were still working together.

Included in this was both a recognition that introducing other hobbies or education becomes harder as athletes progress, and that, if conversations concerning broader identity are left too late, athletes assume they conceal a de-selection agenda. Conversely, mentioning “the subject often enough so it's not taboo and not specific to certain athletes” makes it easier to draw on as required.

The Right Support at the Right Time

The concept of a journey also emerged as relevant for athletes who have already left sport but who had not yet carried out overt identity work. Similarly, Group 2, the external coaches, recognised they still had a role to play with those athletes who had done the identity piece prior to engaging them, or who were 'big names' arguably not as lost or in need of immediate income. In these instances, instead of spending time focusing on possible identities, the sessions considered how

best to articulate the athlete's personal brand for the next stage of their career and led to more formal relationships.

Whatever form their support took, the coaches all recognised the value their relationships added:

Sometimes you've got athletic egos. You think you're all alone and no one has ever felt like this before in the history of athletics and you don't want to talk to anyone about it.

However, the participants also recognised that help should not come from them alone, and sports coaches, friends and family who provide "the psychological support and emotional support that is needed when you are transitioning" were also important.

By Choice or By Force

One reason for being prepared is that injury can take you by surprise. Another is that, while there is a general acceptance that athletes know when they are underperforming, they do not always recognise what this means, and leaving by force, however it happens, can bring difficult emotions:

When it's by choice, you're more prepared, when it's by force, you think 'what if?'. If your career ends by force you are mad, you're upset, you're angry because it didn't work out the way you thought it was going to work out, you couldn't control it. Now this identity crisis is even harder for you, it's harder for you to swallow that pill.

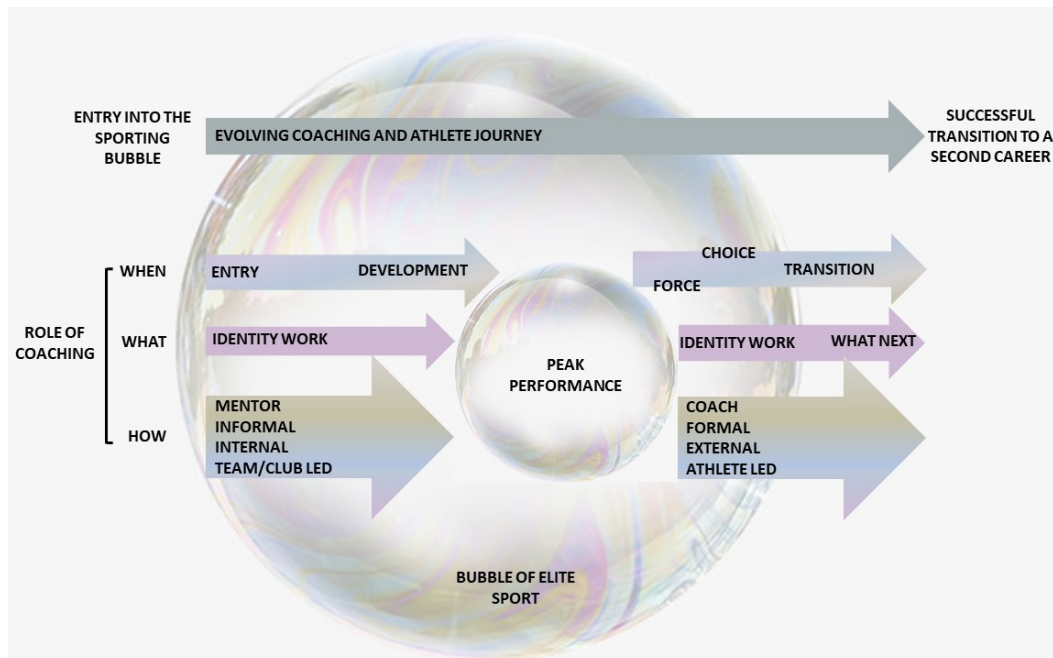
Evidence-based Theory

In bringing together the four main themes that emerged from this piece of research, I arrived at an evidence-based model born out of the grounded theory methodology. This considers all aspects of the role of coaching - both in terms of the work done with athletes to enable psychological and physical mobility ('what'), as well as 'when' and 'how' this work should take place. The resulting model provides this study's contribution to research, starting to address the gaps in the literature, and highlighting the need to consider the full journey elite athletes go on, as opposed to a single moment of transition. In doing so, it draws attention to the different ways coaching can help, as well as in what setting, and what form, as elite athletes' transition to a second career.

