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Title: Do you have to walk it to talk it? The significance on an elite athletic career in becoming a high-performance coach in men's football and rugby union

Alexander D. Blackett, Ph.D.

Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent, UK

Introduction

Many high-performance sports coaches share a connecting theme with one and another: they each have a previous history as an elite athlete in their respective sport before becoming a coach (Chroni, Pettersen & Dieffenbach, 2020; Ewing, 2019; Mielke, 2007). Focussing on men's football across the UK for example, after having been elite players the likes of Pep Guardiola, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, Frank Lampard, Mikel Arteta, Neil Lennon and Steven Gerrard, to name a few, are all at the time of writing head coaches at some of the best and most prestigious professional teams. Similar trends are seen across men's rugby union within the English men's Premiership: Geordan Murphy, Rob Baxter, Mark McCall, Pat Lam, Stuart Hooper, amongst others, are all head coaches/directors of rugby after serving time as elite athletes. For many of these listed names, their playing careers also include representation at international level.

The trend of elite athlete to high-performance coach is widespread across men's team and individual sports, but also now frequently seen amongst women's sports too. Within tennis, former elite players are becoming coaches of current top players. Individuals such as Lindsay Davenport, Amieie Mauresmo and Kim Clijsters are matched by esteemed names from within the men's game like Andre Agassi, Boris Becker, Ivan Lendl, Goran Ivanešević and John McEnroe in becoming elite level coaches. Across many sports, there is a deep-rooted history for the athlete to coach pathway, one that has been socially reproduced throughout the twentieth century (Carter, 2006; Pawson, 1973; Taylor, Ward & Thatcher, 1997) and which seems to have come to prominence within the twenty-first century (Blackett, Evans & Piggott, 2017; Rynne, 2014). The pathway has become so established that it now reprises a taken-for-granted

assumption, one which has been uncritically accepted without empirical analyses (Ewing, 2019). This has culminated in the 'myth' that it is important to have been an elite athlete in order to be proficient as high-performance coach.

For aspiring coaches then, who do not and will not possess an elite playing career, the misconception of needing to have a competitive-athletic playing career has seemingly created a 'glass ceiling,' one which prevents them from accessing high-performance coaching roles on account of their lack of playing experience at an elite level. Anecdotally this has become very evident for me as a university lecturer in sports coaching over the past decade. A focal point of my role has been to educate and then support undergraduate students who hold aspirations to become effective and successful coaches at the elite levels of their respective sports. Yet, seldom few students do indeed attain their desired roles, particularly in the sports of men's football and rugby union. I stress the term *yet*, as I sincerely hope after hearing about my students' ambitions and helping them achieve their degrees that they are still pursuing these dreams and that they do indeed one day fulfil them as they continue to work towards these. Nonetheless, no matter how much I try to be as supportive as possible with my current and future students who share the desire to become head coaches of men's Premier League football teams or Premiership rugby union teams, as well as in other sports, based on my experiences, I am becoming ever more dubious that these are realistic ambitions if they have not been elite level athletes themselves. The myth of having been an elite athlete in order to be a high-performance coach seems to be a steadfast cornerstone of sporting dogma.

When I outline the research on high-performance coach development pathways to my students, emphasising the seemingly important need to become an elite player in order to successfully transition into elite level coaching, the names of José Mourinho, Arsène Wenger, Arrigo Sacchi and André Villas-Boas are readily given as examples that counter the myth. All four are notable

anomalies within football (although Mourinho and Wenger were indeed professional players themselves, albeit at a low level), yet unfortunately they are still exceptions to the rule in football and across other sports too. Two quotes are also regularly cited as a base to student rebuttals which have been respectively attributed to Sacchi and Mourinho: a) "You do not need to be horse to be a jockey" and; b) "You do not need to be a piano to be a pianist." Both statements seem logical and hard to argue with. Nevertheless, in the world of elite sport, sense and logic seem to be overridden by a mixture of tradition, sentiment and irrationalism as head coach appointments have been and continue to be largely the "exclusive preserve of former players" (Kelly, 2008, p. 410).

Fast-tracking: A contradiction to coaching professional standards?

