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“Should I stay or should I go?” Is there a use by date on coach-athlete relationships? Shifting, temporal and contextual notions of power-relations within track and field athletics

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ABSTRACT

In high-performance sport, the coach–athlete relationship is often framed as central to athlete development and well-being. Yet, such relationships are dynamic, contested, and deeply embedded within broader sociocultural and institutional landscapes. This study critically reconsiders how athletes experience and interpret these relationships in UK high-performance track and field athletics. Drawing on poststructural and postmodern theory and sensibilities, this research explores how athletes navigate, resist, and engage with complex power relations. Semi-structured interviews with twelve high-performance athletes were analysed through a Neo-Foucauldian lens producing a paired extended vignette. Findings suggest that dominant model-based approaches to coach-athlete relationship research are both limited and limiting, and ignore complex social dynamics. Power is shown to be fluid, temporal, relational, and non-possessive, challenging traditional conceptualisations of power. This work contributes a theoretically rich and empirically grounded reconceptualisation of coach–athlete dynamics, offering new ways to understand how power operates in high-performance sport.

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Power; coach-athlete relationship; vignettes; narratives; poststructuralism/postmodernism

Walking the course; mapping the landscape.

Darling, you got to let me know.
Should I stay, or should I go?
If you say that you are mine.
I'll be here till the end of time.
So you got to let me know.
Should I stay, or should I go?
(The Clash, 1982).

Inspired by the singer Mick Jones, we have been intrigued by the potentialities of relationships; assessing their value and wondering if certain connections have a shelf-life, or if they are long-life? We ask, is there a time to call time on those relationships that no longer work? As critical sports coaching scholars it is these potent, complex, and fluid relationships central to the coaching process and set within the context of high-performance sport that intrigues us. Specifically, the coach–athlete relationship is widely recognised as central to athlete success and welfare within sociocultural and pedagogical environments (de Haan & Norman, 2020; Potrac & Jones, 2011; Solomons et al., 2026). We argue by examining these vibrant, important, and powerful relationships set within the wider contextual landscape, we can better comprehend the myriad means in which coaches can exert influence on athletes (Consterdine & Taylor, 2025; Denison & Mills, 2014; J. Mills et al., 2020; Purdy & Jones, 2011). Correspondingly, reflecting on how athletes view the relational aspects of the coaching process may have important ramifications for athlete learning, holistic development, personal growth, or vice versa (Battaglia et al., 2022; Gearity et al., 2023; Potrac & Jones, 2011).

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Nevertheless, despite a large body of work that explicates the workings of coach-athlete relations from an individual-level psychological model-based perspective (e.g. Jowett, 2007, 2017; Jowett & Poczwadowski, 2007; Jowett & Wachsmuth, 2020; Lorimer & Jowett, 2009; Zhao & Jowett, 2023), we are not convinced that this is illustrative of the subtler forms of interaction between agents, creation of coaching norms/practices, or the construction of the athlete. We take our point of departure from approaches that conceptualise coach-athlete relationships primarily through stable constructs, measurable outcomes, and linear explanatory frameworks. While productive in many respects, such approaches pay less attention to questions of power, discourse, subject formation, and the contingent nature of coaching relationships. Furthermore, our approach contrasts with apolitical, model-based postpositivist perspectives that prioritise explanations grounded in an objectively knowable social reality and cause-and-effect relationships (Markula & Silk, 2011). Alternatively, our poststructural/postmodern¹ tendencies posit that there are contested and fragmented truths and that knowledge, reality, and truth are socially constructed and reproduced through evolving discourses (Markula & Silk, 2011). These tensions that reject universal metanarratives, binary interpretations of power, singular truths, and the rational, objective, and impartial self will be explored throughout this paper with practical implications for both sports coaching scholarship and coach education. In order to address these issues, we argue for a Foucauldian-informed poststructural/postmodern approach to explore the operation and manifestation of power within the context of high-performance coach-athlete relationships. As the first empirical study to unite poststructural and postmodern principles in this field, this research combines a neo-Foucauldian understanding of power relations with postmodern approaches to qualitative inquiry, generating novel insights into the coach-athlete relationship.

Spotlight on power

We posit that power is an integral aspect of coach-athlete relationships (Denison & Mills, 2018). This potent social force pervades and saturates the social world, giving colour and shape to social interactions by operating across multiple modalities (such as repression and coercion, hegemony and counter hegemony, strategy and manipulation, discipline and governance, and seduction and resistance) across the social sites in which it is practiced (Carrington, 2022; Westwood, 2002). Despite its wealth of multiple iterations, however, power is often conceived of in Weberian terms where it is presented as possessional and hierarchical (Potrac & Jones, 2011). The interpretation of power to influence or cause an effect or to have asymmetric control over valuable resources in social relations is endemic to much writing on the coaching process or the coach-athlete relationship (Consterdine & Taylor, 2025). We argue that this framing is both limited and limiting, and requires a more sophisticated, nuanced and versatile comprehension of relations of power that moves beyond traditional hierarchical, top-down operations.

Our thinking is influenced by power theorists such as Foucault (1977/1991, 1978/1998, 1980) and Westwood (2002) who conceptualise power as fluid, transient, multifaceted, relational and non-possessive. For Foucault “Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (1978/1998, p. 94). These fluid, nebulous and temporal aspects of power are corroborated by Westwood (2002) who purports that power is constitutive of social relations as opposed to operating outside of them and locates the phenomenon as pervasive and disseminated through the interstices of society. Gaventa (2003, p. 3) neatly provides a brief summary of how Foucault departs from conventional definitions of power; “Power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them”.

