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1 **‘I want to do well for myself as well!’: Constructing coaching careers in elite**
2 **women’s football**

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5
6 **Abstract**

7 There is a limited understanding of career development of sport coaches, especially from the
8 subjective perspective focused on personal meaning and evaluation of this life project in
9 sport. We drew on career construction theory and narrative methodology to explore football
10 coaches’ career development, adaptability resources, and the meanings they assigned to their
11 journeys. Ten women’s football (soccer) coaches (2 women) aged 23-60 in England took part
12 in narrative interviews which we analysed using thematic narrative analysis. Our analysis
13 indicated that early immersion into the football narrative context most often resulted in low
14 career exploration and a strong commitment to coaching as an attempt to keep the footballing
15 identity narrative ‘going’. Whilst the majority of coaches had a full-time occupation
16 elsewhere, they self-identified as professional coaches and approached coaching with a career
17 orientation animated by a desire to progress to a full-time coaching position. The coaches
18 were resourceful and active career agents in crafting their careers in football; however, most
19 of them expressed little concern or curiosity for other careers aside professional coaching,
20 leaving them vulnerable to psychological distress if unable to realise their career ambition.
21 The findings illustrate the seductive nature of football with the narrative context providing
22 coaches with a cherished sense of identity but also bringing a permanent sense of insecurity
23 and costs to their lives outside of the game.

24
25 **Keywords:** coach identity; career development; narrative; vignettes; women’s sport

26 **‘I want to do well for myself as well!’: Constructing coaching careers in elite**

27 **women’s football**

28 Sport coaching provides the coach with a life project that often requires extensive
29 commitment, at times at the expense of other activities and interests. Although research into
30 athletic careers spans over the last five decades (Stambulova, 2017), the study of coaching
31 careers is at its early stages (Christensen, 2013; Nash & Sproule, 2009; Purdy & Potrac, 2016).
32 Studying coaching careers is important for understanding how to support coaches’ professional
33 and personal development, well-being and motivation (Koh, Mallett, & Wang, 2011).
34 Furthermore, researchers have argued that personal histories and career development
35 trajectories play a significant role in shaping coaching philosophies and practices, often more
36 so than formal coach education (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Watts & Cushion, 2017).

37 Similar to theorising on athletic careers, the coaching careers in high-performance
38 contexts have been described with modernist models focused on normative stages in the
39 upward pathway to an expert/professional/elite position (Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas,
40 2007; Koh et al., 2011; Schinke, Bloom, & Salmela, 1995). Studies have illustrated that the
41 coaches are typically former athletes and accumulate several years of coaching experience
42 before transitioning to the elite level coaching (e.g., Schinke et al., 1995; Koh et al., 2011).
43 However, some researchers have started to problematise the stage-based career models in that
44 they “ignore individual backgrounds, socio-cultural and contextual differences, and significant
45 life events” (Barker-Ruchti, Lindgren, Hofmann, Sinning, & Shelton, 2014, p. 118).
46 Researchers critiquing the linear career models have studied alternative pathways to become
47 an elite sport coach (Blackett, Evans, & Piggott, 2018; Christensen, 2013), whereas others have
48 portrayed coaching careers as political life projects enmeshed with complex power dynamics,
49 relationships and occupational structures where experiences of uncertainty and change are the

50 norm (Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne, & Nelson, 2012; Purdy & Potrac, 2016; Purdy et al., 2017;
51 Thompson, Potrac, & Jones, 2015; Watts & Cushion, 2017).

52 Football in the UK remains an occupational context strongly linked with working class,
53 masculine identities (Champ, Nesti, Ronkainen, Tod, & Littlewood, 2018; Fielding-Loyd &
54 Meân 2011) and the traditional culture has been marked by volunteer coaching (Taylor &
55 Garratt, 2010), anti-intellectualism and hostility towards education (Kelly, 2008; McGillivray
56 & McIntosh, 2006). McGillivray and McIntosh (2006) argued that football culture lures
57 adolescent boys into committing to football at the expense of formal education and intellectual
58 curiosity, thus limiting career planning and prospects of carving out professional careers
59 outside of football. The issues of identity foreclosure and psychological distress following de-
60 selection in elite adolescent footballers are well documented (Blakelock, Chen, & Prescott,
61 2016; Brown & Potrac, 2009). Researchers have further described football as a
62 hypercompetitive, insecure and uncaring social world for coaches, too, who know that they can
63 be easily replaced (Potrac et al., 2012). Previous findings have indicated that acceptance and
64 respect need to be earned especially by newcomers (Thompson et al., 2015) and that female
65 coaches' lack of career progress is often constructed as an individual deficiency within the
66 rhetoric of liberal individualism asserting equal access to opportunities and success (Fielding-
67 Loyd & Meân, 2011).

