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Running head: FEMALE COACH CAREER TERMINATION

**Are Career Termination Concerns only for Athletes?**

**A Case Study of the Career Termination of an Elite Female Coach**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a case study of an elite female coach and her career termination from a 20+ year career following a critical life incident. A novel autobiographical approach was adopted whereby the participant undertook expressive writing to describe her experiences prior to, during, and following coaching an athlete at the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. Thematic analysis indicated seven phases related to the participant's experiences of the critical incident: Build up to the event, the event, the aftermath, recovery and reflection on the event, sampling of new avenues, enlightenment, and career re-birth. The findings reinforce the high demands placed upon elite coaches, the subsequent threats to physical and mental well-being, and the importance of having robust psychological skills and suitable social support to cope with these demands. Implications for preparing and supporting coaches for successful career transition are discussed.

Keywords: *career termination, coaches, critical life incident, social support, expressive writing*

## **Are Career Transition Concerns only for Athletes?**

### **A Case Study of the Career Termination of an Elite Female Coach**

Competitive sport at the elite level has experienced an “arms race” in recent years as athletes, coaches, sports organizations, and national governments invest increasing amounts of money and resources in their attempts to be, or produce, elite competitors (e.g., De Bosscher, Bingham, Shilbi, 2008; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Today, elite level athletes across non-professional sports are amateurs in name only, and they are committed to achieving sporting success in a full-time capacity, often supported by scholarships or government funding (Ryba & Stambulova, 2013). Athletic careers in many sports last until participants are in their late twenties to mid-thirties (e.g., Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). If athletes have not prepared for retirement, they may experience negative vocational, psychological, social, and even physical consequences (Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013). In recognition that retirement represents an inevitable, yet major, adjustment in most elite athletes’ lives, a considerable volume of research has been undertaken regarding sport career transitions, spanning a range of countries and cultures (see Stambulova & Ryba, 2013 for a comprehensive review). In practice, many national organizations and sport governing bodies have implemented career assistance programs to support athletes successfully negotiate each step in their career pathway, up to and including retirement (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014).

Despite the fact that knowledge, awareness and support of athlete career development is viewed as the key to the success in many sports (Gordon & Lavalley, 2004; Hawkins & Blann, 1996), it is surprising to note that given the significance of the coaches' role in athlete development, research focusing on coach career development is lacking (cf. Dawson & Phillips, 2013). Although researchers have devoted considerable attention to elite athletes, there has been less work focusing on elite sports coaches and their career transition experiences, despite acknowledgement that these can be a significant and long lasting event

1 for professional coaching staff as well (Gordon & Lavalley, 2011). Results from the limited  
2 number of published studies indicate that the findings from the athlete population may be  
3 paralleled in elite coaches. Specifically, cross sectional questionnaire-based studies by  
4 Lavalley (2006) and Hawkins and Blann (1996) exploring coaches' retrospective views of  
5 transition, and specifically the retirement process, have implied that like athletes, the majority  
6 of coaches do not consider the end of their careers or believe it is important to plan for  
7 retirement despite acknowledging job insecurity. Indeed, there is chronic job insecurity  
8 associated with working in high performance sport environments where evaluation revolves  
9 around cyclical events (e.g., 4 yearly Olympic cycles) and employment can often be  
10 susceptible to rapid turnover or changes in executive personal (cf. Wagstaff, Gilmore, &  
11 Thelwell, 2015). In addition, coaches may be so focused on maintaining and building their  
12 coaching careers that they fail to engage in career planning and involvement in activities  
13 outside of coaching. This behavior is an important consideration since coaches may suddenly  
14 find that they are no longer able to make a living in their profession as a result of poor  
15 performance, deselection, injury, illness and burnout for example. Unless they have planned  
16 for such events, coaches may therefore experience similar difficulties to athletes in  
17 contending with a non-normative, unplanned transition out of their sport and potentially their  
18 coaching career as a whole (e.g., Warriner & Lavalley, 2008).

19 In light of the lack of knowledge regarding elite sports coaches' career transition  
20 experiences, the aim of the current paper is to present a case-study examining an elite female  
21 coach's career termination from a sport she coached for over 20 years. Given that research on  
22 the topic of coach career transitions is at an embryonic stage, there is a need to understand  
23 and describe the experiences of such individuals. In this respect, qualitative approaches offer  
24 a meaningful way to advance our knowledge. More specifically, a case study methodology,  
25 was adopted for this study, as it allowed for a holistic, in-depth exploration of the experience

1 of an individual over time (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991) and offered insight into the  
2 underlying mechanisms that drive actions and events surrounding coach career transition  
3 experiences (Tellis, 1997). Further, examination of in-depth case studies that are rich in data,  
4 allow practitioners to comprehend the way in which significant factors influence the  
5 phenomena of study (i.e., the coach transition process), highlighting potential points of  
6 leverage for future intervention with clients (Andersen, 2005).

7 In the current study, the coach career termination experience was studied through the  
8 lens of Stambulova's (2003) athletic career transition model, which has been used to consider  
9 the transitions of athletes across various stages of their lives. In Stambulova's model career  
10 termination is the final transition encountered during an athletic career. Like all other  
11 transitions throughout the lifespan of an athlete, career termination is seen as the process of  
12 coping with a specific set of demands, the effectiveness of which is contingent upon the  
13 balance between an individual's coping resources (knowledge, competencies and skills,  
14 social support) and the barriers that confront them (lack of certain competencies and skills or  
15 lack of financial or social support). This dynamic produces either a successful transition  
16 (effective coping) representative of a good fit between transition demands and the athlete's  
17 resources or a crisis transition indicative of ineffective coping and need for intervention.

18 The primary focus of the case study presented in this paper is in relation to a critical life  
19 incident associated with an elite coach's career termination. A critical life incident refers to a  
20 single event, stressor, or series of demands in an individual's life that is perceived to be  
21 critical to that individual (Stambulova, 2012). In the present case study, the specific critical  
22 incident was the elite coach's involvement in coaching an athlete to compete at the 2012  
23 Summer Olympic Games, and the athlete's subsequent failure to medal. In order to illuminate  
24 the role of critical incidents in the transition experience, in line with Stambulova's (2003)  
25 model of career transition, we sought to consider the following questions in the interpretation

1 of the findings from our data: 1) The various challenges or demands faced by the coach  
2 during this transition period; 2) The resources available to /deployed by the coach in relation  
3 to these demands experienced; and 3) The outcome of the transition process in terms of its  
4 relative success (i.e., effective coping or crisis transition).