Furthermore, the invisible ways in which power operates has particular implications for our paper in which we adopt Foucault’s (1977/1991, 1980) connection between power and discourse; “... power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1977/1991, p. 194). For Foucault, “truth” is not presented as neutral or apolitical reflections of society, but as something produced within historically and socially contingent relations of power. Importantly *what counts as knowledge and who can be a knower* feeds into particular discourses and institutional practices to produce certain “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). In coaching, power operates through discourse to produce

“truths” such as the “expert” coach, “best” practice, or appropriate relationships that both constrain and enable what can be known, said, and done. In this way, the power-discourse nexus actually constitutes subjects who come to regulate themselves in line with these truths; what Foucault might recognise as “conduct of one’s conduct”.

Problematising the coach-athlete relationship

If we claim the importance of power then we need to move beyond the vast body of work that treats the coach-athlete relationship as existing within a vacuum, or as decontextualised dyads, homogenous understandings or reductionistic interpretations that either ignore power relations, or treats power as dualistic, hierarchical, and possessive (e.g. Jowett, 2007, 2017; Jowett & Wachsmuth, 2020; Lorimer & Jowett, 2009; Zhao & Jowett, 2023). Over the last 25 years sports coaching discourse has been influenced by psychological models that prioritise interpersonal variables, behavioural correlates and measurable relationship outcomes. Whilst these approaches have generated valuable insights, they leave relatively underexplored the broader sociocultural, discursive, and relational conditions through which coaching relationships are constituted (Consterdine & Taylor, 2025). Furthermore, by disregarding the contextual, relational, and temporal nature of relationships, these models do not account for the wider entangled relationships and power networks that surround the coach and athlete (Denison & Mills, 2018). We join with Consterdine and Taylor (2025) who posit that these postpositivistic, mechanistic, and idealist representations of the coach-athlete relationship produces binary, apolitical, and closed conceptualisations that quieten alternative epistemologies require a new approach to illuminate new understandings.

Where the socio-cultural or pedagogical context has been the focus of empirical work on the coach-athlete relationship from a qualitative interpretivist perspective, much of this work is micropolitical in nature or takes a range of power perspectives (Consterdine et al., 2013; Potrac & Jones, 2009, 2011; Potrac et al., 2007; Purdy & Jones, 2011; Solomons et al., 2026). An exciting direction in sports coaching is the proliferation of Foucauldian and poststructuralist scholarship, in which fluid and relational aspects of power intersect with language, culture, discourse, subjectivities, and knowledge production (e.g. Avner et al., 2021; Denison & Mills, 2014; J. P. Mills et al., 2022). For example, Denison and Mills (2014) operationalised Foucauldian concepts by presenting endurance coaches’ training plans and sessions as technologies of disciplinary power. They explored how elements such as the organisation of space, time, and movement works to produce controlled, effective, and trained, but potentially docile athletic bodies. By applying Foucauldian ideas, the authors showed how athletes are constructed, coaching discourses created, and how this links to the power-knowledge nexus and the operation of power relations within and between agents. In contrast, Consterdine and Taylor (2025) extend this lens by further situating these practices within broader networks of discourse, context and sociomaterial relations, demonstrating how power circulates through language, institutional norms and culture, rather than residing in the coach. They both present coaching as an entanglement of power-knowledge relations which is produced across the lived reality of training practices and enacted through wider discursive conditions.

These conceptualisations are less frequently explored specifically in wider empirical coach-athlete relationship research (and none have taken a postmodern approach), but the poststructuralist work of Avner, Jones, and Brown (2025) and Gearity et al. (2023) demonstrate value to understanding how discourses are (re)produced and contested, and explore the unintended or unpredictable consequences of power relations.

Notwithstanding the above, if we claim a poststructural/postmodern position then we also need to go beyond critiquing previous work and problematise the coach-athlete relationship in a Foucauldian sense. Rather than simply identifying an issue or problem, this term provokes us to connect with the deeper historical-cultural practices that is concerned with how coaching phenomena or practice may come to be understood as problematic in the first place (Foucault, 1977/1991). For us, problematisation questions how presumed practices or discourses are constructed, gain potency, and are disseminated through the social and linked to regimes of truth. For example, presenting the coach-athlete relationship as inherently beneficial, natural, idealised, or fixed does not consider the socio-discursive conditions (such as authority, care, control, and welfare) that govern coaching practices or athlete subjectivities. Rather, this paper problematises coaching by destabilising dominant model-based and dyadic representations of coach-

athlete relationships, decentring the operation of power relations in the process, and opening space for alternative ways of thinking.

This research, therefore, seeks to address the workings of power in a sports coaching context using the coach-athlete relationship as a vehicle from which to observe, explore and critically examine how power relations operate within the rarified atmosphere of high-performance track and field athletics in the UK. This gives rise to twin aims: (1) to examine how power relations are enacted, negotiated, and experienced within sports coaching contexts, and (2) to analyse coach-athlete relationships through a theoretical framework informed by poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives. Consequently, through the creation of two storied vignettes and associated analysis we hope to provide coaches with a toolkit for identifying and navigating the complex dynamics of power relations, help them with reflective decision making, enhancing trust and transparency, and may help safeguard athlete wellbeing by revealing subtle dynamics often overlooked. The findings may also provide sport organisations, policymakers, and coach education programmes with a more context sensitive framework for recognising and navigating complex power relations.

Methodological method entanglements

Working within a poststructural/postmodern theoretical framework

From inception to dissemination, this research has taken an unapologetic and ambitious perspective located in the poststructuralist/postmodernist paradigm. Thus, our research ontology frames reality as multiple, subjective, and fissured, where there are disputed, incomplete, and contradictory truths (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018; Sarup, 1993). Furthermore, we align ourselves to a position where reality is a complex, unfinished and evolving process involving entangled interactions between people, processes, things, and the world (St Pierre, 2023). Consequently, our standpoint epistemology posits that knowledge is actively co-constructed within particular social realities and within relevance to the development of particular discourses (Avner, Jones, & Brown, 2025; Lyotard, 1984). Adopting this approach to epistemology questions why certain discourses dominate and others are marginalised; it also allows for the existence of fluctuating and contested discourses that are themselves borne out of mobile and complex power relations (Avner, Jones, & Denison, 2025).

