

## **Contemplations on sport, complexity, ages of being and practice**

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### **Abstract**

From my experience of working alongside coaches, I would say that they are complex people. The people they coach are complex too. In the present paper, I consider complexity as an underlying dynamic to (coaching) practice, something that might be understood, not only through one's own life, but through the notion of shared lives. The central thematic of the story to follow is that we live and practice through different 'ages of being' and that our complication changes as we age. These ideas and their relevance to critical thinking and personal practice are illustrated through a personal story, a father and son story. The tale begins, as many sporting father and son stories might, as they run together on a windswept beach. From that childhood memory, a meandering tale of growth, companionship and critical reflection unfolds. By charting this particular relationship, one shaped and sustained by a shared history, yet defined by different 'ages of being', I contemplate often fractured and sometimes shared relationships between ourselves and with sport. It is a story described partly in parallel, across generational and working contexts and in life-long terms. The story telling ends with an attempt at defining myself, my complexities and my own practice in the present day. Through this, I urge all coaching practitioners to reflect on their work and on the intentions and scope of their research and, finally, the associations of such thinking with their own ages of being.

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## **Introduction**

It is not uncommon to be asked what it is that we 'do for a living'. This can happen in casual conversation, maybe when meeting people for the first time. We might also need to register our occupation when completing tax forms and other official documents. At such moments, particularly those which allow for a degree of flexibility (such as in moments of casual conversation), I am tempted to hesitate a little. Of course, I could say I am a university lecturer and that would be an accurate enough definition. Yet this says nothing about 'what it is I do'. Running through the various sub-sections of my contract of employment with the associated pages detailing job specification and the like, would also fail to really define my practice. In fact, it might be better for people to inquire about 'practice' rather than invite an explanation based on job description, role specification, position or title. Indeed, I wonder if by asking questions about 'practice', rather than inquiring about the notion of an occupation, we might encourage people to examine not only 'what they do' but 'who they are'.

The present paper has been predicated on the idea that we practice as we live and that how we live (and so how we practice) is in constant state of flux and progression; a process underpinned by events in our own lives, by our relationships, by our complexity. In terms of communication and illustration, the medium of auto-ethnographic story telling is used to explore the above ideas and suppositions. In that regard, it is, I hope, possible for us all to consider an eager, bright eyed boy seeking excellence in sport attended to by his doting father. For those in tracksuits, those with playing experience and coaching awards, and for those in the academic world of lecture rooms and conference presentations, this one scene might, in an essential way, encapsulate their world and define related challenges. Some practitioners, practicing coaches for example, might contemplate the need to engage with boy and parent and so might consider strategy; for others (academics say) the challenge could be seen in more distal terms, based around analysis, theorization and considerations of application.

## **The story to follow**

In the present communication, I talk primarily of two lives. This storying is my way of reaching out, by considering the nuances and meanings within intra-and-interpersonally connected lives. I do this in the hope that the story (my story), in a way, contains a fragment of everyone's story and, through these fragmentations, the themes in the tale might resonate and challenge in some way. More specifically, my sport-related lifetime with my father (Dad) is central to the forthcoming tale. I explain how Dad and I have somehow lost touch with our sporting lives, the very thing around which our relationship was forged. This storyline touches on 45 years of relational events ending with me perusing my present moment whilst also looking forward to our final age together; an overall message that is more upbeat than I had expected it be when writing began.

I hope and suspect that academics, those teachers of tomorrow's coaches, are differentially implicated in what I have to say. Consequently, the present text may nudge such scholarly types further along their own critical journey; a journey into the future but one that remains mindful of a past-lived. Through this act of retracing and looking ahead, it is possible that coaching practitioners might find different ways of understanding and conveying their own age of being and from this re-evaluate the notion of 'complexity-in-coaching'. Regardless of the audience or their degree of qualitative persuasion, the story to follow is just that, a story; one framed around an interrelated tale of two generationally separate lives which might take

some un-picking. My conviction is that un-picking is a process worthy of the effort. This is because every young person a coach meets will grow older and with age will remember and revisit their 'increasing stock of past'. From this they might cement their story, their script, establish their 'take' on matters, and the practice of coaches they met along the way may be part of that evaluation.

Similarly, attendant fathers and mothers (attendant on sporting things) will have their history and their hopes for themselves and their offspring. What a coach does in the present will be logged by these people too; in fact by all actors in the scene, and, so, outcomes may shape the future of all concerned. In these meanderings, an opaque exercise in introspection is presented. I try my best to resist *telling*, opting instead just to *show* aspects of self, and trust that those who stay with this manuscript from top-to-tail reflect a little on their own relationships, their complexity and what any of this might mean for their own coaching practice.