68 Women's football has received minor funding and media attention compared to the men's
69 game. Until recently, even the elite players and first team coaches in women's football mostly
70 had jobs and careers outside of football. However, the recent decade has witnessed a growth of
71 interest in women's game in participation, attendance and viewership both globally and in the
72 UK (Bridgewater, 2019; Lewis, Roberts, & Andrews, 2018). The women's elite game in
73 England went through major restructuring in the last decade, and the introduction Women's
74 Super League (WSL) in 2011 meant that for the first time female players could be paid

75 (Woodward, 2017). The recent transition of the WSL to a fully professional league (Football
76 Association, 2017) has also opened new possibilities to become a professional coach within
77 the women's game. However, despite the growth of women's game and their participation as
78 athletes, researchers have found that men still dominate coaching and managerial roles in
79 women's football (Lewis et al., 2018; Fielding-Loyd & Meân 2011; Scraton, Caudwell, &
80 Holland, 2005). Critical scholars have argued that cultural insiders in women's football largely
81 reproduce exclusionary and hierarchical cultures that sustain male privilege (Scraton et al.,
82 2005). The English Football Association, like the game more broadly, has been described as
83 ideologically masculine and resistant to women (Fielding-Loyd & Meân, 2011).

84 Despite the recent advances in scholarship, we still have a limited understanding of the
85 psycho-social processes associated with coach career development and the resources that
86 coaches draw on to construct their careers in the volatile sporting environment. This paper aims
87 to extend understandings of subjective career meanings that football coaches assign to coaching
88 and to explore the resources they draw on in the psychological adaptation to the increasingly
89 competitive coaching environment of women's elite football. By drawing on career
90 construction theory (Savickas, 2002, 2013), our study extends previous, predominantly
91 sociological literature on coaching careers by shedding light on psychosocial processes
92 associated with coaches' self-construction. Furthermore, since previous research has mainly
93 studied those coaches' experiences who have achieved expert/professional/elite status (e.g.,
94 Erickson et al., 2007; Christensen, 2013; Nash & Sproule, 2009; Schinke et al., 1995), our
95 study adds to the literature by exploring early career coaches' career experiences. Based on
96 our analysis, we will also make inferences on the potential consequences of coaches' career
97 narratives on the development of women's professional game and women's experiences of
98 playing the sport.

100 Conceptual framework

101 Career construction theory is a psychological theory of career development that aims to
102 explain “the interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals construct
103 themselves, impose direction on their vocational behavior, and make meaning of their careers”
104 (Savickas, 2013, p. 147). It can be considered a critical realist approach in postulating that
105 “individuals construct representations of reality, yet they do not construct reality itself” (ibid)
106 – in other words, a constructivist epistemology is combined with a realist ontology (see
107 Maxwell, 1992). Savickas proposed viewing vocational development as a personally
108 meaningful process of life design, where “career denotes a reflection on the course of one’s
109 vocational behavior, not vocational behavior itself. This reflection can focus on actual events
110 such as one’s occupations (objective career) or on their meaning (subjective career)” (Savickas,
111 2002, p. 152).