They are also difficult, challenging, and complex with multiple definitions, competing theoretical strands, distinct genealogies, and various approaches. Postmodernism and poststructuralism are sometimes positioned not as outright breaks with modernism and structuralism, but as ongoing engagements with their intellectual predecessors, extending and reworking earlier concerns. While they overlap, key distinctions remain. Postmodernism operates as a broad, culturally oriented framework concerned with transformations in society, knowledge, and culture; emerging from 1960s artistic and intellectual movements in New York. It is often characterised as a sensibility that challenges Enlightenment ideals, destabilises universal truths, and embraces fragmentation (Bauman, 1992; Lyotard, 1984). By contrast, poststructuralism has a narrower analytical scope, rooted in European intellectual traditions of linguistics and philosophy. Developing from and in opposition to structuralism, it focuses on the instability of meaning, the production of knowledge, and the role of discourse and power. Rather than a general cultural condition, poststructuralism functions more as an analytic orientation, offering tools to interrogate how truths are constructed, sustained, and contested (King, 2015).

Taken together, not only do they act as a powerful lens to view a phenomenon, but they question established “truths” and help us to consider alternative readings (Markula & Silk, 2011). In seeking new interpretations of coach-athlete relationships, we are guided by specific poststructural/postmodern principles. First, by rejecting humanist, dualistic interpretation of power where it is presented as binary, possessive and hierarchical, we can conceive of power as relational, diffuse, omnipresent, and discursive (Foucault, 1978/1998, 1980). Second, we offer that the Foucauldian link between power relations and the constitution of social science knowledge(s), whose entanglement leads to the hybrid term – power/knowledge is crucial (Foucault et al., 1980). Rather than presenting power in negative terms (e.g. repression, coercion, control) we are interested in the productive aspects of power between agents within mobile and non-egalitarian power relations.

Furthermore, our third poststructural/postmodernist principle leads us to reject rigidly applied scientific methods and the privileging of singular objective truths (Bauman, 1992). We also share Lyotard's (1984) anxieties around universal metanarratives and grand unifying theories. Rather, our postmodern focus celebrates plurality, incompleteness, heterogeneity, tension, and fractured knowledge (Sarup, 1993). Finally, we are sceptical towards the notion of the humanist self, where the presentation of the rational, objective, independent, agential, and logical individual is questioned (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Procedures, pilots, people, processes, and politics of doing poststructural/postmodern research

Postmodern and qualitative methodologies were applied as a *bricolage* to explore the voices, stories, and accounts of high-performance athletes as they participated in a range of semi-structured interviews with the first author. This study received ethical approval from the Faculty of Health and Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee at Manchester Metropolitan University (Ethics Committee Approval Number 26.11.15[i]). Participants were provided with a Participation Information Sheet (PIS) and informed consent obtained prior to the start of data collection.

We focused this research on high-performance track and field athletes in the UK where participants were considered eligible if they had a national ranking, or had competed for Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As the research team were "outsiders", in order to gain access to this specific population, five gatekeepers were purposefully recruited to develop our connections and add value to our credentials (Kim, 2011). Initial participants then became second and third order gatekeepers in line with snowball or chain sampling, thus widening potential scope (Flick, 2018). The research sample was not decided *a priori*, but actively constructed during fieldwork. 16 athletes were interviewed (six female and ten male) across a variety of events. Interviewees were at various stages of their careers, which included World, European, or Commonwealth Champions, Olympic medallists or finalists, Diamond League winners, National Champions, or National Record holders. Of the 16 participants, four university student athletes took part in a pilot study that preceded the main study.

Pilot work played a vital part in shaping the main data collection and analysis. Often overlooked, preliminary fieldwork was vital in helping first author (Alex) generate and refine the interview script, to evolve the craft of a skilled interviewer, and to consider reflexivity and the role of the interviewer in both pilot and main interviews (Kim, 2011). Specifically, pilot interviews permitted Alex to experiment with questioning styles and interactional techniques while recognising that interviews are active, co-constructed encounters, rather than neutral data gathering tools (Roulston, 2021). Early interviews highlighted lingering postpositivist habits, prompting a gradual shift towards embracing uncertainty, multiplicity, and the emergent nature of interview dialogue. Reflexive journaling² was central in identifying these tensions and documenting moments of progress, ultimately helping her become a more mindful interviewer who views meaning as negotiated and contextually situated:

The last interview with my para-cyclist went particularly well and I felt quite proud of the way that I set the scene, initiated the questions and responded to her [the athlete's] answers by including deeper, follow up questions that elicited quite thoughtful, considered replies. I am beginning to use silences more!. (Reflexive Journal)

This is also representative of the joint construction of knowledge operating within power-relations between interviewer and interviewee, where interviews are not apolitical, but are dynamic social encounters involving mediated practice (St Pierre, 2023). Being mindful of the ways that power actively shapes the co-construction of knowledge between protagonists helped Alex lean more into Foucauldian concepts.

Two female and two male university athletes were recruited and interviewed by the first author, producing 3 hours and 35 minutes of interview data (average 50 mins per participant). Audio was recorded on two electronic devices simultaneously which were then transferred as coded and encrypted files to a password-protected PC. A bank of 50+ interview questions were generated and gradually refined. From this, the final set of 23 interview questions clustered around four main themes; exploratory coach-athlete relationships; physical culture in high-performance sport; coaching interactions in high-performance sport; and external pressures (sport governing bodies, funding, and media).

