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Coaches' Reflections on the Meaning and Value of Masters Athletics

2

3 **Abstract**

4 Masters sport is a growing social movement offering the opportunity to participate in
5 competitive sports in later life. Although many studies have explored Masters athletes'
6 experiences, little is known about how other actors in the sport subcultures construct meaning
7 in Masters sport and whether their stories work to support or hinder participation. Our study
8 explored the cultural narrative resources and life scripts surrounding sport and ageing that
9 coaches draw upon in two European countries, England and Finland, where sport policy has
10 put different emphasis on elite sport and sport for all. We analysed interviews from 23
11 athletics (track and field) coaches (8 women) to understand how they assign meaning and
12 value to Masters sport. The narrative analysis showed that coaches constructed two possible
13 athlete pathways: the elite athlete pathway, followed by disengagement from competitive
14 sport, and the 'second chance' pathway, describing Masters athletics as an option for those
15 who did not succeed in youth. Normative expectations about the life career in athletics,
16 underpinned by the Western life script, also worked to construct Masters athletes as a selfish
17 activity and neglect to 'give back' to the sport. Finnish coaches constructed more nuanced
18 stories about Masters athletics and sport in later life, tapping into sport for all narrative
19 resources that circulate in the Nordic countries. The findings indicate that athletics subculture
20 is a contested space where 'new' discourses of ageing are only slowly starting to challenge
21 the normative life script of sport as a project of youth.

22 *Keywords: lifelong sport participation; narrative positioning; social inclusion; Veteran*
23 *athletics; coaching practice*

24

25 **Coaches' Reflections on the Meaning and Value of Masters Athletics**

26 In the recent decade, scholars have increasingly observed that the biomedically driven
27 ageing-as-decline master narrative has been challenged and partly replaced by 'active',
28 'positive', 'successful', 'productive' and 'healthy' ageing discourses (Dionigi, Horton, &
29 Baker, 2013; Evans, Nistrup, & Pfister, 2018; Gard et al., 2017; Lamb, 2014; Katz &
30 Calasanti, 2014; Rudman, 2015). The physical activity promotion campaigns tied to these
31 concepts have often been articulated through neoliberal discourses where older people are
32 encouraged to take moral responsibility for the success of their ageing by maintaining
33 physical and psychological health through exercise (Dionigi & Son, 2017; Pike, 2015). With
34 the change of paradigm and increasing research evidence on the benefits of physically active
35 lifestyle in advanced years, policymakers across the globe (e.g., Sport England, 2018; WHO,
36 2002) have encouraged older citizens to engage in physical activity including the more
37 intensive forms of exercise and competitive sports (Allain, & Marshall, 2017; Kirby & Kluge,
38 2013; Horton, Dionigi, Gard, Baker, & Weir, 2018). Scholars have recently associated the
39 growing popularity of Masters sport with this shifting narrative landscape that re-stories old
40 age as a time for leisure, growth and activity (Dionigi, 2015; Gard et al., 2017).

41 Despite its success in fueling research and influencing policies, numerous researchers
42 have criticised the successful ageing concept (for a review, see Bülow & Söderqvist, 2014).
43 Centrally, the concept has been argued to place the responsibility to age 'successfully' on
44 individuals themselves and disregard pressing questions of social exclusion, health disparities
45 and the difference in social and material resources (Katz & Calasanti, 2014). Furthermore,
46 scholars have viewed it as a particular expression of individualistic North American culture
47 (Jiang & Luo, 2015; Lamb, 2014), overly focused on health and optimal physical functioning
48 (Cole, 1992), and excluding the inevitable facts of death and dying (Cosco, Stephan, &
49 Brayne, 2013). Some alternative concepts that researchers have introduced include

50 'harmonious' ageing (Jiang & Luo, 2015), 'conscious' ageing (Moody, 2013) and
51 gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 2005) that, although including distinct components, all
52 emphasise the spiritual dimension of old age, contemplation, and acceptance of ageing.
53 However, these alternative concepts seem marginalised both in research discourses and
54 popular cultural understandings of sport in later life. That is, sport has most often been
55 constructed within successful ageing –related discourses as a vehicle for the pursuit of
56 sustained youthfulness or a health-management technique to avoid illness and physical
57 decline (Allain & Marshall, 2017; Eichberg, 2009; Ronkainen, 2019). As Tulle and Phoenix
58 (2016) noted, a challenge for social scientists lies in moving understandings of sport in later
59 life beyond the instrumental notion of physical activity as a panacea for the problems of old
60 age.

