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# **Coaching transitions across borders: The pursuit of individuals advancing coaching careers in the competitive global landscape of Olympic sports**

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## **Abstract**

Intensified international competition for sporting success has facilitated coaches' cross-national migration, which constitutes a space for coaches' career transitions and development. This paper examines elite coaches' international migration as part of coaching career transitions within the context of the global sporting arms race. Using a qualitative case study design, data were generated from documents and semi-structured interviews with six South Korean coaches who had moved to Western nations to coach national teams in two Olympic sports. The analysis reveals an underlying mechanism of the coaches' international mobility: 'dual imbalances' existing between the sending and receiving countries – one in the levels of sporting performance; the other in the perceived levels of modernisation in coaching cultures and sports systems. The migration opportunities were created by the 'performance imbalance' between the home nation and destinations amid the structural context of the global sporting arms race. However, equally important is the individuals' strategic initiative to seize the opportunities for their

career development and mitigate the perceived ‘modernisation imbalance’ in coaching practices. By highlighting coaches’ agentic capacity to navigate their career pathways within the global context, this study contributes empirically to the literature on both international coach migration and coaching transitions.

Keywords: coach development, coach migration, elite coach, South Korea, global sport arms race

## **Introduction**

Sport migration has now become a prominent global trend. Increasing numbers of elite athletes, coaches, performance analysts and referees travel across national borders (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Elliott & Gusterud, 2018; Orłowski et al., 2018). Previous research has highlighted the economic, political and social factors that impact international mobility among sports labours, such as globalisation and commercialisation in sports (Maguire, 2004, 2008; Weedon, 2012). Despite academic efforts to comprehend sports labour migration in different contexts, existing studies have mainly centred on professional sports where commercial leagues have been established, such as football and rugby, and thus on athletes and coaches in these sporting disciplines (e.g., Maguire & Falcous, 2011; Guo et al., 2023). Consequently, significant gaps remain to be addressed given the diversity of sporting disciplines, national sports policies and socio-cultural contexts. In particular, the migration experiences of elite coaches within the Olympic circuit remain under-studied, although national Olympic teams, funded largely by their governments in pursuit of Olympic golds (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2008), are increasingly employing foreign elite

coaches to enhance their athletic performance (e.g., Dionne, 2018; Germano, 2022). Such international relocation also accompanies coaches' career transitions along the migration processes, given that skilled coaches move to new environments characterised by different cultures, norms and practices.

This paper aims to investigate the international migration of elite coaches in Olympic sports as part of their career transitions. Specifically, it delves into two interconnected research questions: (1) how does international coach recruitment take place within the context of the global competition for Olympic success; and (2) how do individual coaches engage with it in terms of their career development? South Korean elite coaches' relocation to Western countries serves as the main case for this study given their unique mobility route (from the non-West to the West), coaching culture and practice (allegedly coercive and authoritarian) and autonomous decision-making (a deliberate choice of Western nations). Korean coaches' international migration presents a noteworthy context where both the global competition for sporting success and individual coaches' considerations behind the decision to cross the border can be observed simultaneously. Utilising a qualitative case study design, data were generated from documents and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six Korean elite coaches who had moved to Western countries (the UK, the US, France and Ireland) to coach national teams in two Olympic sports (taekwondo and short-track speed skating).

The analysis shows the relative influence of the *structural* conditions that create the mobility paths and the *individual* agency that motivates the coaches' career transitions. It highlights that while the opportunities for the coaches' international mobility were created by the accelerated global race for sporting achievement, the coaches were self-determined to move to a new country to explore reportedly more advanced sporting environments with the hope of pursuing personal growth as a coach. In discussing this relative power of structure

and agency in the Olympic-related coach migration, the paper offers a key mechanism of the coaches' international relocation: 'dual imbalances' that exist between the sending and receiving countries – one in the higher and lower levels of sporting performance between nations; the other perceived one in more and less modernised coaching cultures and sporting systems. Our analysis emphasises the individual coaches' active initiatives in capitalising on the opportunities arising from the dual imbalances for their coaching career development. By highlighting the implications of international coach migration as a route for transitions in coaching careers, this study not only sheds light on the intricate and multifaceted nature of coaching career pathways (e.g., Blackett et al., 2018; Purdy & Potrac, 2016) but also contributes to the existing research on coach transitions in diverse contexts (e.g., Blackett et al., 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021; Chroni et al., 2021; Rynne, 2014).

Following this short introduction, the paper outlines academic discussions on international coach migration and global competition for sporting success, which is followed by this study's case context and methodological approach. Next, the paper presents two key findings from our analysis: the structural context of the coaches' migration processes and their endeavours for career development. Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting implications for sports coaching studies.