Consolidating Model

The consolidating model showcases this journey, in which the context of elite sport is represented by two bubbles: an outer boundary signifying the time from an athlete's entry into a sporting setting to the moment they leave to pursue a second career; and an inner one of peak performance. Within this, the evolving role of coaching can be seen. While the coaching focus is primarily concerned with the future point of transition, and so centred on identity work until this moment approaches, the way in which it is delivered evolves with the athlete. Therefore, we see coaching initially most effectively delivered by a mentor, in an internal setting, working inside, and paid for by, a club or team, and doing work that is largely informal in its nature, with young athletes at the beginning of their career. There is a break at the point of peak performance, when coaching arguably has less of a role, before a more formal, external coaching relationship, engaged and paid for by the athlete, and focusing on the immediate what next, gains a role as the moment of transition nears or passes (see Fig.2 below).

Fig. 2: An Evidence Based Model of the Role of Coaching in an Elite Athlete's Transition to a Second Career



The Role of Coaching: Implications for Practice

As shown by the consolidating model, this study concludes that, despite neither being well-established nor more widely researched in this setting, there are several roles for coaching in an elite athlete's transition from their playing to their second career. To understand the potential implications for practice, when, what and how coaching can be utilised on this journey needs to be examined.

When: Throughout the Journey

The consolidating model illustrates both the wider context of elite sport, and the smaller moment of peak performance within it. As such, it mirrors Bloom's (1985) three stages of talent development which Moore (2005) subsequently reapplied to sport: young athletes being identified as having potential and entering the elite sport bubble; training and development; and peak performance or mastery. While the theorists' models end here, the one which has emerged from this research continues past the peak to the inevitable transition out into the wider world of work, by choice or force, and shows that, with a possible break during peak performance, there is a role for coaching in working with athletes on their future transition throughout.

While literature exists which looks to understand athlete identity and the issues surrounding retirement, and much is written on the broader context of career change, general transition and liminality, through its use of Charmaz's (2006) GTM and theoretical sampling to build this evidence-based model, this is the first to recommend that coaching, in some guise, begins from the moment athletes as young as eight years old enter the world of elite sport in academies or foundation stages.

What: Identity Work and Preparing for What Next

The research highlighted that this coaching should initially be delivered in an informal, mentoring capacity, as part of the internal support provided by the club or team, before growing in stature

alongside the athlete throughout their journey. The core theme to emerge from participants was the role coaching can play in conducting identity work with athletes, enabling them to understand their multiple selves. The earlier this is carried out, the easier it is to establish, lessening the bump if a career ends prematurely through injury or de-selection, and enabling athletes to gain a broader understanding of who they are over and above their sport.

When discussing their respective segmentations of the boundaryless and Protean career models, Arthur and Sullivan (2006) and Hall and Briscoe (2006) highlighted identity as a key factor in those looking to significantly shift career being able to transition successfully. This theme is picked up by other theorists (Brown, 2015; Burns, 2015; Ibarra, 2004) who argue that, to move on to do something different, you first need to reduce any identity boundaries (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), 'reframe' (Brown, 2014) or 'reimagine' (Burns, 2015) who you are, or 'reconfigure' (Ibarra, 2004) your work identity among the possible selves available to you. Part of this process involves gaining greater self-awareness and self-knowledge, two of the aspects of consciousness-raising seen as a significant process for those looking to create change (Moore, 2005). This is in keeping with what the interviewees in this study disclosed: no matter when they worked with athletes, where, or with whom, ensuring that they understood that there was more to them, and life, than their current occupation was a huge part of the journey.

Where the findings of this study differ from the literature is on the emphasis put by many of the participants, and particularly those working with the younger athletes, on understanding non-work interests as part of this exploration. While Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Esbroeck, and van Vianen argue 'career itself is built by engaging in activities and then reflecting on the outcomes' neither they, nor other theorists, expressly include hobbies and pastimes as part of the identity work discussed, focusing instead on 'tangible experiments' within a work context and 'learning from peers' (Ibarra, 2004, p. 122) to help reveal one's next working identity. This makes sense given that literature surrounding career change theory, liminality and work transition is exclusively concerned with adults, as opposed to the younger people identified by some of the respondents and is generally focused on the actual point of transition from a given career to a new one. This contrasts with much of the work being done by those interviewed within sports organisations, who see a need for young athletes to ensure they are not pigeon-holed – by themselves or others – into being what they do.

While some of the participants, and many ex-athletes informally interviewed for the purpose of triangulation, believed this work could not continue during the performance peak given the need to focus, others presented an emerging school of thought that identity work could enhance performance. Whether done early, or after an athlete's peak, the model shows understanding their broader identity is crucial if athletes are to begin to prepare for what next, enabling them to avoid the void, or period of liminality, that can accompany significant change. This echoes Bridges' (1980) three-stage transition model of ending, void and new beginning, and work by Van Genep (1909) before him. However, Bridges argues that no matter the order, all three stages need to be experienced for a transition to be complete, something not found in this study where, conversely, the participants either stated, or intimated, that paying due attention to identity early might enable the limbo stage to be bypassed. As such, the participants did not appear to agree with the premise that liminality is potentially a path to identity growth (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016) instead suggesting that, by working on this growth early, there would be no void.