61 Masters sport movement emerged approximately 50 years ago in North America,
62 Australia and Europe (Gard et al., 2016; Tulle, 2008a). Hastings et al. (2005) noted that, in
63 the U.S.A., the Masters movement was initiated by relatively affluent adults who wanted to
64 pursue competitive sport as a serious leisure career in later life. Their participation was
65 facilitated by improved salaries, a growth of leisure time, and advances in medical and sport
66 sciences that dispelled the myths that physical exertion should be avoided in older age. Since
67 then, Masters sport has become a phenomenally popular global phenomenon, with
68 competitions held in 5 or 10 year age categories in various team (e.g., basketball, volleyball,
69 and hockey) and individual (e.g., swimming, tennis and athletics/track and field) sports (Gard
70 et al., 2016). Researchers have sometimes championed Masters athletes as the manifestation
71 of successful ageing in that they typically maintain high levels of physical, psychological,
72 cognitive, and social functioning (Geard, Reaburn, Rebar, & Dionigi, 2017). The Masters
73 sport movement itself has embraced multiple and somewhat contradictory discourses of
74 ageing and sport: while embracing a 'sport for all' ideology and health-related, social, and

75 inclusive practices, it has also facilitated the pursuit of competitive goals, serious leisure
76 careers, and World records (Hastings et al., 2005; Tulle, 2008a). Studies with Masters
77 athletes have similarly indicated that a diversity of discourses shape the participants'
78 understanding of their sport practices; while indeed fear of frailty and ill health have been
79 identified as motivating elements in some athletes' stories (Gard et al., 2016; Litchfield &
80 Dionigi, 2011), other studies have also illustrated how many of them train seriously and aim
81 at winning or achieving personal or national records (Dionigi, 2005, 2010; Tulle, 2008b). The
82 complex meanings of Masters sport involvement illustrate that participants both reproduce
83 and resist dominant discourses of sport and ageing in constructing meaning in the sport life
84 project and being an older person.

85 Cultural narratives surrounding sport and later life are reproduced, resisted and
86 transformed by various actors including the policymakers, the media, sport leaders, coaches,
87 and athletes themselves. Drawing on Pollner and Stein (1996), Phoenix and Sparkes (2006,
88 2007) used the concept of 'narrative maps' to describe the resources that young athletes
89 enrolled in a sport science undergraduate degree drew on in imagining their (athletic) futures
90 and the options that were open for them. They showed that older teammates were a central
91 source of guidance for thinking about ageing and athletic retirement, and mature athletes who
92 continued playing despite the age-related performance decline were constructed as 'feared
93 selves', that is, those who were 'hanging on' too long. They also showed that family
94 members and sport science curriculum were important providers of narrative maps for young
95 athletes (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). Perhaps surprisingly, coaches' influence as potential
96 contributors to narrative maps was not mentioned, even if other studies emphasise their role
97 as key socialising agents in athletes' lives and powerful transmitters of (sub)cultural beliefs
98 and attitudes (MacPhail & Kirk, 2006). This paper extends understandings of narrative maps
99 available for athletes by scrutinising coaches' views and experiences of Masters sport.

100 Focusing on coaches' stories of being a (former) athlete and their reasons (not) to take part in
101 Masters sport can help us understand how they view the meaning and value of Masters sport,
102 and what kind of narrative maps they are likely to transmit to athletes. Methodologically,
103 focusing on coaches' self-narratives rather than only asking for general opinions about
104 Masters sport allows for combating the social desirability biases and previous observations
105 that coaches' 'official' philosophy of practice does not always align with their actual values
106 (Carless & Douglas, 2011). Understanding coaches' journeys and their own choices (not) to
107 take part in Masters sport can shed light on the ageing concepts that circulate in sport
108 subcultures and how policies are understood and interpreted in the daily practices in sports
109 clubs.

110 In this paper, we will compare and contrast coaches' stories constructed within two
111 European countries with different sport policy trajectories: England and Finland. In both
112 countries, there are ongoing tensions between the two sporting ideologies of elite sport and
113 sport for all, although the emphases in these countries are arguably different. England can be
114 considered the home of modern sports which frame sport as a project tied to youth,
115 competitiveness and aggressiveness (Eichberg & Loland, 2010). Green (2004) observed that
116 sport policy in England had been focused on elite sport development since the mid-1990s;
117 Devine (2016) and Kirk (2004) also argued that physical education in the UK is framed
118 within masculine, competitive sport discourses. There are significant gaps in sports
119 participation by age, gender, and class, implying that sport is predominantly catered for
120 young, middle-class men (Hartmann-Tews, 2006; Houlihan & Lindsey, 2012). Collins (2010)
121 also noted that, except for one campaign in the 1980s, Sport England has largely ignored
122 older people in the promotion of sport. Athletics in particular has received substantial funding
123 for elite development (Renfree & Kohe, 2018), but the broader participation base at the club
124 level is declining (Grix, 2009).