At a time where the role of a coach is being advocated to become fully recognised as a profession, on par with teaching, medicine and law for example, the actions of national and international governing bodies of sport in accelerating the pathway between elite athlete and high-performance coach seem to contrast against the desired professional standards these governing bodies themselves have set. On account of their playing histories, current and former professional athletes at present are afforded the opportunity in many sports to circumvent entry level coaching qualifications. Instead, they can attend condensed higher coaching qualifications which can 'fast-track' their entry into coaching (Blackett et al., 2018; Rynne, 2014). The benefits of doing this are to clearly incentivise athletes to stay in the sport upon their athletic retirement, a particular benefit in mitigating against mental health issues associated with transitions out of sport (Park, Lavalley & Tod, 2013). For coach development scholars, however, the proliferation in accelerating coach education and offering more fast-tracking opportunities has been problematised on the basis for how coaching as whole may struggle to meet the requisite professional standards that it aspires toward.

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For example, McMahon, Zehntner, McGannon and Lang (2020) reported how one former Australian elite level swimmer was fast-tracked through formal coach education structures three months after their athletic retirement into a State level coaching post despite “missing four of the eight modules required for successful completion of the course” (p. 7). Through the research process, the coach reflected upon their experiences as an athlete and revealed how they had received psychological and physical abusive coaching practices. The coach continued to admit how they then went onto recycle these same practices in their own coaching. Through their own athletic career, these poor practices had become entrenched and unquestionably adopted (Benish, Langdon & Culp, 2020); a feature of their coaching which may have been highlighted and reflected upon had they not been fast-tracked through their coach accreditation. Indeed, four out of the eight modules where they were provided the concession of not needing to complete “all contained content relating to development of ethical coaching practice” (McMahon et al., 2020, p.8).

Given the recent disclosures made by elite gymnasts in the UK about abusive coaching practices (Roan, 2020), such potentially recycled toxic coaching practices are therefore not solely applicable to swimming. Therein the significance of how abusive practices and questionable coaching ideologies are uncritically adopted by all coaches, and not just former athletes who transition into sport, has received growing scholarly attention (see Wilinsky & McCabe, 2020). This emerging body of research has largely been set within post-positivist paradigms that analyse the socio-cultural contexts of sport and coach learning. Such analyses have reported on the significance of how the socio-cultural landscape in which athletes are positioned in prior to their coaching comes to serve as an ‘apprenticeship of observation’ which shapes their initial coach learning and future coaching practice (Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2003, p.217). As this chapter will continue to explore, this research has indicated how this

subconscious learning then implicitly informs future coaching behaviours where questionable coaching practices are sometimes enacted.

At this point I think it necessary to outline that there have been some exceptional coaches that do possess an athletic background who have advanced coaching methods and who are highly regarded as in having changed their sports for the better (e.g. Johann Cryuff, Pep Guardiola and Jurgen Klopp in football, as well as others in a variety of sports). Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that this does not always happen and that the transition from elite athlete to high-performance coach is not always a successful one. Irrespective of these failures, the trend of elite athletes fast-tracked into post-athletic high-performance coaching roles does not seem to be abating, rather increasing within senior environments and is also now regularly occurring within youth development contexts also (see Blackett et al., 2019). In turn, this has led onto the reinforcement of the myth being true of having to play to coach, which brings with it several potential concerns and contradictions for professionalising the role as well as advancing coaching practices for producing better players.

An empirical rationale for fast-tracking

Empirical research on the athlete to coach transition is an emergent one. Chroni et al. (2020) have identified this to arise within Norwegian winter sports along with McMahon et al. (2020) having reported on the potential negative consequences within Australian swimming. Moreover, Mielke (2007) reported that this pathway is also prevalent in Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA) and to a lesser extent within the National Football League (NFL). Blackett and colleagues (2017) have also empirically analysed the fast-tracked pathway phenomenon by different means after having sourced the perspectives and beliefs held by senior club board members of professional men's football and rugby union clubs on why they fast-tracked former athletes into head coaching roles of their respective

teams. The intention was to extend the coach-centric samples administered by extant research by collecting data from those in positions of power amongst the cultural field of elite sport and who played significant roles in perpetuating the fast-tracked pathway by sanctioning such appointments, offering insight into why the fast-tracking pathway may also exist in other sports.

