

Running head: READING JOHN GRISHAM'S *BLEACHERS* WITH FOUCAULT

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Reading John Grisham's *Bleachers* with Foucault: Lessons for sports retirement

Abstract

This paper explores how a sociological reading of John Grisham's (2003) short work of fiction *Bleachers* can shed light on the complexities of the coaching and sports retirement processes. The aim of this paper was to explore the "sociological insights" that *Bleachers* has to offer by reading the novel in companionship with the thoughts of French post-structuralist thinker Michel Foucault (1995), specifically his disciplinary analysis from *Discipline and Punish*. I have also observed how the figure of Coach Eddie Rake in *Bleachers* can be considered as trope for retired athletes' unresolved feelings towards their former sport. In achieving these aims, this paper has considered how *Bleachers*, when read through a sociological lens, can act as a meaningful data source for those invested in learning more about the poorly understood phenomena of sports retirement, as well as the dangers of coaching practices that are overly reliant upon the disciplinary logic of sport.

Keywords: sports fiction, discipline, docility, sports retirement, Foucault

Reading John Grisham's *Bleachers* with Foucault: Lessons for sports retirement

The following paper explores how a sociological reading of John Grisham's (2003) short work of fiction *Bleachers* can shed light on the complexities of sport and the coaching process. To achieve this agenda, the paper had two specific aims. Firstly, I considered how Grisham's main characters emphasise the connection between the social arrangement of sport and the sports retirement experience (Jones & Denison, 2017). Secondly, I show how the athletes' emotional responses to the death of Coach Eddie Rake within *Bleachers* should be considered as trope for retired athletes' unresolved feelings towards their former sport.

In the first section, '*The sports novel and sociological analysis*', I introduce the potentialities of sports novels as sources of data, as well as introducing the theoretical framework adopted for the current paper. In the second section, '*The main characters of Bleachers*', I present Grisham's depictions of the book's main characters that are relevant to my thesis. In the third section, '*Reading Bleachers with Foucault*', I include a sociological analysis/commentary of the aforementioned main characters in the book. As with my previous work on sports retirement (Jones, 2013; Jones & Denison, 2017; Jones, 2018), throughout this article I draw upon the disciplinary analysis of French post-structuralist thinker Michel Foucault (1995). Specifically, I concentrate upon how the imposition of discipline connected to Rake's approach (a) renders Neely and the American High School Football team players as "docile footballing bodies" and (b) the impact that this process has upon their lives after football. In the final section, '*Eddie Rake's depiction as trope for retired athletes' relationships with sport*', I surmise that *Bleachers*, as a whole, and specifically the representation of Head Coach Eddie Rake, can be read as a symbolic of an elite athlete's challenging reconciliation with their previous sporting role.

Bleachers

Published in 2003 to a mixed reception from literary critics, *Bleachers* is set in the southern United States and is a story based around the impending death, passing, and funeral service of Coach Eddie Rake, the long-serving and celebrated American football coach of the Messina High School Spartans (bleachers is the North American term for stadium seating). The protagonist for the story is former Spartan quarterback Neely Crenshaw, a maverick once destined for the big leagues before suffering a career-ending knee injury during his sophomore year (second year of college). *Bleachers* is chiefly told through Neely's eyes and centres around his reconciliation with his sporting past and his difficult relationship with Coach Eddie Rake. Throughout the novel, Grisham reveals to the reader key interactions, moments, and events that occurred between Coach Eddie Rake and his teams and players. These include, but are not limited to, the death from heat exhaustion during pre-season training of one Scotty Reardon and the infamous and victorious 1987 championship game against East Pike (during which tempers boiled over and Coach Rake struck Neely across the face during a heated half-time locker room altercation). *Bleachers* flows towards a conclusion at Rake's memorial service and at the novel's culmination, the reader sees Neely delivering a cathartic and emotional eulogy. *Bleachers* is 163 pages long and its chapters are split up into the four days leading up to, and including, Coach Eddie Rake's memorial service (*Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday*).