112 Career construction theory postulates that successful career development is underpinned
113 by the psychological mechanism of career adaptability which stems from balancing personal
114 needs and aspirations with socio-cultural expectations (Rudolph, Zacher, & Hirschi, 2019).
115 Career adaptability is a psycho-social resource facilitated by concern, control, curiosity, and
116 confidence (Savickas, 2002; 2013). Resourceful individuals respond to career development
117 tasks and transitions by (1) becoming concerned about their occupational future, (2) aiming to
118 increase control over that future, (3) exhibiting curiosity by engaging in explorations of future
119 trajectories and selves, and (4) building confidence at their possibilities of realising their
120 ambitions. Concern is often considered the most important dimension of career adaptability
121 that involves planfulness, anticipation and optimism, and is shown to be associated with future
122 time perspective (Öncel, 2014). Control refers to individuals’ sense of responsibility for
123 constructing their careers, involving related constructs of agency, locus of control, self-

124 determination and autonomy. Curiosity refers to exploration and information seeking of career
125 opportunities, and is often seen as the key developmental task of adolescence. Finally,
126 confidence relates to one's sense of ability to successfully navigate the career challenges and
127 reach career goals and is empirically associated with self-efficacy (Öncel, 2014). It has been
128 suggested that career adaptability is especially crucial in times of career transition (Fasbender,
129 Wöhrmann, Wang, & Klehe, 2019). Empirical findings on career adaptability have indicated
130 that it is related a number of positive factors including career satisfaction, employability and
131 life satisfaction, and negatively related to job stress (for a review, see Rudolph, Lavigne, &
132 Zacher, 2017). However, Rudolph et al. (2019) noted that there is still little research on
133 contextual influences such as team environments, organisational culture and broader socio-
134 economic situation shape the processes of adaptation, and previous studies have often explored
135 broad groups of students and employees. To date, a few studies have drawn on career
136 construction perspective to study athlete career development (Ryba, Ronkainen, & Selänne,
137 2015; Ryba, Zhang, Huang, & Aunola, 2017; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2018), but no research has
138 applied this approach on the study of coaches.

139 Career construction theory draws on narrative theory (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011;
140 Rudolph et al., 2019) where the underlying assumptions are that narratives are our primary
141 means of constructing meaning and that career identities are developed through storytelling.
142 From a narrative career construction perspective, career development can be understood as “a
143 process of constructing a self-story which integrates the self into the society and the career into
144 the broader framework of life meaning through available narrative resources and life scripts”
145 (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2018, p. 43). In our study, we consider identities as situated self-stories
146 constructed within social relationships (Smith & Sparkes, 2009), while also recognise that
147 storytelling is enabled or limited by material conditions, embodiment and social structures
148 (Sims-Schouten, Riley, & Willig, 2007). Storytelling also locates the speaker in a specific

149 socio-historic context, as the ability to construct particular kind of career stories is dependent
150 on the narrative resources that are available to the individual. Therefore, analysing stories of
151 sport coaches allows for understanding the role of unique personal experiences as well as the
152 socio-cultural influences in the processes of career construction.

153 **Participants**

154 Ten coaches (2 women) were invited to take part in narrative interviews. The coaches were
155 aged 23-60 years old (median age 29), had been coaching for an average of 11.8 years, and
156 were coaching girls or women in an elite development context across age groups from under
157 10's to senior teams in England. All coaches had been players before starting their coaching
158 careers, but none of them had played in elite senior level. Eight coaches had started as coaches
159 in boys'/men's football and most of them had recently transitioned to the women's game. Seven
160 participants were amateur coaches and had a full-time job elsewhere, two participants were
161 full-time coaches, and one participant was a player alongside coaching. However, in the
162 demographic form, the majority of coaches circled "professional" in the question concerning
163 their coach status, which gave us an initial impression about their subjective career
164 construction.

165 **Procedure**

166 After obtaining ethical approval for the study, the interviews with the coaches were
167 arranged in the club facilities (empty changing rooms and offices) mostly before or after the
168 training sessions. The coaches were informed that the study was about their stories as a coach
169 and their coaching philosophy, and we explained their rights as participants. We invited the
170 participants to ask any questions they had about the research before and after the interviews.
171 The coaches provided written consent before the interview. The interviews were audio recorded

172 and lasted between 45 and 83 minutes with an average of 57 minutes. The first and the second
173 author conducted the interviews.