## 5 **Method**

### 6 **Case study context**

7 This case study describes the reflections of an elite female coach on career termination  
8 from the sport she coached for more than 20 years, at the same time as leaving the  
9 employment of the National Governing Body (NGB). At the time of the initial data collection  
10 the coach had been working in sport for 24 years. During this time, she had coached a  
11 number of elite swimmers to compete in the Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA)  
12 World Championships, the Ligue Européenne de Natation (LEN) European Championships  
13 and at four Olympic Games: Sydney (2000), Athens (2004), Beijing (2008) and London  
14 (2012). Within the elite swimmers she coached, there were world record holders, national  
15 record holders and Olympic finalists. Additionally, this coach was recognized as the "Coach  
16 of the Year" twice at the National Centre of Excellence in Sweden. In the context of the  
17 critical life incident, the case study describes the coach's experience of taking a two-time  
18 world record holder in two events to the London 2012 Olympic Games and the athlete  
19 subsequently failing to not only medal, but not even make the finals.

20 In addition to the description of the case it is also important to acknowledge the  
21 background and experiences of the academic team involved in the project in order to provide  
22 an indication of the capacity of these individuals to contribute in a meaningful and credible  
23 manner to the research process. The respective authors' backstory was as follows: The first  
24 author is employed as head of sport psychology by the Sport Confederation of the nation of  
25 the coach (and was at the time of the initial data collection), with around 20 years of

1 experience in research and practice in applied sport psychology. The second author has over  
2 15 years of experience in research and practice in applied sport psychology practice with  
3 professional and Olympic sports and organizations, particularly with a background of  
4 research in qualitative methods. Lastly, the third author, a former competitive swimmer, has  
5 over a decade of experience of practice in applied sport psychology with Olympic sports, and  
6 whose doctoral thesis is focused on retirement from elite sport.

## 7 **Data Collection**

8 The origins of the study began when the coach contacted the first author following a  
9 presentation at a conference organized by the national sport psychology association. The first  
10 author made contact with the second author regarding this initial approach from the coach  
11 and it was decided to discuss with them the potential for their collaboration in a research  
12 project as a means of making sense of their experiences. At this stage, the third author, whose  
13 doctoral thesis focuses on career transition, was invited to contribute to the project. Prior to  
14 the study proceeding ethical approval was first sought and gained by the ethics committee of  
15 institution of the second author. The coach was then contacted and formally invited to  
16 participate in the study.

17 Following discussion among the project team the primary method selected for data  
18 collection was that of a novel autobiographical approach via the use of expressive writing,  
19 with the coach encouraged to describe her experiences of the critical incident in the form of  
20 written letters<sup>1</sup>. Expressive writing is a simple technique that encourages individuals to write  
21 freely about their thoughts and feelings regarding an important stressor they are facing, or

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<sup>1</sup> To clarify, the two letters were not the sole data sources collected throughout the duration of the project. Numerous informal electronic and face to communications were held between the first author and the coach. The letters (and their subsequent analyses) were selected for inclusion in this paper to represent the beginning and end respectively of the coach's transition process in relation to the critical incident experienced. We also chose to 'play down' the involvement of the first author with the coach in this paper in order to focus on the novelty of the methodology adopted and protect the Coach's anonymity.

1 have faced (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), and can lead to physical and psychological benefits  
2 (Gortner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006). Although the use of letters and personal  
3 correspondence as a primary data source has attracted little attention in the qualitative  
4 methodology literature, such sources have been argued to be highly worthwhile as a means to  
5 investigate the character of self-representation (Harris, 2002). Letters have value as empirical  
6 material because they are obtained through an unobtrusive method of data collection whose  
7 generation is not directly influenced by the researcher's interests (Charmaz, 2006). Letters, in  
8 contrast to diaries, have certain points of difference as personal texts. Whereas diaries are  
9 written for oneself or an imagined other, and play on the satisfactions of monologue, letters  
10 are written to a certain particular other and implore a dialogue. Writing a letter enables time  
11 for reactive thought prior to putting pen to paper, providing opportunity for the participant to  
12 shape and reshape their stories before being told (Kralik, Koch, & Brady, 2000). As the  
13 writer shapes their thoughts into a written text, complex and recursive patterns are elicited,  
14 moving back and forth between thinking and writing, writing and thinking, creating a web-  
15 like pattern that reshapes initial ideas into a new meaning (Merle Sorrel, 1994). To our  
16 understanding this study is the first of its kind in the field of sport psychology to adopt the  
17 use of expressive writing, through written letters, as an explicit data collection technique.

18       Following the provision of consent, the first author contacted the coach and asked her  
19 to write a letter reflecting on her experiences of the critical incident (coaching an athlete to  
20 compete at the 2012 Olympic Games, and the athlete's subsequent failure to medal). In line  
21 with standard processes for expressive writing (Charmaz, 2006), no formal prompts or  
22 guidance were given to the coach other than to request her to merely reflect on her own  
23 experiences and write whatever she wanted, expressing whatever she felt was appropriate and  
24 salient to her specific situation. The coach was then re-contacted 2 years later and asked to  
25 reflect on her subsequent experiences in respect of the critical incident since she had written



1 the initial letter. The decision to request the coach to write a second letter 2 years following  
2 the first was based upon the ongoing correspondence between the first author and the coach  
3 themselves. Specifically, this time frame represented the end of the coach's transition period  
4 out of their sport and into a new formal full time role with another sport, thus signifying the  
5 start of the next journey in their coaching career. Similar instructions regarding letter  
6 composition were provided for the second letter as to those given for the first.

