



**Life Beyond Olympic Sport: A Foucauldian Examination of
Olympians' Experiences and Coaches' Perspectives of Athletic
Retirement**

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Neil Boardman

BA, Sheffield Hallam University

MA, University of Sheffield

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my grandparents – Eileen, Bill, Kathleen, and Harold. Although, sadly, only one of you remains to share these moments with me in-person, I sincerely hope that my efforts and hard work have made you all proud. I have learnt more from the four of you than I could ever put into words.

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Publications and Conferences

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Abstract

The Olympic project is built upon modernist foundations. Olympic sport cultures across the world have been shaped by modernist, neoliberal discourses that emphasise the importance of athlete control and performance. In recent years, reports by NGBs, such as The Whyte Review, have exposed that an immersion within the cultures of British Olympic sport can have damaging effects for athletes' physical and mental well-being. However, current understandings of the residual implications of an Olympic career are limited. Therefore, the aim of this study was to understand how an immersion within the cultures of British Olympic sport might impact upon Olympians' long-term retirement experiences.

For this study, I conducted interviews with 18 retired British Olympians and eight Olympic standard coaching practitioners. A Foucauldian theoretical framework was used to analyse the data. Foucault's (1990; 1991a) work provided a means for conceptualising how former Olympians' experiences and coaches' perspectives of retirement are shaped by relations of power.

I found that the lived experiences, bodies, and movements of retired British Olympians remain intimately connected to the power arrangements that typified their careers, often well beyond their immediate retirement adjustments. Indeed, my analysis suggested that, although the lasting implications of an Olympic career can be damaging, these effects are typically experienced inconsistently and non-linearly, and that resistance is possible for retirees. Also, I found that Olympic coaches' understandings of the Olympic retirement process are heavily influenced by disciplinary power-knowledge relations; this has implications for how coaches consider the problematic of athletic retirement and how they approach transitioning

Olympians. I argue that the dominance of this logic has underlying implications for Olympians' capacities to think effectively about their retirement adjustments. My findings demonstrate the necessity of continuing to problematise the modernist cultures of British Olympic sport to better support Olympians' retirement adjustments in the future.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The Olympic Games are the pinnacle of modern sport. Many athletes dedicate a substantial part of their lives to the pursuit of Olympic success. In turn, it is widely accepted that modern Olympians must be focused, driven, and, above all, disciplined in order to condition their minds and bodies for the Olympic stage (Chambliss, 1989; Sutton, 2023). As a result, the efforts of Olympic athletes have been extensively celebrated throughout modern society. Despite this, when we hear stories about the post-sport lives of Olympians, we are regularly confronted with narratives laced with difficulty, confusion, and anxiety. In recent high-profile cases, British Olympians Max Whitlock, James Cracknell, Victoria Pendleton, Alice Dearing, and Gail Emms have all discussed the intense challenges that accompany both the prospect of leaving sport, and the years that follow the retirement moment (BBC, 2022; Emms, 2022; Hattenstone, 2024a; 2024b; Lee, 2024). In light of the difficulties that often surround Olympians' retirement experiences, it is becoming increasingly important to pose the question: why, in a culture that celebrates the ethics and achievements of Olympic sport in such an explicit manner, do Olympians experience these turbulent, uncertain, and problematic futures?

To date, academic research on the topic of sports retirement has been dominated by the disciplines of sport psychology and social psychology. These studies have, for the most part, demonstrated that retirement can be an extremely challenging aspect of an athletic career (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Esopenko et al., 2020). In turn, sport psychology researchers have largely attributed athletes' retirement outcomes to various predictors based upon individuals' psychological traits and

personal circumstances, such as the concentration of one's athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993; Cosh, 2022) and one's degree of control over the timing of their retirement transition (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021). In their attempts to assist athletes in managing the challenges that are often associated with retirement, these scholars have postulated a series of coping strategies. These mechanisms have typically centred upon sportspeople's efforts to adequately prepare for their retirement adjustments, as a means of allaying those feelings of uncertainty that regularly accompany this transition (Lally, 2007; Schmid et al., 2023), and the necessity of cultivating multidimensional identities to mitigate the dangers associated with premature identity foreclosure (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017).

Despite the depth of this body of literature, modern sportspeople continue to report many of the same retirement challenges that were described by their counterparts in the earliest socio-cultural studies of the phenomena (Hill & Lowe, 1974; Mihovilovic, 1968). What is more, in recent years, an increasing number of retirees have spoken to how these challenges have continued to impact upon their lived experiences, long after their immediate retirement adjustments (McMahon et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2022; Toner, 2023). Therefore, one could argue that psychological interpretations of athletic retirement have long dominated the field to limited practical avail. Thus, my research *does not* extend these dominant ways of thinking. Rather, I embrace a more nuanced and, as of yet, under-utilised philosophy for examining retirement from British Olympic sport.

In recent years, sociologists have introduced the theoretical concepts of Michel Foucault's (1985; 1990; 1991a) *oeuvre* to the field of sports retirement (Gerdin, 2023; Jones & Denison, 2017; 2019; Jones et al., 2022; Kuklick, 2023; McMahon et al., 2012).

The Foucauldian theorisation of athletes' retirement experiences has represented a significant break from those psychological interpretations that have long dominated the field. These studies have rejected the notion that athletes' retirement outcomes can be exclusively linked to their individual traits and psychological characteristics. In contrast, Foucauldian informed scholars have suggested that athletes' retirement experiences are influenced and shaped by the cultures and power relations that typify their sporting careers (Jones et al., 2022). My project extends previous Foucauldian informed sports retirement research by examining how the cultural milieu of British Olympic sport, and the workings and effects of relations of power therein, imprint upon the minds and bodies of Olympians in ways that influence their thoughts, feelings, and experiences for the remainder of their lives beyond sport. Therefore, an understanding of this cultural context is paramount to the study.

1.2 Olympic Sport in the United Kingdom

The first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in 1896. The British Olympic team (commonly known as 'Team GB') have been a consistent fixture at both the summer and winter games from 1896 through to the present day. The revival of the Olympics is largely attributed to Baron Pierre De Coubertin (1863-1937). Coubertin envisioned the modern games to be a spectacle to celebrate the purity of athletic competition and international unity (Gruneau, 2017). However, in contrast to the ideology that Coubertin endeavoured to advance, the modern Olympic project has been significantly influenced by capitalism and international political tensions (Guttmann, 2002). Over the last century, the Olympic Games have been colonised by modernist discourses of governmental control, commercialism, and nationalism (Chatziefstathiou & Henry, 2012; Gruneau, 2017; MacAloon, 1981). As a result, the

Olympic values of sportsmanship and unity have been penetrated by an intense emphasis on results and performance (Beamish & Ritchie, 2006).

The British Olympic team has been immersed in the ideological shift that has surrounded the Olympic project over the last century. The significance attached to performance standards in the current moment perhaps becomes most clear when placed within the context of British sport's modernisation project in the late 1990s (Grix & Harris, 2016; Houlihan & Green, 2009). Following Atlanta 1996¹, high-performance sport in Great Britain and Northern Ireland received a significant injection of funding courtesy of the national lottery. In light of this financial insertion, high-performance sport funding in the United Kingdom has since been filtered and allocated by UK sport and its affiliated national governing bodies (NGBs). Funding allocation is based upon the developmental and performance potential of Olympic standard athletes. Increased levels of funding have granted Olympic standard athletes enhanced access to the resources that are considered fundamental for their development and performance. These resources include: the opportunity to train full-time, access to centralised coaching and support staff, and funded opportunities to attend international competitions. Since 1996, Team GB have enjoyed their most successful period of Olympic competition as British athletes have produced 387 medals across both summer and winter games.

For many years, this modernist system largely went unproblematised. However, in recent times, there has been an increase in critique regarding the intricacies of the

¹ Atlanta 1996 was widely considered a disappointment from a British perspective as the British Olympic team ranked 36th in the medal table and only produced one gold medal winning performance.

British Olympic context. Recent reports by academics (Bradshaw et al., 2022; Feddersen et al., 2020), the media (BBC, 2024; Ingle, 2023; Topping, 2021), and NGBs (Whyte, 2022) have pointed to the ‘brutal but effective’ cultures of British Olympic sport. These reports have suggested that the pursuit of Olympic medals can have detrimental effects for the physical and mental well-being of athletes. Indeed, researchers, athletes, and practitioners have argued that modern British Olympians are subjected to intense levels of pressure to produce medal-winning performances, as a means of justifying the standards that are set by themselves, NGBs, coaching staff, and the wider public (Bradshaw et al., 2022; Feddersen et al., 2020). Although this increase in critical insight has begun to illuminate that an immersion within the cultures of British Olympic sport can have problematic consequences for athletes’ well-being, there remains limited explorations, to date, regarding the long-term implications that are associated with a career in this context. To attend to this paucity in research, my study asks: what are the legacies of an immersion within the cultures of British Olympic sport?