174 We adopted a narrative approach because it provides the participant with considerable
175 control over choosing which events and experiences to introduce to the researcher (Bates,
176 2004), and is compatible with the key tenets of career construction theory. While all qualitative
177 interviews elicit stories, a narrative interview is unique in introducing a broad biographical
178 topic and inviting participants to tell long uninterrupted stories from the past to the present
179 (Jovchelovitch, & Bauer, 2000). In line with Rosenthal (1993), we used a two-phased approach
180 where the period of main narration was followed by a period of questioning. Our interviews
181 started with a grand tour question “could you tell me your story of becoming a coach”. As the
182 coaches started telling their stories – most often from their childhood when they had played
183 football themselves – the interviewers started drawing a timeline to note critical events, thus
184 mapping the objective career trajectories of coaches (e.g., career transitions). After coaches’
185 stories had come to a ‘natural’ close, we started to complement the stories with additional
186 reflective questions and questions about the club environment. The additional themes we were
187 interested in included coach identity and meaning (example question: you spend a lot of your
188 time in coaching. What is it that makes it worthwhile for you?), club culture (example question:
189 How would you describe this club’s objectives and mission?) and players’ dual careers
190 (example question: do you feel that the players with full-time status will now make different
191 decisions concerning education?). The timeline was also used to ask additional questions of
192 significant moments and gaps in the narrative, thus providing a helpful tool to ensure that the
193 story was as detailed as possible (Kolar, Ahmad, Chan, & Erickson, 2015). At the end of the
194 interview, we drew another 5-10 years in the timeline and asked the participants to imagine
195 where they would see themselves in the future. The future perspective was included in the
196 interview because career construction theory emphasises the impact of ‘futuring’ (i.e.,

197 exploration of future vocational possibilities) on career adaptability (Savickas, 2013). By
198 inquiring coaches' imagined futures, we sought to understand which future selves the coaches
199 prioritised in their life design (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2018) and their perceptions of the subjective
200 career which "is not a behavior; it is an idea" (Savickas, 2013, p. 159).

201 **Narrative Analysis and Representation**

202 After the interviews were transcribed, we read them several times to further immerse
203 ourselves into the stories. We also coded the interviews to organise the data and prepare it for
204 further analysis. We then worked with thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) to
205 systematically focus on the content of the speech and to compare and contrast participants'
206 stories. Our specific interest was on understanding how the key events and experiences (e.g.,
207 transition from a player to a coach, transition to coaching women's football) were rendered
208 meaningful, and to identify life themes (Savickas, 2013) that shaped the storytelling. The
209 interpretation of themes was further informed by career construction theory that suggests an
210 interaction between career development tasks and culturally dominant expectations. The
211 subjective patterns of meaning (selected moments of career satisfaction, success and failure)
212 were compared to objective career structures (promotions, transitions) to understand their
213 interactions. In line with career construction theory's contextualist emphasis, we focused on
214 analysing the impact of the socio-cultural field and relationships on coaches' stories. We sought
215 to understand what interpretive resources were available to the participants to make sense of
216 careers and how the coaches positioned themselves in relation to culturally privileged
217 storylines and other actors in the football world (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

218 We represent the participant stories through a series of composite vignettes as described
219 by Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) and Spalding and Phillips (2007). These vignettes
220 represent multiple participant voices amalgamated into unified stories to illustrate the key
221 themes identified in the thematic narrative analysis. Similar to other researchers using

222 composite vignettes in sport studies (e.g., Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Erickson, Backhouse, &
223 Carless, 2016; Ryba, 2008), we constructed the stories from coaches' own words and kept
224 researchers' insertions to a minimum. Composite vignettes (like other forms of representation)
225 eventually lose some idiosyncratic features of individual stories; however, they allow for
226 drawing together insightful elements from several participants' stories and can provide with
227 credible portraits of how people in that particular cultural context might think and feel about
228 themselves and their career trajectories (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015). Composite vignettes are
229 particularly suitable for protecting participants' ethical right for anonymity while also allow
230 for staying firmly grounded in the data and committed to representing participants' actual
231 words and meanings as truthfully and accurately as possible (Erickson et al., 2016). The
232 vignettes show the common trajectories and experiences in coaches' journeys; however, we
233 also represent stories that deviate from the most common patterns identified in our analysis.