Blackett et al. (2017) interviewed eight directors who had been central to the process of coach recruitment for their men's senior teams and had previously appointed 'fast-tracked' coaches. Unsurprisingly the results indicated club board members prioritised successful on-field performances and an improvement of results when recruiting new coaches. A latent theme underscoring their reasons for appointing fast-tracked coaches though was a desire for the directors to preserve and maintain their own power within the club by selecting coaches who would most likely continue to reproduce the club's culture. Doing this would safeguard the directors' positions within their clubs, as they would receive the approval of the fellow board members, sponsors, staff, players and spectators. Significantly, there was a perception that appointing a former competitive athlete would better enable the incoming coach to immediately earn the players' respect by socially reproducing the club culture in addition of demonstrating empathy and an overall shared understanding of what the players go through in competition. To illustrate this, one rugby director described being a player as having "to put your head in some dark places" meaning "the fact that you've been a player and come through that you then have that knowledge" to be empathetic but also being attuned to the technical and tactical elements of the game (as cited by Blackett et al., 2017, p. 753). Such sentiments reflected the value assigned by the directors on coaches having previously 'walked in the shoes of their players' and was a valuable resource for the incoming coach to draw upon in legitimising their authority and earn the players respect.

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The significance for coaches earning player respect was central to all directors' views on whether a coach would indeed be successful in achieving the necessary on field performance outcomes. As cited by Blackett et al. (2017, p. 750), another director explained what guided his recruitment processes:

What do I look for? I think that you've got to ask the players how and what they think of the guys, because ultimately they are the assets which you need to sweat. And if a player is not a player or players aren't reactive to the coaches, you can be the best coach in the world but if you can't resonate with that player then you make a choice, you can either get rid of them the player or you get rid of the coach.

In this regard the directors articulated a coach's prior competitive athletic background being the bedrock for developing coaching proficiency. Technical and tactical knowledge as well as the more tactile aspects of building cohesive and positive athlete relationships were judged to be best acquired from a competitive athletic history in comparison to formal coach education courses. As such, a recurring theme across the directors' views was the limited value attributed to governing body coaching courses, as illustrated in the following quotes (as cited by Blackett et al., 2017, p. 752):

They [qualifications] don't really stack up a lot of the time. There are a lot of guys who have got level three or four coaching certificates that can't coach you know. I employed a bloke who's done RFU (Rugby Football Union) coaching assessor, top of the food chain with all of the qualifications, even got a Welsh RFU senior coaches badge and I put him in front of our forwards because I needed a forwards coach and had to give him the bullet after two months... He just couldn't cope with it and the lads saw through him straight away.

...to me there is a difference between RFU level 27 coach or whatever it is and someone who has just raw personality to do the right thing at the right time, to put an arm around someone when it matters, to kick them up the arse when it matters... I'd far, far look at character... You are far better recruiting a type of character that is going to be a cultural fit to your club.

Instead of judging coaching candidates on the formal coach accreditation which they had received, the directors prioritised informal coaching knowledge that arose from their everyday experiences as an athlete. That is, there was an assumption that athletes' careers provided them with a coaching apprenticeship to absorb not only the technical and tactical knowledge

necessary for coaching efficacy but also the more culturally accepted dispositions for acquiring athlete respect. It is this fundamental belief, along with the ability to quickly earn athlete respect, as to why fast-tracking was preferred over appointing a coach without a competitive playing history. On this basis, there was an evident preference that incoming coaches had indeed been pianos and horses!

Clearly, this is counter to how the previously mentioned professionals within teaching, medicine and law, are assessed, judged and then appointed based on their accreditation and qualifications to perform in the roles. To put it bluntly, a medical surgeon is not appointed on the amount of time they have spent having been a patient and operated on. Unlike the directors, the assumption that the knowledge a patient has absorbed when introduced and consulted on concerning the operational procedures and underlying theory as to why the surgery is necessary, and how it will be administered, does not supersede the necessary formal qualifications. Patients that have been operated on by the best surgeons many times over cannot be fast-tracked through their surgical qualifications; they must attain the stipulated professional standards in order to be authorised and registered by the prevailing medical councils as surgeons. Indeed, such subjective recruitment processes in men's football and rugby illustrated how senior directors continued to resist the professionalisation of coaching by assigning playing experience and the knowledge that arises from the associated socialisation process more value over formal coach education (Kelly, 2008).

A conceptualisation of fast-tracking

To explain the theoretical and conceptual bases for coach behaviours and practices, Bourdieu's (1989, 1990) sociological framework has been increasingly used. Indeed, Bourdieu's inter-related concepts of *habitus*, *field*, *species of capital* and *practice* have all produced informative conceptualisations as to why coaches possess certain beliefs and why they implement their

coaching in the ways that they do. In this instance, Bourdieu's theoretical framework can shed light onto the underlying reasons as to why these club directors upheld these views and why the myth of needing to have been an athlete to become an effective elite coach persists.