### **In the beginning: our first age**

'Come on...race ya.'

'Dad wait...'

'Go on...I'll give ya a start.'

I'm running and running, arms driving, legs reaching, bare feet sink into soft warm sand, then into cooler harder sand left in deep grooves by the tide, then wet heavy sand. I can hear the sea now. I know Dad's closing in, he always does, our two bodies, side-by-side. Then, he's gone, feet splashing into the sea ... 'You cheated Dad'.

Sport was our thing. Me and Dad seemed to connect through the sheer physicality of it all. Things started with kick-around games on summer holidays. With sand in our plastic sandals we both struggled to tame bouncy, flouncy, multi-coloured beach balls. Tests of speed and strength, tests that I always lost, were part of that time; races to the sea being my favourite. After one holiday, he said he would take me to watch a football game:

We walked together, all those years ago, together along the bridge that spans the river that has already shaped one life and will soon become an iconic place for another. The sight of stadium sent a tingle down my spine. I remember feeling mesmerised as floodlights cascaded streams of white light through misty rain. I was nine years old and this all seemed magical. As we crossed the road, Dad reached down and held my hand. I felt his grip change gentle then firm then gentle again.

I had started to like being around a football, and Dad played football with me. He 'drilled' a nice ball, no swerving or lofting, inches off the grass, touch of back-spin, clean and straight. Year-on-year he drilled footballs at me, on local parks, on beaches. My job was to 'take the sting' off the ball and pass it back. We did this for 10 years or more ... it sounds dull but we loved it. During this time football was everything, we shared our lives together through it. I got football kit for Christmas and birthdays; top of my 'must have' list was always a new football. In the early days, I got cheap plastic ones then, as I got older, I was bought real leather footballs just like the top teams used. Through all of this growing, me growing up, Dad growing into middle age, we just did football and when professional football wanted me

he handed me over. He let me go, I let go of him. Our time together ended, parkland kick-about times a thing of the past, everything that was 'us' just stopped.

### **Revisiting our first separation**

Some years later, when hopes of playing under those misty floodlights had long been laid to waste, I began to write about Dad and about my football life with him. This took place sometime around 1998–1999, the beginnings of my own auto-ethnographic journey in fact. A published paper finally emerged from these early efforts (Gilbourne, 2002). In this text I had begun the process of revisiting my football past, one dominated by injury and failure. Although Dad was clearly central to my development as a young player, as the power and reputation of coaches and others who worked in the professional game started to dictate matters, he melted into the background to the extent that when I decided to end my playing days I refused to discuss anything with him; a difficult memory that doesn't ease with age.

I had been to the pub with a few mates and was walking home. I stepped from pavement onto the road, a simple enough act, and my knee hurt like never before. It had come to this, unable to step across a road. When I arrived home, I told mum and dad that I would resign the next day. As I recall, we talked very little ... I have wished many times that I had done things with a greater sense of inclusion and consideration. My decision must have hit dad hard. Of the little conversation we had that evening it was clear that he did not want me to finish. I was reluctant to listen. He had spent years helping me to learn how to play. We must have kicked footballs around for a thousands of hours in the local parks, many of these sessions taking place after he had come home from a full shift down the pit. There are moments when I now feel that I threw away his commitment too lightly. My decision to stop playing ended something in me but, I suspect, something ended for him also. (Gilbourne, 2002, p. 81).

My playing career ended the following morning. I met the club physiotherapist and told him of my decision, but, out of this moment, Dad and I forged a new beginning; something that neither of us, I suspect, recognized at the time. The 2002 paper includes passages that describe what happened on that particular day:

I left the physiotherapist's room (situated beneath the main stand at the ground) and walked along a short, badly lit corridor that led towards an outside door. ... To leave the ground I had to walk through a glass foyer area. As I walked towards it I could see two figures, stood square on, facing each other; one of the figures was dad. My mind raced, 'why was he at the club? He had not told me he was coming, we had not arranged to meet'. Dad looked at me and gestured in my direction. He carried on talking. He had his 'pit-jacket' on, an old scruffy item he used for work, his hair was sticking-upwards at all angles (partially dry from his post-shift shower). He was talking in an agitated manner to the club surgeon (the one who had repeatedly operated on my knee). The surgeon stood, impassive, hands thrust deep into his expensive suit pockets. A heated debate of sorts was in full-swing. I stood at the side of dad as he argued 'my knee was fine ... it just needed time' (p. 81).