234 **Validity**

235 In addressing validity, we drew on a realist assertion that no standardised procedure can
236 guarantee sound interpretation and valid conclusions (Hammersley, 1992; Maxwell, 1992). In
237 other words, the validity of an account is not in the procedures but in attending to the possible
238 ways in which it might be wrong – whether in misrepresenting the participants or in making
239 implausible interpretations or questionable theoretical inferences. To address potential ways in
240 which we might be wrong, we followed Maxwell's (1992, 2017) recommendations to scrutinise
241 descriptive, interpretive and theoretical validity. After checking the transcriptions to ensure
242 they represented what had been said accurately (descriptive validity), the first and second
243 author read all interviews and worked extensively on the transcripts to understand the
244 subjective meanings of the research participants (interpretive validity). Frequent author
245 meetings took place to discuss the interviews and our impressions of the transcripts and career
246 meanings in coaches' stories. In these meetings, we also sought to reflexively address power

247 relations and gender dynamics in the research relationships, our reactions and emotional
248 responses to the stories being told, and the potential consequences of the research (Etherington,
249 2007). In reflexive dialogues, we explored our own identities and positioning (female vs male,
250 insider vs outsider in football culture), our pre-conceived ideas of the studied phenomenon, and
251 how these issues influenced how we represented the stories (Day, 2012). Furthermore, although
252 we were committed to representing participants' views as accurately as possible, we were
253 cautious that anonymity was crucial not to harm participants' future career prospects. In
254 addition, although gender issues were infused with the stories being told, due to the potential
255 identifiability of female participants we chose to omit gender from the vignettes.

256 Theoretical validity refers to the plausibility of the more abstract explanatory account
257 created by the researchers (Maxwell, 1992, 2017). In the manuscript preparation stage, the
258 second and the third author acted as critical friends helping to explore alternative interpretations
259 to identify the most plausible explanations. The second author's specific task was to seek for
260 disconfirming cases in the transcripts that challenged the first author's analysis. The findings
261 were also discussed with other colleagues to test whether the interpretations were defensible.
262 The formal peer review acted as a further step to evaluate the soundness of our theorising,
263 methodology and interpretations. While maintaining that some explanations can be better than
264 others, realist researchers agree with interpretive scholars that interviews are shaped by the
265 interactions between the researcher and the participant, our interpretations are fallible
266 constructions, and that many valid explanations are also possible (Hammersley, 1992;
267 Maxwell, 2017).

268 **Results**

269 In the following, we represent our analysis with composite vignettes to illustrate the
270 coaches' reflections on their journeys from their early experiences as players to their current
271 coaching positions.

272 **For the love of the game**

273 So we grew up with my brothers always playing football. I had the passion for wanting
274 to be a footballer as most youngsters do. I just liked to run with the ball and win. [At] the
275 back end of my career, probably 17, 18, I started to pick up more injuries. I did my rehab
276 but there is always going to be doubt, and I think that was kind of me done and I kind of
277 knew. And then, I made a decision for myself, although it was probably being made for
278 me, that I was never going to play at a high level. I wasn't going far [as a player], which
279 is why I then went into coaching. The way I look at it, I failed as a player in terms of not
280 having a long career but I'll make sure now that I make up by succeeding as a coach.

281 I suppose I have always played, so I am in love with the game anyway because I have
282 been a player. [I didn't think of the other options], because that [football] was just what
283 I love doing and I wanted to stay in it somehow. [As a coach], I'm doing something that
284 I love. It's not really... I don't see it as a job.

285 Only few coaches who had retired from playing told stories about exploring or weighing
286 different options when they had transitioned to coaches; the majority of participants
287 constructed the transition to coaching as the "natural" progression in their involvement in
288 football. The narrative rhetoric of "love for the sport" worked to normalise the "natural" desire
289 to stay in football and continue extensive investment in the sport, only in a different role within
290 the game. All coaches rejected the idea of coaching as simply a job and described it mainly as
291 a career and at times as a passion, a hobby (because coaching, like a hobby, was freely chosen
292 and something they love), or even a calling. These narratives also worked to exclude
293 consideration of alternative pathways and justify strong dedication to 'making it' as a coach.