### **Cross-border coach migration in government-funded sport sectors**

Reflecting the international trend of sport migration, scholarly interests regarding sports labour migration have been growing over the decades (see Borges et al., 2015; Carter, 2013; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Maguire & Falcous, 2011; Orłowski et al., 2016). Researchers, mainly from sociological schools of thought, have directed their attention not only towards globalisation within which sports labour migration occurs (Maguire, 2004; Maguire &

Falcous, 2011) but also towards the migration experiences and acculturation processes of sports professionals (Carter, 2013; Weedon, 2012). A central interest of this group of studies has been in tracing the patterned movements, notably athletes' international migration from diverse countries to North America and between North America and European continents in professional sports, including football, rugby, cricket, baseball, basketball and ice hockey (see Elliott & Gusterud, 2018; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Maguire, 2011; Maguire & Falcous, 2011; Weedon, 2012). In doing so, they identified reasons for the migration patterns (e.g., globalisation at a macro level, and the pursuit of financial opportunities and individual career development at a micro level), along with their implications for host countries as well as migrants themselves (Maquire, 2011).

More recently, attention has increasingly shifted towards the transnational mobilities of sports coaches (see Borges et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2023; Hassanin & Light, 2014; Kerr & Moore, 2015; Kerr & Obel, 2018; Orłowski et al., 2016, 2018; Tao et al., 2019; Wicker et al., 2018). For example, research on German coaches (Orłowski et al., 2016, 2018; Wicker et al., 2018) was concerned about the growing outflow of skilled coaches, examining emigration patterns of elite coaches in national/state teams that are generally government-funded. Orłowski et al. (2016) suggested that elite coaches would be more likely to emigrate when there are higher salaries, longer-term contracts and a command of the languages used in receiving countries, whereas the likelihood would decrease with geographically longer distance (e.g., nine flight hours and more) and lower chances of career development and reputation. Wicker et al. (2018) demonstrated more segmentalised determinants of German coaches' emigration: higher income, a permanent contract in new countries, having school-age children, former careers as high-performance athletes and a sports science degree.

The above line of research has made an important contribution to the previously under-researched area of coach migration in government-funded sporting sectors. Some

research shed light on the potential impacts of national sports systems on coaches' working conditions (e.g., low salaries and limited job opportunities) which would facilitate coaches' emigration from their home countries (Orlowski et al., 2018; Wicker et al., 2018). Moreover, other research provided insight into coaches' learning process during cultural adjustment in their worldviews and coaching practices after relocation (Kerr & Obel, 2018; Tao et al., 2019). For instance, Tao et al. (2019) highlighted the way in which migrant coaches from China to Australia reshaped their coaching practices, aligning themselves with the receiving country's societal norms and culture, such as a more individualistically oriented relationship between coaches and athletes compared to that of their home nation.

However, many of the coach migration studies tend to reiterate analytical frameworks that have been used in research on athlete migration, including push-pull factors (Orlowski et al., 2018; Wicker et al., 2018) and typologies of migrants, such as mercenaries, ambitionists, cosmopolitans and pioneers (Borges et al., 2015). This can limit the scope of analysis largely to motivations/drives of migration and individual migrants' acculturation/adaptation in new settings. Furthermore, little has been known about the coach recruitment practices of sport organisations or National Sport Governing Bodies (NGBs) in the competitive landscape of the international sports arena. In this respect, the available literature on global competition between countries for sporting excellence can provide a critical point of departure for a more in-depth investigation of elite coaches' transnational migration, to which this paper now turns.

### **Global sport arms race: the context of international coach migration**

Achieving international success in elite sports has become a policy priority in many national sport development systems (Green & Houlihan, 2008; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Sam, 2012; Skille & Chroni, 2018). By modelling some of the former Eastern Bloc's approach to elite

sport development, such as early talent identification, Western democracies, including Australia and Canada, initiated strategic investment in high-performance sports in the 1980s and 90s (Green & Oakley, 2001; Kerr et al., 2020). Since then, many national governments and sports organisations have followed suit and developed be-spoke support schemes for their athletes to reach world-class performance (De Bosscher et al., 2006; De Bosscher et al., 2016; Green & Houlihan, 2005). This competition among countries has been metaphorically referred to as a ‘global sporting arms race’ (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Oakley & Green, 2001) in which nations invest more resources to rank higher than other countries in Olympic medal tables. According to Green and Houlihan (2008), one of the consequences of this global ‘race’ is the homogenised formulas of national elite sports systems across countries, despite their historical, political and socio-cultural differences. These countries strive to maximise the use of available resources, including human assets, such as coaches, to ensure the most effective and productive capacities of their systems for elite sport development. Accordingly, coach development, recruitment and retention strategies have also been developed as integral parts of their elite sports systems for athletic dominance on the global stage (De Bosscher & van Bottenburg, 2011; Liston et al., 2013).