In the 2002 account I explain 'how' I watched the debate, describe how Dad held his ground and argued my case. As I looked at the two men they seemed like old enemies, protagonists from different worlds; a Shakespearean dual, two men separated by birth, class, education. Dad dug coal, the surgeon stood at the pinnacle of our society, a medical man. Dad refused to be cowed, he made his case time and again. I watched him fight for me and in those moments my love for him was without measure, my loathing of myself intense, and, through all of this,

I became politicized for the first time. The club never contacted us again, they never asked how things were for me, a story I hear most years from former footballing undergraduates; some things never change!

The whole exchange was over very quickly but, in an odd kind of way, it is a memory I now treasure. Seventeen years later, with me edging towards my 40th year, I told Dad about the idea of me 'writing up' that scene. He was standing with his back to me, looking at his garden through a downstairs window. After I made my case there was a pause, then, and without turning around, he said 'I didn't know you remembered'. I have since wondered about the expressions that might have played across his face in those moments. Perhaps up to then he hadn't realized those few minutes in our memory mattered to me as much as they did to him.

It has seemed to me since, that for us all, it is possible that too much remains unspoken. Maybe it is normal for people to struggle with their emotional stock, maybe we are all waiting for the 'right moment' to say all we have to say; but what if that time never arrives? The very notion that I *had remembered*, and that it meant enough for me to want to write about it, moved him. I don't think I over-state matters when I say that it made him see me differently.

In-between times, we had not spent much time together. There were the usual Christmas visits and so forth, but we rarely talked, *really talked*. After finishing playing I went headlong into an academic world of degrees and postgraduate study. I did try to share some of that, but Dad was never interested. In fact, if I mentioned getting this or that degree he would seem more irritated than pleased. Our worlds, once so closely connected, appeared to be separate now, damaged even by my academic achievements, achievements he seemed unable to understand or contextualize.

In this age of being, *our* lost age, if someone had asked me 'what I did for a living?' I would probably have responded by saying that I lectured in sport and exercise psychology, for that is what I did. If someone had asked me 'how I practiced' or 'why I practiced' I would have been lost for a response, because at that time, in that age of being, I hadn't really thought about such things. In this phase of living I had travelled from late 30s, past the milestone of 40 and onwards. A part of me was still intoxicated with sport and, as improbable as it sounds, my own sporting past felt but a short distance away. I still worked alongside professional football players as an applied psychologist, so a door into the game remained open; sport still gave me a buzz. On reflection, I feel that intoxication (of the kind described above) acted to interfere with critical thinking, preventing me somehow from standing back and taking stock. I think there is a message in that. In an age when we are all supposed to be passionate about what we do (prepare to tell an interview panel otherwise and prepare to not get a job), it seems counter intuitive to deconstruct elements of a domain that might pay our wages. Yet, in a bizarre and largely un-workable parallel, our degree programme documentation makes it clear that we want, expect even, our students to be 'critical'. To me this seems ironic, for being critical leads to deconstruction and I suspect, for many of my colleagues, criticality is much closer to cynicism than all those 'things' we associate with being passionate ... I digress and feel tired by the process of it.

Yet, despite the dangers inherent in the process of deconstruction, I had started to question my own past, my discussion with Dad being an early example of that. However, in auto-ethnographic terms, I was in neophyte territory. In truth, I was still some distance from stepping back from sport and really asking questions of it. I was delayed in this exercise by a

facet of my scholarly persona, I had, you see, been well and truly seduced by theory. I just loved the explanatory patterns that theory might create, and, to my eternal shame, I enjoyed my own agility when presenting such material to cohorts of undergraduate and postgraduate students (presentations that edged closer to performance than pedagogy).

In these times, in this age, I never questioned the utility or efficacy of theories. I just 'read-up' ahead of lectures and regurgitated what I had understood the theories to mean. I had not started to question, I had not begun the journey into critical reflection. I had not embraced the tenets of critical social science. Such things would define the next age. When coaching science students, maybe the same students tempted to read this piece, first 'get' theory, they may presume explanation, some kind of scholarly truth. This presumption is a mistake and it might take a long time before such thinking falters and wanes ... you read it first here.

### **Our second age**

The day I spoke to Dad about the writing seemed to rekindle something in our relationship. We began to meet more often and began to go to football games again. Over the next 20 years or so we watched a lot of football together. It became our place to meet. There would always be time, before the game mostly, to sit and talk, and in those moments we got to know who we now were; we got to know each other all over again. I was becoming critical, writing auto-ethnographically, exploring embedded qualitative methodologies. My world, my scholarly world, was shifting, but I never spoke to Dad about such things. I remember this age with a warm glow. It was *our new* age, and as our times together progressed our relationship grew all over again. Looking back it is my greatest joy that we have had these times, but things change and sometimes they change when you least expect them to.