294 The dominant storyline of coaching as a natural next step was temporarily challenged by
295 two participants who had a period of exploration manifest in their choices to pursue university
296 education unrelated to sport.

297 Everyone expected me to go to sport. I didn't like coaching back then. I was quiet and
298 I didn't like standing in front of people and doing the coaching bit. So when I went to
299 university I said I don't want to go into sport I want to go into [unrelated field]. The
300 lifestyle at uni took over really and I enjoyed it but I actually made a close group of
301 friends who studied sport science and sport psychology and I just ended up in circles of
302 people, of other coaches who worked in the professional game, and I had a passion for
303 football... [And] there were no jobs [in the field of studies] when I graduated [so] I'd start
304 to go into sports things.

305 These coaches also returned to football for the love for the game, an enduring life theme
306 that was evident in all coaches' stories. The relationships with others who were passionate
307 about football further directed the coaches' career choices. What was common to the stories
308 was the primacy of the coaching in their lives after the commitment had been made, even if
309 many of the coaches also pursued an unrelated job. Many coaches discussed the jobs they had
310 done to sustain their livelihood with little enthusiasm, whereas coaching was constructed a
311 passion they would pursue even for little or no financial compensation.

312 **Steps, ladders and pathways**

313 I wanted it [coaching] to be a career [and so] I did my coaching badges. I thought
314 I am 21, I am in a hurry, I want this to be a career. I need the qualifications to get paid
315 work. I booked onto a level one [coaching qualification], I went and [I've] done that
316 and then they opened up the pathway that you can follow. So I started gathering teams
317 around me, under 12's and under 13's, early on (...) the last club where I was [before
318 this] was with the under 16's. I didn't wait for an opportunity, I just kept knocking on
319 doors. From that, I took a further qualification because the requirement was that you
320 had a B-licence to work at an academy. I am trying to go up through the age groups.

321 Participants' understanding of their career development was shaped by metaphors of
322 'ladder', 'steps' and/or a pathway of progression through the coaching qualifications and age
323 groups. These metaphors gave structure and direction to the coaches' subjective journeys and
324 projections towards the future. The coaches' stories expressed a strong sense of agency and
325 resourcefulness in finding one's own way through the career 'steps' and a clear view on the
326 desired future in a more prestigious position. Women's football was often integrated into this
327 storyline as an opportunity to 'fast track' that progression, and could potentially become
328 instrumental for career success:

329 One of the reasons I came into the women's game was because there will probably
330 be a few more opportunities. I don't do this for money, I always pick a job on the
331 opportunity. Because for me, it's about progressing up the ladder.

332 When the [women's] sport gets more exposure, then the people working in it get
333 more exposure. So from my point of view that is an opportunity for me to showcase
334 myself as well. I'm not, I'm not an angel. I want to do well for myself as well, and
335 being here helps me. And that is partly the reason why I am here.

336 Being asked to come and coach here was quite a shock to me. It was a massive
337 step. This is probably for me the [career] highlight as we say, of the journey, I have
338 managed to get myself to come and work at a club like this.

339 Most coaches had only recently transitioned to women's game and constructed the transition
340 primarily as a personal opportunity for progress. However, one of the coaches had been
341 involved in the women's game for several years before it had become professional and did not
342 see it just as a step towards personal advancement: 'I care about women's football, because
343 I've invested so many years, so I want to see it do well'. However, the coach also maintained
344 that he had benefitted from being in women's sport as it had facilitated career progress through
345 the age groups much quicker than in typical coaching careers.

346 **Competition and collaboration**

347 You know, because football is so difficult. A lot of the times, you don't get opportunities
348 because somebody is threatened by you or whatever it may be. [Another coach in the
349 club], he got me the job. That's what often happens in football. It is a shame isn't it but
350 that is the way it is. I am lucky that someone gave me that opportunity.

351 Coaching is fickle, isn't it? I take security from the fact that I feel that I do a good job.
352 [But] if you don't fit in with what someone wants or you are not winning games, then
353 you will lose your job. You know, and t'at's the reality of those things because even with
354 contracts now; you know, proper contracts... losing games or – if you're on losing streak,
355 you can get questioned by the club.