Bourdieu placed significance on how applied actions of individuals (social agents), whether these actions be unconscious or subconscious, ultimately produce an 'output.' For Bourdieu, an 'output' was referred to as the concept of *practice*. All social agents therefore practice within a social world. Society is composed of multiple layered spaces known as *fields*. With Bourdieu emphasising society to be made of multiple fields means that there is a *delimited* composition to these fields. Social agents may simultaneously be positioned across multiple fields and there are other fields which agents are not associated to. For example, rugby union is a layered social space. A male rugby union player practices within the cultural space of rugby union but specifically they practice within the men's games and not the women's games. Indeed, the two versions of the game are delimited fields, as although they share cultural similarities, they have their own subcultures that make them distinct from each other (see Barrett, Sherwin & Blackett, 2021). Furthermore, within the delimited field of the men's game, each club creates their own subcultures that form further delimited fields. This becomes evident when considering how each club attempts to define their own individual identities and cultures against other clubs.

As indicated, within these fields, a collective of social agents then produce cultures that are based on accepted and legitimised traditions and values. These values are ingrained into the culture of each field, becoming over time uncritically accepted and which form the basis of an array of myths, such as the importance of having been an elite athlete for becoming an elite coach. The process for how these cultures and myths become logically accepted was conceptualised by Bourdieu (1990) as *doxa*.

When social agents, like athletes practicing within the delimited fields of their sports and clubs, they both consciously and unconsciously assimilate with the specific values of these fields.

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Over time, this assimilation becomes a subconscious form of 'knowledge' on how the field operates, the culturally accepted norms and expectations concerning the dispositions of how social agents practice within it. This subconscious knowledge becomes the guiding principles of each agent which is embodied to become ingrained in their everyday interactions. The tacit embodiment of these values then leads to the production of an individual's *habitus*, an implicit familiarity of knowing how to engage accordingly within these appropriate social fields. Bourdieu's (1989, p. 43) well cited explanation of the habitus helps situate how he defines its manifestation: 'when the habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself "as a fish in water", it does not feel the weight of water and takes the world about itself for granted.' The immediate adherence of the habitus and the continued embodiment in agent's social practice over time was termed as *hexis* by Bourdieu (1990).

When practicing within fields throughout their everyday lives, social agents seek acceptance and legitimacy. In so doing though, they compete for resources of power against other social agents. This process and effectiveness for power is dependent upon the accumulation of a variety of *species of capital*.

Capital was found by Blackett et al. (2017) as being an important concept for how the board members identified, profiled and then appointed coaches. Significant for board members were the species of cultural capital and symbolic capital. For example, board members preferred to recruit former athletes because this indicated that they had greater amounts of what Bourdieu termed as embodied cultural capital; an assumption that through socialisation as an athlete then the knowledge of the technical and tactical intricacies of playing the game (the 'feel of the game') at an elite level had been acquired and could be transferred into a coaching role. Institutionalised cultural capital, which represents educational qualifications such as NGB coaching certification, was in comparison devalued by the board members in comparison to the embodied cultural capital that was hierarchically valued. Indeed, the quotes cited

beforehand clearly indicate this, such as: "They [qualifications] don't really stack up a lot of the time..."

Objectified cultural capital in the form of tangible assets such as clothes, cars and artwork that indicate a coach's taste was not deemed significant in the recruitment process. Institutionalised social capital, however, was highly valued. A former elite athlete having been immersed in the field of elite sport meant there was a presumption that the incoming coach possessed lots of beneficially valuable social networks with important stakeholders like other coaches, players and their agents to help improve on-field team results. Furthermore, on the basis that former elite athletes could potentially perform sport specific skills in contrast to other coaches without an elite athletic background, meant that greater amounts of physical capital were attributed to former elite athletes too. This was seen to be beneficial in helping with coaching proficiency by allowing the coach to perform demonstrations that helped improve athletic performance onto the current players. Moreover, a coach able to perform the skills that they asked and expected their athletes to perform afforded physical capital to be transferred over to symbolic capital. For coaches without an elite athletic playing career then, this coaching attribute and form of capital was not necessarily a resource available to them. Again, the myth of needing to be a piano or a horse is perpetuated here.