7 Research which uses correspondence for data generation, requires that participants be  
8 literate and physically able to correspond. For the current study the Coach was experienced in  
9 writing research and development reports spanning most of the sport science disciplines, and  
10 had attended numerous coaching and sport psychology workshops over their career, with  
11 invitations to present at national academic coach programs and sport psychology conferences.

## 12 **Data analysis**

13 Letters were translated into English from the native language of the coach, by the first  
14 author, who was bilingual in both languages. The second author was then presented with the  
15 translations, and subsequently undertook an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke,  
16 2006) comprising six stages. First, the letters were read over repeatedly in order for the  
17 second author to become familiar with, and immersed in, the data. Second, the text was  
18 divided into quotations comprising words in a sentence or several sentences bound together  
19 by their content. Next, the quotations were condensed and labeled with a code that retained  
20 their original essence. Codes were subsequently organized into similar sub-themes, and then  
21 sorted into themes. Lastly, the first and third authors were presented with the original letters,  
22 themes and table of extracted data to offer critical feedback and reach agreement on the  
23 results (e.g., key themes that emerged).

## 24 **Methodological rigor**

25 Given that no universal criteria exist regarding the judgment of the standards of

1 qualitative work (Smith, Sparkes, & Caddick, 2014) we sought for the methodological rigor  
2 of our study to be considered via the processes of trustworthiness (cf. Sparkes & Smith,  
3 2009). A number of steps were taken to establish trustworthiness in this study. Peer  
4 debriefing was employed to facilitate researcher triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), taking  
5 place throughout the research process via regular formal meetings and informal discussions  
6 among the team. Specifically, the first and third author provided the second author (i.e., lead  
7 investigator) with on-going guidance on the research process, critical evaluation of the data,  
8 and challenged the researcher's assumptions. Here, dependability was addressed by  
9 attempting to achieve consensus regarding data extraction, data coding and theme generation  
10 among the research team. To enhance credibility, dialogue was maintained with the coach to  
11 solicit their views on the fairness, appropriateness, and believability of the researchers'  
12 interpretations of the data and analysis (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Lastly, a 'critical friend' not  
13 involved in the project was consulted to offer a more independent and critical evaluation of  
14 the results, with the aim of enhancing transparency. This individual had extensive experience  
15 working as a sport psychologist with professional and Olympic coaches, and was therefore  
16 asked to comment critically on the findings in relation to their knowledge and experience of  
17 such contexts.

## 18 **Results**

19 In total, the two letters represented some 1400 words of text. Thematic analysis resulted  
20 in a total of 58 quotations from the letters, organized into 25 sub-themes. Seven phases or  
21 periods of change were subsequently identified (Table 1) related to the coach's experience of  
22 the critical life incident that was coaching at the 2012 Olympic Games. These phases  
23 included: the build up to the event, the event itself, the aftermath of the event, recovery and  
24 reflection on the event, sampling of new career avenues, enlightenment regarding career  
25 opportunities, and career re-birth. The phases are discussed in the following narrative

1 supported by relevant quotes to illuminate themes of interest.

## 2 **The build up to the event**

3 Two main themes were noted surrounding the phase of the build up to the 2012  
4 Summer Olympic Games, namely the demands of being an Olympic coach and the  
5 psychological skills or strategies developed and deployed to cope with these demands. In  
6 relation to the demands faced as an elite coach three sub-themes were evident. The first of  
7 these was the challenges to the mental (cognitive and emotional), physical and social well-  
8 being of the coach:

9 My heart rate has been elevated at the races - the tension has created havoc inside me  
10 and yet I have always tried to be cool on the outside. Just like the athlete waiting for  
11 selection for The Games I have also waited for news from the National Olympic  
12 Committee to see if I can go or not. As a coach, like an athlete, you also need to be  
13 ready, have time to prepare yourself to be in your peak performance condition when the  
14 time comes to perform at The Games.

15 Further sub-themes related to the demands of the elite coaching role were the experiences of  
16 isolation from family and significant others. Indeed, the isolation from family and significant  
17 others was closely related to the challenges to the work-life balance the coach faced because  
18 of the demanding commitments of her role. Specifically, the coach noted, "Friends and  
19 family have had to be put aside many times, although I have worked hard to try keeping the  
20 pieces of the puzzle of life together."

21 In relation to the second theme, in the build up to the Olympic Games, a range of  
22 psychological skills or strategies were developed and deployed to cope with the various  
23 demands of the elite coaching role. In particular, goal setting and planning were noted:

24 In four years I have planned, lived and thought about the London Olympics during each  
25 training session. I have told myself, 'I will be there, in London, it will happen!' Most of

1 my work at the edge of the pool has been undertaken with that goal in mind - one  
2 athlete, two distances, six races - trials, semifinals and finals. The reward ... an  
3 Olympic medal!

4 A further sub-theme related to the use of psychological skills by the coach was the  
5 description of enhanced level of emotional control, developed through increased self-  
6 reflection and awareness:

7 I have trained myself in mental skills. Not to be a good counselor or sport psychologist,  
8 but first and foremost, to become a better coach to my athletes. The result - I have  
9 become a better coach! Not that my physiological, biomechanical and technical  
10 knowledge is better, but because my mental skills training has taught me so much more  
11 about myself, and improved my self-awareness. ... My reptilian tongue has become  
12 more well-trained (i.e., less immediate emotional responses – authors note), and  
13 sometimes I actually think before I act!

#### 14 **The event itself**

15 The second phase related to the critical incident described the event itself; the 2012  
16 summer Olympic Games, and the coach's experiences of working with her athlete during this  
17 specific time. The time phase here comprised the pre-games holding camp, the beginning of  
18 the games and the athlete's competition itself. In particular, a number of negative affective  
19 experiences and anxieties were reported by the coach following the failure of her athlete to  
20 qualify for the finals in the competition of their respective event, thereby not achieving their  
21 expected performance target.

22 Olympic race day – early breakfast, stay alert, be on time to the warm-up. At last, a  
23 walk to the call-room, marching in to the arena, presentation of the participants. Now it  
24 is time to execute a perfect race. It's over! The athlete did not even make the semi-  
25 finals! What happened? I feel a big void, what do I do now? Can I go home, or do I

1 have to stay in the Olympic village? ... My thoughts and anxieties, everything is the  
2 same as my athlete is experiencing.