125 In contrast, Finland often ranks as a top country in mass sport participation (Van
126 Tuyckom & Scheerder, 2010) and has much smaller participation disparities in terms of age
127 and gender than most other European nations (Hartmann-Tews, 2006). Historically, however,
128 the elite sport achievement has been a central building block of the young nation's identity,
129 especially in the first half of the 20th century (Tervo, 2001). Athletics, in particular, has been
130 the most successful sport for the Finns in the Olympic Games, and many of the most well-
131 known Finnish Olympic athletes have been long-distance runners (Koski & Lämsä, 2015).
132 However, there was a marked policy shift to sport for all in the late 1960s with a series of
133 strategy documents and facility development to support sport for the masses (Green &
134 Collins, 2008). Nevertheless, Koski (2012) argued that “only two or three decades ago the
135 structural hegemony of top and competitive sport was unquestioned [...] even though Finland
136 has long been among the forerunners of the ‘sport for all’ idea” (p. 259).

137 To summarise, despite these recent advances to understandings of Masters sport
138 movement and individual athletes' experiences, few studies have investigated how other
139 central actors in sport subcultures assign meaning to Masters sport. With the calls for moving
140 beyond individuals' strategies to age ‘successfully’ and seeking to understand broader issues
141 pertinent to cultural forces and social inclusion (Katz & Calasanti, 2014), we sought to
142 understand how coaches construct meaning and value in Masters sport. The following
143 research questions guided our inquiry:

- 144 1) How do athletics coaches position themselves in relation to Masters athletics?
- 145 2) What are the cultural narrative resources that coaches draw upon and what
146 narrative maps do they transmit about ageing and sports?
- 147 3) What are the influences of national cultural contexts on constructions of Masters
148 athletics?

Methodology

149

150 Our theoretical approach was grounded in narrative psychology and loosely within
151 what Smith and Sparkes (2008) described as a psycho-social perspective on narrative. That is,
152 a commitment to ontological realism (there is a real world independent of how we view it) is
153 combined with epistemological constructivism that asserts knowledge as concept-dependent,
154 theory-laden and fallible (Maxwell, 2012). In line with a realist perspective, we acknowledge
155 that the life as lived provides the basis for stories (Spector-Mersel, 2011) and that biological
156 reality and social structures influence psychological experiences and constrain the stories that
157 can be constructed (North, 2017). Athletics subculture centralises standardised events and
158 objectively measured physical performance; in other words, it is an exemplar of a modernist
159 sport (Guttman, 1978). The embodied experience of inhabiting this life-world as well as the
160 dominant ideologies shape the stories that can be told and accepted by others; however,
161 participants in the subculture are also agentic in bringing situated meaning to their
162 experiences and negotiating or rejecting culturally dominant narratives.

163 Bamberg (2012) suggested that narratives' primary purpose is to explain why things are
164 the way they are and to normalise what has happened. Therefore, analysing narratives is
165 informative in revealing how people make sense of the social world and their place in it.
166 Individuals construct their self-narratives in relation to cultural life scripts that function as
167 prescriptive resources for how an 'ideal' life should unfold and when certain life transitions
168 are expected to happen (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Fivush, 2010). If individuals' trajectories
169 align with the dominant script, they do not need to explain why they have chosen this path as
170 it is implicitly understood by others within the same cultural sphere. Pursuing an athletic
171 career in youth coincides with a typical life script and especially that associated with
172 masculinity (Spector-Mersel, 2006), whereas continuing to do so after passing over peak
173 physical performance becomes countercultural and older athletes often need to justify this

174 choice to others such as family members, friends and teammates (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017).
175 Fivush (2010) theorised that those who do not conform with the life script need to speak up to
176 justify themselves; therefore, being silent indicates power, whereas speaking up signifies the
177 loss of power.

178 While life scripts represent the typical series of events and transitions in the life course,
179 master narratives offer culturally dominant interpretive frameworks that pre-exist the
180 individual storyteller (Bamberg, 2005). Master narratives offer guidance on how to
181 experience the world in ‘an appropriate’ way and are perpetuated by people who occupy
182 some position of authority (Thorne & McLean, 2003), such as sports coaches. While not
183 everyone accepts the master narrative, similar to when deviating from life scripts, they are
184 often forced to acknowledge it and work to justify developing an alternative position. In
185 ageing studies, the ageing-as-decline master narrative has been noted to direct older people to
186 experience and narrate later life in terms of loss and diminished resources (Trethewey, 2001);
187 it has been also noted that its authority has become increasingly questioned by
188 counternarratives in the recent years (Gard et al., 2017).