The Sports Novel and Sociological Analysis

Bairner (2015) has suggested that, when read sociologically, the accomplished sports novel should be recognized as a legitimate source of data for sports researchers. Furthermore, Oriad explained:

Sports fiction offers the opportunities to explore some of the most fundamental values and contradictions in our culture...ideas about failure and success, individualism and

co-operation, fame and obscurity, youth and aging, brutality and beauty, control and freedom...are crystallized in sport in such a way as to give the novelist an entry into discussing much that is fundamental to culture. (Oriad, 1983, pp. 13)

It is clear that an argument can be made for the sports novel as a means of relaying certain truths about sport and life through fictional representation. Sports fiction should therefore be considered as fertile ground from which the understanding of many of the social aspects of sport might be enhanced. Therefore, in the current article I suggest that *Bleachers*, when read through a sociological (in this case, Foucauldian) lens, should also be considered an acceptable data source with which to better understand the sports retirement process. I suggest that, in doing so, this paper can contribute to the critical debate surrounding how fiction might act as a data source to exemplify elements of sports theorising, and to foster discussion and dialogue between works of contemporary fiction and aspects of sports coaching. In what follows, I explore the “sociological insights” that *Bleachers* has to offer (Bairner, 2015), and exemplify them using certain “sociological concepts”, namely the thoughts of French post-structuralist thinker Michel Foucault (1995), and specifically his disciplinary analysis from *Discipline and Punish*.

A Word On Michel Foucault

For Foucault (1995), in the transition to modern society, the body became both the object and target of power. Central to the functioning of this power was an integrated system of control designed to ‘make useful individuals’. To explain this transformation of the individual, Foucault (1995) provided four specific techniques, or ‘disciplines’. These four techniques were: the *art of distributions* that involved how bodies were managed and used in spaces; the *control of activity* that involved how bodies were shaped by time in these spaces; the *organization of genesis* that involved the way specific bodily practices were categorised and grouped; and the *composition of forces* that involved the way bodies were brought

together to function as a machine. Importantly, for Foucault, these techniques worked together to exert their influence over the body alongside three specific instruments: *hierarchical observation, normalising judgment* and *the examination*. Foucault observed that the collective power of these techniques and instruments to assure the body's subjection, to render a body docile. Foucault's (1995) analysis of the making of docile bodies was built upon his understanding of *panopticism*; a concept he derived from the architect Jeremy Bentham's design of a prison complex, engineered to maximise the efficient workings of power over inmates. According to Foucault, "the panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately... assuring the efficient and automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). Foucault was able to show how in large social institutions where disciplinary regimes are prevalent (like sports teams), individuals can easily be transformed into cogs in a system where interaction, learning and personal growth are subservient to large-scale production (performance outputs).

Foucault's (1995) disciplinary analysis has been utilised to explain how the physical environments and relationships commonly found within elite sport are intentionally choreographed to discipline athletes (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Foucault's analysis of discipline has also been useful to identify how a sporting individual becomes a 'docile body' because of his/her exposure to disciplinary power (Denison, 2007) – that is a body that can "be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1995, p. 136). This occurs via the individual's exposure to various techniques and instruments of discipline within an intentionally cordoned and hierarchically ordered sports context (Jones & Toner, 2016). Importantly, Foucauldian scholars all point to the potential pitfalls for athletes associated with becoming a docile athletic body, including the implications for retired athletes (Jones & Denison, 2017). Indeed, a small collection of sports retirement studies have suggested that using Foucault might lead to "more sophisticated thinking" (Hickey & Kelley, 2008, p. 491)

about how to understand the fortunes of athletes after they leave their sport (Crockett, 2014; Hickey & Kelley, 2008; McMahon, Dinan-Thompson, & Penney, 2012). This contemporary research into sports retirement has suggested that it is the process of becoming docile as an athlete that dictates how an athlete experiences their future retirement.

The main characters of *Bleachers*

Coach Eddie Rake

Two major incidents are central to the character development of Coach Eddie Rake in *Bleachers*. The first is the death of Scotty Reardon. Scotty Reardon was a fifteen year-old Spartan who collapsed during one of Rake's particularly brutal conditioning sessions on an excessively hot day. Scotty's death was the catalyst for Rake losing his job as Head Coach of the Spartans. The second incident centres around Rake striking Neely Crenshaw across the face during the 1987 championship game. With the Spartans trailing 31-0 at half time, in a fit of rage, Rake struck Neely across the face in a locker room altercation, whereupon the team locked the coaching staff out of the changing room. The team re-appeared without the coaching staff present and proceeded to storm to a dramatic victory that the reader is made privy to through dramatic archived radio coverage (see *Wednesday*).