44 years on from me going to my first game, Dad and I cross the same bridge, over the same river, the same road going to the same football ground. It's a big game, a promotion winning game (maybe). As we step out to cross the road he looks unsteady. I reach across. He looks at me and places his hand in mine, halfway across I gently squeeze his hand, a circle is closed ...

To get promotion we need to win (and two other teams need to fail). The ground is packed tight, an atmosphere that penetrates nerve endings, pre-match singing is at unheard levels, and the sun is shining. The team execute perfectly, no fear, controlled aggression, pace and flair; two nil up in 15 minutes. 2-0 becomes 2-1 becomes 3-1 becomes 3-2, the other two teams are drawing ... there's 10 minutes to go ... if scores stay the same we're up, promoted, out of this dreadful league. One game ends, then the other, now it's down to us, hold-on and we've done it ... this is a 'we' situation, 'we' fans start to chant to sing, 'we' fans try and make it happen ... apart, that is, from Dad ... as the whole stadium stands and urges and screams and chants, Dad just sits there staring at the backside of the man in-front ... I start to feel ill at ease and try to explain why I'm so worked-up 'I just don't want them to blow it Dad not today ... not in front of all these people'. The final whistle goes and I roar something primeval, fans invade the pitch a scene of joyous mayhem, people who don't know each other embrace, they hug and pat backs and smile and laugh and Dad, now standing, claps his hands but he's not really that bothered. Regardless, I soak in the moment, embrace my own sense of pride in the team, they held it all together, they got the job done ... but I know this moment is just mine ... not ours ... and I knew I would need to think about that ...

A year later, another game, Dad fancies a pint, I'd prefer a cup of tea. I win, so we find a new café just outside the ground and as I order the drinks Dad shuffles towards an empty seat. Minutes later, I place two mugs of steaming tea on the table ... I look across at Dad; there's no response. He just sits arms folded, head down. Then, he snitches his nose, a bad sign, he snitches his nose when he's angry. I look closer, he looks really angry! Before I can ask what the problem is, all forms of emotion burst-out. First his eyes go up to the café walls, walls littered with ex-players, players I was with at school, was with at the ground, players who made the grade. I couldn't believe my eyes, every picture tailor-made to wind Dad up ... before I could suggest we find another table...

'You should have scored more goals'

I last heard that line when I was 18 ... I'm trying desperately now to work out what is going on ... to find a way out of this situation ... but it's too late ... over the next 5 or 6 minutes no-one escapes his wrath ... first the coaches (all useless), the physiotherapist (slimy bastard), the manager (a joke), other players (who in his view conspired to never pass me the ball), and, of course, the surgeon got his usual pasting ... this was not a passing moan, it was hard core stuff ... Twice I try to calm him down, twice I fail ... as he launches into another attack I glance around the café embarrassed ... in the end I sit back in my chair and wait for his anger to run out ...

Eventually, he fell silent, his eyes returning to the table top ... we sit without speaking for a minute or so ... I break the silence, suggest we go into the ground. I hand dad his ticket 'come on lets get our seats' ... as we leave the café ... our cups of tea untouched ... he said he was sorry ...

### **A brief reprise: further complications from our second age**

I have often mentioned Dad in my writings. Like many fathers around the world, he has been a central figure throughout my life. Yet, and in these various acts of writing, I almost make his life appear neat and linear, as if he existed alongside me and no-one else. There are risks in this, particularly when the complexity and multi-layered nature of lives lie at the core of my various rages against reductionist theoretically derived qualitative projects (Gilbourne, 2011, Gilbourne & Priestley, 2011).

When we watched games together, we watched the same team I failed to play for; there is nothing unusual in this for we watched them years before I had ever contemplated joining them as a player. He took me there when I was nine years of age, he held my hand. The football ground is situated alongside a river that drives through the outskirts of *our* City and out towards the east coast. This is the area of town that Dad began the first of his (now over 50) married years. As we got to know each other better, got to know each other again, we allowed more time before games to meet and talk. Always there was time to talk football, who's in the team, who *should* be in the team, but over the years (through my 40s and into my early 50s) it is the fabric of life that dominated our conversations. So, at every game for the past 20 years he has waxed lyrical about those early years, of walking by the river, hand in hand with Mum. There is no me in Dad's tales, I don't exist in these memories.