189 **Participants and procedure**

190 After obtaining relevant ethical approvals for the study, coaches in two athletics clubs
191 (one in Finland, and one in England) were invited to take part in an interview with a
192 researcher. Both clubs were among the biggest clubs in their region with a long and
193 successful history, broad participant base, and over 30 coaches working with junior and
194 senior, both elite and non-elite athletes. The data were collected as a part of two broader
195 projects; one on club culture, athlete development and lifelong participation, and other on
196 youth athletes’ developmental trajectories in Finland (Ryba et al., 2016). The aim was to
197 include as diverse range of coaches as possible in terms of age, gender, years of coaching
198 experience, and the group of athletes. Heads of coaching in both clubs were asked to help in

199 participant recruitment and all coaches who volunteered to participate were interviewed.
200 Access to the clubs was furthermore facilitated by the first and fourth authors' involvement in
201 these clubs' activities, but nevertheless they did not personally know most of the participants.
202 The final sample included 24 coaches (8 women), 15 in Finland and eight in England, aged
203 between 22 and 86 years. All participants were current or former athletes in athletics having
204 competed from regional to international level. They had been coaching for 2.5 to 48 years
205 with an average of 19.4 years. The participants in Finland were ethnic Finns, and in England,
206 all except one participant were ethnic British; one participant was originally from an African
207 country. Seven coached children and adolescents, 11 coached adolescents and young adults,
208 one coached young adults only, one coached young and middle-aged adults, and three
209 coaches were exclusively working with Masters athletes with the official title of a peer
210 instructor. Finally, the Finnish coaches received a small financial compensation for their
211 coaching (whilst the majority considered themselves amateur and volunteer coaches),
212 whereas the coaches in England were not paid for their work.

213 The first and the second author developed the conceptual background, the
214 methodological approach and the interview guide for the study. Other authors helped to refine
215 the interview guide further, and the first and the fourth author conducted the interviews. The
216 interviews started with a grand tour question "tell me your story of becoming a coach" and
217 then followed up with probes depending on what kind of narratives the participants started
218 developing. Most often, the participants started telling about their athletic careers, and the
219 interviewers invited them to share these stories before moving into the coach story. The
220 participants were also asked to tell about their current sport and physical activities, and
221 whether they had ever competed in Masters athletics or might consider doing that in the
222 future. To discern life scripts, we also asked them to tell when they thought was a good time
223 to retire from athletics. Furthermore, we asked about different athlete pathways in the clubs

224 and whether any of the youth or senior athletes the coaches had worked with had become
225 Masters athletes. The interviews were carried out in Finnish with the Finnish coaches and in
226 English with the coaches in England. They lasted between 35 and 89 minutes with an average
227 of 59 minutes.

228 **Data analysis**

229 The first, third and fourth authors coded the interviews inductively, and the first and
230 the third author developed thematic maps and tables to organise the data and further immerse
231 into the content of the stories. The first author then worked with a thematic narrative analysis
232 to understand the main ‘whats’ or building blocks of the individual stories (Smith, 2016). In
233 line with the narrative approach, each interview was perceived to be unique within its own
234 right, and therefore the focus was first on the internal logic of the stories rather than a cross-
235 case analysis. In reading each story, the first author was asking questions such as: “what are
236 the narrative threads that run through this story? What occurs repeatedly?” (see Smith, 2016).
237 The throughout the analysis, we held frequent author meetings and discussed possible
238 interpretations and tentative connections across the stories, with co-authors acting as critical
239 friends, challenging the first authors’ interpretations and highlighting unique themes
240 identified in the analysis. The first and the second author linked the thematic findings to
241 analytical concepts and explored potential theoretical explanations.

242 As a second analytic step, we employed positioning analysis as outlined by Bamberg
243 (2011). Although Bamberg’s main emphasis was on identity construction, he noted that
244 positioning analysis is also illustrative of how the referential world (in this case, Masters
245 athletics) is constructed (Bamberg, 2011). Briefly, positioning analysis explores three levels
246 of the narrative: (1) how different characters of the story are positioned, for example, as
247 winners or losers, in control or helpless, and so forth; (2) how the storytellers position
248 themselves in relation to the audience in this particular interactional setting; and (3) how the

249 storytellers position themselves in relation to master narratives or ideological discourses, thus
250 giving a local answer to who they are, in our case in relation to Masters athletics. Our aim
251 with the positioning analysis was, in conjunction with Fivush's (2010) theorising on voice
252 and silence in relation to life scripts, to understand how coaches navigate master narratives
253 about the sporting life and the role of Masters athletics in this picture.

254 Our approach to rigour is grounded in a realist view where validity is not seen as a
255 product of standardised procedures, but in the relationship between the researchers' account
256 and those things it is supposed to be an account of (Maxwell, 2012). Following Maxwell's
257 (2017) recommendations, we sought to identify threats to validity in descriptive, interpretive
258 and theoretical levels. For example, translations of the Finnish interviews were discussed
259 between the first and fourth author to enhance descriptive validity, whereas the first, second
260 and fourth authors' involvement in athletics provided additional contextual resources that
261 helped to understand meanings held by subculture insiders (interpretive validity). Theoretical
262 validity – that is, the plausibility of the explanations of the studied phenomenon – was
263 addressed by the first and the second author by exploring alternative conceptual tools and
264 theoretical ideas to explain the phenomenon. The formal peer review offered further critical
265 commentary from reviewers that helped us to explore further theorising and empirical
266 findings that supported or challenged our account. However, given the theory-laden nature of
267 knowledge, we accept that other equally valid readings from alternative theoretical lenses are
268 also possible.