In the main study, 12 high-performance athletes took part in *vis-à-vis* semi-structured interviews resulting in 11 hours and 56 mins of interview data (average 59 mins per participant). After adhering to

institutional ethics and alerting participants to the steps we have taken to maintain anonymity and confidentiality, audio data were treated as per the pilot study. Six interviews were manually transcribed, refined, and edited by the lead author which allowed the research team to read into the data independently, drawing personal insights incorporating aspects of Ellingson's (2009) crystallisation as an analytical tool. As a postmodern sensibility, crystallisation acknowledges incompleteness, partiality and fractured truths that accommodates disparate researcher positions and embodies multiple possibilities for the meanings of data. Regular researcher meetings where we interrogated ourselves and our interpretation followed after immersion into the data. We made the decision not to transcribe all the audio data, but instead to keep close to the original, raw and unmediated experience of the interview and draw out codes, themes and sub-plots then recorded in researcher reflexive logs, fieldwork journals and records of intra-researcher meetings. We found this to be a powerful tool as Schostak (2006) reminds us that the intimacy engendered by close immersion in the audio data may mitigate against the transformation or degree of separation that sometimes occurs when translated to text.

Care was taken protect the identity and welfare of the participants as per ethical standards of qualitative research, but as these participants exist in the public sphere, being mindful of the consequences of potential breaches of anonymity adds an extra dimension to the process (Flick, 2018). We contend that the act of naming is an act of intimacy and power, so the first author (Alex) tried to be considerate of age, gender, culture and background when matching pseudonyms to participants. For example, in attempting to match the meaning of the new name with Alex's impression of the participant, one interviewee who was vibrant, outspoken, and compelling, was renamed *Maeve*. One interpretation of this Irish name means "warrior queen" and sat well with us. Similarly, another interviewee who came across as self-assured, direct and fiercely bright we referred to as *Kira*. We considered the Sanskrit meaning "ray of light" to be appropriate and both participants provided illuminating accounts that moved our understanding.

Decisions about data analysis and representation

To present data analysis as an isolated activity tacked onto the end of the research process would do a disservice to our postmodern sympathies, as data analysis started from the onset of the fieldwork and is never disconnected from the process of data creation (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Drawing on reflexive field notes, member reflections and journaling, the data were manually coded and meanings evoked on multiple levels (Saldaña, 2016). We engaged in a lengthy looping hermeneutical process which involved moving back and forth across the data, crossing, twisting, and circling whilst in contestant engagement with reflexive journaling and member reflections.

These engendered lively and sometimes difficult discussions within the research team, which was accompanied with extensive reading and sense making of the theoretical frameworks and comprehension of poststructural/postmodern schools of thought. This ongoing negotiated practice permitted meaning to be diverse, in flux, and reflected fractured realities that was mindful of polyvocality (not only of the voices of the participants, but our own heterogeneity). These approaches shaped coding, interpretation and co-construction of meaning and is reflected in the vignettes section. We offer that poststructural conceptualisations of power interacted with our four poststructural/postmodern principles (outlined earlier in this section) allowed us to both inductively and deductively *read into* the data (Foucault, 1977/1991, 1978/1998; Lyotard, 1984).

This led to certain anxieties about how to thoughtfully and sensitively represent the voices and accounts of our participants and research journey. This disquiet around applying postmodern tendencies is exemplified by the following:

... I really do not know what to do for the best. The options seem to be endless and at times overwhelming. If I go down the easier thematic route, I will ultimately disappoint myself and I fear others – if I grasp this opportunity to be different, to be brave and challenge myself I might learn a new approach and be true to my commitments to a postmodern and poststructuralist inspired study. (Reflexive Journal)

It was through engaging with Carless and Douglas's (2013) use of narratives to exploring the lived experiences of sports participants that the methodological and representational potential of story-based approaches became fully apparent. "Sport is storied" as Carless and Douglas (2013, p. 706) argued. It

has beginnings and ends, it has villains and heroes, drama and intrigue – there is a story to be told in sport. Even more so, it allows the personal and political to be intertwined into a narrative that will hopefully carry the reader while being authentic to those who own their own stories (Cavallerio, 2022). We decided to showcase two stories as extended vignettes to explore athlete perceptions of their experiences of coach-athlete relationships in their evolving contexts to demonstrate transferability and resonance (Tracy, 2025). Although data are located across 12 individuals, we chose two athletes based upon the quality of their responses, the rich and textured data created, and their varied experiences that are intended as illustrative cases of evolving coach-athlete relationships. These stories are presented from the perspective of the first author, Alex. This deliberate shift in voice privileges the role and direction of the first author in conducting the interviews, generating the data and creating the vignettes (Townsend & Cushion, 2021).

Kira's story – “you can go your own way”, the temporal nature of relationships

I met Kira, a non-funded, multiple national title holder distance runner towards the middle of my data collection at a track in the south-east of England. I was immediately struck by her friendly, yet forceful personality and wanted to do justice to her account and her openness. To assist with the storied vignette, I have clustered the data around the three subplots to represent the operation and manifestation of power.

Changing fortunes: relational power (re)configurations

I joined Kira at a “very interesting time”, as she mused over her recent decision to change coaches at a crucial point in her career. Six months into her new training set up she recounted:

I wanted to make sure it was very carefully thought out with my previous coach, because we have had a very long-standing relationship, and I am respectful of somebody who has developed me well in the sport. The main reason for changing coaches was for my own progression really. I just felt it was the right time in my career. I am 28, I am moving forward, and I needed to revolutionise myself in a different way.

