

**'Fast track' and 'traditional path' coaches: Affordances, agency and social capital**

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### **Abstract**

A recent development in large-scale coach accreditation (certification) structures has been the 'fast tracking' of former elite athletes. Former elite athletes are often exempted from entry-level qualifications and are generally granted access to fast track courses that are shortened versions of the accreditation courses undertaken by 'traditional path' coaches. While formal coach accreditation is not the focus of this research note, it does provide the context for the two coaching case studies. The aim of this paper is to consider and contrast the experiences of a former elite athlete and a traditional pathway coach with respect to their development and their trajectory towards employment in high performance coaching settings. The notion of relational interdependence (Billett, 2006) is used to consider the characteristics that particular coaches may bring to their work. In examining the social nature of coaching work and coaching appointments further, it is possible to connect with the notion of social capital (Field, 2006). Informed by accreditation course information (coaching history, aspirations and educational achievements) and three days of in-course observations by the author, the interpretivist case study design incorporated a semi-structured interview with one former elite athlete and one traditional pathway coach during the top-level coach accreditation course of one of Australia's most popular team sports. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded via a hierarchical content analysis. From this study it was possible to identify a range of affordances that are available to former elite athletes that are not readily accessible for traditional pathway coaches and vice versa. Regarding social capital, former athletes appear to possess greater amounts and are better able to leverage that capital for development and employment. Recommendations are offered and implications discussed for coaches and those individuals and organizations charged with employing high performance coaches.

*Keywords:* Sports coach; development; education; certification; accreditation; pathways.

### **Introduction**

This research note on the differential treatment of coaches takes place in a coach accreditation context. Large-scale coach accreditation (also known as certification) represents the biggest form of structured delivery for coach specific education. Despite some concerns about their effectiveness, coach accreditation schemes have continued to proliferate throughout the world (Bowes & Jones, 2006; Cassidy & Rossi, 2006; Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Dickson, 2001; Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Lyle, 2007; Mallett, Trudel, Lyle, & Rynne, 2009). Contributing to this expansion in some ways has been the globalization of coaching qualification frameworks to facilitate the standardization of skill recognition across regions (particularly in the European Union) (Bales, 2007). Accordingly, coach accreditation is increasingly becoming a global issue involving local actors such as national sporting organizations, coach educators and the coaches themselves. With respect to a local example, reviews of Australia's National Coach Accreditation Scheme (NCAS) have reported that coaching accreditation has, for the most part, met coach's needs (Dickson, 2001; Woodman, 1993). Like a number of programs throughout the western world, the NCAS reportedly provides a ticketing function for coaching roles, has achieved high status within the sporting community, has had an impact on personal coaching confidence and awareness, provides standards for others to judge the quality of coaches, and functions as somewhat of a gatekeeper (Dickson, 2001; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). While the effectiveness or otherwise of large-scale coach accreditation is not the focus of this research note, it does provide an important context for this study. As will be discussed throughout this paper, the differential perception and treatment of people with elite playing backgrounds compared with those from modest sporting

backgrounds is significant in this setting because of its quite public nature and the fact that it is controlled and regulated by the national sporting body.

An example of such differential treatment that is largely the focus of this study has been the recent development of 'fast tracking' former elite athletes through the established national coach accreditation structures. Fast tracking refers to the special concessions offered to former elite athletes so that their progress through formal coach accreditation structures is expedited. For example, former elite athletes may not be required to undertake entry-level qualifications and may be granted access to fast track courses that are often shortened (sometimes less rigorous) versions of accreditation courses. Understandably given the target participants, fast track courses will often exclude the sport-specific skill sessions found in the traditional path courses. Entry to these courses is often subsidized partly or wholly by the sport or the relevant professional playing bodies. In his article, Turner (2008) noted two high profile international examples of fast tracking: Paul Ince in Football (Blackburn Rovers) and Martin Johnson (English National Rugby Union). The practice is also commonplace in Australian coach accreditation with special dispensation granted to former elite performers in virtually every sport. While there have been occasional critiques in the media (e.g., Koch, 2008) and some critical consideration of fast tracking in coaching forums (e.g., Turner, 2008), few empirical studies have considered the implications of fast tracking with respect to coach learning. This lack of research represents an opportunity to further our understanding of this phenomenon through qualitative studies engaging with specific coaching cases.