Now this river, this flood of water, is part of our continued sporting life. When we meet at games, he tells me of his past. If the weather is nice enough we take time to sit and look at the swans as they paddle past. During my time of growing into middle age and Dad's time of

growing old, this process of meeting and sharing provided us both with a sense of connection; we have aged together through it. We have also slowly moved on whilst, oddly, staying anchored to the same place, a place of our greatest misery and joy; for he wanted me to play in his space alongside his river, this river that never fails to move him:

‘Look at all that water’  
‘Oh just look’ mum was surprised that by turning the corner  
We had arrived, as if by magic, at a place she, with such joy,  
Walked some fifty years ago. Dad has told me how he visited these  
Watery banks and when he talks I imagine him in youth, proud and strong  
With strength in arm, love embodied for all to see  
This embankment was their place, their space, a playground  
For grown-ups to hold hands, to walk and talk of life to come  
And now, as a product of those heady times, I have strolled  
With both along the river-side and listened to past happiness  
Tales of summer time meanderings. They were in-love in this  
Place and both know-it, the pulse of the river can still catch their  
Breath, and as they gaze once more their eyes suggest no withering  
Of love in-memory, no dissolving of affection for a restless torrent that  
Once had shared their youth, surging droplets long past that captured once  
*And hold to this age-lived day, a place in both pulsing hearts.*

I wish so much that I had failed in some far off town, some city unvisited, a place without purchase or emotional investment, some space far away. Instead I failed in the most critical place in his memory, and from this I have come to understand the depth of his pain all over again.

Towards the end of our second age, in my own age of being, I was in some turmoil. I have said already, that, for me, a process of critical engagement had begun and my writing was increasingly taken with concerns over darkness in life generally and in sport more specifically (Gilbourne, 2010, 2011). I was now a critic of the sport and exercise psychology profession rather than a member of it (Gilbourne & Andersen, 2011, Gilbourne & Priestley, 2011). Theory was now something to be challenged rather than promoted.

These were emotive and unstable times, the age of intoxication with sporty things and seduction with conceptual matters had long past. In scholarly terms, I felt very alone. Had someone asked me about the work I did for a living then, as my ages of being edged towards the present day, I would have moved closer towards the idea of talking about ‘thinking’ and ‘writing’ critically. Yet these are difficult descriptors to articulate, they risk sounding pompous or self-important. As I am forever ill at ease, I can say, with some certainty, that I embody neither of these things. If I return to an idea sketched out in the early lines of the present text, it was around this time, as the years moved from 2004 towards 2012, that the idea of being asked ‘how I practiced’ made increasing sense; much more sense than a job specification ever could.

### **Our third age**

This is *our* endgame, *our* final destination, it is the *present*; a place that (for all our shared lives) we were always heading toward. Odd after all those years, first of being sporty, then our age of distance and doubt, then a time when we watched others be sporty, that now all is

gone, dissolved, to the extent that it seems as though our past never really existed. If pushed I would say Dad has fallen out of love with sport. He's engineered new spaces, new places for us to meet. An old pub at the end of his road is one, and, when he visits my wife and I in Wales, we tend to talk in a corner of one room, always the same corner of the same room. He sits and talks whilst looking out of the window. In both pub and home, he's usually nursing a pint of beer.

The pub at the end of the road is surreal ... the bar-man has one leg and some days I swear he doesn't wear his prosthetic ... I have wondered if maybe it gets sore ... on such occasions, he seems to swing himself around the bar ... add to the scene, wallpaper with big bright flowers and a carpet of coloured squares ... as for the customers ... well Dad's 80 and they refer to him as 'young Jonny'. This is where he takes me now.

Until I was 50 or so I'd never seen Dad cry, now he cries all the time. He's not interested in talking football at all, no interest in 4-4-2 vs. 4-3-3. They (players) 'earn too much', behave in ways he can't understand, he curls up his bottom lip ... 'football's not what it was ... it's all about money'.

A new conversation now dominates our time, conversations about his life (mainly from his time down the coal-mine) and, often, we contemplate his own death. As far as I know he is healthy, yet, he insists we explore all the options for his demise ... and after considering every ailment known to western medicine he settles for dust on his lungs ... dust from his days down the pit that'll lead to what he calls 'complications'.

We have this endgame conversation every time we meet and it is as though every time is the first time. We always end-up with 'complications from dust' ... nod in stoic agreement ... reach for our respective pints ... have a slurp and, with a perfect sense of timing, place them back onto the table. As we walked back from the pub one night I wondered what turmoil he must be in. On another day, selfishly maybe, I contemplated going to the ground alone ... but no ... it did not seem possible ... something has ended, he's not a footballing Dad, not anymore, but maybe he hasn't been a footballing Dad for a long-time ...

The last time I spoke with Dad he was nursing a cup of tea facing out into his garden; growing flowers and vegetables have always been one of his skills. It was mid-winter and the ground was frozen hard. His garden would not welcome spring sunshine for some time yet. Out of the blue he turned towards me:

'Now then lad, tell me exactly what it is that you do?'