Coach development pathways

Club attachment is a seemingly important issue when looking at coach development pathways. The club directors in Blackett and colleagues' (2017) work explained how they preferred to 'draw through' current and/or former players of their clubs into coaching roles. They prioritised prospective coaches who had previously represented their club over other candidates who had not. In such a light, this indicates the importance of not only the field's values being embodied by an incoming coach, but more significantly that the delimited values of the club's culture

would be embodied. To help with this process of developing a future coach's habitus and the subsequently embodiment of this (hexis), athletes who were identified as being prospective coaches of the senior teams were encouraged to gain more coaching experiences within the same club's youth academies alongside their playing careers. This is suggestive of what Cushion and Jones (2014, p. 277) argue as being the 'hidden curriculum' in coach education whereby much of a coach's learning is "covert and embedded within daily routine and practice," thus becoming part of a 'hidden curriculum.'

Echoing Cushion and Jones' (2014) analysis of the 'hidden curriculum,' after Blackett et al (2018, 2020) interviewed individuals who had begun to negotiate the career transition from elite athlete to high-performance coach, they were not able to recall how their respective clubs' values had shaped their coaching practice and importantly their emerging coaching philosophies. Sentiments were frequently recorded from the interviews that explained how going back to clubs they had previously represented as athletes to begin their coaching careers was appealing. As cited by Blackett et al (2018, p. 222), Roger was one recently retired rugby player who explained his thinking about where he would go to begin his post-athletic coaching career:

I'm going back to a team called (current semi-professional rugby football club 1). They are a team I played for when I was a kid and I stayed there until I was twenty four so I know quite a few people down there and I'm intending on going back down there next season because I need to do my level three [coaching qualification] and I think it's a good place to go and work.

This pathway of returning to a club which novice coaches had previously represented as an athlete is also seen when looking at recent appointments across football and rugby union. Novice coaches with a competitive playing background seldom go to clubs they have not played for when attaining their first post-athletic coaching role. For example, Steven Gerrard returned to Liverpool FC to begin his coaching career within their youth academy, as did Frank Lampard when beginning his post-athletic coaching career at Chelsea FC's youth academy.

Within rugby, Nick Evans and Adam Jones both retired from their playing careers at Harlequins FC and were 'drawn through' by the club immediately into coaching roles. There are many more examples, both within and away from football and rugby union, which further emphasise the importance of having some form of club attachment that aids the career transition into a post-athletic coaching role. Yet again, this also indicates the presence of the myth that it is important of needing to have been a former elite player in order to achieve a position as a high-performance head coach.

Practical implications and recommendations

Given the importance placed on the development of a coaching habitus that reflects the values and culture of a high-performance club, in addition to the accumulation of institutionalised social capital, embodied cultural capital and symbolic capital that form the basis of acceptance, legitimacy and respect for being seen as effective in the role, then the myth of needing to be an elite athlete prior to becoming a high-performance coach seems largely true. For aspirant coaches to accumulate these species of capital and to develop a coaching habitus that is commensurate with the club's culture so it can be socially reproduced like the directors wished, are all acquired from a competitive playing career in these sports. Accessing the 'hidden curriculum' to embody these culturally accepted norms and to be judged a candidate that can and will reproduce the club's culture in future coaching practices seems vital. Unfortunately, however, this imposes what can be considered as the metaphorical glass-ceiling that prevents aspirant coaches in these sports without a competitive playing career accessing high-performance coaching roles at the elite level. The issue is even more concerning for women trying to access elite coaching roles in men's sports. The glass-ceiling can even be considered as a concrete-ceiling for women on the basis that they are not able to access the valued species of capital and coaching habitus acquired from a playing career in the men's game (Norman, Rankin-Wright & Allison, 2018).

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Until more equitable and transparent coach recruitment processes are enacted at a structural level across elite sports, then it is hard for me and others to be less sceptical about the prospects of aspirant coaches without a competitive playing record being able to access these roles. For the time being, however, prospective coaches without a playing background gaining as much experience within elite club environments is important. Although this is easier said than done, accessing the 'hidden curriculum' and portraying a 'feel for the game' as Bourdieu describes, or at least an awareness of how each club's values are embodied in your own coaching habitus is important. This can help acquire the valued species of capital to be considered proficient for the role of high-performance coach within the men's sports of football and rugby union.

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