Throughout *Bleachers*, it is clear that Grisham wants the reader to know that Rake was a great example of a "typical" coach of his generation and context. Rake is celebrated because of his ability to win and to lead his team without reproach. Rake is portrayed as an individual who achieved these ends through the domination and intimidation of his athletes. In doing so, it is clear that Rake attempts to procure and sustain a certain type of coach-athlete relationship, one typified by authoritarian, excessively disciplinary and aggressive coaching practices and relationships. The following excerpt from the book outlines Grisham's illustration of a "great" coach in Eddie Rake:

Greatness comes along so rarely that when we see it we want to touch it. Eddie Rake allowed us, players, and fans, to touch greatness, to be part of it. He was a great coach who built a great program and a great tradition and gave us all something great, something we will always cherish...Whether you loved Eddie Rake or you didn't, you cannot deny his greatness. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 150)

Throughout the novel, various examples point to Rake's reputation for intensity and his militant approach to the preparation of his players. In one instance, we are told of Rake rushing into an eighth grade locker room to "deliver a harsh postgame lecture on Spartan pride" (Grisham, 2003, p. 74). Here, Grisham tells the reader that Rake "terrorized a bunch of thirteen year olds" (p. 74) and immediately replaced their coach. It was not only verbal intimidation that epitomised Rake's character, but also physical confrontation, as this excerpt details:

Rake relished physical contact with his players, but not the slap on the back for a job well done. Rake liked to hit, and no practice session was complete until he angrily threw down his clipboard and grabbed someone by the shoulder pads...Every Messina player had seen Rake, on a particularly bad day, throw his body at a running back and take him down with a vicious hit. He loved the violence of football and demanded it from every player. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 22)

Not only did Rake install fear through his physical contact with his players, he also devised punishing coaching practices designed to strike fear in his players, for example, the 'Spartan Marathon'. Each preseason, at the height of summer, all Spartans were required to run a minimum of twelve laps of the field, with Rake prowling and barking at them throughout. In addition, Rake's default response to losing was to ramp up the physically punishing practice routines, for example after one particularly unsatisfactory season he "ran his players like dogs all summer" (p. 40). Rake's approach also focused on the glamourisation of the endurance

and management of pain – “Rake loved stories of players who refused to leave the field with broken bones and bleeding flesh and all sorts of gruesome injuries” (Grisham, 2003, p. 38).

The reader is left in no uncertain terms. This was a disciplinarian, a stoic man of his time, and a man worshipped by the Messina faithful for delivering glorious victories that put the town on the map.

Neely Crenshaw

In *Tuesday*, we are given clues as to how Neely's identity as Messina's all-American hero developed. Grisham begins by establishing how Neely's strong athletic football identity has been formed as a consequence of his cultural context and performing under the watchful eye of Coach Eddie Rake:

And they remembered stories. One that was now a legend in Messina was, of course, about Rake. Neely, Paul, and a handful of their buddies were playing a rowdy game of sandlot football when they noticed a man standing in the distance, near the backstop of the baseball field; watching them closely. When they finished, he ventured over and introduced himself as Coach Rake. The boys were speechless.

“You have a nice arm, son,” he said to Neely, who could say nothing in response. “I like your feet too”. All the boys looked at Neely's feet.

“Is your mother as tall as your father?” Coach Rake asked.

“Almost,” Neely managed to say.

“Good. You'll make a great Spartan quarterback.” Rake smiled at the boys, then walked away.

Neely was eleven years old at the time. (Grisham 2003, pp. 51)

The reader is also made privy to Neely's struggle to negotiate his life after his football career ended, including the painful memories he associates with this difficult transition. As the chapter opens, Neely returns to Rake Field in the late autumn afternoon. As he is confronted

with the scene of his past glories, the memories “come roaring back as he knew they would” (Grisham 2003, p. 2), and all his thoughts were “weighted heavily with sounds and images of another life” (p. 3). Here, Grisham describes Neely as “a forgotten star who faded so quickly” (p. 6). Being physically present at the scene of his many triumphs induces a painful nostalgia in Neely that he tries to block out – “those days were long gone, he told himself for the hundredth time. Long gone” (p. 6). The reader is also made aware of Neely’s desire to remain anonymous and not to discuss his football experiences, including not to be spotted by those practicing, or noticed in the town’s coffee shop. Combined, these depictions of Neely paint a clear picture that this is a man ill at ease with his former athletic self. Furthermore, as someone who is still clearly conflicted and uncomfortable with many aspects of an unresolved past.