It is within this increasingly competitive global sporting context that foreign elite coaches have been more actively employed in countries that seek to improve their chances of achieving global sports supremacy. The media has reported successful cases of foreign coaches who came from countries with world-class performance and then made significant contributions to the host countries’ Olympic medal wins (see Dionne, 2018; “Foreign faces,” 2021; Germano, 2022; Hussain, 2021; Oxley, 2022). These cases demonstrate strategic international coach recruitment by state policies, aimed not only at enhancing the national teams’ performance levels in targeted areas but also at adopting cutting-edge coaching expertise and knowledge of the sports (Borges et al., 2015; He et al., 2018).



More particularly, the race for winning Olympic medals among Western countries has created a noticeable migration flow from non-Western countries with world-class performance to Western liberal democracies. This includes gymnastics coaches from the former Soviet Union to Australia, the UK and the US (Cervin et al., 2020; Girginov & Sandanski, 2004; Kerr & Cervin, 2016), archery coaches from South Korea to Australia, Italy and the US (Kirshman, 2021; “Korean-born”, 2012; Ransom et al., 2016) and diving coaches from China to Australia and the UK (O’Brien, 2012; Tao et al., 2019). Many of these Western countries have *imported* coaches from other nations, recognising the world-best expertise in the respective sports, compared to their weaker performance levels. In the discussion on how to “foster Britain’s future Olympic hopes” in diving, for example, a media report cited an interview with a coach recruiter in the UK who stated that “if we wanted medals *en masse* then we would have to do what the Chinese did” (O’Brien, 2012, para. 2).

Cases of Olympic-related coach migration from the non-West to the West imply its key driving force, namely ‘excellent sporting performance’. The migration direction of elite coaches flows from countries with higher sporting performance and greater accumulated training methods to countries that are comparatively underperforming in the respective sports and eager to improve their performance levels. On the surface, therefore, this international relocation of elite coaches appears to be governed primarily by the macro-structural condition, such as nations’ pursuit of international sporting success. However, such international mobility simultaneously involves coaches’ career transitions, because coaches, as skilled workers with extensive knowledge and experience acquired in their native settings, move to new environments with new cultures, norms and practices (Day, 2023). In this regard, this paper examines these two interrelated aspects: international coach recruitment practices that occur amidst the race for excellence in world sports; and individual coaches’

career considerations and manoeuvres within the Olympic-motivated global coach recruitment campaigns.

## Methodology

### Case context: South Korea's elite sports coaching

The empirical focus of this paper is Korean elite coaches' migration to Western countries. Korea has traditionally been dominant in several summer and winter Olympic sports, including taekwondo and short-track speed skating. As the birthplace of taekwondo, Korea has garnered a total of 22 Olympic medals in the sport, being ranked at the top, up to the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics (12 golds, three silvers and seven bronzes).<sup>1</sup> In addition, Korea has maintained a leading position in Olympic short-track speed skating events for decades, winning 53 medals until the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics (26 golds, 16 silvers and 11 bronzes).<sup>2</sup> It is commonly acknowledged that Korea possesses a large pool of talented athletes with extensive experience and knowledge about the sporting disciplines and many of them have transitioned into coaching positions (Kim et al., 2020). Therefore, it is widely believed that the coaching pipeline for these sports in Korea is both robust and of high quality, resulting in excellent and consistent performance production, as evident in the outcomes of Olympic medals. Consequently, Korean elite coaches in these sports are highly sought after and recruited by other national Olympic teams, such as the UK, the US, Hungary and China ("Korean-born coaches", 2022; Thoopkrajae & Kulwanich, 2021; "Tribute paid", 2018; "S. Korean coach", 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> Sources were obtained from the IOC's web pages: 'Taekwondo' (<https://olympics.com/en/sports/taekwondo/>) and 'Olympic result' (<https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/olympic-results>).

<sup>2</sup> Sources were obtained from the IOC's web pages: 'Short track speed skating' (<https://olympics.com/en/sports/short-track-speed-skating/>) and 'Olympic result' (<https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/olympic-results>).

Compared to their high levels of sporting performance, Korea is known to be lagging behind in organisational policies and practices for protecting and promoting athletes' human rights and well-being (Lee et al., 2022). According to Kim et al. (2020), there used to be a coercive elite sport environment where the infringement of athletes' rights and abusive practices were normalised. While such an authoritarian sporting environment has gradually improved since the implementation of sports reform initiatives in the mid-2000s (Lee et al., 2022; Nam et al., 2018), there is a broad consensus that normalised abusive coaching methods persist (Kim & Dawson, 2022). Until recently, there have been a series of high-profile sexual and physical abuse cases in Korean high-performance sports (see "South Korea unveils", 2019).