269 **Results**

270 The stories from coaches in both national contexts were underpinned by a master
271 narrative that constructed competitive athletics as a project of youth. The participants could
272 be either reinforcing the master narrative or working to destabilise it and construct an
273 alternative narrative of a sporting life. Either way, narrative constructions worked to portray

274 Masters athletics as a competition for the ‘lesser’ or not ‘real’ athletes. Twelve coaches
275 expressed little interest in participating in Masters athletics, 10 coaches had done so or could
276 consider participating in the future, and one coach was ambiguous. The responses were
277 almost equally distributed by country; however, there were different patterns in the narrative
278 constructions of Masters athletics and the reasons (not) to consider participation. The Finnish
279 athletics club had a separate section and training groups for Masters athletics, and almost all
280 Finnish coaches who were eligible had been asked to compete for their club as a Masters
281 athlete. In contrast, the club in England did not have a section or specific coaching for
282 Masters athletics, but some coaches had athletes who were qualified to compete in Masters
283 competitions (i.e., over 35 years of age) in their training groups.

284 Only in a few cases, the reasons to reject Masters sport were primarily related to
285 physical (i.e., injury) constraints; instead, the coaches’ identity claims and ideological
286 discourses were more important for understanding their lack of enthusiasm. The following
287 analysis focuses on narrative strategies and not on specific persons; at times, coaches could
288 be telling a combination of these stories in making sense of themselves in relation to Masters
289 athletics.

290 **‘It is not my thing’: Elite sport as the only ‘real’ sport**

291 Those coaches who had competed in national level senior competitions or strongly
292 aspired to do so mostly constructed an elite athletic identity which was incompatible with
293 Masters competition. The stories were aligned with the masternarrative of aging-as-decline
294 that centres on the loss of athletic performance as described in several previous studies
295 (Dionigi, 2005; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007). The coaches constructed several reasons to reject
296 Masters sport, including the view of Masters athletics as ‘the third division’, loss of desire to
297 compete, lacking the embodied sensation of high performance and not being able to reach
298 one’s best results. For example, Sami (late 20s, Finland) explained:

299 *I've had the expectation that I should be achieving a lot in sport. When you can really*
300 *be a top athlete in your sport... if we're honest about it, I don't have a lot of respect*
301 *for Masters sport.*

302 The identity claims of being a high-performance athlete were constructed in opposition to
303 Masters sport athlete identity, which was clearly the 'other', the 'lesser' athlete. For example,
304 although Peter (70s, England) slightly deviated from the ideal script of sport as a project of
305 youth, was quick to correct the interviewer to disassociate himself from Masters athletics:

306 *Peter: ... and I carried on [competing] until I was 50.*

307 *Interviewer: so you continued until you were a veteran?*

308 *Peter: so I mean – I did not compete in the veterans, I competed in open competitions.*
309 *I was still making the teams and... [Masters sport], it is very good for the health of*
310 *the nation. But it is managing decline (...) If you are good enough to compete,*
311 *compete in open competition.*

312 However, although these coaches disassociated themselves from Masters athletics, most of
313 them had maintained recreational exercise activities. Some Finnish coaches also took part in
314 mass jogging or skiing events. The sport for all ideology, prominent in the Nordic countries,
315 provided an alternative narrative resource to 'fall back on' to restory sport-related self-
316 narratives that were now firmly based on participation rather than performance. Jari (50s,
317 Finland) explained his current identity position:

318 *Jari: Well I never stopped recreational activities. I like to go for a run. The spark has*
319 *been there since I was a child.*

320 *Interviewer: and is it only recreation or are you still interested in local competitions*
321 *or something like that?*

322 *Jari: no, I'm not interested in competing against others, no. But I can go to a mass*
323 *jogging event once a year or something. But competing against others, it's not my*
324 *thing anymore.*

325 Finally, although the coaches' stories did not fall into neat categories based on the national
326 context, the coaches in Finland often had more thoroughly considered their position; in
327 England, some coaches rejected Masters athletics very bluntly with few explanations offered
328 – perhaps because they did not have as diverse narrative resources as the Finns had for doing
329 so. Furthermore, the coaches like Carl (80s, England) who simply dismissed Masters athletes
330 as “a bit funny”, were likely to be from older generations who had grown up in times before
331 the successful and active aging discourses were introduced. The normative discourse of sport
332 as something that is preserved for young people is illustrated by John (50s, England):

333 *Interviewer: do you ever think about getting back into competing or racing again?*

334 *John: no I am too old... I am too old.*

335 *Interviewer: but you still have people running who are 70 years old. So why not? Is it*
336 *just not that interesting for you?*

337 *John: No, just doesn't interest me.*

338 **“I would like to challenge myself into that again”: Masters athletics as a ‘second**
339 **chance’**