356 While describing their early years in coaching as a series of strategic actions to develop their
357 careers, the coaches demonstrated a strong awareness of the insecurity of coaching positions
358 and limitations to their agency in the professional game. At this juncture, the relationships with
359 other coaches and people in the position of power became a central issue. Although there could
360 be, on occasions, collegiality with other coaches, an underlying tone of the instrumentality of
361 these relationships was evident in some stories.

362 Some of the coaches are friends. Some not. I think they would never help each other. But
363 definitely that is not how it works in the long term, you need to make friends along the
364 way. Because they might be able to help you in the future when you really need them.
365 You're – you're not using them, but you are keeping them close [because] you might
366 need them in the future. [But in the end,] I think it is everyone for themselves, everyone
367 knows that everyone is trying to get to that next step.

368 Some of the coaches sought to manage the insecurity of their positions by focusing on factors
369 they can influence (e.g., being active in creating a social network and working excess hours).
370 Although the formal coaching qualifications were a prerequisite for developing an elite

371 coaching career, football was essentially described as a “who you know” culture that worked
372 to help some and marginalise others. Indeed, most participants stressed that qualifications alone
373 were not sufficient for crafting a career in coaching, especially for female coaches:

374 The FA has stretched out to say that they will make sure that if the female coach goes
375 to like the UEFA B or UEFA A, it is not just about getting a qualification and there is
376 nowhere to go. I think that has happened before, like people have got to that point –
377 that’s it, ‘you have got the qualification, well done’. Now what?

378 **Football comes first**

379 When [I was] asked if I wanted [the current coach position], and I was like “I have
380 actually two weeks [of holiday]”. And they went, “hold on. When could you start?” And
381 I remember cancelling my holidays and it was like a lot of money, but it was almost like
382 the best decision I ever made. It wasn’t because I had calculated that I had to, “Oh, this
383 would really impress.” That was just what my gut instinct told me was the right thing to
384 do because I love football more than I love holidays.

385 Until recently I was coaching Monday night, Tuesday night, Wednesday night,
386 Thursday night, Saturday and Sunday, and worked full-time Monday to Friday. And I
387 saw my wife and my kids on Friday night. So I don’t really have the time to do any other
388 sports away from here. I have a mentor at the minute and he’s actually a psychologist
389 and he can’t believe the amount of time [I put in].

390 Most of the participants had been willing to situationally or more permanently prioritise
391 coaching over holidays, own sport activities, free time, and family life. While the coaches
392 acknowledged the costs associated with their career choice, the commitment was often justified
393 within the rhetoric of the love for the game. The (prospective) elite coach identity took
394 precedence over other life roles, including the identity associated with paid work. Football

395 cultural narratives emphasising hard work and dedication to sport appeared not only relevant
396 to players, but also to coaches who were aspiring to ‘make it’ into professional ranks.

397 **Looking ahead: becoming an elite coach**

398 Yeah senior football is what I want to be in. I want a full time role in professional
399 football. There are always barriers aren’t there but you just have to overcome them. I
400 look at qualifications as barriers - I probably need to get another qualification before it is
401 realistic, for coaching to be a full career or profession.

402 [If I got a full-time position] here, that was great, because I know the club. I enjoy my
403 time here. We all want bigger and better. [But am I] going to get the opportunity here? If
404 that wasn’t to be, it would be coaching full-time, professionally, at a football club
405 somewhere [else]. I haven’t got any particular allegiance to [my current club]. No, if
406 [another club came] and said listen I am going to give you £50,000 I would say, thanks,
407 ‘see you later!’

408 If I think how long have been doing this, now it [becoming professional] has to be my
409 next goal; doing it full-time and just concentrate on that instead of concentrating on this
410 and have another job besides it. Just to concentrate on coaching and give everything to
411 that... as long as I am on that pathway towards it, then I will be happy.