It is against this ambivalent background of 'excellent performance' generated by potentially 'abusive coaching' that some Korean elite coaches consider relocating to new environments. Many Korean high-performance and elite coaches in their 30s to 50s experienced such a gruelling environment throughout their involvement in sports as competitive athletes, thus embodying the Korean style of abusive practices (Kim et al., 2020). As their coaching practices have been challenged by the implementation of sports reform policies (Kim & Dawson, 2022), the coaches have gradually developed a strong need to explore 'better practices' (Kim, 2020). In this regard, Korean coaches' exploratory migration to Western nations provides a unique space for investigating the nexus between international coach migration and coaching career transition.

### **Research design: data collection and analysis**

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach (Starman, 2013) in order to examine the macro-level dynamics and micro-level agency that underlie the international migration of coaches from non-Western to Western countries. Following institutional ethical approval,

data were collected by the first author through a combination of document analysis and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Documents, such as media articles and policy reports, enabled a deeper exploration of the topic with a nuanced and holistic understanding of the case by providing contextual information (Bowen, 2008; Morgan, 2022).

The participants were purposively recruited (Tracy, 2020) based on two criteria: elite coaches who had (1) an elite athletic career in Korea and (2) experiences coaching high-performance/elite athletes in Western countries, such as Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. The recruitment process employed a combination of three access techniques, including the use of gatekeepers, direct contact through social media and snowball sampling. Ultimately, a total of six male coaches were recruited in two sports disciplines (taekwondo and short-track speed skating). Due to the constraints caused by the Coronavirus outbreak, not all interviews could be performed face-to-face. Five coaches were interviewed online and one by telephone. All interviews were conducted in Korean.

At the time of the interviews, all participants were coaching or had prior experiences of coaching athletes who competed at international levels in the UK, the US, France or Ireland. Five of the six coaches worked for national senior teams. The other one coached a national junior team which was trained at the country's national training centre as part of the pathway towards the next Olympic representatives. All of these coaches had previously competed in the same sports at national and/or international levels, with two of them being Olympians. They had varying levels of experience as both athletes and coaches, with their years of competing ranging from 12 to 22, and of coaching ranging from two to 33. The length of their residency in the migrated countries varied from one to 30 years, with two out of the six participants having returned to Korea after the termination of their contracts in their foreign countries. To ensure the participants' confidentiality and anonymity, no additional

information about the participants is provided, and pseudonyms (Coaches 1-6) are used throughout this paper.

After gaining consent, all participants received a list of interview questions three to seven days before the scheduled interviews. Interview questions were centred on the participants' first-hand experiences, observations, thoughts and emotions, with specific emphasis on their decision-making processes and reasons for their international relocation. The conversations were carefully adapted to each participant's background during the interviews, taking into consideration publicly available information obtained through media searches beforehand, such as their athletic performance, coaching experience and destination countries. The duration and number of interviews were tailored to each participant's individual circumstances and availabilities, varying between one to three sessions per interviewee and lasting between 40 and 150 minutes per session. In total, 13 interview sessions were conducted, yielding a cumulative recording time of 1,110 minutes. In cases where participants engaged in multiple interviews, the questions and conversation topics of the subsequent interviews were carefully (re-)organised, considering the themes discussed during the previous interviews and unique backgrounds and perspectives of individual participants (Tracy, 2020). All interviews were recorded with a digital recorder, transcribed verbatim, selected for the presentation of the findings and translated into English by the first author.

The first author's subjectivity, as a former national representative athlete who had undergone similar athletic experience as the participants in the former authoritative Korean sporting regime, was beneficial in fostering an environment that enabled the participants to comfortably express their experiences, feelings and thoughts. Moreover, the authors' self-reflexivity as international migrants, who seek to reflect on their own identities and daily

practices in relation to the societal norms, culture and structure in different countries, played an important role in interpreting the collected data (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Tracy, 2020).

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After becoming familiarised with the collected data through multiple readings of each transcript and document gathered, four initial codes relevant to the participants' experiences of international employment and decision-making processes were developed (e.g., reasons for planning to move abroad, performance enhancement, social connections, hostility toward Korean coaching and sporting cultures, etc.). These initial codes were then mapped together to create two potential themes (e.g., macro context and micro agency, and coaching career development). The codes and initial themes were refined via further readings of the collected data, coded maps and existing literature, followed by discussions between the authors and their critical reviews of the developed themes to generate clear definitions and names of them (e.g., the dual imbalances) (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). Subsequently, these themes were then relabelled and reorganised with two key findings: the structural context of international coach migration; and coaches' endeavours for career development. The next two sections present these findings.