### ***Theoretical frameworks***

In attempting to critique the practice of fast tracking, this study utilised the notion of relational interdependence to compare and contrast the learning opportunities and personal agency of a fast track coach with that of a traditional path coach. Relational interdependence has previously been shown to be a generative way of considering coach learning (Rynne, Mallett, & Tinning, 2006; Rynne, Mallett, & Tinning, 2010). Within this theory, it is proposed that there is an interdependence between the social and the individual world and the interaction between the two may be considered to be relational because it is person dependent (i.e., the same situation is likely to be experienced differently by different people) (Billett, 2006). Using this framework allows the consideration of the relationship between individual learning processes (related to agency) and collective processes (related to structure). Moreover, it is possible to better account for individual differences in perspective, disposition, as well as social capital and the like (Fenwick, 2001). The variety and nature of affordances and the willingness of the coaches to engage will be considered in the discussion section of this paper.

In examining the social nature of the affordances for fast track and traditional path coaches further, it is possible to connect more specifically with the notion of social capital. While somewhat messy and elusive in its conception (Koniordos, 2008; Law & Mooney, 2006; Morrow, 1999; Swain, 2003), at its core, social capital implies that people can treat their connections with others as an important resource which can be drawn upon for a variety of purposes (Field, 2006). As suggested by Brough and colleagues (2006), if Putnam's (2000) conception of social capital as social networks is adopted along with his view of the associated norms of reciprocity and trust that arise from them, then there is scope to consider the potential privileged access to people and resources for some and denial of access for others. Forms of social capital have also been theorised, with bonding capital (exclusive) being thought of as 'glue' that holds people together (e.g., the relations between close friends) and bridging capital (inclusive) being the 'lubricant' that helps different people mix together (e.g., the relations between workmates) (Brough, et al., 2006; Field, 2006; Putnam, 2000).

It is felt that the two notions of relational interdependence and social capital will be quite generative with respect to the understanding of fast tracking in a general sense. More specifically, they

will contribute directly to the achievement of the project aims of considering and contrasting the experiences of a former elite athlete and a traditional pathway coach with respect to their development and their trajectory towards employment in high performance coaching settings.

## **Method**

In this research, an interpretivistic approach was adopted viewing social organisations as being constructed based on purposeful actions of individuals as they negotiate their social roles and *define status* within the collective social group (Macdonald, Kirk, Metzler, Nilges, Schempp and Wright, 2002). In keeping with this approach, qualitative methods that capture the perspectives and opinions of relevant individuals were deemed to be best positioned to address the acceptable ways of knowing in the interpretivist paradigm (Patton, 2002).

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

One such qualitative approach adopted in this study was the use of semi-structured interviews within a case study design. Semi-structured interviews were used because they permitted a degree of standardization and commonality between interviews while allowing the coaches to discuss issues of importance that arose outside the scope of the original line of questioning. The interview questions were informed by the coaches' accreditation candidate information forms (provided by the sport's coach education manager and included information such as coaching background, aspirations, and educational achievements) and by observations made by the author over the first three days of the accreditation course. This research was cleared by a University ethics body.

### ***Participants***

The sport was chosen because of its status as one of Australia's most popular team sports, its professional nature (i.e., full time employed athletes, coaches and administrators), and its willingness to be involved in sports coaching research. The author did not have any pre-existing relationships with the participants but did have some professional rapport with the coach education managers of the sport.

The Level Three course was the highest level of coach accreditation possible in the sport and the course functioned as an 'invitation only' forum consisting of fast track and traditional path coaches. Fast track coaches were defined as those that came from elite athletic backgrounds in the sport and had completed the designated 'fast track Level Two coach accreditation course' (i.e. no Level One course and a shortened Level Two). The traditional path coaches were those that had come through the regular Level One and Two courses and did not have elite careers as athletes. In assembling the purposeful sample (Patton, 2002), and in addition to having coaches at the same level of accreditation, the aim was to have coaches of approximately the same age. The reason for matching participants for age was to improve the degree of comparability with the regard to the total amount of years of accumulated experience (in a variety of fields such as education, athletic participation, coaching participation, workplace experience, formal coach accreditation). In the week prior to the commencement of the course, the coach education manager forwarded the contact details of one fast track coach (Daniel) and one traditional path coach (Geoff) of similar age (40 years).