Where this research and the literature do come together again though is in the updated concept of liminality provided by Ibarra and Obodaru (2016). By giving a more fluid definition of liminality than originally proposed (Turner, 1969), they not only argue it can be self-created, something the participants also highlighted, but also agree it can vary in time, length and form.

A secondary role for coaching became apparent in this study once athletes are comfortable in who they are outside of what they do. At this point, coaches can work with them as they consider the more practical elements of transition, including networking, CV creation and gaining a greater

understanding of what it means to work in a different career and setting. Being adaptable, requires an understanding of who you are, but also confidence in what you are going to next and the ability to project your future into different contexts (Savickas et al, 2009), which is where the more traditional careers coaching alluded to by some respondents comes in. While most did not focus as much on these specifics as they did identity, there was a recognition that a secondary role of coaching was helping with the 'what' as well as the 'who'. These elements are more directional than one might expect from coaching, but this has been argued to be appropriate within careers coaching (Hazen & Steckler, 2018) and this form of support is certainly evident in the roles played by the coaches interviewed. Indeed, Savickas' Career Adapt-Abilities scale, which can be segmented into five pillars of: concern (how prepared you are); control (responsibility taken); curiosity; confidence and commitment (Savickas et al, 2009), is arguably a good summary of the areas in which coaching, in different guises and at different points along the journey, can play a role in an elite athlete's transition to a second career.

How: Fitting the Environment

The research identified that the sporting bubble is a unique environment bringing athletes into an elite setting, often from primary school age, and holding them until they inevitably leave by choice or force.

This concept of a 'bubble' was clearly articulated by all participants, and yet no reference to this term, or concept, could be found in the academic literature reviewed. As well as describing the bigger bubble of elite sport, encompassing the entire experience from identification as a youth to the moment of transition back into the wider world, the interviewees also referenced a smaller, arguably more intense, bubble of peak performance within it. Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavallee (2004) argue that athletic careers are comprised of several mini-transitions, their description of which has similarities to the 'bubble within a bubble' suggested by these findings, and particularly the identification of three stages of talent development, based on Bloom's (1985) model, including the 'mastery or perfection stage in which athletes reach their highest level of athletic proficiency' as a separate phase of their journey (2004, p.10). As discussed above, the findings show a role for coaching at all stages in this journey, but the participants clearly identified that different approaches were needed along the way. Children and young athletes are unlikely to request, or respond to, a formal coaching setting or to work with external practitioners as they enter what they hope will be their primary career. However, a clear role emerged from research for practitioners, ideally with sporting backgrounds and coaching qualifications, to act as support within clubs and teams, interacting with the athletes informally and in their setting, arguably as mentors, helping them consider their wider identity and the hobbies and skills they might wish to pursue outside of their sport.

Conversely, while those at the point of transition and leaving their sport may still interact with internal support, at this point of exit, a role also emerged for more formal coaching, complete with the goal setting and contracting that brings, paid for, and engaged by the athletes and delivered outside of their previous work setting. Here, the focus may again be on identity work but may also involve storytelling techniques and a more practical emphasis on careers, with the agenda set by the client.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted that the role of coaching in an elite athlete's transition to a second career evolves with the athlete, and environment, over time, maturing from an internal, informal mentoring relationship with those just starting out to a more formal, external, coaching relationship with traditional client-coach contracting and processes later on. It recommends that elite sport organisations either engage internal coaches to act as mentors, working in an informal manner with

young athletes from the moment they arrive in order to help them develop and understand their multiple identities, or follow the examples of the football clubs and English Institute of Sport in training their practitioners in coaching skills and creating this provision. It also recognises the role external coaches, and particularly those with a sporting background themselves, can play by working individually and externally with athletes at the point of transition, and recommends practitioners look to raise awareness of the work they can do in this space, either by engaging with sports organisations or through their own resources.

Future Research

One barrier to coaching becoming more established in helping athletes' transition is a lack of awareness and understanding of its role in this unique context, and despite much cross over between the experience of athletes and literature concerning career change, transition and liminality, no specific theory exists relating to this group over and above the learnings from this research. The prevalence of the concepts of identity and liminality in the interviews conducted showcases a real need to explore these ideas further within elite, and pre-elite sport settings, not least because a high-performance lens makes the themes found in the literature feel even more pronounced.

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