### **The structural context of international coach migration**

It was evident from the data that our coaches' migratory flux was shaped by *performance imbalance* within the context of a global sporting arms race. The primary factor driving the cross-border movement of our coaches was the disparity in sporting performance levels between their home and migrant destinations. In such a macro-structural condition, social networks played a crucial role in activating Korean coaches' recruitment by sports organisations overseas and in opening doors to the coaches' international mobility.

Specifically, recruiting Korean coaches was mostly arranged by influential Korean coaches, showing a pattern that a Korean coach in a foreign team is supplanted by another Korean coach. This section examines how the coaches' international migratory paths in Olympic sports were created and developed.

### **Performance imbalance: a condition to engender coaches' cross-border mobility**

Our data confirm that sporting federations strive to source foreign coaches to utilise overseas expertise and knowledge for global success in sports competitions. Congruent with the notional accounts of the global sporting arms race (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2008), our data show that Korean coaches are recruited by foreign national teams for their goal to achieve performance enhancement. As a news article reported, “the Korean Skating Union has been receiving many requests from other countries wishing to recruit Korean coaches for their national teams ... as they want to learn Korea’s secret skating methods” (Lee, 2006, translated). Coach 1 also provided a detailed statement:

During the 2000s and 2010s, quite a lot of countries wanted to employ Korean coaches because Korea showed the best, overwhelming performance on the world stage [in the sport]. So, in the eyes of other countries, probably, Korean coaches were viewed as skilled technicians with excellent strategies and methods for winning the Olympic games ... Countries whose performances remained in the lower ranks seemed to have the expectation that a Korean coach could elevate their performance levels.

The above quote emphasises a crucial aspect of international elite coach migration – it was integral to the national sports organisations' preparation for the Olympics. Coach 6 recounted that he was brought on board when the hosting country embarked on an ambitious

long-term project “to cultivate junior athletes for the Olympics but faced a lack of expert coaches available in the sport domestically”. These NGBs’ desire for international success was particularly apparent in the coaches’ contract conditions and duties, which were generally aligned with the four-year Olympic cycle. Coach 2 mentioned: “During the four-year contract, ... my compensation was increased annually, and we renegotiated incentives every single year”. Moreover, being part of the organisation’s performance development system for the Olympics, many of our participants engaged in establishing their host institutions’ annual plans which, as Coach 1 pointed out, fundamentally aimed to “win Olympic medals ... as a number-one priority”. The main role of recruited Korean coaches was thus to help the host nations gain a competitive edge against their rivals in the ‘race’ for global sports triumph (De Bosscher et al., 2008; De Bosscher & van Bottenburg, 2011). Coach 2 corroborated this point by stating:

The federation wanted to win more medals than other countries. ... After a season finished and before the next one started, they would tally up all the medals won by each country during the season and see who came out on top. Specifically, they would always focus on the medal tables of countries on the same continent and try to figure out what the differences were and why some countries performed better than others. [At the meetings] we would talk about how we could improve, what we could learn from other countries and what we needed to do to be better than them. ... The ultimate goal in the four-year plan was to win more medals in the next Olympic Games than we did in the previous one.

The pattern of international relocation among our participants from Korea to Western nations contrasts with Orłowski et al.’s (2018) claim that coaches prefer staying in their original countries if the countries are leading nations in their sports. Our coaches’



international movement was in the opposite direction – moving from a leading country to countries with comparably lower performance levels in the respective sports.<sup>3</sup> This is because the underlying condition for these elite coaches' transnational migration was the differential or *imbalance* in performance levels between exporting and importing nations.

In the contemporary international sporting context, recruitment of foreign coaches with expert knowledge and practices is a means of survival or prosperity not only in the intensified competition in global contexts but also in performance-based funding systems in national contexts (Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Sam, 2012). The countries to which our coach participants moved are the industrialised nations that are actively participating in the global race for sporting success and operating competitive funding schemes amongst national governing bodies (De Bosscher et al., 2016; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Sam, 2012); yet they have recorded relatively lower performance than Korea in the respective sports. Therefore, it appears that our coaches' migration experiences demonstrate the *macro*-level influence of the global arms race in elite sports: international sports labour employment for global success.

### **International recruitment by social connections**

Under the macro-structural condition, the demands for Korean coaches across the globe are fulfilled through *social connections*. A common process shared by our coaches during the interviews was that a foreign sporting organisation, formally or informally, asked a Korean involved in the sport or a Korean sport federation to send a Korean coach to their country.