Daniel was an elite performer in his sport. He represented his country for a decade, playing nearly 150 times in international competitions (more than one form of the sport). Prior to, during, and after his national representation, Daniel represented his state and various international club sides more than 250 times in a broader professional career that lasted around two decades. Daniel was the designated captain in a number of teams, most often for his state. Such was the elite nature of his

performance that he also won a number of awards at the national and international level. His career was not without incident, however, with injury and personal conduct issues resulting in missed competitions. Since retiring from professional sport, Daniel has been employed as a specialist coach, commentator, and has held other paid and honorary positions at the top levels of his sport.

Geoff was born one year later than Daniel and while he has been involved in his chosen sport for a long time, the nature of his involvement is quite different to Daniel. Geoff had an extensive playing career at the recreational and developmental level. Having started at approximately six years of age, Geoff finished playing the sport approximately 20 years later. During this time, Geoff played for school and some low level (e.g., regional) representative teams and about the time Daniel was debuting for his state, Geoff was playing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> tiers of the state competition. He continued to play at the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> tier level until the final few years of his participation where he played in a more social (i.e., less competitive) fixture. Towards the latter part of his athletic participation, Geoff commenced coaching and has been coaching for approximately 10 years. His coaching has been at the club and representative level in a range of settings including senior and youth males and youth females. He has also coached at school, district, and junior state levels. Finally, Geoff has undertaken formal study and currently works for a state sporting organisation in the same sport that he coaches.

### ***Procedure***

The author was present fulltime at the Level Three course and after three days of interacting with the coaches, times were arranged for data collection. One in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with each coach face-to-face, at a time and location most convenient for the participants (N.B., the interviews took place within the week of the course with one coach nominating a small meeting room at the venue and the other choosing his hotel room). Based on the aim of the study, questions were asked in relation to personal history (athletic, work and education; e.g., Can you tell me about your previous playing experiences in your sport?), learning through athletic experiences (e.g., In what ways has your playing background helped your current coaching?), learning through coaching experiences (e.g., Consider the last time you had a problem to solve in your coaching. How did you go about resolving it?), personal agency (drives, interests etc; e.g., What drives you to want to engage with the different sources of learning you have discussed?), and perceived value of various coach development activities (e.g., How valuable were your observations of other coaches when you first started coaching?). Clarification and elaboration prompts were used when necessary and in some cases had been developed based on the Level Three course application forms that the coaches had filled out (containing information such as coaching history, greatest success in coaching, and coaching aspirations) and/or the observations from earlier in the week.

The semi-structured interview protocols took an average of 68 minutes to conduct (*Range* = 60-75 minutes). Interview data were transcribed verbatim and were subsequently checked for accuracy and returned to the participants for member checking. The participants were asked to check for accuracy regarding the typography, and also accuracy with respect to the intent of their comments. It should be noted that this extension of member checking is not common within empirical sport research (Culver, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2003).

### ***Data analysis***

The process of interpretational qualitative analysis involved partitioning the relatively unstructured textual material into coded chunks of information (meaning units) firstly through the creation of tags which was then followed by the generation of categories (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993). The stipulation was that the codes be valid (accurately reflect what is being researched), mutually exclusive

(distinct with no overlap), and exhaustive (all relevant data should fit into a code) (Gratton & Jones, 2004). These categories were then organized into higher order themes and while this process necessarily relied on the analysts' subjective decision-making process it was enhanced through the use of decision-making heuristic developed by Côté and Salmela (1994). It should be noted that the categories necessarily remained flexible as they were derived from data analysis and needed adjustment as the process continued. Manual manipulation of the unstructured qualitative data was aided through the use of a qualitative data management and analysis software package (QSR Nvivo version 8). This package helped facilitate the coding of the data and the construction of meaning units allowing conclusions to be drawn more efficiently.

Regarding the process of coding, triangular consensus was used. This approach has been variously referred to as peer review, peer debriefing, and generally refers to discussing codes or results with knowledgeable colleagues who act as sounding boards (Culver, et al., 2003). Discussions were held with individuals immersed in the field of sports coaching, physical education pedagogy, and workplace learning. Similar to the process employed by Irwin and colleagues (2004) each quotation and theme was independently identified by those individuals involved in the discussions and were debated until agreement was reached.

## **Results**

The results from the two cases (Geoff and Daniel) are presented below. Their athletic and coaching histories are detailed as well as the developmental opportunities available to them within and outside of their sport. These cases are then discussed in relation to some major themes in the section that follows.