340 Most coaches open to the idea of taking part in Masters athletics in the future had
341 competed as junior athletes but disengaged in adolescence before reaching their hypothetical
342 peak of physical performance. These coaches were more often from the younger generations
343 and many mentioned being used to seeing Masters athletes training at the sport facilities.
344 Starting anew as a Masters athlete was constructed as ‘a second chance’ to compete and

345 measure one's performance, mainly in comparison to oneself, and with the prospect of doing
346 better than in the first athletic career. Jonna (late 20s, Finland) explained:

347 *Jonna: At that time [age of 13] I also had other hobbies (...) I felt I should have come*
348 *to training more often in order to do well. And so that's how I stopped doing athletics.*
349 *But I have regretted later! (...) At the moment, I've been thinking about Masters*
350 *athletics, [I would like] to be able to compete again and see what I can still do.*

351 For most of these coaches, there was no 'burden' of stepping down from their previous
352 competitive level or seeing their results significantly decline; although some of them had
353 been goal-oriented junior athletes, they had not experienced an elite athletic career. 'The
354 second chance', however, was not considered merely as 'health management' as constructed
355 by many coaches who rejected Masters athletics, but a possibility to challenge oneself in
356 record production again:

357 *Taru (20s): Well, it is wholly about challenging myself, but I have high goals for*
358 *myself in terms of the results. I need to do better than what I did as a junior. In*
359 *athletics, there are very clear results that I would try to reach. (...) I might not*
360 *continue if I cannot do that (laughing).*

361 From the coaches, three were regular competitors in Masters athletics. Their stories
362 conformed to the previous studies illustrating multiple meanings of Masters sport as a serious
363 life project, a hobby, a health-related activity, and a socially-oriented practice. However,
364 making a comeback had required rejecting the life script of sport as a project of youth and
365 accessing new the narrative resources about athletics. Heli (40s, Finland) reflected:

366 *A bit more than five years ago, I couldn't imagine myself being an athlete again. Now*
367 *I've started again in Masters athletics and I also compete. [But before that], I never*

368 *thought of athletics as a sport that you can do as a hobby. Either you compete or you*
369 *don't compete. Either you are elite and active, or you are not an athlete at all.*

370 Heli's story confirmed the dominance of the elite sport narratives in the athletics subculture
371 and described how these narratives had limited the choices she could see open for her.

372 While the three Masters athletes were all international level competitors, they tended
373 to downplay their identity claims. Hanna, multiple time medallist from international Masters
374 competitions, offered: "It is, of course, also a hobby, but it has become goal-oriented, so I do
375 feel like I am some kind of an athlete..." That is, despite her achievements, she positioned
376 herself as 'some kind of' athlete who was still in some way not a 'real' athlete. The
377 construction of Masters sport as an activity for 'other people' than the 'real' athletes was also
378 evident in Harri's (40, Finland) reflections on (dis)continuity of different careers in athletics:

379 *I'm thinking, about the people I've coached... I don't remember [if anyone became a*
380 *Masters athlete]. Oh well, in its own way, yes. I had athletes of different levels,*
381 *athletes who never made it to the national championships, some of them might*
382 *continue. Does that count? But then, most often, Masters sport is for people other*
383 *than those who already tried to reach their limits.*

384 **"We always ask for people to become officials": The normative life career in athletics**
385 Especially in the English club the coaches often turned the question of Masters athletics to
386 the lack of officials and coaches. For them, the normative life career in athletics started from
387 being an athlete in youth and then transition to coaching, officiating and other volunteer roles
388 in the club. Similar to those who rejected Masters sport as not 'a real' sport, the coaches who
389 developed this normative life career script were likely to be older coaches who valorised the
390 traditional amateur culture of athletics and felt a strong duty to keep it alive. Several coaches
391 in England worried about the growing difficulty of getting volunteers to run the competitions,

392 coaching and other club activities, suggesting that Masters athletics could be to blame for
393 that:

394 *John (50s, England): The problem with Masters athletics is that – the reason there is*
395 *a lack of officials and coaches, is because a lot of athletes are still competing. That*
396 *would actually be more beneficial to the club if they moved from being athletes*
397 *themselves and moved towards being coaches.*

398 The Western life script which prescribes the life course as starting from individual
399 exploration and achievement and later shifting to other-oriented, generative activities shaped
400 the narrative constructions of Masters athletics. Being focused on one's own athletic career
401 was the privilege afforded to young people, whereas the lack of volunteers was potentially
402 'caused' by older peoples' 'selfish' choices to continue pursuing their own athletic career.
403 Many older coaches also positioned themselves as those fulfilling a duty to the community
404 and helping others, aligning with Western life scripts emphasising generative activities as the
405 task of middle adulthood and later life. Mark (50s, England) explained:

406 *If I'm being completely honest, I am probably here because I feel committed to be*
407 *here. There are no other coaches around [in my event], there's nobody to take over.*
408 *There's nobody that assists me, and if I'm not here sessions don't happen.*

409 Implicitly, the stories contained a notion of Masters athletics as a selfish activity as the older
410 athletes were deviating from the life career in athletics by possibly not 'giving back' to the
411 club and the new generation of young athletes.