Kira's relationship with her previous coach Seth was evidently dear to her heart and one that she acknowledged as central to propelling her onto the international stage. Indeed, at 17 years, the relationship had longevity. Kira indicated that he was, for her, a “phenomenal coach”, one that had nurtured and built a supportive and fun atmosphere in which to work:

I think for me it was about the *environment* he created and within that environment I was able to foster characteristics that I guess made me successful, but equally had a social aspect which was so enjoyable. I wouldn't have been as successful as I have as for as long as I have, if I didn't enjoy it. I think that the club set up, the environment that he gave me, and the squad system, I believe, developed me in my early years of the sport. It was *fundamental* in terms of having someone to meet at the track, having that agreement that we were going to commit to a training session, and to push ourselves.

Such was the ease that Kira felt when working with Seth that she followed him to the university where he coached to maintain the relationship:

I think that athletics is evolutionary, but I don't think it's a one form linear programme. This re-framing that I'm talking about has got to be cyclical; constantly recycled, constantly adapted. Yet you've got to *not* step away from what works, so there's that blend of knowing when to let the variables change, and when to keep the variables the same.

For the last two years I had probably reached a point with Seth where I was autonomous. I was giving the direction, giving what I needed to do, saying that ‘I think we need to include this in our programme, I think this will work’. And I would say that in doing so, Seth became a *little bit less useful* in a way, and that sounds really harsh, but you have to work out where the responsibility weighs.

Kira recognised that she had options and used her agency and power to seek out a new coach to improve her performance. In this way, Seth's relational coaching power depreciated in value as the relational intensities deteriorated. The ties that gave significance to the coach-athlete relationship became old and worn, and loyalty appeared to give way to pragmatism. Power, therefore, is not purely located in the realm of the coach

but is constantly re-assessed as negotiated practice (Foucault, 1977/1991, 1978/1998; Westwood, 2002). Ultimately, Kira perceived there to be a use-by date on that relationship and considered alternatives to her situation.

Shifting notions of power in context

In reflecting on her development, the need to always take the lead from her coach became less. Thus, the situational power imbued in these relationships appeared to fluctuate:

I think he had got to the point in his own learning and his own coaching where he wasn't willing to learn anymore. So where did that leave me? I had risen to the top so many times I was like 'what's going to push me on now?' I also almost needed someone better than me to push me, rather being at the top of the pyramid helping everyone else . . .

And yet this transition was not without upset. Yes, there appeared to be a utilitarian aspect to Kira's manner of terminating the relationship, but she did emphasise the stress she felt in considering his feelings and the fallout from leaving:

Unfortunately, I think I've taken it better than he has as I have come to realise what I need and what I would like to do. For me, the hard bit is having what I consider a close friend, but maybe now [he] finds it really hard to speak to me.

Our reading of Kira illustrates the changing power dynamics operating between coach and athlete, but I do not propose that it is equal, finite, and possessional. Rather it is related to changing fortunes and relational power (re)configurations that goes beyond the transactional faculty of power; thus, demonstrating temporal affects.

Revisiting the conversation and inferring meaning between the lines, I feel that Seth may have felt betrayed by Kira, who in daring to break the sacred, long-term, bonded relationship, replaced him with a rival coach. The whispers in the transcript point towards a tipping point, but she appeared vindicated in her decision to switch coaches, especially as she found herself being propelled towards greater accomplishments on the track.

Contradictions and concessions

As the conversation developed, I sensed that Kira appeared to relax into her storytelling role more as she became eager to share her experiences in detail. It also led to consideration of other complex power relations being enacted between the squad. Kira recounted quite proudly how she was considered to be the lead runner in the group and that Seth used her as a barometer against whom the other athletes were measured. She recounts that:

Seth has been instrumental in developing loads of girls through the club ranks, through to National vests and international success. Seth helped support and foster that and I think another positive was his belief in me. I think I developed a lot of girls who came into that group as they got a lot out of training with me because *I know how to train*.

Both the animation in her voice and her choice of words conveyed a sense of satisfaction and I got the impression that Kira was used by her coach as a lieutenant, supporting and endorsing a regime by adding to the tightly controlled system. Rather than power being solely conceived as relational, this aspect of the conversation suggested how athletes become constituted as particular kinds of subjects, as Kira was produced a leader, mentor and standard bearer within the squad.

This over-reliance on Kira, however, came at a cost and she began to resent the situation she found herself in. The trade-off became one-sided where:

I had difficulty managing my training sessions to be performance related and not just fitting in with tons of other athletes who had different requirements. . . . I got to the point where I didn't want to sacrifice a small part of me for each session; I needed now to think about what is going to be the performance margins that are going to help *me*.

This reciprocal, if asymmetric, relation of power made disentangling herself from the set-up more difficult. But as I reflected on the interview transcription process later on, this deterioration was perhaps inevitable, leading to athlete rebellion and Kira carving her own path with a new coach.

Maeve's story – catch a tiger by the tail, or a tale of when to let go?

I met Maeve, a recently retired Olympic medallist, towards the start of my fieldwork at a track in the north-west of England where I was still exploring the performative and political nature of managing the interview. I confess was a little dazzled by this illustrious 400-metre runner but was determined to match her energy and acquit myself well. The ensuing analysis provoked a reading of coach-athlete relationships based around the following three subplots as follows.

Power play: compromise/peacemaker or contestation/provocateur?

Like Kira before her, Maeve identified the changing nature of the coach-athlete relationship as being related to its stage of development or evolution. This shifting, time-dependant affiliation is never uniform, despite any apparent longevity, as it is subject to fluctuating social forces, which are themselves related to agency and context. Maeve volunteered what her lead coach of nine years brought to the relationship:

I think it depends very much on what stage an athlete is at. For example, Eric's role at the start was quite different to his role at the end. So, at the beginning he was predominantly the one who set absolutely everything, and he was 100 percent in charge of absolutely everything I did, apart from my weights. Everything that was running related he did; he organised and planned the sessions for me so I could just get on and train.