1.3 Thinking About Olympic Retirement With Foucault

Foucault (1991a) theorised that individuals are shaped by the cultures in which they are immersed. Specifically, Foucault was interested in how the dominant relations of power in these cultures work to shape the bodies, thoughts, and actions of subjects. Over the last thirty years, Foucault’s work has been influential throughout the sociology of sport (Cole et al., 2004). Indeed, sociologists have drawn upon Foucauldian informed theoretical frameworks to consider how the bodies (e.g., Rail & Harvey, 1995), subjectivities (e.g., Shogan, 1999), and emotions (e.g., Lee Sinden, 2013) of athletes are moulded by the power-laden cultures of sport.

In recent years, a limited, yet growing, number of scholars have drawn upon Foucauldian theory to examine the retirement experiences of high-performance athletes (Gerdin, 2023; Jones & Denison, 2017; 2019; Jones et al., 2022; Kuklick, 2023; McMahon et al., 2012). These researchers have argued that in order to better understand athletes' lives after sport, it is essential to examine how the norms of athletic cultures impose upon sportspeople a prescribed mode of being and thinking during their careers. In turn, these authors have shown that normalising arrangements of power are imprinted upon athletes' minds and bodies in ways that influence, and often limit, their lived experiences (Jones & Denison, 2017), their bodily relations (McMahon et al., 2012), and their movement relations (Jones & Denison, 2019) throughout their lives after sport.

Foucault's (1991a) work speaks to how individuals are shaped by the spaces, temporalities, and relationships of a culture. In light of this, Foucauldian informed sports retirement scholars have pointed towards the importance of problematising how hierarchical relationships within high-performance sport cultures may be influential in shaping athletes' retirement experiences. For example, Jones and Denison (2017, p. 936), speaking from the context of association football, argued that "there is a strong association between football's culture of coach control and player-conformity and how retirement from football is understood and experienced by players". In turn, Jones and Denison suggested that it is necessary to undertake a more in-depth problematisation of how those leaders with ethical responsibilities to the lives of athletes (e.g., coaches, coach developers, talent scouts, sport scientists) may influence the retirement adjustment. However, extant explorations of these connections have been somewhat superficial (Boardman et al., 2024). This is because

researchers, with the exception of a very recent study conducted by Brown (2024), have almost exclusively relied upon empirical data collected with retired athletes to extend and fabricate their theorisations of how post-sport adjustments are influenced in social and relational ways. My study attends to this dearth in research by introducing Olympic coaching practitioners to the ongoing empirical equations surrounding athletic retirement.

In this study, I embrace Foucauldian theory to formulate a nuanced understanding of retirement from British Olympic sport (Jones et al., 2022). A Foucauldian theoretical framework supports the analysis of qualitative data, collected from semi-structured interviews with both retired British Olympians and current Olympic coaching practitioners (Avner et al., 2025). First of all, I consider the interview data collected with retired British Olympians regarding their ongoing experiences of adjusting to post-sport life and, more specifically, how these experiences might be understood as residual implications of their careers within the power-laden cultures of British Olympic sport. Following this, I examine the interview data collected with Olympic coaching practitioners regarding their perspectives of Olympic retirement and how they consider (if at all) the retirement processes of Olympians throughout the orchestration of their practices.

1.4 Aims and Purposes of the Study

The overarching aim of this study is to understand how an immersion within the cultures of British Olympic sport may impact upon Olympians' long-term retirement experiences. The purpose of the study is to position the British Olympic sport context as a central point of problematisation for the examination of Olympic retirement. By working closely with two samples of participants – retired British Olympians and

current Olympic coaching practitioners – the intention of this study is to present a relational mapping and analysis of retirement from British Olympic sport. Several distinct, yet interrelated, research questions guide the project.

In examining the retirement experiences of British Olympians, I set out to consider the wide-ranging ‘legacies’ of a career in Olympic sport. Specifically, owing to the limited extent of existing research covering athletes’ experiences beyond the initial retirement transition (Barth et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2023), I pay significant attention to how Olympians may experience retirement from sport as an ongoing, omnipresent negotiation that impacts upon the remainder of their lives. In doing so, an Olympic career is framed as a central influence in shaping Olympians’ adjustments to post-sport life, both within and well beyond their immediate retirement transitions (McMahon & McGannon, 2023). To attend to these considerations, I ask the following research questions:

- How does a career in Olympic sport influence retired Olympians’ subjectivities throughout their lives after sport?
- How does a career in Olympic sport impact upon former Olympians’ ongoing relationships with their bodies and exercise?
- In what ways, if at all, do retired Olympians resist the limiting implications that are associated with a career in Olympic sport?

Furthermore, in working with Olympic standard coaching practitioners, I endeavour to engage in a deep, relational examination of the phenomena of Olympic retirement. In doing so, I present one of the first empirically informed mappings of the connection between sport coaching and athletic retirement (Brown, 2024). As a result, it is my intention to establish this aspect of the project as an important basis for further

research to explore the interplay of these complex phenomena. To establish a more considered understanding of the coaching position within the Olympic retirement process, I pose the following research questions:

- To what extent do Olympic coaching practitioners consider themselves to be involved in the retirement processes of the Olympians they coach?
- How do coaches consider the post-sport adjustments of Olympians throughout the orchestration of their practices?
- Do Olympic coaches encounter any challenges to the re-configuration of their approaches, in light of the problematic elements of Olympic retirement?

It is through these guiding research questions that I examine the complexity of Olympic retirement through a socio-cultural lens.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I present a comprehensive review of existing sports retirement scholarship². To situate my thesis in the historical context of this field, I first discuss the emergence of athletic retirement as a topic of scholarly interest. This discussion goes on to inform a consideration of the frameworks that have been used to study the phenomena of sports retirement. Following this, I present an extensive review of the main themes and findings of extant research. I use a disciplinary lens to frame this discussion by, first, focusing on the major findings that have emerged from those studies residing in a psychological domain, before shifting my attention to socially and culturally informed readings of athletic retirement. Finally, I present a more concentrated review of existing research that has focused upon my topic of study – retirement from Olympic sport.

2.1 The Emergence of Athletic Retirement as a Topic of Scholarly Interest

The academic study of athletic retirement is not a new endeavour. The topic has attracted scholarly interest since the middle of the 20th century (Hill & Lowe, 1974; McPherson, 1978; Mihovilovic, 1968; Weinberg & Arond, 1952). Early empirical research has provided contemporary scholars with a foundational basis for

² Throughout the thesis, I alternate between the terms ‘sports retirement’ and ‘athletic retirement’ (or, in the specific instances that I discuss retirement from Olympic sport, this is denoted by the use of the term ‘Olympic retirement’). These terms are used interchangeably. However, they are both used to refer to athletes’ retirement from high-performance sport work. Jones et al. (2022, p. 2) define high-performance sport work as “as a fulltime competitive bodily endeavour, typified by the representation of a community group/institution and compensated by finance (including scholarships) and/or status, access, and affiliation”.

understanding the retirement experiences of sportspeople. Primarily, these studies helped to expose that the process of retiring from sport can be incredibly difficult for athletes. For example, reporting on survey data collected from 44 former male footballers, Mihovilovic (1968) identified that retirement is often associated with challenging emotional responses that are related to feelings of isolation and changes in socio-economic status.

Although the experiences of athletic retirees have been examined by researchers for well over half a century, it is only within the last thirty years that the topic has emerged as a well-established area of academic interest (Stambulova et al., 2009). Throughout this period, a number of conceptual approaches have been utilised to examine the circumstances of retired sportspeople. In the following sub-chapter, I outline the popular frameworks that have been used throughout sports retirement scholarship.

2.2 Dominant Frameworks of Study

The majority of existing research covering the topic of athletic retirement has emerged from the discipline of sport psychology (Fuller, 2014; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2021). This body of research has been heavily influenced by the paradigms of positivism and post-positivism (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Positivism has its roots in logical empiricism. Positivist researchers “distance themselves from the particular phenomena under investigation, searching for a reality that is entirely independent of their opinions about certain phenomena: a measurable and objective reality that determines a universal truth” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 27). To do so, positivists draw exclusively upon quantitative methods. Post-positivism is closely connected to positivist logic. However, post-positivists also embrace qualitative methods as a means

of more accurately accounting for the varying meanings that human actors attach to their activities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Markula, 2019; Markula et al., 2001).