The next scene in *Tuesday* sees Neely meet up with his former teammate Paul Curry at Rake Field. As the old friends catch up they are joined by other players and shoot the breeze high in the bleachers of Rake field. At times their conversation sheds some light on Neely’s difficulty adapting to life after football. Curry chastises Neely telling him he is “still living back then, still dreaming, still the All-American quarterback” (Grisham 2003, p. 10), and reminds him:

You win and win and you’re the king of your own little world, then poof, its gone. You play your last game and everybody cries. You can’t believe it’s over. Then another team comes right behind you and you’re forgotten...it was wonderful. Then it hurts like hell because it was over, our glory days gone in a flash. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 11)

As the players leave the field late on Tuesday night, we are left with a poignant insight into the psyche of a former athlete. Neely’s knee is stiff from sitting for a long time and he attempts to hide any indication that he was “anything less than what they remembered”

(Grisham, 2003, p. 42). As *Tuesday* concludes, Grisham leaves the reader with no doubt that Neely still harbours significant regrets about how his football career ended, and importantly, that he has not fully come to terms with his experiences from “a long time ago. In another life” (Grisham, 2003, p. 62).

In *Thursday*, the reader finds Neely inviting himself to ex-girlfriend Cameron's house to apologise for a historic misdemeanour. In a prickly conversation, Cameron enquires about Neely's experience of losing his iconic footballing status:

“So you became just a regular person, like the rest of us?”

“I guess, but with a lot of baggage. Being a forgotten hero is not easy.”

“And you're still adjusting?”

“When you're famous at eighteen, you spend the rest of your life fading away. You dream of the glory days, but you know they are gone forever. I wish I'd never seen a football.”

“I don't believe that.”

“I'd be a regular guy with two good legs. And I wouldn't have made the mistake with you.” (Grisham, 2003, pp. 129).

It is clear from this interaction that Grisham wants to reiterate to the reader that Neely has experienced a diminished sense of self in his post-career state, and that he acknowledges his football experiences as negatively influencing his relational capacity. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Neely's desire to have “never seen a football” is one that has been reported in non-fictional retired athletes from other sports (Jones, 2013).

Another theme central to *Bleachers* are the coach-athlete relationships that Neely and the other Spartans had with Coach Eddie Rake. The reader is frequently shown how, through their relationships with Rake, Neely and the Spartans' football indoctrination began early, that included knowing Rake's strategies and tactics:

Rake had us in uniforms when we were in sixth grade... We played Tuesday nights and drew more fans than most high schools. We learned the same plays Rake was calling on Friday night. The same system. We dreamed of being Spartans and playing before ten thousand fanatics. By the ninth grade, Rake himself was supervising our practices and we knew all forty plays in his book. Knew them in our sleep. (Grisham 2003, pp. 10)

From their first meeting during sandlot football, until their last, where Neely is laid up post-op in a hospital bed, the novel revolves around the central role that Coach Rake played in Neely Crenshaw's life. In *Friday*, as Neely composes himself ahead of the memorial service for Rake, Grisham provides an insight into Neely's complicated relationship with Rake in a lengthy section composed of two parts:

Rare is the Coach who can motivate players to spend their lives seeking his approval. From the time Neely first put on a uniform in the sixth grade, he wanted Rake's attention. And in the next six years, with every pass he threw, every drill he ran, every play he memorized, every weight he lifted, every hour he spent sweating, every pre-game speech he gave, every touchdown he scored, every game he won, every temptation he resisted, every honor role he made, he coveted Eddie Rake's approval. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 144).

Here, Grisham describes Rake as an omnipotent presence in Neely's upbringing and development. Grisham also goes on to characterise the daily routine of an elite athlete rather well, including how, for Neely, as for most elite-level sportspersons, the inescapable gaze of the coaching staff (or in this case, Eddie Rake) is constant. We are clearly meant to understand that this coach-athlete relationship, and the associated expectations, were, for Neely, unceasing, and their effects long-lasting:

And rare is the coach whom compounds every failure long after the playing days are over. When the doctors told Neely he would never play again, he felt he had fallen short of Rake's ambitions for him. When his marriage dissolved, he could almost see Rake's disapproving scowl. As his small-time real estate career drifted with no clear ambition, he knew Rake would have a lecture if he got close enough to hear. Maybe his death would kill the demon that dogged him, but he had his doubts. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 144)

Later, during the eulogy that he has been invited to deliver at Rake's memorial, Neely explains how Coach Rake attempted to apologise for striking him and to comfort him during his recuperation after his knee surgery. It is clear that Neely acknowledges Rake's concern for his welfare, but of particular relevance to this paper's position is his explanation of the consequences of having known Rake as a coach, neatly summed up in the conclusion of his eulogy:

Once you have played for Eddie Rake, you carry him with you forever. You hear his voice, you see his face, you long for his smile of approval, you remember his tongue-lashings and lectures. With each success in life you want Rake to know about it. And you want to thank him for teaching your success is not an accident. And with each failure, you want to apologize because he did not teach us to fail. He refused to accept failure. You want his advice on how to overcome it. At times you get tired of carrying Coach Rake around. You want to be able to screw up and not hear him bark. You want to slide and maybe cut a corner without hearing his whistle. Then the voice will tell you to pick yourself up, to set a goal, work harder than everybody else, stick to the basics, execute perfectly, be confident, be brave, and never, never quit. The voice is never far away. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 158-159)

Although, for the most part, *Bleachers* questions the residual effects of Rake's supervision upon Neely's life, Grisham makes it clear that Neely is not the only Spartan Rake influenced indelibly. At various junctures throughout *Bleachers*, Grisham reveals how Rake has touched the lives of several other former Spartan American Football players.

Nat Sawyer

Nat Sawyer, the openly gay coffee shop owner, is a pivotal figure in *Bleachers* and it is through his reflections that Grisham attempts to generate a certain amount of pathos for Coach Eddie Rake. However, we also learn how Nat's coach-athlete relationship with Eddie Rake was also typified by aggression, intimidation, and discipline. The reader also learns that the intensity of this relationship continued to influence Nat long after he finished playing football at Messina High:

How can you not miss Rake once you played for him? I see his face every day. I hear his voice. I can smell him sweating. I can feel him hitting me, with no pads on. I can imitate his growl, his grumbling, his bitching. I remember his stories, his speeches, his lessons. I remember all forty plays and all thirty-eight games when I wore the jersey. My father died four years ago and I loved him dearly, but, and this is hard to say, he had less influence on me than Eddie Rake. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 65)

Jesse Trapp and Sheriff Mal Brown

In *Thursday*, the reader is taken on a long car journey as Neely Crenshaw, Paul Curry and Sheriff Mal Brown (all former Spartans) travel to the county jail to visit another former Spartan, Jesse Trapp. Although Jesse is incarcerated, we learn that what has hurt him the most is knowing that he "had failed in Rake's eyes" (Grisham, 2003, p. 121). The reader also hears about Mal Brown's interactions with Rake, including how Rake's methods shaped him in his life after high school and, specifically, an encounter with the Viet Cong during a tour of Vietnam. Pinned down under a boat by enemy fire Mal explained:

You know what saved me? Rake. When I was hangin' on for my life, under that boat, I didn't think about my momma or my dad or my girlfriend, I thought about Rake. I could hear him barkin' at us at the end of practice when we were running sprints. I remember his locker room speeches. Never quit, never quit...I finally got hit in the leg. Left hamstring. I never felt so much pain, like a hot knife, but Rake expected us to play hurt, so I told myself Rake was watchin'. Rake was up there somewhere on the side of the river, watchin' to see how tough I was. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 108)

By presenting these anecdotes, Grisham makes clear the far-reaching and long-term impact of entering into a coach-athlete relationship with Coach Eddie Rake. Importantly, for the line of argument developed in the present paper, these insights show how Rake's omnipotent influence has extended beyond the football field into other areas of several of these men's lives.

Reading *Bleachers* with Foucault

Drawing upon Foucault, Mills and Denison (2013) have identified that according to conventional thinking, the more coaches can control athletes' training, the more likely they are to be successful. However, these authors also explained how there are numerous limiting unintended consequences brought on by coaches' attempts to control and coerce their athletes. When reliant upon a controlling logic enacted in order to produce obedient athletes, "coaches don't just have to exercise overt control, they *always* have to exert overt control over their athletes to be considered effective" (p. 146). In the depiction of Coach Rake throughout *Bleachers*, we see a man who wholeheartedly adheres to sport's conventional 'disciplinary logic' of control (Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2015). We see a man obsessed by controlling every single aspect of the Spartan program from start to finish. An effect of this for Rake was that any poor performance from a Spartan was an indication of individual inadequacy, a lack of commitment or weakness, rather than a flaw in his coaching methods.

This belief legitimised Rake's continued reliance upon an authoritarian approach to his job. It is clear that Rake's adherence to this coaching philosophy led to the Spartans experiencing an arrangement rife with disciplinary power and ripe for the subsequent fabrication of what Foucault (1995) would call 'docile bodies'.