At this stage of development, the power asymmetries appeared to be most pronounced, with the athlete depending upon and being led by her coach as they are learning their craft from a knowledgeable other. This nurturing element arose at the start of my conversation with Maeve saying:

... it was very much that he guided me and sort of developed me in areas that he thought I needed. We have a very close relationship. He was like my track Dad. (I can't remember the last time I spoke to my actual Dad)

Maeve implied that her coach played an important role in her life, in addition to someone who could just make her run fast. She went on to discuss the parentification of the relationship where I got the impression that Eric provided a vital anchor point for her. She nodded her head vigorously and stated:

It's never been like he was in an authoritative position, and I was like the subordinate. It was very much like an equal, more friendship, family-based figure, it's never been like I'm his athlete, it's always been – he's my coach.

I read that there seemed to be a significant amount of flexibility within their relationship, demonstrating that not only can power be contextual, but also elastic (Foucault, 1977/1991, 1978/1998). I admit that I was deliciously shocked when she shares:

I'm known to throw a bit of a hissy fit occasionally. Sometimes if I wouldn't want to do a session, we would have an argument about it. I remember one time he wanted me to do a session and I knew it wasn't right, but my season was going so badly, so for about an hour after I'd warmed up I'd had a cry and I was too busy having a strop and everybody had finished the session and I said, 'you know what Eric, fuck it, I'll just do the session!' (laughter) And I actually ran really well!

These incidents appeared to be illustrative of both athlete recourses to subversion and resistance within the power asymmetries of the coach-athlete relationship and compliance once the performance is over (Foucault, 1978/1998). Ultimately, Maeve yielded once she had had her outburst – itself a display of power. Conversely, Eric appeared confident in his position as father/coach and permitted these flare-ups knowing his athlete well enough to come round.

The latter part of her career saw a different type of relationship develop with Eric, which illustrated the changing power balance:

Though Eric was in charge of absolutely everything at the start, his role changed to one where at the end – he was more of a facilitator. So, I was the one who tended to say what I wanted and I needed, because I think the sign of a good coach is when the athlete doesn't *need* you, but they *want* you. So, it kind of changed throughout time.

As relationships mature and evolve, the power dynamics appeared to alter reflecting temporal and ephemeral characteristics (Westwood, 2002). Rather than being static and fixed, the coach-athlete relationship is subject to constant negotiation, flux, co-operation, and compromise. Each brings different elements to the relationship based on an evolving mutual inter-dependence and flexibility of roles.

Rhizomatic power relations as an aspect of squad culture

In addition to being located in time, I suggest that the social context is also key to framing these relationships. From Maeve's account, the influence of other significant relationships seems to have a bearing on how coach and athletes view and respond to each other. These complex interrelations are reminiscent of a *rhizome* in which all parties are tied to each other in an ever-changing, overlapping, interconnecting root system (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). The system is in constant flux with athletes entering or leaving the group, affecting its chemistry. These power-laden interpersonal relationships played out accordingly as Maeve mischievously offered:

There is so much banter in our group, it's ridiculous! Like if someone's being sick and everyone's laughing at them or pointing. It's just like everyone is constantly taking the micky out of each other. We used to make stupid jokes at each other all the time, which makes dealing with the session so much easier. If someone's lying on the floor dying of lactate, someone will say 'look Tommy's got his toolbox out, he's got hammered!' (laughter)

At this point Maeve became more serious and her demeanour changed as she reflected on how the introduction of one person can disrupt the power dynamics of the group. As the *rhizome* adapts to facilitate the addition of a new member, new power relations take shape and flourish, whilst other connections wither and die:

... But then there was a new girl who came in, and I didn't warm to her at all. In a couple of years, it came to light that she was just a complete bitch to everybody. She used to kick off, swearing at people who work down at the track, just causing a lot of issues and a lot of tension within the group.

The resulting discord seemed to lead to misapprehension and distrust. As a forceful personality in the group, Maeve seemed to clash with the newcomer with new battle lines being drawn. She suggested that the changing context:

... caused tension with my coach because I think I felt that I was being neglected. She would get all the attention; she would get everything and sometimes at the end of the sessions I wasn't even getting my times off my coach. So, in the end I just gave him a notepad and said 'right, just write my time down and give to me afterwards'.

Furthermore, I found Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/1987) concept of the *rhizome* to be a pertinent way to account for the way that power produces reality. The athletes in Maeve's squad not only interact with one another, but with other coaches, training practices, stopwatches, performance standards and other human and non-human agents that comprise the sociomateriality of the coaching landscape (Camiré, 2023). Interconnections are ceaselessly fashioned, and it is this metaphor that encourages us to consider how power networks may develop and intensify, or disintegrate and perish.

Discord and dishonesty: confessions of a conflicted athlete

Despite upsets to the squad culture, Maeve always spoke very highly of her coach. Yet it was his lack of structure that seemed frustrating:

He's very laid back ... but, not in a bad way. I think halfway towards the end of my career when it was getting more serious, it was probably a bad thing because he was that laid back. I recognised that I needed more structure in my programme because I was then working with other coaches.

As Maeve became more autonomous, paradoxically, I read that she may have found being an elite athlete more difficult. Other interviews yielded accounts of athletes moving towards independence as a positive move, but for Maeve:

I almost became my own head coach then and that's when it became quite hard to link all things together. I think if you've not got trust in the process, that's why things go downhill. That's probably what kind of happened to me

in the last year and a half was that I was not trusting in the process. And I think that's what caused problems near the end, because I sort of knew what I needed, but I wasn't getting it.