Five out of six coach participants were recruited through this process. The other case was the

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<sup>3</sup> In Olympic taekwondo, the US has won a total of 10 medals (three golds, two silvers and five bronzes), the UK total of nine (two golds, three silvers and four bronzes), France a total of eight (three silvers and five bronzes), and Ireland has recorded no medal so far. In short-track speed skating the US has earned 20 medals in total (four golds, seven silvers and nine bronzes), the UK secured only one bronze, and Ireland and France have not won any medals. All sources here were collected from the IOC, 'Olympic results' (<https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/olympic-results>).

coach's individual effort to contact and negotiate directly with a sports organisation in a foreign country to which he wanted to move. The five coaches initially received information about the overseas requests from acquaintances and were introduced to the foreign sporting institutes, such as NGBs. Subsequently, they entered into formal contracts with these institutes with curriculum vitae checks and, occasionally, informal interviews with recruiting organisations.

In the process, Korean coaches often acted as a linchpin. These 'influential' coaches had already been working for several sports federations abroad and had established themselves as renowned experts from a dominant country in the sport. As a result, they possessed the authority and reputation to introduce and recommend promising coaches who they thought would be a good fit for foreign teams. Coach 1 detailed how a Korean coach is recommended or approached by other Korean coaches:

Generally, if a Korean coach leaves their coaching position in a foreign NGB, the NGB usually asks the coach if they have some other [Koreans] in mind whom they would like to recommend. Then, the coach suggests a [Korean] successor. If the recommended coach meets the NGB's requirements, there is a good chance that he or she will get the opportunity to work in that country.

The interview remark above highlights that social networks mediated the hiring process of Korean coaches. In such cases, the pre-existing closeness between the coaches was essential in producing specific pathways to an international migrant career in sport. Indeed, the informal recruitment channel often hinged on the 'junior and senior' links among Korean coaches, which was mirrored in Coach 5's comment:

Becoming a national team coach [of a foreign country] was often determined by senior Korean coaches. They suggest to a young or junior Korean coach, like "Hey, why don't you give it a try coaching the national team this time?"

... or “It’s your turn to coach the national team.” ... This was kind of, like, a practice that shares and rotates the chance of coaching the national team among senior and junior Korean coaches.

This ‘bring-another-Korean’ practice occurs because Korea is the ‘brand’ as a powerhouse of these sports, producing quality coaching experts. The coach participants acknowledged that the international reputation of Korean performance in the sports created opportunities for ordinary Korean elite coaches.

We have thus far discussed international coach mobility in response to the performance imbalance in two Olympic sports. From this perspective, it may seem that the international migration of these individual coaches was predominantly driven by the macro-level force to redress or overturn the performance ‘imbalance’ between nations. However, one may question whether the coaches’ international mobility depends entirely on the structural influence of the global sporting arms race. The following section explores this question by focusing on the individual agency of the coaches who strategically utilise the asymmetry in sporting performance to further their coaching careers and practices.

### **Coaches’ endeavour for career development: addressing dual-imbances**

There appear to be specific motives for the coaches’ international relocation: i.e., why they chose to move particularly to Western countries. Some mentioned that they readily accepted the informal offer from acquaintances to work in a Western state. Others stated that they had previously been offered coaching positions in other Asian countries but declined as those were not their preferred destinations. The coaches were already aware of the lower levels of sporting performance in their destinations as well as diverse challenges they would face,

regarding different languages, cultures and sporting/societal systems. This section delves into the coaches' proactive initiatives to migrate to Western countries. What follows is our analysis of the coaches' reflections on their personal and career development in the context of international migration and their strategic use of the migration opportunities.

### **Initiatives for coaching career development**

Our coaches commonly noted that they had relocated to the West as a part of their *career development* plans. The cross-national migration of the coaches, as highly skilled sports professionals (Maguire, 2004), constitutes a crucial opportunity for their career transitions and development (e.g., Meyer, 2001). Unlike other cases where sport labour migration occurs due to limited job opportunities 'in quantity' in home nations (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014), the fundamental reasons behind our coaches' migration related more to their perception of limited potential for 'quality' personal growth as coaches in Korea.

Our coaches had long contemplated moving to new countries before taking action. They expressed their curiosity about other countries' sporting systems and their desire to explore new environments outside of their home country. Three out of six participants had an ambition to contribute to disseminating their sports abroad and enhancing the overall performance levels of foreign countries where their respective sports were underdeveloped, as noted by Coach 4: "Among the factors I considered [for overseas migration], I was thinking of going to an area where the sport I am involved is not very active". These coaches may be seen as 'pioneers' in Maguire's (1996) typology – a type of migrants who go abroad to promote their sports internationally. However, for our coaches, such a pioneering spirit came off second-best. Rather, they prioritised seeking opportunities for exploring the sociocultural systems of the countries they considered more advanced. All our participants had held similar expectations of acquiring advanced knowledge and practice by working in

supposedly more developed countries. They particularly sought better-structured sport development systems and more liberal sporting environments than those available in their home nation where they grew up and trained as elite athletes (Kim et al., 2020).