### **Geoff**

Geoff began playing his sport as a junior. While he never played at the elite level, Geoff commented that his playing experiences had *"very much moulded me into the coach that I am"*. Beyond discussions of simply knowing what the sport was about, Geoff commented that through his athletic participation he gained an appreciation of *"a lot of training practices, you know, just, just different things"*. However, Geoff suggested that his time playing the sport did not give him *"the knowledge in, like, strength and conditioning and nutrition"*. Despite this lack of knowledge, Geoff was clear that he was able to shape his current coaching by drawing on the strengths of a small number of coaches throughout his playing days: *"I've moulded myself on taking the good points out of the good ones [coaches] and the good points out of the bad ones"*.

Geoff was first asked to coach while he was still playing and since that time he had almost continually been involved in coaching his sport. He progressed his coaching and held a multitude of coaching roles including athlete-coach, head coach, club coaching director and representative team coach. Regarding his formal progress in coaching, Geoff completed the first level of accreditation when he first was asked to coach a team at the age of 31. He then went on to complete the Level Two approximately five years later and was present in the Level Three course (the highest level of accreditation) four years after that; approximately a decade since he undertook the Level One course.

In his life outside of his sport, Geoff engaged with a number of educational opportunities and business experiences. While he now works in a development capacity within his chosen sport, Geoff formerly held a range of positions in large companies from retail sales to state-level management. During this time, he also completed a Diploma of Business Management and a Certificate in Retail Management. He also had access to a number of management courses and programs within and beyond his workplace. Geoff spoke of the importance of achieving business qualifications and working in management contexts regarding his coaching: *"So I've been a manager, so I've been able to lead people"*.

Since moving into coaching in a more professional capacity, Geoff encountered some impediments to his development. Geoff described his struggles to find others to speak with:

[our sport] isn't, I don't think it's a good environment for people sharing a lot of information ... it's hard to, to get people to open up and share and just sit in a room or stand in a room and ... talk about technique and that. (Geoff)

Further to these developmental impediments, there were perceived career roadblocks also. Although Geoff aspired to coach at the national level in Australia, he was very adamant that he was unlikely to secure even state level employment as a senior coach because of his lack of elite playing experience: *"I've got all the management experience but ... if I was going for the [senior state] job ... I reckon I would have a probably a 2% chance of getting that job"*. Geoff felt that, in contrast to his case, former elite performers *"just have to do the coaching accreditation and they will get the [top coaching positions]"*. Further emphasizing the perceived injustice, Geoff made the point that *"I've coached a lot longer ... I would actually have a lot more coaching experience [than someone who was fast tracked]"*.

### **Daniel**

Daniel suggested that his previous elite playing background provided him with context-specific knowledge:

the biggest thing for me in the playing background side of it will be the fact that I've got a wealth of knowledge I can bring to the coaching table ... it gives me a good library to call back on for the different scenarios that will come up as a coach.

(Daniel)

Daniel did acknowledge that there was some work to be done if his playing knowledge was to be used in a possible coaching career: *"I've been in pretty much every situation you could imagine as a player and now it's transferring that as a coach to the player"*. Despite playing professionally, like Geoff Daniel noted that his experiences playing did not inform him about all aspects of coaching such as aspects of fitness: *"I don't sometimes understand that, the physical demands"*. Interestingly, Daniel went on to say that the reason for this was that despite not being the fittest athlete, he was able to perform well over long periods of time. The increasing technological components present in the sport were also acknowledged as future challenges in Daniel's coaching: *"that's going to be really interesting for me dealing with the IT side of coaching"*.

While much of Geoff's leadership and management experiences had been in business settings, Daniel had regularly been a leader in the teams he played in. He explained the benefit to his coaching by saying *"look I think if you're captain of a side you are a coach as well ... so really I've been coaching in some form at an elite level for the last sort of 10 years in a way"*. When asked to explain further he said:

you have the coach to help out pre-[competition] but [as a captain] you're doing a lot of the pre-[competition] with the coach so you're setting the way you want to play. You're setting you know, the team structure. You're setting ah the vision you want to see to influence the players how to play in a game. And that's part of coaching as well. (Daniel)

Like Geoff, Daniel felt that he was able to draw on the strengths of a small number of coaches throughout his playing days. The difference was the caliber and profile of coaches with whom Daniel was able to interact with as an athlete. Indeed, Daniel was able to list a range of coaches (most very well known in his sport) who had influenced the way he played and now coached. Daniel's most interesting comment regarding learning from previous coaches, however, was that *"the game's changed so much, the way they coached is out the window"*.