### 3 **The aftermath of the event**

4 In the immediate aftermath of the critical incident the coach's experiences were  
5 represented through three themes, including emotional distress, threats to self-identity, and a  
6 lack of perceived available social support. In relation to the emotional unrest experienced in  
7 the aftermath of the event the coach described in her first letter the extent of the uncertainty  
8 and anxiety that was present:

9 What happened? I feel a big emptiness. What do I do now? Can I go home, or do I have  
10 to stay in the village? Surely there is someone who needs my accreditation pass better  
11 than me?

12 The level of distress experienced at the time was further emphasized by the the coach in the  
13 latter of her writings:

14 2 years ago I was at a loss. What do I want to do? How much of myself am I willing to  
15 sacrifice to continue in this career? 2 years later I still remember with sadness how  
16 exhausted I was and how "unsuccessful" I thought the Olympics were.

17 Related to the emotional distress reported were expressions of low self-esteem, and low  
18 self-efficacy towards her ability to carry out her role successfully. These feelings were  
19 characterized by an overall threat to her identity as a coach. The following excerpt from  
20 elements of both letters sum up the coach's state of mind at the time and the various doubts  
21 and foreboding she was experiencing:

22 Do I have the energy to continue? Am I motivated enough to commit this much time  
23 for another four years? Am I able to give a level of commitment on par with what my  
24 competitors are doing? Am I good enough? What did I do wrong? Could I have done

1 anything differently? I have so many questions, but no one asks them to me or even  
2 seems to think that I have any concerns or worries.

3 The final theme in the aftermath of the failure of the athlete in competition reflected the  
4 lack of social support the coach felt was available, or provided to her, to help her cope and  
5 make sense of the various anxieties she was experiencing. Specifically, the coach indicated  
6 that she perceived there to be a lack of support provided by from her governing body,  
7 Olympic committee and National Sports Federation following her involvement in the Games:

8 I wish the (*National Governing Body*), the (*National Olympic Committee*) and the  
9 (*National Sports Federation*) had helped me on the journey, instead of leaving me  
10 without support. They could have asked me about what kind of support I needed.

#### 11 **Recovery and reflection on the event**

12 Following the aftermath of the event two themes emerged from the coach's writings  
13 regarding taking time-out from work and the social support received from family and friends.  
14 In the first theme, a clear period of separation or disengagement from the sport was noted by  
15 the coach. Initially, this activity came in the form of planned time out away from the sport,  
16 "My only plan was that I would take time off for at least two months before I started a new  
17 job. A real break where I could do whatever I wanted and when I wanted." In relation to the  
18 second theme, during this time away from the sport, the coach also noted how the availability  
19 of social support from significant others was helpful to her, not only in her recovery from the  
20 disappointment of the Olympic Games and her own performance, but also in helping her to  
21 make sense of the incident and reflect upon its meaning. Specifically:

22 I was fortunate enough to have family, friends, and a manager, who had been through  
23 the same thing themselves, they listened and asked me the right questions. Questions  
24 whose answers led me to conclude that I was finished in the sport and very happy with  
25 my career as a swim coach! I had experienced and done everything I had on my own

1 personal agenda and on list of goals, the one I never revealed to anyone. I am done as a  
2 swimming coach!

### 3 **Sampling of new career avenues**

4 Following a period of elected time out away from work and sport that involved rest and  
5 reflection the next phase of the experience of the critical incident described how the coach  
6 began to explore or consider the possibility of new career opportunities outside of her own  
7 sport. In particular, the sampling of a new job led to a rediscovery of her identity and re-  
8 affirmation of her-self through an overall increase in mental well-being via changes in  
9 feelings of competence, confidence and esteem.

10 I started working at the National Para-Sports Federation, a temporary position of 12  
11 months as a high performance manager. What a boost in self-confidence. I discovered  
12 how competent I am, and also that my experience and skills were appreciated. As a  
13 swimming coach, I felt that I was taken for granted, and when someone said well done  
14 to me it was more out of proper etiquette rather than to express true appreciation for a  
15 job well done.

### 16 **Enlightenment regarding career opporitnties**

17 In the penultimate phase of the transition the main theme of writing from the coach  
18 reflected an enlightenment regarding the critical incident she had experienced. Specifically,  
19 this phase reflected description of an element of closure in dealing with her perceived failures  
20 and that of her athlete at the summer Olympic Games and a sense of efficacy regarding future  
21 career opportunities:

22 I do not think it would have been so if I did not realize that I was finished and satisfied  
23 as a swim coach, and had the courage to take a step into uncertainty and be curious  
24 about something new.

1 In expressing her feelings towards potential new career opportunities and avenues the  
2 writings also indicated the formation of a new identity for the coach in this respect. Here she  
3 wrote about her efficacy regarding the transition to a new role and career when her temporary  
4 position within a sports federation as a high performance manager came to an end:

5 I knew that from April I would be without a job, but the difference this time was that I  
6 knew what I wanted to do. To work with coaching and development of coaches and  
7 athletes! Within or outside of the sport it does not matter.

### 8 **Career re-birth**

9 In the final phase of the transition process the coach's writings indicated a return to a  
10 positive state of mental well-being, indicative of feelings of positive affect surrounding  
11 herself and her new job, and career. The writings also suggested a clear degree of closure and  
12 perspective regarding the critical life incident experienced in terms of how she viewed what  
13 she had achieved in her former coaching role in the sport, "I'm proud of myself, proud of the  
14 choices and decisions I have made. Swimming is still the sport I am passionate about, but  
15 from now on as a spectator." This degree of closure and perspective was further emphasized  
16 in the following quote when the coach realized that she would do the same coaching journey  
17 all over again if possible:

18 Recently, at a dinner, the question "what would you work with if you were given a  
19 chance to start over?" went around the table. The answer came to me instantly and very  
20 clearly. "I would do it all again, because I have enjoyed it so much, but I would have  
21 quit after the Beijing Olympics!" (Four years before the London Games).

