

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

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## Abstract

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

**Keywords:** coach identity; career development; narrative; vignettes; women's sport

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Conceptual framework**

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

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

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

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

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

## **Participants**

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

## **Procedure**

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

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

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



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

## **Narrative Analysis and Representation**

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

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

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

## **Validity**

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

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

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

## **Results**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Football comes first**

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

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

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

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

## Discussion

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

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

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

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

football brings. As such, women's football is becoming a sphere that many young, ambitious and competitive men are entering to find opportunities to fast track their coaching careers towards professional positions. Given the significance of coaches as socialising agents and providers of narrative resources in young athletes' lives, we speculate that the problematic cultural narratives surrounding men's game will likely be increasingly transmitted to women's football through coaching practice. Issues such as the instrumentalist discourses of education that circulate in men's football (McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006) and traditional notions of authority, hierarchy, hard work and single-minded dedication as a pre-requisity for success are likely to have an impact on the psychological development and life choices of current and future female players.

While suggesting that sub-cultural values and discourses in elite football are powerful in shaping individual experiences and identities (Cushion & Jones, 2006, 2012; Champ et al., 2018), it is important to recognise that individuals are capable of rejecting the dominant interpretations and practices to sustain a sense of personal authenticity, as described in previous studies (Potrac et al., 2012; Roderick, 2014). Our study is not exhaustive in mapping the subjective career meanings in football coaching, and it is possible that other coaches may imagine their careers less linearly and make career choices for reasons other than upward mobility. Studying coach career development longitudinally would be an important next step to understand personal and social processes influencing the development of career meanings and adaptabilities, and the individual differences in how coaches develop their relationship with their craft.

## Conclusions

Through an analysis of coaches' career narratives, we demonstrated that the linear models of career development remain relevant for understanding the experience of career construction in sports coaching. Although the coaches were resourceful and active agents in pursuing their

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

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