Unsurprisingly, given the ontological and epistemological traditions of these paradigms, various conceptual models have been developed to analyse the athletic retirement process.

Early empirical research used positivist and post-positivist methodologies to examine sports retirement (e.g., Mihovilovic, 1968). However, these studies were not underpinned by a precise conceptual framework, through which the experiences of sportspeople could be analysed in a specific manner (Stambulova et al., 2021).

Analytically, these early studies were most closely related to gerontological (the study of aging) and thanatological (the study of death and dying) understandings of retirement (Stambulova et al., 2009). In this sense, researchers tended to frame retirement from sport as a singular, isolated incident that was overwhelmingly negative (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994); an incident that was “considered analogous to retirement from a working career” (Stambulova et al., 2009, p. 396). However, these frameworks were criticised in relation to their applicability to the context of athletic retirement. This criticism primarily surrounded the ways in which thanatological and gerontological frameworks were typically underpinned by the assumption that one’s retirement from sport could occur in a singular moment. As Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) suggested, these perspectives often failed to match the complex realities of athletes’ retirement decisions. Therefore, these authors argued that sports retirement must be treated as a gradual process, as opposed to a termination.

Given the limitations associated with earlier approaches, there were calls for scholars to develop and adopt athlete-specific frameworks for examining sports retirement

(Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Swain, 1991). In turn, there has been a gradual shift towards 'transitional' models of analysis over the last 30 years. These renewed characterisations of athletic retirement have primarily drawn inspiration from Schlossberg's (1981) Model for Analysing Human Adaption to Transition. In this model, Schlossberg (1981, p. 5) defined the concept of 'transition' as "an event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions regarding oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships". This concept garnered attention in the field of sport psychology because it offers a conceptualisation of how alterations in personal circumstances may affect changes to one's cognitive-behavioural state. However, Schlossberg's model was not explicitly designed for application to athletic contexts and scholars critiqued the conceptual reference to 'events/non-events', with respect to the practical applicability of this framework for considering athletes' retirement transitions (Stambulova et al., 2009). Subsequently, several athlete-specific transition models, employing the key foundations of Schlossberg's (1981) work without definitively subscribing to the model, have been developed (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014).

Two analytical models have been the most influential for the development of sports retirement research over the last 30 years. Firstly, there are career development frameworks that view an athletic career as a "miniature lifespan course" (Stambulova et al., 2021, p. 528). Stambulova's (1994) stage model is an example of this category of framework. This model focuses on conceptualising a set of generalised aspects of the athletic life course that can be considered 'transitional' periods. Categorisations of athlete transitions include disciplinary specialisation, junior-to-senior sport, amateur-to-professional sport, and retirement. Each of these phases represents a transitional

period in the occupational life course of an individual athlete; thus, this model is built upon the assumption that athletic careers unfold in a linear fashion (Stambulova et al., 2021). The framework has become important for the conceptualisation efforts of sports retirement scholars because each of these periods are likely to complicate and intensify the psychological behaviours and responses of individual athletes (Stambulova, 2000). In turn, transitional periods, including the retirement transition, are widely considered to be potential 'crisis' moments for sportspeople.

Secondly, there are career transition frameworks. These models are more closely aligned to Schlossberg's (1981) model (Stambulova et al., 2021). Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) 'conceptual model of adaption to retirement among athletes' is an example of a career transition framework. This model includes a consideration of the causes of retirement (e.g., injury, contract termination, autonomy in decision-making), the resources available to athletes (e.g., coping strategies, retirement planning), and the factors related to positively adapting to post-sport life (e.g., financial management). In this respect, Taylor and Ogilvie's model is underpinned by a focus on the underlying circumstances of one's retirement, as well as a contextualisation of the resources and external factors that may influence individual transitions.

The development of these models has been an essential component in athletic retirement research emerging as an important section of the wider literature covering athletes' careers, over the last 35 years (Agnew, 2022; Stambulova et al., 2021). The influence of positivist and post-positivist thought for this body of research is clear in the reductionist logic that has underpinned many of these studies; the development of generalisable athlete transition models serves as evidence of this (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). In turn, a wide breadth of quantitative (e.g., Aston et al., 2024) and

qualitative (e.g., Swain, 1991) studies have been conducted. Research has covered retirement transitions from several disciplines, including gymnastics (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008) and association football (Schwenk et al., 2007), as well as from a range of experience levels, from college-level sport (Adler & Adler, 1991; Harry & Weight, 2021; Menke & Germany, 2019) to Olympic sport (Torregrosa et al., 2015; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). This range of focus illustrates the manner in which athletic retirement scholarship has diversified across the last three decades (Park et al., 2013). In the following sub-chapter, I outline the dominant issues that have surfaced from this research.

2.3 The Difficulties Associated With Retiring From Sport

As I have previously stated, existing sports retirement scholarship has largely been informed by the methods and assumptions of the positivist and post-positivist research paradigms (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Researchers adopting these approaches look to examine the effects of certain phenomena (i.e., retirement from sport) and to determine the causes of these implications (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Therefore, in this sub-chapter, I detail a number of the associated effects of athletic retirement as proposed by sport psychology researchers. Following this, I consider how these implications have been traced to several causes.

2.3.1 Psychological Challenges

Empirical research on the topic of sports retirement has pointed to the overwhelmingly common psychological challenges that are faced by athletes upon transitioning away from sport. A substantial amount of research has demonstrated that symptomologies of depression, anxiety, and confusion are common amongst athletic retirees (Adler & Adler, 1991; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Harry & Weight, 2021;

Powell et al., 2024; Van Remele et al., 2017). A recent example of these findings is present in the work of Aston and colleagues (2020). Drawing upon survey data collected from 409 active and retired hockey players, these authors identified that retired sportspeople reported experiencing moderate to severe levels of depression at almost twice the rate of active players. This body of research has shown that retiring from sport is likely to be laden with problematic emotional and behavioural responses for athletes.

Primarily, researchers have examined the associated psychological implications of athletic retirement through a 'short-term' lens. That is, scholars have found that athletes are particularly receptive to experiencing challenging psychological outcomes during the 'initial' retirement transition³ (Barth et al., 2021; Fuller, 2014; Park et al., 2013). These understandings were supported by a longitudinal, comparative study conducted by Barth and colleagues (2022). Reporting on the findings of an online questionnaire completed by 78 ex-professional German footballers, these authors identified that levels of depression were significantly lower in those former athletes that had been retired for ten or more years, in comparison to those athletes who remained immersed in the initial retirement transition. These findings suggest that the overwhelming psychological difficulties that are experienced by retiring and retired sportspeople may decrease in intensity over time. Despite the advancements made by this recent paper, there remains a distinct lack of empirical research examining the

³ It is difficult to define exactly what should be considered as inclusive of the 'initial' retirement transition. However, in a recent systematic review of research covering retirement from association football, Barth et al. (2021) suggested that 'short-term' retirement analyses have typically examined athletes' lives for up to ten years following the retirement moment.

psychological challenges that are experienced by athletic retirees over a long-term basis.

2.3.2 Physical Challenges

Existing sports retirement scholarship has been dominated by examinations of athletes' cognitive-behavioural responses to the post-sport transition. This is a feasible implication of the dominance of psychological interpretations over research output (Fuller, 2014; Park et al., 2013). However, a limited, yet noteworthy, amount of research has been undertaken by positivist and post-positivist scholars in relation to the physiological adaptations that are experienced by athletic retirees. These studies have largely focused on ascertaining the physical activity participation levels of former sportspeople. For example, Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) surveyed 1123 former intercollegiate athletes (427 males and 697 females that competed in college-level sport between 1970 and 1982) about their experiences of retirement. The researchers reported that only 75% of these former athletes were engaged in any form of physical activity at the time of survey. Therefore, 25% of these former athletes stated that they did not participate in any level of physical activity.