### **Alone in our third age**

I must accept that I am, now, a bit like Dad, constantly agitated by sport and sometimes by those who represent it. I am irritated by their unwavering mix of jolliness and awe, neither of which seems warranted. So, I find myself in what I have termed my third age; I am now 55 years old. In the closing sections that follow I try to articulate a further complication, my own work-based complication, before ending with some thoughts on how that impacts on my practice. I urge that these things matter, for *how* I practice is filtered through a reflection of *who* I have become. I wonder if that might be the same for you, for coaches, for any practitioner and so I often contemplate whether we should take more time to truly understand our own moment-in-time. I understand, all too well, that there are under-developed thinkers

'out there'. I know that might appear harsh but I am weary of their quick (although rarely slick) accusations of indulgence; a grotesque misrepresentation of thinking clumsily categorized, I have always thought, through their fundamental misunderstanding of social science (of being). I know it is hard to stand up against bullies, but progress in our humanity demands that we do. So, I will press ahead a little more in the hope that you and your coaching might follow in some way or other, a way that only you can critically define. First, it may be helpful to paint a picture of my unease with sport, for it sits alongside my sense of occasional displacement in the world generally. I do this to allow you some knowledge of me in the present (18 April 2012, to be precise).

The process of writing this paper has been unusual in that it has taken me several weeks rather than two or three years to complete. That said, the sentiments contained here have festered in my ramblings and scribbling for a long time, for years in fact. In terms of my own age and time, the manuscript has been compiled amidst turbulent sporting headlines with the UK news media reporting that a number of elite performers (coaches and athletes) have taken their own lives (a theme I return to briefly later). Through the same time period, a UK television programme has been screened to highlight the 'hidden' side of sport, a radio programme has been dedicated to the topic of depression in professional cricket, and, in a dismal few days, stories of alleged incidents of racial abuse and sexual assault involving professional soccer players made the air waves. In such times, sport appears bankrupt, close to crisis.

In this final stage of writing I do not dwell on the above matters in any detail, yet these issues surround me, they are part of my context and they infuse into my embedded complexity. What is of interest here is the degree to which such stories dissolve into my thinking, yet I am no expert on such matters, I do not seek to offer a position statement on sports ethics or on mental illness. Yet, in my own mind, these headlines tell me that it is so important to urge others to stay critical, to give time to the idea that sport, and those engaged with it, might not *always* be in a good place or be good per se.

In my third age of being it seems to me that contesting within the academic sporting community is difficult when so many colleagues patently remain intoxicated by sport and those who participate in it. I try to empathize, concluding it must difficult to be critical when one is simultaneously seduced by glitz and glamour. I also understand that I too was once a member of the intoxicated group, a perspective that, thankfully, I no longer fall victim to.

We can, of course, listen to or watch the various news media, note the challenging sporting stories, and recognize that there are a few that dare to suggest sport is *not that great really*. We might then forget about them and continue to give lectures that, by implication, suggest we are truly convinced about the importance of someone running a little faster or jumping a little further. We might lecture about how particular coaching sessions might, like some form of elixir, hold out a promise of a great sporting life to come (implicit here is that great sporting lives are great lives to live). That way of being is possible for many, and though I do not judge those who do such things, I must also say that it is no longer an option for me; such matters no longer dictate my practice in higher education. As I teach I tend to warn of peril in sport rather than evaluate the prospect of medals and so forth:

The London Olympics is now a matter of months away and squads are being announced. The radio is on, I'm making breakfast and listening to the news ... another squad has been named and the athletes who have 'made it' are in the studio. They say the usual things. They are

‘over the moon’, they are ‘delighted’ ... and such reactions are understandable. The reporter then asked one of the athletes ‘Are you surprised that you got selected as you finished second in the trials?’ ... a good question, I thought (as long as it was not one of his relatives who finished first). Caveat aside, I thought it a good question for it highlighted that there are many out there who will not get picked, many who fall short. I turn towards the radio ... ‘You’re interviewing the wrong athlete’.

My pocket analysis of all this ‘sporty stuff’ is that different people from different walks of life are cueing up to tell us that sport is good, whilst very few are telling me that it might not (be good at all). Why then, I sometimes ask, is my research and the research of my students telling me that sport-lived lives are often more trauma than joy?

Qualitative research has become my academic zone; it is a large part of what others think ‘I do’. I feel a sense of debt to all things qualitative and to the capacity of qualitative research to unearth, to uncover, to capture all that it means to be human. One consequence of being involved constantly with projects that utilize in-depth methods of inquiry is to experience the sadness of other lives; sadness often hidden behind smiles and a jaunty stride, it is the qualitative way, close, I often think, to the process of therapy (we listen to stories, mostly sad stories). Qualitative researchers unearth messy things and, once out into the open, it matters that we do not allow the stories of those who speak with us to stay hidden (old tapes on shelves never used because the messages contained in them are off-message).