For instance, Coach 4 “wanted to learn about the environment where dual career opportunities for elite athletes were possible” when encountering a news article detailing a European Olympian who successfully pursued careers as both an elite athlete and a professional medical doctor. This is because he “had originally wanted to study further during [his] athletic career, but couldn’t” as it was almost impossible within the former coercive elite sport setting of Korea (see Kim et al., 2020). Similarly, Coach 1 expressed his interest in the reportedly more modernised administrative practices in Western society:

I once heard that this [migrant] country had a very well-organised admin system in the sport, so I wondered what the system would look like. Although there’s no doubt Korea’s athletic performance has always been top-notch, I wanted to know more about the quality of this country’s system, regardless of the national team’s medal count. ... I’d like to work in an environment where my merits are genuinely recognised because I’m not really good at making Brownie points, which is important for coaches in my sport in Korea.

As suggested by Coach 1’s remark on ‘Brownie points’, the Korean coaches’ desire to work in the West is to some extent driven by their strong resistance or aversion to the coaching culture and practices in Korea. In describing their reasons for migrating to the Western countries, they commonly pointed to the authoritarian and conservative nature of the Korean sporting environment, citing issues, such as rigid hierarchy in coach-athlete and senior-junior relationships, challenges for athletes pursuing dual careers, inefficient administration, sectarianism and favouritism (see Chang et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020). Rather than remaining in what they perceived as a poor and antiquated setting of Korean elite

sports (Kim et al., 2020) and recycling the coaching practices that they had embodied since their athletic careers (Blackett et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2020), our coach participants hoped to leave the country and explore other environments that they deemed more advanced than their own. This sentiment is reflected in Coach 3's observation:

I didn't really like working [as a coach] in Korea ... I liked foreign cultures and staying outside of Korea as I didn't like the hierarchical senior-junior relationships and cliques. ... I wanted to coach my athletes in similar ways that foreign coaches did. I didn't like coaching my athletes in the same way that I had learned when I was an athlete. I believe that coaches should strive to coach in a more advanced manner. But, in my view, it was impossible to do that in Korea. There was nothing particularly worth learning. So, I thought it would be much better to learn new ways [of coaching] overseas.

As evidenced by the excerpt above, our coaches displayed a critical understanding of their social, cultural and historical situatedness which would inevitably shape their practices and knowledge in the path of development as coaches. They believed that working in new environments would enable them to challenge the Korean practices and, thus, help them renew themselves. This underscores the coaches' strong aspiration for transition in their coaching careers, which is further expounded upon in the subsequent section.

### **Agentic individuals capitalising on dual imbalances**

The coach participants' wish to depart from their native setting demonstrates their active *agency* – individual social actors' capacity to actively engage in assigning specific meanings to their experiences, make choices and adapt their behaviours based on their interpretations and social interactions (Scott, 2015). Through conversations with our coach participants, it

became apparent that they harboured a fear of perpetuating the entrenched, vicious cycle of conventional Korean approaches to elite sports coaching unless they leave their home nation and proactively expose themselves to entirely new environments. The coaches' decision to migrate was underpinned by their negative views and critical reflection on the sporting climate within their country of origin.

Our coaches' disengagement from their native setting contrasts with the existing discussions on coach transitions. Earlier work by Blackett et al. (2018, 2019) and McMahon et al. (2020) highlighted that coaches could uncritically endorse, recycle and reproduce the practices, norms and values they had acquired during their athletic careers when taking up high-performance coaching roles. Moreover, Kim and her colleagues (Kim & Dawson, 2022; Kim et al., 2020) identified that upon retiring, elite athletes in Korea tend to return to their "comfort zone" – the Korean elite sport setting in which they previously competed as athletes and then later transitioned to high-performance/elite coaching positions albeit reluctantly (Kim et al., 2020, p. 94), working with their like-situated fellows who share similar athletic experiences under the former state-led authoritarian sporting regime (Kim & Dawson, 2022). However, our coaches did not follow the typical pathway of coach transitions that many Korean coaches have chased. Instead, they actively exited from their 'comfort zone' and challenged the existing practices by pursuing new career paths.