In response to Greendorfer and Blinde's (1985) findings, Tracey and Elcombe (2004) argued that the physical activity engagement levels of retired athletes should be treated as problematic. These authors hypothesised three potential factors to explain the issues with movement that are commonly experienced by former athletes:

- Hypothesis 1: "atypical physical behaviours in the competitive sporting realm negatively shape lifelong healthy and meaningful activity patterns in former competitive athletes" (p. 245)

- Hypothesis 2: “a utilitarian attitude toward physical activity fostered by competitive athletics negatively impacts lifelong meaningful healthy movement” (p. 249)
- Hypothesis 3: “athletic identity negatively influences post-competition physical activity behaviours” (p. 252)

In outlining these hypotheses, Tracey and Elcombe (2004) attempted to engender further research regarding the movement practices of former athletes. Responses to the authors’ calls have been relatively limited. However, in the last ten years, several noteworthy positivist and post-positivist studies addressing the relationship between athletic retirement and physical activity have emerged (Ferrara et al., 2023; Plateau et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018; Simon & Docherty, 2014). These studies have identified that former athletes are susceptible to physical inactivity (Ferrara et al., 2023) and dissatisfaction with their physical activity levels (Plateau et al., 2017). What is more, these studies have found that low levels of physical activity engagement amongst former athletes are most commonly associated with the physiological and psychological effects of sport injuries (Russell et al., 2018; Simon & Docherty, 2014), as well as retirees’ difficulties in adapting to alternative physical activity contexts i.e., new social circumstances in retirement presenting a dearth in the temporal resources that can be dedicated to physical training (Ferrara et al., 2023).

In terms of answering Tracey and Elcombe’s (2004, p. 249) call to question whether competitive sport “negatively impacts lifelong meaningful healthy movement”, responses have been fairly limited throughout this body of research. However, reporting on survey data collected from 218 former female college athletes, Plateau et al. (2017) attempted to account for how physical activity participation levels may be

temporally subjective throughout athletes' post-sport lives. Their survey found that there was no relation between the number of years that an athlete had spent in retirement and their degree of current exercise frequency. Despite this, the participants in Plateau and colleagues' research study had only been retired from competitive sport for a maximum of six years at the time of data collection. Therefore, despite the authors' findings, one could argue that the efficacy of their evidence is limited as they failed to acknowledge the experiences of retirees that have spent a more significant amount of time navigating their retired lives (Barth et al., 2021).

2.3.3 Identifying the Causes of Athletic Retirement Difficulties

Thus far, I have outlined the associated effects of retiring from sport, as identified by positivist and post-positivist studies. Keeping with the traditions of these paradigms, scholars have identified several causes that can be interpreted as 'predictors' for the development of these psychological and physiological responses (Markula & Silk, 2011). A range of factors – such as the loss of dressing room culture and camaraderie (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998), social isolation (Jewett et al., 2019), reflection upon relative athletic achievement (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), and sub-standard coach-athlete relationships (Darvin et al., 2024; Harry & Weight, 2021; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007) – have been cited as common indicators for the development of challenging cognitive-behavioural responses to retirement. Amongst these indicators, two factors have emerged as the most common and significant for the interpretation of athletes' retirement experiences from a psychological perspective. These factors, relating to the voluntariness of retirement transitions and the concept of athletic identity, are the focus of the following two sub-sections.

2.3.3.1 Voluntariness of Retirement Transitions

Researchers have identified that retiring from sport can be a less problematic experience for athletes when it is planned as a gradual process, as opposed to occurring in a sudden, isolated moment (Park et al., 2013). Indeed, scholars have argued that maintaining control over the timing of the retirement decision can allow sportspeople to adequately anticipate and prepare for their post-sport transitions (Fuller, 2014). These transitions have sometimes been referred to as 'normative' (Stambulova et al., 2021). In turn, researchers have suggested that retirement planning can help to limit the anxieties and uncertainties that regularly accompany this transition as it allows athletes a greater opportunity to, for example, prepare for financial losses or to accumulate work experience (Lally, 2007; Torregrosa et al., 2004). In a recent study, Schmid and colleagues (2023), reporting on survey data collected from 290 former high-performance sportspeople, suggested that retirement planning was a significant indicator of athletes' retirement experiences. These researchers found that adequate retirement preparation (i.e., constructing a clear and actionable plan of adjustment to post-sport life) could positively influence athletes' transitions and, in turn, limit the onset of potential self-esteem issues.

In contrast, researchers have also identified that those athletes who retire involuntarily from sport and, in turn, lack the degree of control that would be required to engage in retirement planning activities, are at a greater risk of developing challenging emotional reactions (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Esopenko et al., 2020). These transitions have sometimes been referred to as 'non-normative' (Stambulova et al., 2021). Of course, it must be noted that voluntary exits from sport are not a control naturally afforded to athletes. Enforced retirement, owing to factors beyond many athletes' control such as de-selection (Agnew & Abery, 2022), burnout (Rothwell et al.,

2020), and injury (Buck, 2022; Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021), is a common circumstance throughout sporting contexts. In response, researchers have suggested that sportspeople should receive more guidance regarding retirement planning throughout their careers to mitigate the risks that are presented by enforced retirement (Esopenko et al., 2020; Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021).

2.3.3.2 Athletic Identity

The concept of athletic identity has been a central focus throughout psychological interpretations of sports retirement for several decades (Park et al., 2013). Athletic identity can be defined as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). Brewer and colleagues’ conceptualisation of athletic identity is designed to be utilised in conjunction with a quantitative framework: the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). Although the concept of athletic identity has been examined via multiple methods over time – e.g., interviews (Lally, 2007) – the AIMS scale has provided researchers with a consistent framework for measuring the athletic identities of retirees (Brewer et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997; Park et al., 2013).

Existing research has indicated that strong degrees of athletic identification are closely linked to the development of psychological and physiological difficulties for retired sportspeople (Cosh, 2022; Lally, 2007; Webb et al., 1998). This connection is developed through individuals’ immersion in sporting contexts; these settings facilitate and encourage the development of identities that are intensely composed in relation to one’s athleticism and sporting achievements (Brewer et al., 1993; Martin et al., 2014). In turn, researchers have argued that sportspeople are vulnerable to the development of unidimensional identities (Baillie, 1993). Therefore, as identified in a relatively early study conducted by Blinde and Stratta (1992), retirement from sport can result in a

disruption to the self-defining arrangements that were once provided by one's respective athletic context. Consequently, research has shown that it is common for athletes to undergo identity crises following their transitions out of sport (Aston et al., 2024). These crisis moments are linked to the development of challenging emotional responses, such as loss and confusion (Cosh, 2022; Manthey & Smith, 2023).

Sport psychology researchers have persistently lent considerable weight to the central, predictive role enacted by athletic identities within their interpretations of athletes' retirement experiences. To understand the prevalence of this concept throughout the field, there are three fundamental points to consider. Firstly, scholars have suggested that strong degrees of athletic identity can significantly impact upon sportspeople's capacities to productively adjust to post-sport life, regardless of the voluntariness of their transitions (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Indeed, strong degrees of athletic identity can impede athletes' perceived degrees of control over their retirement decisions and their capacities to recognise the importance of retirement planning (Lally, 2007; Schmid et al, 2023). Secondly, research has identified that strong degrees of athletic identification can be developed at any level of sport participation. As a result, to transition away from any form of athletic environment is likely to trigger some form of disruption to an individual's self-defining processes, irrespective of circumstance (Cosh, 2022; Schmid et al., 2024). In turn, scholars have suggested that the concept of athletic identity can act as an experience predictor for athletes retiring from a range of contexts, from college-level sport (Adler & Adler, 1991; Brewer et al., 1993; Harry & Weight, 2021) to high-performance sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Martin et al., 2014; Wendling & Sagas, 2021). Thirdly, individuals' identification with the athlete role has been linked with a pervasion of multiple aspects

of post-sport life. Research has revealed that strong degrees of athletic identity can influence a number of behaviours, actions, and emotions in retirees, such as their nutritional habits (Yao et al., 2020), perceptions of bodily shape (Cosh, 2022; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008), and, of course, mental well-being (Aston et al., 2024; Webb et al., 1998).

2.4 Limitations of Dominant Interpretations of Athletic Retirement

Most existing interpretations of athletes' retirement processes and experiences have emerged from the discipline of sport psychology and have most commonly been supported by the paradigmatic methods and assumptions of positivism and post-positivism (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). These readings have primarily focused on connecting retirement outcomes to the psychological characteristics of individual athletes and the circumstances of their withdrawals from sport (Stamp et al., 2021). In response to the limiting outcomes that are often associated with retirement from sport, researchers have posited a number of intervention strategies designed to ease post-sport transitions. Most of the practical implementations that have been presented in existing research are closely linked to the cognitive-behavioural strategies developed in the discipline of sport psychology (Tonge, 2022). Indeed, sports retirement scholars have regularly prescribed mechanisms – such as retirement planning (Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021; Lally, 2007), counselling (Bopp et al., 2024; Menke & Germany, 2019), the assistance of social support networks (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), and the positive acceptance of the retirement moment (Grove et al., 1997; Powell et al., 2024; Rich et al., 2022) – designed to assist sportspeople in self-managing the difficulties associated with the post-sport transition. The postulation of these strategies typifies the predominant connection between athletic retirement

scholarship and the paradigms of positivism and post-positivism (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). That is, researchers have worked to identify the associated *effects* of retirement and, in turn, have prescribed strategies to help individuals mitigate their *causes* (Markula & Silk, 2011; Markula et al., 2001).