Spartans as "Docile Footballing Bodies" Under Rake

Foucauldian analyses that have been undertaken in relation to 'real-life' coaching contexts have proven helpful in identifying the limiting effects of historical coaching attitudes and practices based on eliciting control via the imposition of discipline (Denison, Mills, & Jones, 2013; Mills & Denison, 2013). I suggest that Foucault's analysis is also a helpful tool to explore the fictional representations and literary devices employed by Grisham in *Bleachers*. In this story, Neely and his Spartan teammates are rendered "docile Spartans" via their exposure to what Foucault (1995) would call "techniques of discipline" in their immediate football setting (choreographed by Coach Eddie Rake). I suggest that it is also helpful to consider these techniques as being mobilised by Rake's supervision (what one could call Rake's use of Foucault's (1995) "instruments of discipline").

Throughout *Bleachers*, we are regularly reminded of the hallowed space of Rake Field and its imposing, rising bleachers. In these spaces, where the Spartans were regularly intentionally distributed for exercise, their conduct and outputs were easily and constantly assessable. The Spartans' bodies could easily be judged and their merits calculated by Rake, mirroring Foucault's first technique of discipline – the "arts of distribution". We are also told that, as a bare minimum, Rake expected the Spartans to religiously engage in physical exercises activities over the years such as, throwing passes, running drills, memorizing plays, and lifting weights. We are also shown that these exercises were always intentionally graduated and militantly time-tabled, for example, as they became increasingly able as junior high players, the Spartans would learn the same plays as the senior team. This prescribed,

controlled, and timetabled activity is a good example of Foucault's second technique, the "control of activity", and as the activities were intentionally graduated by Rake to follow an "analytical plan" (Foucault, 1995, p. 158) towards increasing complexity, this fits nicely with Foucault's third technique of discipline, the "organization of geneses". For Rake, the outcome of the Spartans machine was the be all and end all, and we can see how his attitude to the football team meant that each Spartan was conceived as a part of a "multi-segmentary machine". This depiction can be read as Rake orchestrating discipline using what Foucault, in his fourth technique of discipline, called "the composition of forces".

Not only does Grisham tell us that the Spartans were expected to engage in these clearly disciplinary practices, but importantly, they were expected to do so under Rake's constant gaze – his "microscope of conduct" (Foucault, 1995, p. 173). Rake's surveillance, his "hierarchical observation" of the Spartans, repeatedly comes through as a key factor in the book. It is made abundantly clear throughout that Neely and his Spartan teammates were aware of Rake's omnipotent presence – from his watching them closely during a game of sandlot football as eleven year olds, to his supervision of their ninth grade practices, all the way to him glaring from the touchline in the dying embers of the second half of the 1987 championship game. Foucault might call this Rake's "uninterrupted, constant coercion and supervision of the processes of the activity" (Foucault 1995, p. 137). This supervision was most clearly evident in Grisham's description of the dreaded 'Spartan Marathon'. In this physical "examination" Rake would set a minimum number of laps (12) and the boys would be exercising alone in a group (Markula & Pringle, 2006), while the surveillance and denigration imposed upon them by the prowling Rake acted as a "specific mechanism in the imposition of disciplinary power" (Foucault, 1995, p. 175). Spartans would become "objects of knowledge" (Heikkala, 1993, p. 401), and Rake publicly collected their outputs, their "personal knowledge" and their marathon achievements would be compared to the normative

values of the achievements of previous year groups. This “highly ritualised” public examination made it possible for Rake “to qualify, to classify, and to punish” (Foucault, 1995, p. 184) the Spartans and to sustain the normalising gaze of the football context.

“Docile Spartans” Post Football Experiences

“Once you have played for Eddie Rake you carry him with you forever”. (Grisham, 2003, p. 158)

Research that has entertained the experiences of retired elite athletes has begun to move beyond sports psychology’s traditional analysis of an athlete’s coping abilities and adaptability. Instead, contemporary socio-cultural readings of sports retirement emphasise that understanding the origins and implications of docility accrued during a sports career should be the focus when attempting to grasp an athlete’s post-sport experience (Jones & Denison, 2017). This includes contemplating that the athlete may struggle with, or be unable to shed the effects of his or her career accrued docility in retirement (Jones, 2018). For example, when athletes (much like Neely) are exposed to an arrangement characterised by the fervent imposition of discipline (such as that orchestrated by Coach Eddie Rake), they often find it hard to adapt to alternative spaces typified with alternative relations of power (Jones & Denison, 2017). For example, take the multiple examples of Neely’s inability to adjust to new circumstances after his football. Rather than reading these travails as a deficit in Neely’s ability to cope or adapt (as sports psychology literature might suggest), a socio-cultural reading purports that these experiences could be attributed to Neely struggling to function because he finds himself in an alternative space governed by less overtly disciplinary relations of power. In short, Neely finds himself in a context with new social rules with which he is unfamiliar, and due to the life he has lived up to this point, ill-equipped to negotiate.