22 Lastly, in the final aspects of her writings the coach also indicated a degree of confidence in  
23 her ability to undertake her new career position in a new sport, expressing a degree of  
24 motivation to towards commencing the upcoming role:



1 On September 1st, I start the new job, a new challenge for me in a new sport, the world  
2 I'm passionate about and am good at. I'm proud of myself, proud of the active choices I  
3 have made. I have more confidence today.

#### 4 **Discussion**

5 This study adopted a novel approach in sport psychology by using an auto-  
6 biographical account, via letters, to understand a relatively unexplored facet of the career  
7 transition literature in sport; that of coach career termination. Our findings illustrate the  
8 various stages in the road to a coach's successful transition out of a sport and suggest this  
9 experience may be comparable to the current conceptual view regarding athletes' career  
10 transitions (Stambulova, 2003). Specifically, a sport transition is characterized by a process  
11 of coping with a set of demands, the effectiveness of which is contingent on the balance  
12 between an individual's coping resources and the barriers that confront them. This dynamic  
13 leads to a successful transition, representative of a good fit between the transition demands  
14 and that of an individual's resources, or crisis transition indicative of ineffective coping and  
15 need for intervention.

16 Our first research question sought to interpret the study findings via the various  
17 challenges or demands faced by the coach during the period of transition out of her sport.  
18 Across the various phases a large number of demands from a range of sources were faced  
19 (i.e., organizational, performance, personal), which varied in intensity and duration (i.e.,  
20 acute/chronic). For example, at the outset, prior to, and in the lead up to the experience of the  
21 critical life event (The 2012 Olympic Games) the demands placed upon the coach emanated  
22 from stressors that included managing the competitive environment and sacrificing personal  
23 time. Following the critical incident of the failure of her athlete at the Olympic Games the  
24 coach was then presented with a set of demands associated with dealing with her own, and  
25 her athlete's expectations of failure, particularly in the aftermath and recovery and reflection

1 phases. These findings resonate with the extant literature that highlights the stressful nature  
2 of coaching at the elite level (e.g., Olusoga, Butt, Hays, & Maynard, 2009; Thelwell, Weston,  
3 Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008a; see Fletcher & Scott, 2010 for a review) and the specific  
4 variables perceived to influence coaching effectiveness at Olympic Games, such as the  
5 inability to effectively handle crisis situations and staying cool under pressure (cf. Gould,  
6 Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung, 2002). Aside from describing a number of novel stressors that  
7 potentially contribute to a coach's career termination the current findings also extend the  
8 literature exploring coach stress, which to date has only considered overall experiences of the  
9 stressors faced, without a consideration of the temporal order within which these stressors  
10 occur (cf. Fletcher & Scott, 2010).

11         The seven phases present in this case study also emphasize the dynamic nature of the  
12 resources available to/deployed by the coach in relation to the demands experienced across  
13 the time period under consideration. For example, in the initial phase (lead up to the event),  
14 despite experiencing high demands the coach indicated she had developed a range of robust  
15 psychological skills (enhanced emotional control) and strategies (i.e., goal setting and  
16 planning) to manage these demands and perform effectively. These findings are in keeping  
17 with the extant literature that describes psychological skill utilization in elite coaches (see  
18 e.g., Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008b). However, in contrast to such  
19 effective coping, following the failure of their athlete at the critical life incident of the  
20 Olympic Games, subsequent phases in the transition indicated that the coach experienced a  
21 lack of personal resources and coping with the changing demands placed upon her, resulting  
22 in a degree of strain and challenge to her own well-being. This outcome suggests that the  
23 coach's existing personal resources were not matched or deployed effectively to meet these  
24 new and changing demands (i.e., she had not experienced or did not know how to deal with  
25 failure of this nature and its subsequent implications).

1           From her writings a salient aspect of the effectiveness of the personal resources  
2 utilized by the coach appeared to be the perceived level of social support that was available.  
3 Specifically, in the aftermath phase of the critical incident a lack of perceived available social  
4 support appeared to be significant in the struggle of the coach to come to terms with her own  
5 performance at the Olympic Games. Interestingly, while formal social support networks may  
6 have been available for the coach to access through their governing body or national Olympic  
7 organization (e.g., psychological support, career counseling) these may not have been  
8 perceived as available or accessible. In contrast, during the subsequent recovery and  
9 reflection phases the social support received through family and friends was indicated to be  
10 important in helping the coach come to terms with the critical incident. These findings  
11 highlight the importance role of matching social support; both perceived and received, in  
12 enhancing an individual's personal resources to cope with the demands of transition.  
13 Perceived support refers to one's potential access to social support, while received support  
14 refers to the reported use or exchange of support resources and describes the actions actually  
15 performed by others when offering assistance (cf. Mitchell, Evans, Rees, & Hardy, 2014).  
16 Recent research with injured athletes suggests the nature and interaction of perceived and  
17 received support can influence how an athlete manages the various stressors encountered and  
18 the subsequent psychological responses they experience (Mitchell et al., 2014). While  
19 significance of the role of social support in helping athletes manage their career transition out  
20 of sport is well documented (cf. Park et al., 2013), little is known or detailed about that given  
21 to coaches. Indeed, social support agencies and mechanisms in coaches represent an  
22 emerging area within its own right.

23           Our final objective was to consider the outcome of the transition process in terms of  
24 its relative success. Although the case reported here resulted in a happy ending (i.e., effective  
25 coping), the dynamic nature of the transition illustrated how the coach's experience

1 progressed from one of a crisis transition through to that of effective coping (e.g., Roberts,  
2 Mullen, Evans, & Hall, 2015). This experience was characterized by changes in the nature of  
3 the demands faced, the available resources to cope with these demands and the subsequent  
4 effect on personal well-being and identity. Indeed, despite the fact that the coaches' mental  
5 well-being was robust at the outset of the critical incident due to the effective deployment of  
6 psychological skills and strategies, as the critical incident unfolded and novel demands and  
7 situations were experienced, accompanied by a lack of coping, the coach entered a period of  
8 crisis transition with threats to her identity and subsequent mental and physical well-being,  
9 characterized by distress and strain. In the aftermath phase of the transition many of the  
10 symptoms reported were indicative of burnout, signposted by emotional exhaustion, negative  
11 appraisals related to reduced accomplishment (perceptions of lack of achievement and  
12 success) and devaluation of the perceived benefits gained from remaining working within  
13 their profession (Maslach & Jackson, 1982; Raedeke & Kenttä, 2013). Following 2 months'  
14 rest and time out from the sport, and through the provision of social support, the coach  
15 worked towards a successful transition with positive well-being outcomes and a regained  
16 sense of herself and social identity.