However, as argued by Denison and Winslade (2006), this prevailing approach to research, largely informed by the natural sciences, is somewhat narrow. Under the guise of positivism and post-positivism, researchers have diagnosed problematic responses to retirement adjustments and have suggested that these flawed effects can be managed, regulated, and changed by the individual in question. In diagnosing the problem (i.e., the effects of retirement) and prescribing a treatment (i.e., mitigating the causes of these effects), “all responsibility for change falls upon the individual” (p. 101). Therefore, as argued by Stamp and colleagues (2021, p. 73), dominant research foci have come at the expense of considering the “broader relational and socio-cultural factors” that might impact upon athletes’ negotiations of their in-career and retirement transitions.

One could argue that the persistent focus on treating the cases of individual athletes has limited the translation between sports retirement scholarship and effective practice. Indeed, contemporary athletes are still reporting many of the same adjustment difficulties that were identified by Mihovilovic (1968) over fifty years prior to the writing of this thesis. As a result, scholars have continued to argue that more must be done to assist athletes in adjusting to their lives beyond sport. In recent years, an expanding group of sports retirement scholars have acknowledged the shortfalls of these dominant psychological interpretations and, in turn, embracing a range of social theories and approaches, they have endeavoured to produce readings of athletic

retirement that are, to a greater extent, informed by the various socio-cultural contexts of sport.

2.5 Towards a Culturally Influenced Reading of Sports Retirement

In their efforts to depart from psychological interpretations of sports retirement, researchers have drawn upon a number of analytical approaches informed by more anti-positivist paradigmatic approaches (Markula et al., 2001). The perspectives detailed throughout this sub-chapter all attempt, in some manner, to account for the effects of socio-cultural, historical, and relational arrangements within their examinations of athletic retirement, as opposed to focusing exclusively upon the psychological characteristics and personal circumstances of individual athletes (Stamp et al., 2021). The ways in which culturally informed retirement studies have accounted for the influence of socio-cultural contexts within their analyses has varied significantly in terms of theoretical underpinning, methodological approach, and overarching execution.

Simplistic, surface-level reviews of sports retirement scholarship may reveal that considerations of socio-cultural contexts, and their related implications for the construction of transitional experiences, have been present since the conception of the field. Indeed, several early studies of the topic were positioned as 'sociological' (Hill & Lowe, 1974; Mihovilovic, 1968). However, as I have previously discussed (see chapter 2.2), the conceptual foundations of these studies have been critiqued for their failure to address the complexity of retirement from modern sport and their over-emphasis on analysing the 'negative' aspects of retirement (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Stambulova et al., 2009).

In what I consider to be a pioneering example of the sociological study of sports retirement, Coakley (1983) challenged the normalised notion that retiring athletes are inevitably subjected to difficult retirement transitions. Instead, he argued that retiring from sport can be considered akin to a 'social rebirth', as it is through this process that athletes can withdraw from the exploitative ideologies that permeate modern sport contexts. Moreover, Coakley's work provided a basis to which future sociologically informed retirement scholars could consider how "the dynamics of the sport retirement process are grounded in the social structural context in which retirement takes place" (p. 1). In turn, his work formed a basis for researchers to examine how factors such as race, gender, class, and nationality may shape the ways in which athletes adjust to their post-sport lives.

Over the last two decades, a growing number of athletic retirement studies have attempted to account for the effects of cultural discourses and contingencies for athletes' post-sport transitions. This body of literature can be classified under a wider framework that Stambulova and Ryba (2014) termed as the 'cultural praxis' of athletic careers. Researchers have examined the influence of a range of cultural contexts in their efforts to understand the retirement experiences and outcomes of sportspeople more accurately. For example, Kuettel (2022) conducted a cross-cultural examination of the experiences of Polish, Danish, and Swedish retirees; Alfermann et al. (2004) conducted a cross-national comparison of German, Lithuanian, and Russian athletes' reactions to career termination; Fairlie and colleagues (2020) analysed the post-sport transitional experiences of elite Australian netball players. The primary intention of these studies has been to account for the "idiosyncratic nature" of post-sport transitional responses, whilst also paying attention to the potentially unique aspects of

specific sporting and national contexts (Fairlie et al., 2020, p. 1112). Certainly, Alfermann and colleagues (2004, p. 61), reporting on the results of a questionnaire completed by 256 former athletes, attended to this objective in their reports that “the emotional reactions of Russian and Lithuanian athletes were similar, but differed from the German athletes who, in general, showed more positive and lesser negative emotions after retirement”.

However, for the most part, this modest body of research has done little to de-stabilise the narrow vision of athletic retirement that has historically been presented throughout psychological interpretations of the topic (Denison & Winslade, 2006; Stamp et al., 2021). The analyses presented in these studies have primarily reproduced the dominant, reductionist perspectives that have been used to examine and predict post-sport transitional experiences throughout positivist and post-positivist research (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Indeed, these papers have suggested that the strength of athletic identities and the degrees of control that individual athletes hold over their retirement decisions remain the primary and most common indicators of sportspeople’s capacities to productively adjust to post-athletic life (Alfermann et al., 2004; Fairlie et al., 2020). In doing so, the same scholars have also argued that the accessibility of self-management resources, such as counselling and career support, is crucial for athletes’ efforts to positively transition out of sport (Kuettel, 2022). Therefore, owing to an over-reliance upon the mobilisation of generalisable and reductionist analytical models, this area of research has fundamentally failed to challenge the ways in which the social formations of modern sport may be implicated in shaping athletes’ retirement experiences (Coakley, 1983).

Acknowledging the drawbacks of adopting single-minded research approaches when attempting to interpret the difficulties associated with athletes' retirement transitions, Stier (2007), using a qualitative interview design, blended psychological and micro-sociological perspectives to analyse the identities of eight former professional Swedish tennis players. Stier noted that, although the ways in which retirees continue to self-identify with the athlete role can impact upon their adjustments to post-athletic life, their post-sport identities are also influenced by "new social expectations, diminishing public attention, a new lifestyle and changed status conditions" (p. 108). This reading encouraged Stier to conclude that the reality of retiring from sport may not be "as dramatic as much of the scientific literature suggests" (p. 108). This is perhaps the most significant argument made by the scholar. Stier suggested that sports retirement literature, up until his point of writing, had been overly reductive by siloing the experiences of retirees into finite 'positive' (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Coakley, 1983) and 'negative' (see the majority of early studies e.g., Mihovilovic, 1968) categories. In response, Stier argued that retirement from sport is perhaps better understood as an ambiguous experience that can be subjectively influenced by a range of psychological, social, cultural, and historical forces. This was an important acknowledgment that the mobilisation of alternative approaches might be necessary to more accurately explore the complexities of athletic retirement moving forward.

2.5.1 Narrative Inquiry in Sports Retirement Scholarship

Across the last three decades, a notable number of researchers have drawn upon narrative inquiry to examine the sports retirement process (Brown et al., 2009; Denison, 1996; James & Nadan, 2022; Sparkes, 1998). Narrative research typically sits at the intersection of psychological and sociological perspectives. The primary characteristic of narrative inquiry is to focus on the stories of individuals and how

these unfold and change over time with respect to the socio-cultural contexts in which they are immersed (Jewett et al., 2019). Narrative researchers claim that it is through these stories that individuals attach meaning to their lived experiences and, in turn, narratives act as a key, derivative source of their identities (Carless & Douglas, 2009).