412 In the Finnish club, those involved in Masters sport similarly recognised an expectation
413 to give back to their club. They maintained that they were actively contributing and not a
414 burden for their club. Anna (50s, Finland) explained:

415 *Masters athletes bring membership payments, officials to events, and also their*
416 *children to do youth sport. And so that gives it continuity. That works well and we can*
417 *also get instructors from our own group.*

418 Anna's narrative emerged within a long uninterrupted story, indicating that although she
419 described being very satisfied with her experience in the club, she had to speak up and justify
420 Masters athletes' place in the club. However, volunteering was less frequently taken up as a
421 critical challenge by the coaches in Finland, and there appeared to be a more reciprocal
422 relationship between the younger and older generations and the division of voluntary work in
423 the club. Heli (40s, Finland) offered:

424 *If there's a [Masters] competition in the club, the younger athletes will come and act*
425 *as officials which also tells us that they value it. And we're always in their*
426 *competitions acting as officials, and so they value it and in this way they can give*
427 *back a little bit... This has become a part of our community. I can't speak for all of*
428 *the athletes, but the culture makes it possible to help each other out if you want to.*

429 **Discussion**

430 Our study aimed to understand how coaches position themselves in relation to Masters
431 athletics and the narrative resources they tap into in doing so. In light of literature describing
432 competitive sport an increasingly accepted form of leisure in later life (Gard et al., 2016;
433 Horton et al., 2018), the athletics coaches were surprisingly resistant to Masters athletics. The
434 life script of sport as a project of youth was resilient in prescribing the course of an athletic
435 career (see also Phoenix and Sparkes, 2006, 2007; Phoenix, Smith & Sparkes, 2007) and was
436 often perpetuated especially by those who were long-term members and/or leaders of the
437 clubs. The 'second chance' career in Masters sport emerged as an alternative narrative that
438 destabilised this script whilst also preserving youth privilege and prescribing Masters

439 athletics as the sport for not ‘real’ athletes. Finally, we identified an additional notion of ‘a
440 normative life career’ in athletics which involved an elite athletic career in early life followed
441 by a transition to coaching and volunteering roles in later life. As such, the narratives
442 conformed to a Western life script where sport fits the individualism of youth, whereas from
443 mid-life onwards the societal expectation is to be responsible for others (Phoenix & Sparkes,
444 2008).

445 Similar to Partington et al. (2005) and Phoenix and Sparkes (2006, 2007), we suggest
446 that the coaches’ stories provide others in the athletics subculture with ‘narrative maps’ of
447 different life careers in athletics. The distinct ‘first’ and ‘second’ athletic career pathways
448 constructed the ‘real’ athletic career as a project of youth, whereas the ‘second chance’ was
449 only considered appealing for those who might not have reached their potential in the first
450 attempt (or had missed it altogether). The ‘second chance’ offered an opportunity to re-
451 engage in athletics and a narrative map for reconstructing the life career in sport and
452 resembles stories of ‘rekindlers’ identified by Dionigi (2015). However, despite challenging
453 the notion that older people cannot do competitive sport, the narrative often included an
454 implicit ‘failed’ first career. Therefore, it does little to challenge the youth privilege and elitist
455 ethos of the athletics subculture. That is, both the elite narrative and the second chance
456 narrative contributed to creating boundaries between the ‘real’ athletes and Masters athletes,
457 offering very little continuity between the two. As such, our findings differ from Dionigi
458 (2015) who found that approximately half of the Masters athletes she interviewed were
459 ‘continuers’ in their sport. The difference might be partly related to her interviewees’ top
460 level of performance that assumedly was not elite, which is in line with some of our coaches’
461 narratives constructing Masters athletics a viable choice for those who did not succeed in
462 youth. However, the Finnish coaches also mentioned that there was a gap in the pathway for
463 non-elite athletes after junior years, because the training groups for senior athletes focused on

464 elite competition, whereas Masters sport competitions were only open for people from 30s
465 onward (even if all ages were welcome to join the training groups). Therefore, both
466 ideological and structural boundaries were found to block the continuity of athletes'
467 pathways, positioning different participants as more or less 'real' athletes.

468 The narrative maps created by some of the coaches also afforded younger people the
469 privilege to focus on their own athletic bodies and achievements but tied middle-aged and
470 older people to societal expectations for other-oriented, generative activity (Phoenix et al.,
471 2017). This narrative map is resistant to Masters athletics because the new social movement
472 is perceived as a threat to the sustainability of volunteer-based athletics clubs, and was more
473 often developed by older coaches who had grown up before the active ageing discourses
474 started to gain traction. The normative life career in athletics which involved the movement
475 from an athlete to a coach, official and club volunteer was seen to be disrupted by Masters
476 athletes who might prioritise their own training and competition over other-oriented activities
477 within the sport. Coaches' concerns reflect the broader challenges faced by sport clubs in
478 Europe that need to compete fiercely for the time and enthusiasm of their volunteers (Nichols
479 et al., 2005). Especially in England, the sport club volunteers were normatively assumed to be
480 middle-aged and older people. Still wanting to be an athlete in later life was 'off time' in
481 relation to the cultural life scripts prescribing mid- and later life as other-oriented rather than
482 a self-focused period of life (Phoenix, Smith & Sparkes, 2007; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2008).