17         The coach's themes describing the outcome of the transition process appear consistent  
18 with those reported in the athlete career transition literature (cf. Park et al., 2013; Roberts et  
19 al., 2015). Here, the factors related to successful career transition adjustment by athletes have  
20 been categorized into personal factors (e.g., have a defined self-identity) and the available  
21 resources during the career transition process itself (e.g., the provision of and access to social  
22 support networks). Further comparison between coach and athlete experiences is clearly  
23 warranted given these initial similarities identified.

#### 24 **Study Limitations**

25         While the current study has provided a number of new perspectives on the career

1 transition experiences of an elite coach, the findings need to be taken in context. Indeed,  
2 while the novel approach adopted has sought to illuminate the coach career transition it is  
3 important to emphasize that the findings are only a representation of one individual case.  
4 Clearly sport, cultural and contextual factors are likely to exist that influence such  
5 experiences (cf. Ryba & Stambulova, 2013) and require further exploration. For example, for  
6 the purposes of data analysis, interpretation and manuscript preparation the coach's accounts  
7 were translated from their native dialect into the English language. Although every effort was  
8 made to ensure an accurate representation of the coach's works was translated it is likely that  
9 some meaning may have been lost in translation.

10 In addition, it should be noted that the current case study was not a strict transition out  
11 of a career in sport entirely in that eventually the coach moved into working in another sport.  
12 However, given the nature of the profession, the movement of coaches and support staff  
13 across sports and roles, akin to coach talent recycling, is now becoming more frequent and  
14 therefore an area worthy of future investigation in itself.

### 15 **Future research**

16 The nature of the method adopted for the current study has meant that a retrospective  
17 account of the participant's transition has been represented. Similar to the limitations in the  
18 athlete career transition literature, future research should seek to undertake more prospective  
19 investigations of the phenomena via longitudinal tracking of experiences in order to  
20 comprehend, and ultimately support the coach transition more effectively. It is also  
21 noteworthy that not all coaches will retire following a critical incident (as is the case in our  
22 study). Further investigation is therefore needed to clarify any potential differences between  
23 coaches who retire following a critical incident and those who retire for other reasons (e.g.,  
24 age, health, cessation of employment).

25 A number of themes that emerged from the coach's accounts highlighted the demands

1 and challenges to the overall mental and physical well-being of the participant in the current  
2 study. Outside of the investigation of the stressors placed on coaches (see e.g., Olusoga et al.,  
3 2009) and the subsequent responses to these such as burnout (Goodger, Gorley, Lavalley, &  
4 Harwood, 2007) there exists a dearth of investigations of the overall well-being of coaches. A  
5 particular facet highlighted in the current investigation at various times during the critical  
6 incident was the threats to the participant's self-identity in relation to her role as a coach.  
7 While a body of literature exists regarding athlete identity, and changes in identity with  
8 transition (cf. Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014), no research has been conducted to  
9 understand what happens to a coach's self-identity and how that is overcome.

10       Of additional note in relation to coach well-being are the circumstances surrounding the  
11 coach's exit from the Olympic village following her athlete's failure to progress to the finals.  
12 The coach suggested that in hindsight, when she requested to leave, no one challenged her or  
13 attempted to convince her to stay until the Games were finished as was originally planned.  
14 The National Olympic Committee of the coach instead were happy to pass on her  
15 accreditation to staff members from another sport of that nation. Interestingly, if an athlete  
16 would have expressed the same desire (i.e., that they wanted to leave in the middle of the  
17 Games), it is likely the reaction would have been completely different. In our professional  
18 practice experience, the 'sidelining' of coaches and support staff, often in favor of the athlete  
19 or team at all costs, is not an uncommon occurrence at international multi-sport event. It can  
20 be viewed in one respect as potential employee discrimination in the workplace, and is, as of  
21 yet, an untapped avenue of research worthy of further exploration.

## 22 **Practical implications**

23       Although being context-bound there are some broad recommendations that can be  
24 gleaned from the current case study to assist coaches and other support staff in managing  
25 critical life events, and subsequent career transition experiences. First, a key implication

1 arising from the study relates to the highly demanding business of being an elite coach and  
2 how these challenges can impact on the critical incident experiences that may cause a  
3 transition out of sport. National governing bodies and sports organizations need to continue  
4 to develop resources to promote effective stress management and coping with such demands.  
5 In their review of stress management interventions, Fletcher and Scott (2010) emphasize the  
6 role of primary and secondary intervention strategies for coaches. Primary interventions are  
7 preventative and serve to alleviate the overall demand placed upon coaches by eliminating or  
8 reducing, the quantity, frequency, and intensity of stressors faced (e.g., workload, work  
9 patterns, and the working environment). Secondary intervention comprises reactive  
10 approaches that attempt to help coaches modify their responses to challenges faced from such  
11 critical incidents by increasing their self-awareness and enhancing their overall resilience.  
12 Collectively, the skills developed from both these approaches may also serve to arm coaches  
13 with the necessary resources not only to cope with current challenges, but also for life after  
14 sport, or into a new sport.