I listen to more stories of distress, abuse of all kinds, unrelenting years of peer rivalry, depression and so forth. The data are delicate in nature but in good empathic hands. The researcher is, I sense, a thinker, a fighter, a person to contest and challenge and with viva over and doctorate awarded I contemplate the resolve they will need to stand up and argue, to face down, to confront ... the very thinking of it takes my mind to the point of fatigue ... I close my eyes for a second and hope they find loyal support as they set about this task, a task in which they will tell the community of sport that sport is, for many, a terrible place ... time to start the ignition, to steer my car away from this sporting campus, a campus where sport is thought to be good, where the research undertaken within its walls tells a different story, time for me to get home ...

### **Living the third age**

*Day-to-day things are part of my pulse, they are part of me in my age of being.* I live in an isolated part of North Wales, hidden away in a landscape with its own metronome ... hedge-cutting followed by lambing followed by hay-making followed by hedge-cutting and so it goes on. The metronome ticks slowly here. There is time and space between the ticks. Into these spaces people like me shuffle around (largely unnoticed); a sport social scientist is hardly essential to life in North Wales. We are (I am) surplus to requirements. I don’t cut many hedges but like my isolation.

However, to exist in the world as it now is, I need, sometimes, to gird my loins and visit civilization. When I shop in a town, find myself awaiting a train or a plane at a major terminal, or just walking through a university foyer, I sometimes ‘go native’. I take a deep breath and allow my surprised senses to be bombarded by the super quick images that flash news to us all on those big, flat, wall-mounted television screens ... a sport story always a matter of seconds away ...

I watch myself watching and I can see, in those moments of reflection, how childlike I must seem, stood, as if in a trance, images follow images as they chase ... round and round and round ... once, when entranced and bemused, I almost missed a train. Through my lap-top, I can work from home I can link to whatever is 'out there'. So, when working in my study, I turn, in seconds, away from landscapes unchanged over centuries to the speed-rush of all things hyper-cyber.

I click onto my office, my university and my personal e-mail account and in these simple acts I am left in little doubt that sport is big news. The images and headlines are everywhere. They tell me that sport sells, it is something to admire, to aspire to be associated with, it seems that sport really *is* great. It is something to be a part of, 'wouldn't it be great if I could ...' Maybe it would (be great), but then again, it might just be horrible, it might just be tragic. Does it register with us that several elite sport people have reportedly committed suicide in last 18 months? I watched one these tragic cases play countless times, well ... me and Dad watched, when reports of the player's death 'hit' the web I followed the responses carefully:

'Such a nice lad'

*They all loved him he was just such a nice lad  
Ask anyone they'll tell you the same, I'm not  
Just saying ... well because ... but he was, he was  
just such a nice lad  
Some players, well, they need time, they mature  
Late, we all think he could have been back up-there  
He just needed time ... we're all gutted really ... I just heard  
The news ... Just lost for words ...  
Our thoughts are with his family and friends  
We all loved him ... we can't believe it ... he worked hard  
Model professional in every way ... never a moment's trouble  
A tremendous boy ... what more can I say?  
So a game is called off and the nicest things are  
Said, and I know that reflecting on such things  
Are not easy at all, but what might those  
Who loved him and loved his game so much have  
Wished was different for this lovely lad dare they ask if they  
Could have done more? However hard such reflection might be they should ask  
Themselves such things ... he's gone, that's true, but reflections as brave  
And tough as these are not for him but for those who still have life and live ...  
With hopes and dreams, they should reflect for those lovely lads  
who play and falter today.*

We can be forgiven for taking a view that these stories are extreme, they are not really to do with us ... are they? Yet, I would say they are about us, these stories are as much about our sporting landscape as any gold medal, the stories come and go, one minute everywhere the next gone. Our challenge, I sense, comes when the news is lost to other headlines, do we ponder or just move onto the next image? ... The super quickness of today's computer world takes us close (in an instant) but, I wonder, are we not also distanced by speed?

Computer speed, I have often thought, makes my world strangely unreal. I am troubled rather than fascinated by it, particularly as, in my third age of being, I often write through what I have experienced in the past, the past day or a past more distant. Whatever the proximity of

my efforts to understand what I see, hear or feel, there is no 'speed' to any of it; my watching of the world occurs in *real time*. I listen to people speak on a specific day, at a precise time of day; they speak normally, maybe spending time to finish sentences. There is no 'other item' to *cut* to. When a conversation ends it ends in its own time, it is not interrupted by 'breaking news'.