Narrative inquiry is built upon the notion that identities are formed in relation to both personal and social contexts. In turn, narrative researchers argue that individuals construct the stories that they tell about themselves, and therefore their identities, using the narrative resources that are made available to them within their respective cultures (Sparkes, 1998). Carless and Douglas (2009), investigating the experiences of two former professional female golfers, suggested that the intense focus on performance throughout high-performance sport cultures can potentially limit sportspeople to, what they term as, 'performance-based' narratives to tell about the self. These authors argued that the dominance of performance-oriented narratives in sport cultures consistently results in athletes developing unidimensional identities that centre almost exclusively upon their athleticism and sporting achievements. Carless and Douglas emphasised that the development of performance-based narratives of the self during a sporting career can be problematic with respect to the retirement transition. This is because the narrative resources required to retain such an identity are often rendered unattainable after one withdraws from the high-performance context. Indeed, Carless and Douglas (p. 64) identified that one of their participants, having storied "their life around the contours of a performance narrative", found it immensely difficult to adapt to retired life, owing to the diminishing availability of performance-centred narrative resources; this was linked to the onset of depressive symptoms in retirement. In response, the authors suggested that it is essential for

sportspeople, during their careers, to develop and expand the narratives that they tell about themselves by, for example, engaging in activities and behaviours of self-development that do not solely centre upon athletic success e.g., appreciating opportunities for travel. The basis of this suggestion lies in the notion that expanding one's narrative resources can act as a means of forming a multi-dimensional sense of self. Carless and Douglas identified this characteristic in their second participant. This led the authors to suggest that expanding one's self-narratives throughout a sporting career can help athletes to develop a healthy and resilient self; an identity to negotiate the retirement transition in a more coherent way.

Carless and Douglas' (2009) study was a welcome advance for the field of sports retirement. The general sentiments made by the scholars have been supported in several recent studies. These include: Cavallerio et al.'s (2017) study of former competitive rhythmic gymnasts, Demetriou and colleagues' (2020) research regarding the enforced retirement of an Australian Rules football player, and Haslam et al.'s (2024) study exploring experiences of identity change amongst 21 retired competitive athletes. However, I must address a pressing issue associated with this section of the sports retirement literature. Carless and Douglas' (2009) research suggests that athletes should act with a sense of urgency to expand their narrative resources during their careers because this will help to mitigate the onset of those identity crisis symptoms associated with the retirement transition. This interpretivist position is built upon the assumption that sportspeople are free to act independently to construct their identities and, therefore, are equipped with the autonomy to re-envision, expand, and manage their identities both during and after their careers. However, as the literature reviewed later in this sub-chapter will reveal, it can be incredibly difficult

for athletes to re-imagine their identities in preparation for the post-sport transition (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Therefore, the typical advice provided by narrative researchers may not be effective across the athlete population and it may be particularly difficult to mobilise for those athletes who, upon retiring from sport, find themselves in an identity crisis (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). For those sportspeople experiencing moments such as these, Wendling and Sagas (2021) suggested that feelings of confusion and ambiguity should be embraced in the quest to 'find' a more stable sense of self. The authors' analysis showed that those retired sportspeople that are experiencing identity crises are not permanently subjected to these negative emotional responses, but they can, in fact, build increasingly salient identities by embracing these stages of liminality. This has been another important development for the expanding literature surrounding the connection between sports retirement and athletic identity. This is because Wendling and Sagas' study, in a similar vein to Stier's (2007) paper, transcends dominant, binary understandings of sports retirement that have tended to frame athletes' experiences as 'positive', 'negative', and 'linear'. Instead, their research demonstrates a greater appreciation for the nuances, paradoxes, and complexities of the athletic retirement process.

2.5.2 Using Social Theory to Explore the Phenomena of Sports Retirement

As previously established, there is a 'sociological' tradition present within sports retirement scholarship (Coakley, 1983). However, examples of social theorisation are somewhat limited. In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have drawn upon social theory to help forge a more informed understanding of the experiences of athletic retirees. Adopting this perspective has allowed researchers to illuminate the inherently complex and social nature of the sports retirement process. As a result, sociologists have articulated various ways through which athletes' retirement

experiences can be shaped and influenced by social, cultural, historical, and political formations. In the following two sub-sections, I explore the notable themes that have emerged from the social theorisation of the phenomena of sports retirement.

2.5.2.1 Sociological Interpretations of Post-sport Identities and Adjustment Issues

In line with psychological interpretations, sociologically informed sports retirement researchers have consistently acknowledged the significance of the connection between identity and post-sport transitions (Cosh, 2022). However, the utilisation of social theoretical perspectives has allowed researchers to demonstrate a more in-depth consideration and appreciation of the complexity of human identity and how this can influence athletes' adjustments to post-sport life.

Over the last decade, there has been an increase in research covering athlete career transitions through a sociological lens (Agnew et al., 2018; Hague & Law, 2022; Hickey & Roderick, 2017; 2023; Stamp et al., 2021). For example, Hickey and Roderick (2017), reporting on interview data collected with 10 male participants (all of which had experienced a career transition in the context of Premier League football in the United Kingdom), drew upon the work of Erving Goffman (1959) and the concept of 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986) to consider their transitional experiences. These authors argued that dominant psychological interpretations of athlete transitions have "failed in important senses either to acknowledge athletes' identities as social selves, that is as collectively agreed and validated, or privilege the potential analytical facility and nuances of faltering, insecure, and critical identity work" (p. 271). In response, Hickey and Roderick suggested that athletes' identities should be considered compositions of multiple selves, and that embracing this alternative perspective might provoke a new way of thinking about sporting career transitions. In doing so, their

analysis showed that transitioning footballers (re)construct their athletic identities, engage with non-athletic elements of the self, and are influenced by other social agents throughout their career transitions.

The aforementioned studies have departed from the dominance of psychological interpretations of athletes' career transitions (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). However, despite some of these studies considering the retirement transition within their analyses, they have largely been concerned with examining athletes' career transitions in a more general sense (Stambulova et al., 2021). Sociological research focusing specifically on athletes' adjustments to post-sport life has been more limited.

However, Stamp et al.'s (2023) recent study is a strong example of research that draws upon social theory to illustrate the complexity of the sports retirement process. In this study, the authors used an autoethnographic methodology to consider the embodied, relational, and emotional dimensions of the first author's retirement from semi-professional association football. Adopting a theoretical lens inspired by the work of Ian Burkitt (1999; 2014), the authors demonstrated that retirement from sport is linked to an array of bodily feelings and physical sensations (e.g., sadness, happiness, disappointment, pride) that can only be explained through a retiree's interactions with other agents within the multiple social worlds that they inhabit. In doing so, Stamp et al. (2023) suggested that one's athletic identity is only one element of the multiple selves that they embody, and, in turn, post-sport transitional experiences are influenced by an array of personal and social identities and relations. This is a relational interpretation of athletic retirement (Crossley, 2011). Stamp and colleagues' (2023) work develops, and critiques, psychological readings of sports retirement by suggesting that the emotions associated with post-sport adjustments cannot be

reduced to the psychological characteristics of individuals but, rather, they must be understood relationally.

Stamp et al.'s recommendation that athletes' retirement experiences should be considered through a relational lens is supported by Andrijiv's (2020) research findings. In this study, Andrijiv argued that the context of North American hockey is purposefully organised in a way that produces highly regulated athletic identities that are almost exclusively connected to one's sporting attributes. Thereby, these settings are complicit in limiting athletes' capacities to develop professionally in alternative settings as a means of preparing for their retirement transitions; a strategy that has consistently been prescribed by sports retirement researchers (Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021; Lally, 2007; Schmid et al., 2023). In turn, Andrijiv (2020, p. 910) argued that the strategic management and regulation of athletes' identities by sport organisations can "complicate the process of retirement and engender transition-related difficulties". These studies, in conjunction with sociological readings of athlete career transitions in the wider sense, represent an alternative way of thinking about the experiences of sportspeople. However, one could argue that these interpretivist interpretations of retirement remain somewhat limited as they do not capture how relations of power may impact upon the identity-cultivating capacities of sportspeople (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Alternatively, critical sociologists have developed the pioneering work of Coakley (1983) to consider how athletes' adjustments to post-sport life are influenced by social dynamics such as gender, race, and socio-economic status. For example, Agnew and Drummond (2015), drawing upon the findings of 20 interviews conducted with former Australian Rules footballers, theorised that retirement from sport can trigger a

disruption to the dominant ways in which male athletes construct their masculine identities. For these authors, high-performance sport cultures produce and sustain the hegemonic masculinities that male athletes typically resonate with. Therefore, upon the termination of their footballing careers, the majority of participants in Agnew and Drummond's study felt compelled to identify new avenues through which their masculine identities could be (re)consolidated. However, as their analysis revealed, this process can be incredibly difficult.

In another example of a critical sociological interpretation of athletic retirement, Campbell (2020) presented an intersectional account of 16 retired professional association footballers' (all identifying as 'black', working class, and male) experiences of transitioning into mainstream employment. In doing so, the author exposed how class and racialised identities can complicate retirees' experiences. Indeed, Campbell's work demonstrates how these former players' struggles to identify appropriate and productive post-career opportunities can be connected to the cultural biases that marginalise black, working class individuals both within and beyond the context of association football in the United Kingdom. In turn, the author argued that retired black footballers suffer disadvantageously from the racialised structures of modern British society.