15 A second implication from this study relates to understanding the lifecycle of the  
16 careers of coaches as well as those of their athletes. For example, elite athletes often  
17 experience a 4-year cycle of critical achievement-focused events or goals, such as the  
18 Olympic Games or world cup/championship tournaments, whereby following the completion  
19 of this cycle they have to reflect on a potential decision of whether to transition out of the  
20 sport or continue. Depending on the nation and culture a variety of resources are available to  
21 assist the athlete with this process (cf. Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). In contrast less support  
22 appears available for coaches (cf. Dawson & Phillips, 2013). Indeed, in the current  
23 investigation it was made evident that there was a lack of perceived social support available  
24 for coaches to deal with such critical incidents that may impact on retention within their  
25 current employment/profession. During these competition cycles a lens for these resources

1 needs focusing firmly on the coaches (and potentially support staff), in order to support them  
2 in their potential experiences of critical incidents. Here, Fletcher and Scott (2010) discuss the  
3 nature of tertiary-based stress management interventions, which seek to undertake a  
4 rehabilitative approach to attempts to help coaches cope with, or recover from, the  
5 consequences of critical incidents once they have occurred.

6       The current paper describes how the coach career termination process is characterized  
7 by distinct phases surrounding a specific critical life incident, with the deployment of  
8 personal resources occurring across these phases in an attempt to meet the various demands  
9 faced to reach a successful transition outcome. The findings are line with the athlete-based  
10 research that suggests the career termination decision-making process is multifaceted and  
11 complex (e.g., Roberts et al., 2015), with sport career termination decision-making processes  
12 usually occurring over an extended period of time (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Similar to the  
13 athlete literature, it would appear that aspects of the decision-making process by the coach  
14 have both sport and non-sport related elements that lead to career termination (cf. Erpič,  
15 Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004). Indeed, there appears to be a wealth of (anti-) pull or (anti-)  
16 push factors related to sport career termination decision-making that occur throughout this  
17 process (Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouquereau, 2006). In particular, in the latter stages of the  
18 transition of the current case, the coach reported how she experienced a career re-birth, very  
19 much underpinned by development of a new career self-identity through a period of  
20 reflection and sampling of working in other sports. This finding highlights the importance of  
21 practitioners attempting to support coaches in deriving meaning from their critical life  
22 incident experiences through reflective practices (cf. Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven,  
23 2010), to develop their new career self-identity and subsequently build career transition  
24 efficacy (Cabrita, Rosado, Leite, Serpa, & Sousa, 2014). Athletes have been reported to be  
25 more willing to transfer skills into other settings if they have a high self-efficacy, whereas



1 they may not attempt to transfer their skills if they are less certain of their abilities (Mayocchi  
2 & Hanrahan, 2000). Practitioners should seek to ensure they undertake initial work with  
3 coaches from an efficacious perspective by emphasizing their strengths, self-efficacy, and  
4 ability to transition.

5 A final implication relates to the case itself, a female high performance coach, and the  
6 fact that women are not only underrepresented in high performance sport generally in terms  
7 of athletic participation, but also in relation to occupying roles in coaching and support staff  
8 positions (cf. Burton, 2015). Given the limited number of female high performance coaches  
9 in elite sport, the importance of governing bodies and national sports federations working  
10 towards retaining these individuals within the coaching profession remains paramount.  
11 Retention of female high performance coaches within high performance sport is not only  
12 essential for their contribution to the performance of their athletes and respective sports, but  
13 also in terms of providing salient role models for aspiring female coaches to follow.

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**Figure Captions**

3 Figure 1. Letter 1 from coach to researcher (Post 2012 games).

4 Figure 2. Letter 2 from coach to researcher (March, 2014).

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## **Are career transition concerns only for athletes?**

I have trained myself in mental skills. Not to be a good counselor or sport psychologist first and foremost, but to become a better coach of leaders. The result - I have become a better coach! Not that my physiological, biomechanical and technical knowledge is better, but because my mental skills training has taught me so much more about myself, and improved my self-awareness. My reptilian tongue has become more well-trained, and I can do more to differentiate between me and you, and sometimes I actually think before I act!

In four years I have planned, lived and thought about the London Olympics during each training session. I have told myself, 'I will be there, in London, it will happen!' Most of my work at the edge of the pool has been undertaken with that goal in mind - one athlete, two distances, six races - trials, semifinals and finals. The reward ... an Olympic medal!

The others in my training group have also been part of the plan all along, and they have been working towards their goals. Friends and family have had to be put aside many times, although I have worked hard to try keeping the pieces of the puzzle of life together. My plan has been that my own coaching capabilities would reach their peak in London, but it was not to be. My athlete was in top physical form, but I was far from that myself.

As a coach I have made just as many workouts as my athlete, lived through bad races, good races, injury, yes everything. I have also done all the planning and preparation for every training session so that every race has been undertaken in a way that has lead to the development of my athlete's performance. My heart rate has risen at the races - the tension has created havoc inside me and yet I have always tried to be cool on the outside. Just like the athlete waiting for selection for the Games I have also waited for news from National Olympic Committee to see if I can go or not. As a coach, like an athlete, you also need to be

1 ready, have time to prepare yourself to be on top form when the time comes to perform at the  
2 Games, do be like the sourdoughs who remain at home.

3 Olympic race day – early breakfast, stay alert, be on time to the warm-up. At last, a  
4 walk to the call-room, marching in to the arena, presentation of the participants. Now it is  
5 time to execute a perfect race. Damn! The start was far from perfect, try to catch up without  
6 stress. 22 seconds. It's over! The athlete did not even make the semi-finals! What happened? I  
7 feel a big emptiness, what do I do now? Can I go home, or do I have to stay in the village?  
8 Surely there is someone who needs my accreditation pass better than me! I am having the  
9 same thoughts and anxieties that my athlete must be feeling.

10 Do I have the energy to continue? Am I motivated enough to commit this much time  
11 for another four years? Am I able to give a level of commitment on par with what my  
12 competitors are doing? Am I good enough? What did I do wrong? Could I have done  
13 anything differently? I have so many questions, but no one asks them to me or even seems to  
14 think that I have any concerns or worries. I do get asked these questions, but they are about  
15 my athlete, not about me - How did they feel and react when it went so bad for them?

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17 I end as I began: Are (concerns about) career transitions only for athletes?

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## **2 years later - what happened?**

2 years ago I was at a loss. What do I want to do? How much of myself am I willing to sacrifice to continue in this career? 2 years later I still remember with sadness how exhausted I was and how "unsuccessful" I thought the Olympics were. It should not have been so!