Regarding his movement into coaching, Daniel noted his lack of actual coaching experience saying *“My library of a coach is stuff all [very little] compared to as a player”*. Daniel did have some coaching experience, but in contrast to Geoff’s multitude of team coaching appointments, Daniel’s experiences had primarily been as a specialist coach working one-on-one and with small groups of athletes for short periods. While Daniel conceded *“I’ve never coached a whole side”*, the individuals and groups he had coached recently were all national and international performers.

In terms of his development as a coach, Daniel appeared to be advantaged with respect to the openness of others and the ability to access high-level coaching personnel. In quite a contrast to Geoff, Daniel was able to list the who’s who of his sport, describing the high regularity with which he speaks with them about coaching. He made the point that his elite performance background was useful in this regard: *“doors do open because you know everyone”*. Daniel’s progress through the formal coach accreditation structures in his sport was similarly seamless. Daniel was not required to complete the Level One accreditation and was invited to participate in a fast track Level Two course (shortened version of the regular Level Two course). Daniel completed part of the course, was given prior recognition of learning for the rest and was awarded his Level Two in 2008. Later in 2008, Daniel and Geoff found themselves together on a Level Three course.

Finally, regarding future coaching careers Daniel acknowledged that his prospects were enhanced because of his former elite playing background. The enhanced prospects appeared to relate to a (flawed) perception that former elite athletes automatically make good coaches. Regarding this Daniel said *“the advantage is that people will say ‘well he, he’ll make a good coach’... But it’s bullshit ... It doesn’t mean I’m going to be a great coach”*. Geoff too had previously noted that former elite performers were far more likely to secure top-level coaching appointments than those from more modest playing backgrounds. In somewhat of a confirmation of these perceptions, Daniel discussed a range of high level coaching options that were open to him including domestic and international appointments. Indeed, Daniel indicated that he could secure a national level appointment virtually any time he wanted: *“[the current national coach] always keeps pushing me saying ‘when you’re ready just come on board”*. Proving these discussions to be legitimate, at the time of writing Daniel had completed a short international coaching experience and had gained employment as the head coach of a domestic team competing in the highest level of national competition.

## **Discussion**

### ***Perceived advantages of not having played at an elite level***

While acknowledging potentially useful aspects, previous authors (e.g., Erickson, et al., 2007; Lynch & Mallett, 2006) have noted that elite performance as an athlete cannot be considered to be a prerequisite for coaching success. The main consideration that both Daniel and Geoff discussed was that those without elite playing backgrounds were able to start coaching and developing their craft much earlier. In short, with respect to the notion of relational interdependence (Billett, 2006) it may be argued that traditional path coaches had access to a range of affordances relating to coaching and other areas that fast track coaches did not.

Supporting this further was Geoff’s discussion of a multitude of coaching roles he had held including athlete-coach, head coach, club coaching director and representative team coach. Both he and Daniel felt that these previous experiences allowed coaches to improve their ‘database’ of coaching knowledge and this allowed them to perform the role more competently. Indeed, previous research has established that a major source of coach development is learning through experience (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). It stands to reason then that Geoff would be well positioned to develop through this particular



set of affordances. In contrast, Daniel noted his lack of actual coaching experience. Daniel did have some coaching experience, but in contrast to Geoff's multitude of team coaching appointments, Daniel's experiences had primarily been as a specialist coach working one-on-one and with small groups of athletes for short periods.

Both coaches also noted that traditional path coaches generally had opportunities to gain other qualifications and experiences that former elite athletes simply did not have the time to engage with (because they were engaged as athletes). Achieving business qualifications and working in management contexts were felt to be important to Geoff's coaching. This has relevance to Cooke's (2007) suggestion that coaches should be considered with backgrounds in a variety of fields (not just high level sport involvement) because of the range of skills that they may possess. Given the discussions regarding coaching career prospects (elaborated on below), these qualifications appear to have less social capital ascribed in this particular sporting context.