These critical sociologies of athletic retirement, although very limited in number, have exposed the ways in which social identity formations might intensify the adjustment difficulties experienced by retirees. These studies have illustrated the necessity of shifting away from static, unidimensional interpretations of the relationship between athletic identity and sports retirement. In addition to these studies, a number of poststructuralist readings of sports retirement have emerged in recent years. Although

both paradigmatic approaches seek to account for the influence of political relations in their analyses, post-structural interpretations of sports retirement differ from critical humanist accounts “in terms of the role of the individual within the negotiation of the power relations” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 50). Indeed, critical humanist approaches adopt a dualistic understanding of power that typically assumes that a ‘true’ or ‘universal’ version of the self can be discovered once one has been liberated from the constraints of certain ideological structures. In the context of sports retirement scholarship, the emerging assumption from this perspective is that, although ideological dynamics (e.g., race) can limit athletes’ capacities to productively adjust to post-sport life, should these structures be removed or overcome, athletes should be able to experience less problematic retirement adjustments. In contrast, for those scholars who hold post-structural sensibilities, relations of power cannot simply be overcome (Markula & Silk, 2011). Rather, these scholars believe that power relations permeate all aspects of human life (Foucault, 1990; 1991a). For poststructuralist sports retirement researchers, the effects of power are potent, influencing the behaviours, activities, and dispositions of sportspeople (Markula & Pringle, 2006). In turn, post-structural readings of athletic retirement have primarily been concerned with examining the effects of relations of power for the ways in which sportspeople are able to adjust to post-athletic life.

The first major sports retirement study to draw upon the theoretical tenets of poststructuralism was conducted by Hickey and Kelly (2008). Utilising data collected from a study funded by the Australian Football League (AFL), in addition to interview data collected with 36 current AFL players, these authors explored the effects of ‘professional’ athletic identities for the sports retirement process. The Foucauldian

informed analysis encouraged these scholars to argue that the athletic identities of professional footballers are products of the normalising effects of the disciplinary cultures of high-performance sport. Hickey and Kelly's findings revealed that athletes' lived obligation to conform with the normalising standards of high-performance sport can work to restrict their efforts and abilities to suitably prepare for their post-sport transitions. Therefore, the authors argued that the development of a learned, disciplined athletic identity can prove detrimental to athletes' capacities to negotiate their withdrawals from sport environments in a productive manner.

Hickey and Kelly's (2008) reading of the sports retirement process has been of great importance for the emergence of poststructuralist scholarship in the field. Their work demonstrates that scholars must examine the relationship between identity and retirement through the relational lenses of sport's various discursive contexts. This perspective has been crucial in cultivating further post-structural readings of sports retirement. For example, Crocket (2014) developed a Foucauldian informed theoretical framework to illustrate how retirement from sport can present a unique opportunity for former athletes to ethically problematise the ways in which their athletic identities had been shaped through their exposures to the normalising arrangements of modern sport.

Perhaps the most significant post-structural interpretation of the sports retirement process to emerge over the last decade has been Jones and Denison's (2017) study of retirement from professional association football in the United Kingdom. Using interview data collected with 25 former players, Jones and Denison examined how an exposure to disciplinary relations of power during a footballing career could shape and influence the retirement experience (Foucault, 1991a). In doing so, the authors

identified that the meanings that the former footballers attached to their retirement experiences were conflicting. On one hand, retirement from sport represented a challenge for their participants because they were forced to adapt to a new context that, unlike professional football, was not intensely regulated by the strict control of time and space. Indeed, for several of Jones and Denison's (2017) participants, the removal of these structures proved to be disorientating during the retirement transition. On the other hand, a number of the former footballers stated that they experienced a sense of relief upon withdrawing from these disciplinary environments. By drawing upon the Foucauldian concepts of the *means of correct training* and panopticism, Jones and Denison neatly illustrated that these participants felt relief upon retiring from football as they were no longer bound to the constraining surveillance mechanisms that defined their careers. In this regard, Jones and Denison's findings suggest that the termination of a footballing career, and one's subsequent adjustment to post-sport life, is likely to carry a contradictory legacy.

Sociological interpretations of athletic retirement, and particularly those that have been imbued with the influence of social theory, have strengthened scholarly understandings of the relationship between identity and the post-sport adjustment. Not only have these readings more effectively accounted for the complexity of human identity, in a more sophisticated and significant depth than dominant psychological interpretations of post-sport life (Stamp et al., 2021), but they have also demonstrated that athletes' post-sport adaptations are shaped by their in-career experiences (Jones & Denison, 2017), their relationships with other social agents (Stamp et al., 2023), and their exposure to certain political agendas (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Undoubtedly, there is an underlying strength to this body of research. However, an associated limitation of

this section of the literature is that, to date, researchers have largely failed to expand upon how these complex, and often problematic, adjustments to post-sport life may extend beyond the initial retirement transition by continuing to affect the remainder of athletes' lives after sport; a limitation that is present throughout the sports retirement field (Barth et al., 2021; McMahon & McGannon, 2023).

2.5.2.2 Sociological Readings of the Retired Athletic Body

As I have previously discussed (see chapter 2.3.2), positivist and post-positivist attempts to understand the bodily and exercise relations of retired athletes have been relatively limited. In recent years, a growing number of sociologists have attempted to attend to this paucity in research by drawing upon social theory to illuminate the multiple, complex meaning-making processes that former sportspeople ascribe to their changing bodies in their lives after sport (Jones et al., 2022).

Sociological examinations of the retired athletic body have been a recent development in the field. For the most part, researchers have focused on understanding former athletes' relationships with physical activity. This area of research was recently bolstered by an edited collection compiled by Jones, Avner, and Denison (2023), in which athletes-turned-scholars, hailing from a number of athletic disciplines, used theoretically informed narratives to critically reflect upon their ongoing relationships with exercise, their bodies, and their physical movements. A range of theoretical perspectives were presented in this collection, including narrative theory (Douglas, 2023), phenomenology (Butryn, 2023; Toner, 2023), and relational sociology (Stamp, 2023). This body of research has carefully illustrated the complexity of athletic retirees' relationships with bodily movement. For example, Toner (2023) demonstrated that the objectification of his golfing technique by former coaches has significantly influenced

his bodily relations throughout his post-sport life as he has experienced an associated, residual sense of 'bodily dys-appearance' (where the body feels uneasy, ill, and deviant). This has provoked ongoing feelings of discomfort and unease regarding his posture and bodily techniques throughout his life after sport.

In addition, Stamp (2023) revealed that his retirement from professional association football has allowed him to seek out new forms of exercise with a wider variety of relational networks. In this piece, Stamp articulated the relief that he associates with now being able to engage with physical activities alongside his familial network. The author illustrated that the enjoyment gained from the re-ascription of his exercise practices can be connected to the movement constraints that he encountered throughout his footballing career. For Stamp, the relational networks of association football shaped the embodiment of a hierarchical, judgemental, and performance-based structure for his physical movement. However, retiring from sport has allowed Stamp the opportunity to resist and re-imagine those movement practices that he embodied during his career.

Extant sociological research surrounding the retired athletic body has demonstrated the multiplicity of meanings that former sportspeople attach to their experiences of physical movement. This body of research has shown that former athletes' relationships with exercise, both within and well beyond their immediate retirement adjustments, cannot be separated from their in-career experiences. Poststructuralist theory has also offered a fruitful way of thinking about the art of movement in retirement. As Jones and Denison (2019, p. 931), utilising a narrative approach based upon the first author's experiences as a retired professional association football player, illustrated, athletes' docility can "be a significant obstacle to developing alternative

meanings of exercise". These authors argued that the disciplinary organisation of athlete movement, a key component in the formation of modern coaching practices (Shogan, 1999), imposes a disciplinary logic upon the athletic body, which is incredibly difficult for sportspeople to overcome. In turn, retirees can find it challenging to negotiate new relationships with exercise beyond the exclusionary means of performance.