Her tone dropped and her facial expression became more pained as she described this episode. As she was otherwise close to Eric, to lose confidence in him may have felt like a betrayal. Maeve traced the challenging fluctuating and temporal aspects of the relationship between dependence and autonomy. Unlike Kira who terminates her long-term coach-athlete relationship, Maeve hung onto her slowly disintegrating relationship until the end of her elite career. Thus, no two relationships are identical and subject to the same intersecting forces. This leads us to join with Denison and Mills (2018) in rejecting a trans-contextual, singular reading of coaching where power is either presented purely as one-dimensional or conceived as a negative or repressive force.

Further reflections on the storied data

Reflecting on these vignettes we tentatively offer the following thoughts on how our research may expand our understanding of the field by reviewing the application of four poststructural/postmodern principles outlined earlier. We discuss what is novel about this research and ask what purposeful impact/consequences might transpire?

What's postmodernism ever done for us?

This research has adopted stories in a lively, dynamic mode of representation that highlights both similarities and distinctions between our two main characters, Maeve and Kira. Throughout, our *bricolage* of postmodern qualitative methods (extended vignettes, reflexive journaling, selective transcription with deep audio immersion, and crystallisation) demonstrates a rigorous, transparent pathway for co-constructing multiple meaning while preserving polyvocality and athlete experience (Schostak, 2006; St Pierre, 2023). This has led to novel insights that demonstrate how coach-athlete relationships evolve through temporal cycles of dependence, mutuality, autonomy, renegotiation, and sometimes dissolution.

Both Kira and Maeve offer tantalising glimpses into their worlds, where they give powerful and compelling accounts of their respective coach-athlete relationships operating in high-performance sport. The context is never divorced from our first poststructural/postmodern interpretation of power as complex, entangled, political, and multifaceted. Our data spotlights the operation of these complex, diffuse and decentred relations of power in which social actors inhabit and perform certain roles, where wider social forces intersect with multiple human and non-human entities (Camiré, 2023). Neo-Foucauldian notions of power offer tantalising insights into relationships as negotiated, non-egalitarian, transactional, and relational phenomena. The socio-cultural topography is in flux with both stories emphasising how power fluctuates with changing fortunes, relational power (re)configurations, changing squad culture, and shifting roles over a career. These entangled power-relationships are valuable for they move beyond individual-level psychological models of coach-athlete relationships that cast power as possessional and hierarchical. This shift unsettles the field's reliance on static, dyadic models and invites analyses attuned to context, discourse, and temporality.

Second, by permitting a poststructural/postmodern interpretation of power, we have certain sympathies as to how it can be conceived:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "masks", it "conceals". In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. (Foucault, 1977/1991, p. 194)

This includes people, processes, and politics where agents are constituted via regimes of truth and the entangled power/knowledge nexus that produces the social world (Foucault, 1980). Both stories celebrate powerful coach-athlete partnerships in which parties are sensitive to the situational power dynamics that propel athletes further along their careers (Avner et al., 2021). Productive power is also expressed in the development of a strong athlete identity, prestige, and a robust sense of belonging or commitment to squad culture.

Continuing to think with poststructural theorisations of power and postmodern assumptions encourages us to be suspicious of universal metanarratives where neat dyadic representations of the coach-athlete relationships are captured by behavioural antecedents (Jowett, 2007, 2017; Zhao & Jowett, 2023). We take our position from Denison and Mills (2018) and Consterdine and Taylor (2025) who reject the notion of a singular objective reality in which the coach-athlete relationship can be encapsulated, measured, reduced and controlled. Rather, realities in high-performance athletics are multiple, fissured and, forever in process as there is no single “stable” or “ideal” relationship to be captured. Kira and Maeve exist in different domains, with unique training set ups, unequal access to funding, distinct personalities, disparate stand-points, and unique experiences. These feed into the different representations depicted, freeing the relationships from the tyranny of postpositivism and the totalising effects of modernism.

A final poststructural/postmodern principle concerns the critique of the humanist self. St Pierre (2023) argues, poststructuralism challenges humanism’s assumptions about the objective, rational, autonomous individual. Instead, the self is understood as continuously shaped through the power/knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1980), with no stable or authentic core outside the workings of power. Discourses constitute subjectivity while still allowing possibilities for resistance as individuals participate in, negotiate, and contest power relations (Markula & Silk, 2011). This is evident in Kira’s trajectory: initially positioned as a dependable lieutenant within Seth’s hierarchical squad, she later re-constitutes herself as a more agentic, self-directed athlete upon ending the relationship. Maeve’s shift towards greater autonomy similarly reveals the ambivalence of subject formation – offering both liberating possibilities and new tensions.

Bringing it all together: insights for coaching practice

This work offers a robust theoretical and methodological contribution that, for the first time, integrates poststructural theorisations of power with postmodern sensibilities in the investigation of the coach–athlete relationship. When we apply these entangled philosophical, theoretical and methodological concepts to the socially, historically, economically, politically, and culturally constructed world in which sports coaching is located, we can use them to add colour and texture to an activity that is intrinsically “messy”, dynamic, emotional, chaotic, relational, and social. By privileging two accounts as storied elements has created a persuasive set of ideas around the (re)conceptualisation of these phenomena that challenges dominant model-based approaches to coach-athlete relationship research and opens the way for more diverse theoretical frameworks. Coaches may be exposed to the multi-dimensional workings of power, encouraging them to seek more reflexive decision-making and ethical practices. Athletes may benefit as they may be introduced to new ways that power operates; that they are not subject to dominant, possessive, and binary interpretations of power. Instead, by highlighting the agential and powerful effects of power, prestige, identity, and roles both athletes and coaches may work towards more mutually symbiotic and inter-dependent relationships that could benefit each other.