412 For eight coaches, full-time professional coaching was the unambiguous goal for the future.
413 Exceptions for this perspective were only provided by the coach who was also a player and
414 focused on her athletic career; and the coach in his 60s who already had a long career in
415 professional coaching and looked forward to being in mentoring positions in the future. All
416 participants were aware of the typical frequency of career transitions in coaching careers in
417 football, influenced both by the lack of job security and personal ambitions for career
418 advancement. Career development in coaching was constructed as a profoundly individual
419 matter, with little trust placed on the organisation to provide with opportunities in exchange for

420 employee loyalty. Although coaching junior athletes in an elite development context was
421 already considered a sign of career success for many, it was mostly constructed as an
422 intermediate step towards realising the ultimate career goal as a full-time professional coach at
423 the highest level of the game.

424 **Discussion**

425 Through our analysis of coaches' career stories, our aim was to interrogate the
426 relationships between subjective and objective careers and the potential implications of
427 personal stories on coaches' career adaptability and well-being. Our analysis indicated that the
428 coaches invariably understood coaching as a career which should progress along normative
429 career steps and ladders towards older age groups, higher coaching qualifications, and more
430 powerful and prestigious roles. The findings, therefore, challenge the critiques of linear and
431 stage-based career models that have been voiced in sport coaching (e.g., Christensen, 2013;
432 Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014), indicating that coaches themselves may anticipate their careers in
433 this fashion (see also Parnell, Stratton, Drust, & Richardson, 2013; Purdy & Potrac, 2016).
434 Linear models, therefore, remain relevant for understanding how coaches structure their
435 subjective careers and make sense of their pathways in certain environments. This may be
436 especially true in elite football culture that has been described as ultracompetitive and
437 hierarchical (Champ et al., 2018; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Potrac et al., 2012), offering cultural
438 insiders with narrow narrative resources and little validation to alternative stories that do not
439 focus on progressive attainment of a higher status. Similar to Kelly (2008), we furthermore
440 found that the coaching qualifications were often only important for getting a job (objective
441 career advancement) but were given little value in terms of personal development and finding
442 meaning in coaching (subjective career).

443 The coaches described themselves as active career agents who strategically obtained
444 formal qualifications, looked for opportunities, worked excessive hours and created social

445 networks that could potentially help them in making the next ‘step’. The focus on the things
446 they can do to advance their careers (control), making plans and considering how to reach the
447 next step (concern), and self-belief they expressed (confidence) could be seen as signs of career
448 adaptability in career construction theory (Savickas, 2013). However, while explicitly
449 addressing the fickle competitive nature of coaching careers, none of the coaches experimented
450 with ideas of alternative career trajectories (curiosity) or what they would do if they were
451 unable to realise their dreams. Despite best efforts to maximise chances of career success, the
452 fierce competition in elite football constrains the agency of career actors in ways unlike in
453 many other occupations; as Roderick (2014) put it, “despite strong dedication, perfection is
454 unobtainable and failure inevitable” (p. 143). Effectively relying on a singular cultural narrative
455 of career success (becoming an elite coach in a first team setting) and channelling their
456 adaptability resources to obtain this ultimate goal, many of the coaches might be as unprepared
457 as the players to face rejection despite it being a common experience in the football world.

458 Not unlike the studies exploring players’ career development experiences in football
459 (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Champ et al., 2018; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006), our analysis
460 revealed that the psychological experience of career construction in coaching, too, was
461 characterised by passionate pursuit to ‘make it’ and the prioritisation of football over other
462 areas of life and personal identity. Being immersed in pre-elite football at the formative time
463 of adolescence is likely to have led the coaches to develop a strong commitment to football and
464 internalisation of hegemonic sub-cultural scripts about what ‘a good career’ and success might
465 mean. Our analysis showed that coaching in women’s football, at least as an intermediate step,
466 had now become part of an imagined ‘good’ career because of the newly introduced
467 professionalism of women’s game. The opportunities to progress quickly and develop elite
468 players (signs of career success) were considered better in women’s game which now also
469 provided the possibility of enjoying the power and prestige that working in professional

495 aspirations of becoming a first-team professional coach, their low exploration of other interests
496 combined with few actual opportunities to realise their goals left them in a vulnerable position.
497 We also suggested that the flow of coaches from the men's game to the women's game might
498 contribute to transmission of problematic attitudes, value and practices surrounding athlete
499 development. These concerns should be explored more in depth in future research in this area
500 and addressed in coach education programmes and applied interventions.

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