In this respect, the coaches in this study can be conceptualised as a new type of coaches, namely *defectors*, which may emerge in authoritarian and hierarchical sporting environments like Korea (see Kim et al. 2020). These coaches' rejection of the prevailing sporting/coaching culture contrasts with the portrayal of passive, non-introspective and inertial tendencies among coaches discussed in other studies (Denison, 2010; Mills & Denison, 2013). Rather, our finding resonates with Blackett et al.'s (2021) claim that coaches have the capacity to reconfigure their coaching identities by renouncing emulation of former

coaches' coaching behaviours and pre-established sports club cultures. Our coaches sought to explore the new environments in which their situatedness could foster their personal as well as professional growth as better coaches. Therefore, they are active agents who navigate a way to enhance their practices and careers along the migration paths created by the global sporting arms race.

More importantly, our coaches' migration as part of their career development reveals the dual imbalances with which they manoeuvre within the global context of Olympic-related coach recruitment. As discussed earlier, the coaches migrated under the macro condition of 'performance imbalance' between their home and Western destinations – the very condition for migrant opportunities to arise for the coaches. However, they leveraged their own exchange-value ('performance capital') created by the performance imbalance, not only to narrow the perceived 'modernisation gap' in sporting and coaching culture that these coaches believed exists between their country of origin and targeted destinations, but also to strive to become the embodiment of the advanced practices in coaching, and thus, develop their 'overall coaching capital'. In other words, although it is the global sporting arms race and national governments and/or sports organisations that form the migration paths of elite Olympic sports coaches, equally powerful is these individuals' initiative to develop themselves and address another important imbalance in coaching practices. Therefore, we argue that these coaches are agentic individuals who are capable of using the structural conditions to mitigate what they consider as an issue and benefiting their own development as elite coaches.



## Conclusion

Drawing on literature concerning sports migration and intensified competitions for global sporting success, this paper has explored structural conditions and agentic decisions behind South Korean elite coaches' intercontinental mobility to Western countries. The findings have shown that the flow of our coaches' international relocation was governed by performance imbalance within the competitive landscape of international sports. NGBs and sports organisations imported Korean coaches to enhance their relatively lower performance levels in Olympic sports through social networks with and between Korean coaches. The coaches, on the other hand, appropriated the opportunities that arose from the performance imbalance, with strong aspirations for transition in their coaching careers. They decided to move specifically to Western nations in anticipation of addressing another imbalance in the coaching cultures and practices between their native and new countries, rejecting what they believed to be less modernised coaching practices and culture in their homeland.

The findings of this paper offer three main implications for research on international coach mobility and transitioning. Firstly, our analysis has uncovered a particular migration pattern of elite coaches, which significantly differs from what has been identified in the existing literature. Unlike key emigration indicators of elite coaches in previous studies, such as similar cultures, language-speaking abilities, higher sporting performance levels (Orlowski et al., 2018) and geographical proximity (Orlowski et al. 2016), our coaches relocated to new countries with weaker sporting performance, different cultures and languages and on different continents. These discrepancies could be attributed to the lack of research investigating: (1) untypical sporting migration pathways, such as those from East Asia to the West, apart from Tao et al.'s (2019) work; (2) foreign elite coach recruitment practices by sport federations particularly in Olympic sport; and (3) more importantly, individual coaches' agentic capacity in their international migration.

Secondly, the results have also conceptualised the very mechanism behind the Korean coaches' relocation to Western countries: dual imbalances that jointly drove the coaches' migration. It discussed the relative influence of the structural conditions that create the migration paths and individual agency that capitalises on the paths for their career development. Our analysis of coaches' manoeuvring with these two imbalances has underscored coaches' capabilities to navigate their career paths with a manifest agency. This finding contributes to the literature by challenging linear models of coach development (e.g., Erickson et al., 2007) and emphasising the more dynamic and complex nature of coaching career pathways (e.g., Blackett et al., 2018; Purdy & Potrac, 2016). Additionally, given our discussion on coaches' career transition in the macro context of the global sporting arms race, this study could add another empirical case to the growing body of literature on coach transitions in diverse contexts (e.g., Blackett et al., 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021; Chroni et al., 2021; Rynne, 2014).

Finally, our analysis of coach transitions from non-Western to Western nations may provide a promising avenue for future research exploring how coaches shape their practices in the course of transnational migration. Certain countries, such as Korea, have achieved top-level international sporting performances in some sporting disciplines through relatively harsh coaching methodologies that emphasise discipline and conformity (Kim et al., 2020). In contrast, many Western societies have increasingly prioritised athlete welfare, safeguarding and scientific evidence-based coaching methods, fostering more horizontal coach-athlete relationships (Brakenridge & Rhind, 2010; Lang, 2020). Future research would benefit from investigating transitions of coaches who have accumulated authoritarian values and practices within highly performance-oriented and state-controlled societies and subsequently moved to a more liberalised environment. These coaches' development and adaptation in a new

environment with more democratic norms, values and cultures could offer a valuable case with which to explore coaching transitions in action.

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