These entangled notions circle back to athlete learning. Previous work by Denison et al. (2017) illustrates how athletes perceive the coach-athlete relationship may have significant ramifications for learning and athlete development. By exploring the applied connections between the power/knowledge nexus and the pedagogical environment, we hope to make explicit how athletes come to know themselves and influence *who* they may become. Here, the coach-athlete relationship is not just positioned as scene setting for learning, but as an integral pedagogical site where learning is entangled with knowledge. These coaching environments are not just places to neutrally transmit skills, but they actively produce norms, truths, and athlete subjectivities (Denison & Mills, 2014, 2018). Our stories are illustrative of how athletes learn to train, but also how they navigate their coaching environment by complying, resisting, adapting or adjusting to transient and situational relational dynamics. Far beyond instructional models or a reliance on technocratic ways of knowing, this research urges coaches to reflect on their practice and reframe their understanding of coaching as a political, interpersonal, and contested pedagogical activity that (re)creates athletes. For coaches, this may be a refocus on the everyday practices (e.g. feedback, communication, monitoring, or surveillance) that influence the conditions that make particular forms of learning possible.

The findings also offer sport organisations, coach educators, developers, and other agents a contextual framework for identifying and navigating the complex dynamics of power relations. This comes in response to the common critique that poststructural work is overwhelmingly concerned with deconstruction but fails

to offer tangible solutions (Sarup, 1993; St Pierre, 2023). Perhaps this disquiet comes from a reluctance to offering quick fixes, easy answers, or an aversion in replacing one dominant discourse with another. Crucially, this paper resists the call for singular best models of practice. Rather, our research enhances alternative ways of knowing; reframing coaching as a situated, relational, political, and ethically tinged practice, where trust, (inter)dependency, autonomy, care, and control are enmeshed rather than presented in opposition. In exploring how practice is understood, enacted and governed, we offer certain provocations and orientating principles for coach educators. First, coach education programmes could move away from standardised models of the “effective” coach-athlete relationship, instead emphasising uncertainty, context-dependency, and relational flux between agents. By positioning the coach-athlete relationships as temporal and situational can we consider disruption, tension, and change not as failures, but as constitutive features of evolving coaching practice. Second, if power is relational, mobile, and productive (rather than possessed or repressive), then coaches need to move beyond interpersonal skills and embrace critical reflexivity about their role in crafting and (re)producing power relations (Dennison & Avner, 2011). This also shifts the narrative away from competency-based training to ongoing ethical self-interrogation in which reflexive activities such as journaling, dialogue, and mentoring could help coaches interrogate care, control, and dependency. Third, by designing coach education as a space for critical dialogue rather than valuing knowledge about “what works” can we encourage coaches to problematise their own practice. Lastly, sporting agencies could radically evaluate organisational expectations of coaching relationships which consider funding structures, squad dynamics, and performance pressures.

Potential ways forward for coaching scholarship?

Specifically, we encourage future research to examine not only how the cultural, political, economic, and institutional dimensions of power shape the coach-athlete relationship, but also how portraying sports coaching as an entangled enactment involving human and nonhuman, material, and discursive actors might further advance the field (Consterdine & Taylor, 2025). Incorporating both intra-action and interaction invites scholars to recognise how coaching emerges through complex assemblages of people, technologies, spaces, and other agentic entities (Camiré, 2023).

Concluding thoughts

This paper presents a distinct way of *seeing and doing* coaching scholarship by reframing the coach-athlete relationship through a postmodern/poststructural lens. Our contribution lies in shifting the field away from dominant individual-level psychological models of coach-athlete relationship research, instead emphasising the significance of temporal depreciation, renegotiation, and reconfiguration of relational power across high-performance athletic careers. This marks a significant departure from traditional frameworks and offers a novel, context-sensitive understanding of coaching practice. Specifically, it moves attention to how coach-athlete relationships are lived, contested, and reworked over time by athletes themselves. In doing so, it foregrounds the temporal fragility and changing value of relationships, demonstrating how power is not only relational, but fluid, cyclical, and contingent across an athlete’s career trajectory. This moves beyond existing work by conceptualising relationships not simply as pedagogical sites, but as transient, evolving configurations of power embedded within wider sociomaterial and cultural assemblages. Furthermore, we suggest that adopting postmodern methodological approaches (in the form of the *bricoleur*) can be a valuable way of generating new insights by offering a transparent and innovative analytic pathway that challenges normative expectations of qualitative rigour. Additionally, from an onto-epistemological perspective, we emphasise plurality, co-constructed meaning, the productivity of power/knowledge, and the rejection of universal metanarratives. These principles may encourage scholars, coaches, and organisations to recognise relationships as evolving assemblages shaped by shifting fortunes, situational dynamics, and contextual forces. Ultimately, this work provides a novel theoretical and methodological foundation that reshapes how the coach-athlete relationship can be understood, researched, and enacted in high-performance sport.

Notes

1. As Sarup (1993, p. 144) archly observes “There are so many similarities between poststructuralist theories and postmodernist practices that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between them”. They have been described as “... a loose collection of diverse theories and practice that overlap in their paradigmatic assumptions, share similar philosophical foundations and can be used a method of framing ideas or as a set of guiding principles for fieldwork, data analysis and writing” (Consterdine, 2026, p. 307). In this article, we have used them together to represent a paradigm or framework. When used singularly, we have specifically applied them as a theoretical lens (poststructuralism) or as an approach and guidance to method/methodological entanglements (postmodernism).
2. We found Alex’s use of reflexive journaling to be more than just a stylistic convention, or a quirk of qualitative research. Rather, it represents a critical engagement with exploring what counts as data, to illustrate Alex’s sense-making processes, and to develop a reflexive sensitivity in an attempt to consider postmodern representational issues (Koro-Ljungberg, 2013).

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Dedication

To the memory of Dr Bill Taylor. Thank you for your guidance, critical insights, difficult questions, and much valued friendship over the years.

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