Elite athletes exposed to lengthy periods of intense discipline have been observed as continuing to supervise themselves despite no longer remaining in their localized sporting

space. While for some this affords several apparent benefits, including an ability to continue to exercise extensively as they did during their careers, it can also leave athletes feeling unable to 'escape' their previous roles, or to move on into alternative versions of themselves (Jones, 2018). Considered in this light, Neely's feelings towards Rake are understandable. While, Rake's omnipresent gaze allowed Neely to achieve his champion status, it has also clearly had long reaching and limiting effects in the many years since. Neely has clearly struggled to relinquish the tentacles of Rake's influence as he too continues to covet his approval in all that he does – he seems “to carry him with him forever” (Grisham, 2003, p. 158). In discussing the long-term influence of Rake, Grisham does a good job of highlighting the paradoxical, simultaneously productive and limiting effects of discipline. For example, like his team-mates and fellow mourners at Rake's funeral, Neely acknowledges that Rake's gaze continues to help him to set high standards. For example, Nat Sawyer and Mal Brown also make reference to the legacy of their interactions with their coach:

I see his face every day. I hear his voice. I can smell him sweating...I remember his stories, his speeches, his lessons. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 65)

Rake was up there somewhere on the side of the river, watchin' to see how tough I was. (Grisham, 2003, pp. 108)

However, while Grisham clearly wants the reader to acknowledge the productive aspects of the discipline that Rake has inculcated within his players, importantly for the argument being made here, he also paints a picture that emphasizes the negative aspects of Rake's far-reaching influence. For example, Neely has a real desire to be free from Rake's clutches and to be able to “screw up and not hear him bark” (Grisham 2003, p. 159). And, despite Rake's echo helping him in some areas of his life, the eternal pressure of Rake's voice on his shoulder means that Neely remains forever haunted where his every failure is compounded “long after his playing days were over” (p. 144).

Foucault's (1995) use of Bentham's panopticon is a useful tool to understand what is happening to Neely and the Spartans. Where "the omnipresent gaze of authority subsequently disciplines the subjects to survey their own behaviours in a manner that renders them docile: they become their own supervisors" (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 43). According to Foucault (1995, p. 200), the prime effect of the panopticon was to induce a "state of permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power". The key point presented here is that Neely and the Spartans fictional confessions nicely highlight the permanence of Rake's visibility, despite him not physically being present in their lives – exposing the function and longer-term effects of the discipline imposed by Rake's supervision from the early days in the sandlot until the peak of their Spartan careers. In addition, these confessions reveal that the poignant effects of a normalising, omnipresent gaze do not simply cease once the mechanism of power (in this case Rake and his regime) is removed. Neely and the Spartans inability to shake the influence of Rake's watchful eye demonstrates that, for the once heavily immersed retired athlete, the residue of docility, and the associated pressures, continue to remain (Jones, 2018).

I conclude this section by suggesting that the verisimilitude of Neely and the Spartan's tribulations can shed some valuable light on the complexities of former athletes' relationships with their sports. I suggest that the fictional exaggeration allowed within *Bleachers* reveals how the constant control and supervision typical of authoritarian coach-athlete relationships, as well as their associated training practices, have a detrimental influence upon how former athletes experience retirement. To summarise, Neely and the Spartans' challenging experiences after football can be categorized as a result of a 'docile footballing body' (Jones & Denison, 2017) being removed from a localized disciplinary space typified by a panoptic arrangement of surveillance (Lang, 2010).

