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

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### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher’s version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Ronkainen, NJ, Sleeman, E and Richardson, DJ (2019) “I want to do well for myself as well!”: Constructing coaching careers in elite women’s football. Sports Coaching Review. ISSN 2164-0629**

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

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

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

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

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

**100 Conceptual framework**

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

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

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

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

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

### 153 **Participants**

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

### 165 **Procedure**

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



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

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

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

## 201 **Narrative Analysis and Representation**

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

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

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

#### 234 **Validity**

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

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

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

## 268 **Results**

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

272 **For the love of the game**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 312   **Steps, ladders and pathways**

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

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

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

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

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

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

346 **Competition and collaboration**

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

### 378 **Football comes first**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 424 **Discussion**

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

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

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

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



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

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