### ***Perceived benefits of having an elite playing background***

According to Bloom (2002), the acquisition of coaching knowledge begins with one's athletic experiences. Similarly, other authors (e.g., Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Gilbert, Côté, & Mallett, 2006) have noted that high performance coaches have often had elite-level experience as an athlete. Participants in the current study discussed a number of issues related to: the development of sports-specific knowledge, the potential to develop through being in senior or leadership positions, enhanced opportunities to learn from coaches as athletes, the development of high level contacts within and between sports, being fast tracked through coach accreditation structures, and enhanced career prospects within coaching.

**Development of sport-specific knowledge.** Daniel suggested that his previous elite playing background provided him with context-specific knowledge but that there was some work to be done if his playing knowledge was to be used in a possible coaching career. This is in keeping with Cooke's (2007) concession to practitioners that while there may be some advantages (e.g., gaining respect of athletes), elite-level success as an athlete is no guarantee of being a quality coach. It appeared as though both coaches felt that their previous playing experiences gave them a sort of 'kit bag' from which they could draw upon in their current coaching work. In this way, it might be considered that the learning affordances were somewhat similar despite the very different circumstances in which they took place (i.e., elite versus developmental/recreational).

There were also 'gaps' identified by both coaches regarding the value of their respective playing backgrounds to their current coaching. An indication of the potentially incomplete nature of these affordances was that both coaches noted that their understanding of the biophysical sciences (e.g., exercise physiology) was not developed through their playing histories. Interestingly, Daniel went on to say that the reason for this was that despite not being the fittest athlete, he was able to perform well over long periods of time. This starts to give some indication of the potentially negative consequences of having been an athlete immersed in the sport over a long period of time. His comments in some ways suggest that he may struggle to empathise with athletes who are not like he was and/or that it may be difficult for him to adopt and accept practices that were not common during his playing days. Indeed, bonding social capital has been linked with exclusive (rather than inclusive) behaviours and the reinforcement of current attitudes and values (Koniordos, 2008) (e.g., physical fitness is not essential to high performance). The non-hands on components present in the work of coaches were also acknowledged as future challenges. It has been previously reported (e.g., Bartleson, 2007) that former elite athletes have struggled with the unexpected workload of what Lyle (2002) calls intervention support activities. It is clear that the playing backgrounds of these individuals (be they elite or recreational/developmental) were insufficient to wholly inform their current coaching.

**Development through being in leadership positions.** The coach development literature has also suggested that coaches learn being involved in leadership positions as athletes (e.g., Erickson, et al., 2007). While Geoff had not been designated captain very often, Daniel had regularly been a leader in the teams he played in. This is an example of where Daniel's exceptional ability permitted access to an affordance that Geoff did not have access to (regardless of his personal agency). In a similar way however, because of his playing commitments Daniel did not have access to the leadership and management experiences that Geoff had in business.

**Greater opportunities to learn from coaches as athletes.** Previous coach development literature has suggested that coaches learn from the coaches that they had as athletes (e.g., Cushion, et al., 2003). An issue identified by both coaches was a distinct lack of coaching for them as athletes, particularly early in their athletic engagement. With respect to the nature of this affordance, it might be assumed then that Daniel may be advantaged given his exposure to higher volumes of coaching and presumably high quality coaching in a range of representative teams in senior competition. It should be noted, however, that Daniel's comments indicated that while access to coaches as an athlete may be a useful affordance in the development of coaching ability, it has a used-by-date / shelf-life.

**Building high level contacts.** Both coaches noted that having played at a high level created opportunities to speak with high-level, well-established coaches in their sport. Social capital has been conceptualised as the ability to accrue benefits through membership in social networks (Portes, 1998). As such, the notion of social capital has strong relevance to Daniel's comments regarding who he is in contact with concerning his coaching. Some of these interactions are representative of Daniel's high level of 'bonding' social capital in that they are ties between people who are in similar situations (Koniordos, 2008) (e.g., are former teammates of Daniel). More impressive (and elusive for coaches like Geoff) is Daniel's capacity for 'bridging' social capital (Putnam, 2000), which links people in different situations and was emphasised by Daniel's comment: "*doors do open because you know everyone*". This serves to further emphasise a disparity between Daniel and Geoff with respect to levels of social capital and the associated development that is and is not possible through this particular affordance.