There was no support from the organizations around me, even though they should have offered me professional support to help me with how to move forward. I did receive an e-mail from the National Olympic Committee, it was a mass e-mail to all staff that attended the Games informing us that Coaches at the London Olympics would have the opportunity to contact the sponsor of the Nations Olympic team, for career counseling, contact the Olympic teams' sponsor if you feel like you need it!

I was fortunate enough to have family, friends, and a manager who had been through the same thing themselves, they listened and asked me the right questions. Questions whose answers led me to conclude that I was finished in the sport and very happy with my career as a swim coach! I had experienced and done everything I had on my own personal agenda and on list of goals, the one I never revealed to anyone. I am done as a swimming coach!

I saw out my contract until the end of the year, and longed for the last practice. I had already decided on which cake to serve to my swimmers; a blue Princess cake in the shape of a pool with "24" written in icing. That is the number of years I have been a coach at national team level in swimming without interruption! My only plan was that I would take time off for at least 2 months before I started a new job. A *real break* where I could do whatever I wanted and when I wanted. I took exactly two months off before I started working at (sports federation), a temporary position of 12 months as a high performance manager. What a boost of self-confidence. I discovered how competent I am, and also that my experience and skills were appreciated. As a swimming coach, I felt that I was taken for granted, and when

1 someone said well done to me it was more out of proper etiquette rather than to express true  
2 appreciation for a job well done.

3 I learned a lot during my year at (sports federation), but it was only a limited position.  
4 I knew that from April I would be without a job, but the difference this time was that I knew  
5 what I wanted to do. To work with the coaching and development of coaches and athletes!  
6 Within or outside of my sport it did not matter. Another thing I learned from my trip is to  
7 take care of family, friends, myself and the time I have, and I do that today. For that reason,  
8 this year I have had a summer vacation, and I also applied for a job in coaching, which I have  
9 decided that I want to work with.

10 On September 1st, I start the new job, a new challenge for me in a new sport, the  
11 world I'm passionate about and am good at. I'm proud of myself, proud of the active choices I  
12 have made. I have more confidence today. Swimming is still the sport I am passionate about,  
13 but as a spectator. I do not think it would have been so if I did not realize that I was finished  
14 and satisfied as a swim coach, and had the courage to take a step into uncertainty and be  
15 curious about something new. I wish that the Swim Federation, the National Olympic  
16 Committee and the National Sports Confederation had helped me on the journey, instead of  
17 leaving me without support. They could have asked me about what kind of support I needed.  
18 Now I can only hope that they will help other coaches and trainers in the future, because I am  
19 not the only one going through this!

20 Recently, at a dinner, the question “who would you work with if you were given a  
21 chance to start over?” went around the table. The answer came to me instantly and very  
22 clearly. “I would do it all again, because I have enjoyed it so much, but I would have quit  
23 after the Beijing Olympics!” (four years before the London Game).

24

- 1 The question I posed two years ago remains unanswered. Are career transition concerns only
- 2 for athletes?

**Table 1. Summary of thematic analysis of coach letters in relation to stages of a critical life event**

Stage	Themes	Example Quotes
<i>Build up</i>	Demands of being an elite coach: - Challenges to mental (cognitive and emotional), physical and social well-being - Isolation from family and significant others - Challenges to work/life balance	As a coach I have made just as many workouts as my athlete, lived through bad races, good races, injury, yes everything. I have also done all the planning and preparation for every training session so that every race has been undertaken in a way that has lead to the development of my athlete's performance.  Friends and family have had to be put aside many times, although I have worked hard to try keeping the pieces of the puzzle of life together.
	Mental skills strategies deployed to cope with demands: - Goal setting and planning - Enhanced emotional control	My mental skills training has taught me so much more about myself, and improved my self-awareness. My reptilian tongue has become more well-trained, and I can do more to differentiate between me and you, and sometimes I actually think before I act!

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	- Increased self-reflection and awareness	In four years I have planned, lived and thought about the London Olympics during each training session. I have told myself, 'I will be there, in London, it will happen!' Most of my work at the edge of the pool has been undertaken with that goal in mind - one athlete, two distances, six races - trials, semifinals and finals. The reward ... an Olympic medal!
<i>The event</i>	Failure, anxiety, emotional distress and upheaval, helplessness	What happened? I feel a big emptiness... I am having the same thoughts and anxieties that my athlete must be feeling.
<i>Aftermath</i>	Emotional distress and upheaval	2 years later I still remember with sadness how exhausted I was and how "unsuccessful" I thought the Olympics were.
	Low self-efficacy and low self-esteem, threats to self-identity	Do I have the energy to continue? Am I motivated enough to commit this much time for another four years? Am I able to give a level of commitment on par with what my competitors are doing? Am I good enough? What did I do wrong? Could I have done anything differently? I have so many questions, but no one asks them to me or even seems to

think that I have any concerns or worries.

Lack of perceived social support

I wish the (*National Governing Body*), the (*National Olympic Committee*) and the (*National Sports Federation*) had helped me on the journey, instead of leaving me without support. They could have asked me about what kind of support I needed.

*Recovery and Reflection*  
Time-out from work

My only plan was that I would take time off for at least 2 months before I started a new job. A *real break* where I could do whatever I wanted and when I wanted.

Social support received from family and friends

I was fortunate enough to have family, friends, and a manager, who had been through the same thing themselves, they listened and asked me the right questions.

*Sampling*  
Re-discovery of self-identity, increased self-efficacy and self-esteem

I started working at (*sports federation*), a temporary position of 12 months as a high performance manager. What a boost of self-confidence. I discovered how competent I am, and also that my experience and skills were appreciated.



<i>Enlightenment</i>	New identity formation, transition efficacy	I knew that from April I would be without a job, but the difference this time was that I knew what I wanted to do. To work with the coaching and development of coaches and athletes!  Within or outside of the sport it does not matter.
<i>Re-birth</i>	Role-efficacy, mental well-being, closure and perspective, confidence, motivation	On September 1st, I start the new job, a new challenge for me in a new sport, the world I'm passionate about and am good at. I'm proud of myself, proud of the active choices I have made. I have more confidence today.

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