Coach Eddie Rake's Depiction as Trope for Retired Athletes' Orientation Towards Their Former Sport

In this section, I suggest that *Bleachers* acts as a symbolic tale for how retired sportspeople negotiate the relationship they have with their old sport. Although the novel itself is not written in the metaphorical mode, but rather more as metonymic, as a 'slice of life' (Lodge, 1977), through repeated reference to belonging, violence, and loss, this tale sensitively attempts to symbolise the push-me-pull-you post-sport experience. Here, I argue that Neely's love/hate relationship with the figure of Eddie Rake symbolises the conflicting emotions that former athletes experience in relation to their former sports. In other words, that Neely's complex and paradoxical feelings towards Coach Eddie Rake should be read as trope for a retired sportsperson's attempts at reconciliation with their former sport. Neely clearly misses Rake and his football days; "suddenly he longed for those days" (Grisham 2003, p. 49). However, he is also consumed with contempt and regret because of the way that Rake and the sport of football treated him as outlined when said, "I wish I'd never seen a football" (Grisham, 2003, p. 129). I purport that in *Bleachers*, Rake's character symbolises the bittersweet and fickle nature of sport, and Neely's character symbolises the loss and confusion that is often reported in retired athletes' lives (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Jones & Denison, 2017).

Coach Eddie Rake's ability to win and his commitment to dedication characterise the mythicised inherent goodness of sport – where hard work is ultimately rewarded with success and victory (Eitzen, 2016). In juxtaposition, his consistent proclivity for violent acts (including his physical attack and betrayal of Neely during the 1987 championship game), simultaneously serves to symbolise the inherent jeopardy of sport. Much like the sport of American football, Rake personifies a prowling creature bubbling with the imminent potential for violence. Importantly, in *Bleachers*, Rake, (and by extension the sport of

American football) are for so long Neely's source of stability and belonging, and acts as the symbolic figurehead of his emotional and physical damage and betrayal. Additionally, Rake's stewardship of the Spartans exposes that while sport is a social phenomenon that can sustain and provide a deep sense of belonging, Rake's consistent violence and ultimate loss of control also exposes the dangerous undercurrent common to elite sport. Coach Eddie Rake then, is a poignant symbol; what Eitzen (2016) has called the 'paradox of sport'. I argue, therefore, that Grisham's intention is to use this symbolic technique to demythologise sport to some extent, and I commend him for that. By depicting Rake's character in this manner, he points towards the need to recognise that instead of exclusively viewing sport as a mythical social phenomena destined to make young boys into men, it should be viewed critically and with caution as simultaneously both 'fair and foul' (Eitzen, 2016).

Throughout *Bleachers*, loss surrounds Neely Crenshaw. Neely loses his physical prowess through his knee injury and we are left in no doubt that his athletic identity is ruptured and his bright future stolen because of this destructive event. Later, we learn of Neely's further painful losses in relation to his business failures, his self-destructive management of his relationship with high-school sweetheart Cameron, his divorce with his wife, the loss of his unborn children through abortion and miscarriage, and most relevantly, the breakdown of his relationship with Rake. I suggest that all these combined losses, and in particular the abrupt violence of Neely's altercation and subsequent fissure in relations with Rake, act to symbolise the equally abrupt experience that athletes often face when coming to terms with life after sport. It is possible to argue therefore that Neely's multiple losses and relationship with Coach Eddie Rake in *Bleachers* act as a metaphor for the well-reported challenges all retired athletes endure when coming to terms with their enforced re-orientation to their sport (Brewer et al., 1993). Embler (1953, p. 8) has suggested the merits of modern storytelling surround its ability to describe the "great inner conflicts and tensions" that people

face. While Coach Eddie Rake symbolises the paradoxical nature of sport, Neely's unresolved relationship with Rake represents the turmoil associated with the loss of belonging to sport.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that *Bleachers* has accessibly depicted fictional caricatures typical to a sports context to reveal several complexities of the coaching and sports retirement processes. In addition, although *Bleachers* is clearly not true, it is not too far to suggest that it could be (Bairner, 2015), and that is what makes this story a potentially valuable source of data for the sports scholar. Specifically, I suggest that conducting the above analysis has demonstrated how the literacy devices of fictional work, when married with a sociological lens, can act as a meaningful data source for those invested in understanding the poorly understood phenomena of sports retirement (Jones & Denison, 2017). Indeed, I hope that the content above might prove useful for those responsible for the care of retiring/retired athletes in need. It has also been my intention to provoke sports practitioners who, like Coach Eddie Rake, continue to rely upon the 'disciplinary logic of sport' (Denison et al., 2015) to re-think how their practices and attitudes may be problematic. After all, isn't it time we demythologise the role of excessively disciplinary coaching, both in fiction and reality?

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