**Fast tracking through accreditation/certification.** It is worth emphasising the point that to get the highest level of accreditation possible took Geoff almost ten years and for Daniel it took less than one. Previous research has contended that social ties may act as conduit for human capital, educational resources, and/or the transmission of information that directly benefits individuals' achievement (Broh, 2002). Daniel's swift progression and privileged access to coach accreditation affordances might be considered to be an indication of his high degree of social capital in comparison to Geoff. The implication is that for those like Geoff, becoming better connected to dominant educational structures may not be a straightforward choice (Brough, et al., 2006).

**Improved career prospects in coaching.** It was clear that both coaches had aspirations to coach at the top level in their sport, but their perceptions about their chances of securing employment at that level were very different. While Geoff aspired to coach at the national level in Australia, he was very adamant that he was unlikely to secure even state level employment as a senior coach because of his lack of elite playing experience. In the literature, Turner (2008) was similarly concerned with the uncritical employment of ex-elite athletes and Mielke (2007) also noted high proportions of ex-elite athletes coaching in a range of professional sports. In somewhat of a confirmation of Geoff's perception, Daniel indicated that he could secure a national level appointment virtually any time he wanted. Given the somewhat comparable affordances discussed previously, the explanatory power of social capital in considering future employment prospects is further emphasised. Because of the high levels of social

capital (variety of forms) arising from Daniel's previous playing achievements, he is granted access to opportunities and appointments that are simply not available to coaches like Geoff. As indicated by Daniel's quote in the previous section, it is essentially up to him (personal agency) when he 'comes on board' at the national level.

## Conclusion

While not the primary focus of this investigation, the National Coach Accreditation System of Australia provided the context and stimulus for this research. Notwithstanding the criticisms, large-scale coach accreditation serves a purpose in the Australian sporting landscape (Dickson, 2001; Woodman, 1993). The 'ticketing' function has been proposed as one of its achievements but this project indicates that the value of that ticket is variable. The fast tracking of former elite athletes through established national coach accreditation structures is a relatively new phenomenon but is widespread in international sport (Turner, 2008). In using the notions of relational interdependence and social capital, it has been possible to discuss the personal histories of coaches at the same level of accreditation with respect to the affordances, personal agency and levels of social capital ascribed to particular experiences.

Previous elite playing experience was reportedly valuable to coach development and professional standing in a number of areas including the development of sports-specific knowledge, the potential to develop through being in senior or leadership positions, enhanced opportunities to learn from coaches as athletes, the development of high level contacts within and between sports, being fast tracked through coach accreditation structures, and enhanced career prospects within coaching. The social capital ascribed to former elite athletes meant that overall they were more likely to succeed in securing high level coaching appointments and in gaining access to affordances that were not possible for those of more modest abilities. In contrast, coaches like Geoff who had no elite athletic experience were felt to have little opportunity to progress into the top levels of coaching in their sport. Indeed, their personal agency and their access to certain (highly valued) affordances were stifled by their perceived status as a non-elite performer. This is in spite of the finding that those with non-elite backgrounds were able to gain access to affordances that have previously been shown to have great relevance to future coaching ability (e.g., extensive coaching experience and tertiary qualifications) (Mallett & Dickens, 2009; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006).

The implication for those who employ and those who support high performance coaches is that the development of coaches has a social aspect that should be more strongly considered if individual and organisational outcomes are to be optimised. Coach educators and employers must ensure that they do not simply continue to privilege those who are already privileged. It is also important that a more considered appraisal of coach backgrounds be undertaken so that areas of strength may be leveraged further and perceived 'gaps' be addressed or worked around.

Given the relative lack of empirical research in this area, this investigation might be considered to be largely exploratory. There are also acknowledged limitations inherent in studies that take place over relatively short periods and involve small cohorts. Indeed, while this study provides some substance to the discussion of former elite players in coach education, it is important to take a measured view regarding the veracity of the findings. Similarly, while this research strongly suggests that it is much easier for former elite athletes to get their 'foot in the door' regarding top level coaching positions, it is not possible to comment on their likelihood of success or longevity once in those positions. Future research might consider the sustained engagement and performance of former elite athletes in top level coaching positions by accessing early, mid and late career coaches with elite playing histories. Future research might also consider more thoroughly, the negative aspects of social capital (e.g., conformity and exclusivity) (Portes, 1998). Research in these areas should continue to inform coach educators so that quality affordances are available for a wider variety of coaches (not just those

with elite performance backgrounds). In developing high performance coaches, the emphasis should be on broadening the potential talent pool rather than unnecessarily narrowing it.

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