483 The higher prevalence of the narrative map on normative life career in athletics in
484 England might be further influenced by structural differences in welfare provisions and
485 working arrangements (e.g., better childcare and more flexible work in Finland) (Jyrkinen &
486 McKie, 2012). For example, lower childcare costs and better accessibility as well as social
487 approval for formal childcare in Finland (Verhoef, Tammelin, May, Rönkä, & Roeters, 2016)
488 might mean that parents and grandparents were in a better position to pursue leisure activities

489 including Masters sport *and* volunteering in the clubs. The high regard for physically active
490 leisure in Finland (Vehmas, 2010) was also reflected in Finnish coaches' choices to take time
491 for own exercising and physical activity besides work and coaching. The socially endorsed
492 right to pursue sport and exercise activities at any age could be part of why there was less
493 blame on older athletes for being selfish. The Finnish coaches also complained less often
494 about the lack of coaches and officials. This could be partly due to the small financial
495 compensation that made coaching positions more desirable to students (who comprised a big
496 part of the coaching workforce in the Finnish club), and the more reciprocal arrangements in
497 officiating where junior, senior and Masters athletes acted as officials in each other's
498 competitions.

499 Overall, most coaches drew on two dominant discourses of ageing and sport as
500 described by Eichberg (2009), constructing Masters sport either as a way to combat decline
501 or a pursuit of record production. Both these modes of being could be viewed as variants of
502 successful ageing, where sport and exercise in later life was considered vital for sustaining
503 physical functioning or active engagement in life. Overall, the dominant constructions of
504 sport across the lifespan were rationalistic and instrumental, with sport acting as a vehicle for
505 record production in youth and (most often) health management in later life. The
506 considerations of sport in later life as a potential site for experiencing meaningfulness and
507 self-discovery (as in harmonious or conscious ageing) or embodied pleasure (Phoenix & Orr,
508 2014) were notably absent from the participants' stories. As such, the narrative maps
509 developed by the coaches offered limited resources for thinking and feeling about the role of
510 sport across the lifespan, excluding the potential of sport to offer avenues for joy and spiritual
511 development. Working to help broaden coaches' own narrative resources further to create
512 more diverse narrative maps and inclusive sporting spaces could be done, for example,
513 through coach education and sport science courses. Coach education in various sports in

514 Finland and the UK demands the coaches to articulate a coaching philosophy, and
515 introducing reflective questions about ageing and the meaning and value of sport across the
516 lifespan could be incorporated into this task.

517 In focusing on only two athletics clubs which also have local ideologies (see, e.g.,
518 Heinilä, 1989) that are likely to be shaped by other narratives including gender, social class
519 and ethnicity, our study cannot provide an estimation of the broader national patterns of how
520 athletics coaches embrace or resist Masters athletics. Furthermore, in our participant
521 recruitment, we noticed that in the English club the older coaches were more likely to
522 respond to our invitation for an interview than the younger coaches, leaving the English
523 sample skewed towards older coaches' interpretations of Masters athletics. However, in
524 focusing on broader narrative patterns and interaction of life scripts with personal and master
525 narratives we believe that our study is credible in mapping the cultural forces influencing
526 coaches' choices of adopting certain subject positions and rejecting others.

527 **Conclusions**

528 Masters sport represents one of the new lifestyle choices that were not readily available
529 just a few decades ago. Therefore, making sense of it with modernist sporting narratives and
530 cultural life scripts can be a difficult task. Our study showed that many sport coaches
531 especially from the older generation are still resistant to Masters athletes because they disrupt
532 the traditional narratives associated with ageing. However, we also found that the growing
533 visibility of Masters athletes is slowly starting to influence some coaches' life career
534 construction in sport and might be gaining more traction especially in younger generation of
535 coaches influenced by successful and active ageing discourses. The study also highlights that,
536 if governments wish to promote Masters sport, the neoliberal focus on individual
537 responsibility and health benefits alone seems unhelpful. Addressing traditional sport clubs'
538 actual concerns about survival as well as subcultural age-related attitudes and beliefs

539 hindering Masters sport is crucial for developing inclusive sport subcultures that truly
540 encourage active sport participation for all. We are hopeful that, as the alternative stories are
541 becoming more widely known, the normative life script of competitive sport as a project of
542 youth will become increasingly contested, giving way to alternative ways of designing lives
543 in and through sport.

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