From these human interactions I reflect on an effort to make sense of the life others have and the life that I now lead, one based around critical social science and, so, one based around vulnerability. This takes time. At this moment, in my third age, slow moments at the keyboard have helped me accept and accentuate a difficult perspective; one based on the simple fact that after a lifetime 'in' and 'on-the-edge' of sport I have come to understand that I don't much like it ... a difficult confession as most students I teach appear either fanatical, intoxicated, or seduced by sport (like I was when their age). But this view of life and my life positioned within it, now dominates my practice. It is both central and essential to it. Behind this perspective is my complexity, my life in sport, my life with Dad, some stories, some moments that you are now familiar with. Yet, these stories only capture one facet of the complexity that lurks behind my disillusionment. There it is. So, again, I turn to you, the reader, and ask you to ponder your practice, your coaching practice or other forms of practice. I wonder what super quick images lock into your memory; I wonder how you live, where you live and how this affects you. I wonder what might be essential and central to you as you coach others, and, I hope you are prepared to wonder too.

### **Final thoughts**

In low moments, I think that we are just voyeurs ... a herd that follow anointed celebrity ... we can no longer 'do' sport but we make a living out of it! Maybe we are all guilty (of hitching a lift) to some degree, but readers of this journal are closer to sport than most. Some will be centrally engaged as educators or instructors, some will have been there, heard the crowds, felt the adulation. Others will have hoped for such moments and never known them ... so we are all different. Whatever our history, whatever our proximity to elite sport we all contemplate a connection of sorts. We might connect through our work ... I explain above that we meet people in the flesh, we act and others see, we lecture and others listen, we write and others read, we coach and athletes respond, we listen as others talk to us, we think reflectively, reflexively (often when alone).

As we are real people working with other real people, I have convinced myself to accentuate the positive (a surprise maybe!). We work with people so we can influence them; we have critical capacity, each and every one of us. We can question, for example, how we practice, how we think, how we challenge (or when did we last challenge). In these actions we effect what happens to sport (Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010). If we accept that we do have a voice, have a critical role, then we have agency ... a thought worth holding onto maybe.

I am ending this paper on a train home. I have just taken an undergraduate lecture (on qualitative research methods). It was the first time we had met, me the students and the students me. Earlier, as I had headed towards the lecture room I wondered a little about my agency, about my currency, about the point of it all. I questioned whether the things I question, the things I think, the things I write would (or should) matter *at all* to students ... after all I expect they all just love sport and I know that I don't, not anymore.

As my journey home progressed I settled on the unsettling thought that as I get older (in my third age of being), undergraduate students remain the same age! At the start of the session I had established the usual ground rules. One related to mobile phones being turned off. I held my mobile in the air to reinforce the message. As I placed my mobile back onto the front desk I noticed several students on the front row staring at it. They were transfixed; such was their interest that I looked down at the phone myself. My phone is not cool. I had known this for some time, but something about that moment seemed to emphasize just how un-cool a phone could be. It was (is), in fact, the kind of phone that one might buy for an elderly relative. I picked up the phone for a second time, looked at the students and smiled. They all giggled. In that moment, they reached out in their own way, across the generations, from their age of being, and in my thoughts I thanked them for that.

Yet, as I get older and they, seemingly, stay frozen in youth, it is tougher and tougher for me to sustain belief that my critique may resonate. But when they reach out, for a short time my doubts melt. So, with my mobile now hidden from view, I talked to the group about the importance of complexity, of thinking about lives lived in real time whilst stressing that *they* are also complex and *I* am complex and *we* are complex in different ways. I read tales of me and Dad to illustrate the idea of multi-contextualized aged and ageing lives, of messy things, of failure, of distress, of reconciliation. I tempt them with the idea that sport might be, for many, a dark place and ask how many in this room might have troubled stories to tell ... a point at which all eyes fell downwards ... and wherever they were in the lecture room (the troubled ones) they knew that I knew they were out there ... a moment of unspoken connection. When the lecture ended and they were all departing (once more into their lives) one student wandered past and said 'thank you'. I said 'thank you' back and off he went, troubled I presumed.

Soon the room was empty, I rustled in my bag for the mobile, found it and stuffed it quickly into my inside pocket ... moments later, as I left the building, I pulled up the collar of my coat. It was cold outside, falling dark, and as I headed for the train my left knee felt sore, ice-cool winter rain fell gently on the ground. I was alone in my age of being, alone in a strange town ... I phoned home on the pretext of seeing how things were ... things were fine ... on the train home I watched people in real time, some younger passengers wore the emblems of sport, replica football shirts and so forth. I sketched notes in pencil wondering, all the time, about agency, currency. Maybe this all comes down to 'what *it is* I actually do', and, to be honest, I at times I struggle to answer that, but if I contemplate my practice I understand that I face head on my age of being.

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