Jones and Denison's (2019) paper covered new ground by utilising the work of Foucault (1991a) to examine former athletes' relationships with movement. Developing this perspective, Jones, Avner, and Denison (2022), again adopting an autoethnographic approach to cover the experiences of each author respectively, suggested that retired athletes' problematic relationships with exercise may not be fixed. The narrative vignettes presented by these authors demonstrate that the effects of 'becoming' a disciplined athletic body during a sporting career are profound, and that the associated movement subjectivities have continued to influence their relationships with exercise throughout their post-sport lives. However, Jones and colleagues also suggested that they have not been passive in their acceptance of these meanings. Rather, the authors demonstrated that retiring from sport has allowed them to engage with alternative ways of moving and thinking about exercise. Indeed, this narrative was particularly evident in the third author's (Denison, a retired distance runner) writing. This finding has since been supported by several Foucauldian scholars (Gerdin, 2023; Kuklick, 2023; Mills, 2023). These authors have explained that, although dominant bio-scientific discourses can limit modern athletes' capacities to experience movement practices in non-regulated ways, retirement can provide sportspeople with

a greater degree of opportunity to ethically problematise sport's dominant discourses and, in turn, re-ascribe and develop more fulfilling meanings about exercise.

Furthermore, poststructuralist scholars covering the retired athletic body have extended their examinations, beyond physical movement, to a range of bodily practices and behaviours. In this regard, the work of McMahon et al. (2012) has been significant. Using a Foucauldian informed ethnographic methodology, these authors revealed that Australian swimming culture represents an institutional setting where particular discourses and techniques of power are concentrated upon athletes' bodies. Indeed, these authors demonstrated that swimmers' exposures to problematic discourses surrounding bodily and weight regulation throughout their careers can carry troubling implications for how they navigate their post-sport lives. For instance, McMahon and colleagues identified that retired swimmers might be likely to engage in a range of problematic bodily behaviours, such as the near-permanent self-monitoring of their dietary intakes; a damaging legacy of the surveillance that they were subjected to throughout their careers. These findings have been supported in a more recent study conducted by McMahon and McGannon (2023). The observations made by these researchers are profound as they have indicated that former athletes, some ten to thirty years beyond the cessation of their careers, can continue to be immersed in problematic relationships with movement and their bodies. These relations, as emphasised in both McMahon et al.'s (2012) and McMahon and McGannon's (2023) studies, can have damaging implications for the physical and mental well-being of retirees. Certainly, this is a strength of previous sociological readings of the retired athletic body. Researchers have explicitly demonstrated that a career in high-performance sport can be connected to a range of residual implications for how

former athletes relate to their bodies and exercise, well beyond their initial retirement transitions (Jones et al., 2023).

Existing sociological research surrounding the bodily and exercise relations of retired sportspeople has made significant progress in advancing the field. This is because many of these studies have covered important ground in illustrating the complex nature of athletic retirees' relationships with their bodies and physical movement. Certainly, (auto-)ethnographic methodologies have consistently proven valuable to scholars seeking deeper insights into these relations (Jones et al., 2023). This is because mobilising this qualitative methodology has allowed researchers to develop their imaginations and interpretive openness, to think deeply and theoretically, and to work upon the self in the process (Gearity, 2025). However, the near ubiquitous use of this method across this body of literature has resulted in empirical understandings of these phenomena remaining somewhat limited, with respect to the wider population of retired athletes. In light of the platform that has been provided by reflective interpretation, further empirical research regarding the retired athletic body, inclusive of a wider and more representative sample of retirees, would be logical.

2.6 The Benefits of Examining Athletic Retirement Through a Poststructuralist Lens

In the previous sub-chapter, I outlined a number of the sociological approaches and theories that have been used to examine the phenomena of sports retirement. Several important themes emerged from this review, including: the problematisation of psychological readings of athletic identity, the difficulties that are faced by athletes throughout their retirement adjustments, and the complexity of former athletes' relationships with movement and their bodies. Evidently, to retire from sport is an

immensely complex process that can unfold across many years and influences individuals in a multiplicity of ways (Jones & Denison, 2017; Jones et al., 2022).

Several studies have pointed to the advantages of assessing the phenomena of sports retirement through a poststructuralist lens (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Jones & Denison, 2017; 2019). Poststructuralism, and specifically the associated Foucauldian theorisation, provides the epistemological and ontological currents necessary to facilitate the examination of subjective retirement experiences and perspectives (Avner et al., 2014), and to disrupt the overly simplistic, normative, and essentialist conceptualisations of identity that have long saturated the field i.e., by questioning how individuals' modes of being and thinking are fabricated by socio-cultural, political, and historical formations (Heyes, 2014; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Markula & Silk, 2011). Furthermore, post-structural logic has allowed sports retirement scholars to consider the omnipresence and significance of relations of power within their analyses (Foucault, 1990; 1991a). Indeed, Jones and Denison's (2017) findings demonstrate that the production of docility during an athletic career, through an exposure to taken-for-granted disciplinary coaching practices, can have a series of implications for the ways in which sportspeople adapt to post-athletic life. In doing so, their research points to how athletes' retirement experiences are influenced and shaped by the subtle relations and interactions that construct their lived experiences throughout their careers e.g., coach-athlete relationships (Brown, 2024; Jones, 2020). This consideration has provided a new way of thinking about sports retirement; a new perspective that shifts away from those psychological interpretations of the phenomena that have long dominated the field (Jones et al., 2022).

Brown's (2024) recent examination of elite coaches' roles in athletes' retirement transitions is an example of this post-structural, relational perspective. In this study, Brown, drawing upon the findings of a Foucauldian discourse analysis of eight interviews conducted with coaches from the United Kingdom, demonstrated that coaches draw upon dominant performance and coaching discourses to construct their perceptions of the athletic retirement process. Most coaches interviewed for Brown's study positioned the sports retirement process as inevitably problematic, owing to athletes' adoption of high-performance sport's dominant performance discourses (e.g., the pursuit of performance excellence and the need for discipline and sacrifice). Alternatively, select coaches constructed the athletic retirement process in more positive terms. These participants perceived the post-sport transition to be an opportunity for their athletes to redeploy the valuable life skills that are learned in a sporting career. Brown argued that the coaches' stances were underpinned by patriarchal understandings of the coach-athlete relationship, in which the participants felt a responsibility to support their athletes throughout their retirement transitions. However, drawing upon Foucault's (2008) concept of governmentality, Brown (2024) theorised that the responsibility for managing retirement transitions is often placed upon individual athletes because coaches are subjected to disciplinary tensions to comply with performance discourses and standards. Brown's study has covered important new ground in exposing the further relational tensions that are associated with athletes' retirement transitions. However, as the author clarified in his conclusion, this study only further reinforced the necessity of continuing to investigate the topic of sports retirement through a poststructuralist lens.

It should be noted at this juncture that I recognise the merits of assessing athletic retirement through a poststructuralist lens. Post-structural and Foucauldian theoretical frameworks have been significant in allowing scholars to account for how the political disciplining of modern athletes' minds and bodies can impact upon their ongoing adjustments to post-sport life. Indeed, although poststructuralist readings of sports retirement remain somewhat limited (Jones, 2020), extant studies have shown that the underlying philosophical assumptions of this paradigm act as an appropriate avenue for disrupting the dominant ways of thinking about the phenomena by directly problematising humanist, psychological, and positivist interpretations of experience (Jones et al., 2022). In the following sub-chapter, I review the existing research that relates to this project's population of study – retired British Olympians. I examine this area of the literature with the strengths of existing poststructuralist perspectives in mind.

2.7 Retirement From Olympic Sport

Research focusing specifically upon the retirement experiences of Olympians has been relatively limited. That said, a number of sports retirement studies have included data collected from an extensive range of sportspeople, including those who have competed in Olympic competition, within their analyses (Park et al., 2013). For example, Warriner and Lavalley's (2008) study on the retirement experiences of elite female gymnasts draws upon interview data collected with seven participants; two of which had competed at the Olympic standard. Therefore, in this study, retired Olympians simply comprise a limited section of a more general population of study. This implies the undertaking of an acontextual analysis. Indeed, Warriner and Lavalley did not specifically attempt to consider how the retirement experiences of these

gymnasts may, or may not, have been shaped by their immersion in disciplinary Olympic cultures. This point provides an introductory insight into the state of scholarly understandings of this topic.

There have been a small number of retirement studies conducted with samples of former Olympians exclusively. These studies have most commonly been informed by the principles of post-positivism. Werthner and Orlick's (1986) examination of the experiences of retired Canadian Olympians was the first, widely cited example of research addressing the topic of retirement from Olympic sport. Reporting on interview data collected with 28 former Canadian Olympians, these authors identified that psychological difficulties were a prominent issue amongst this population. Indeed, their findings revealed that 78% of the retired Olympians had experienced some degree of psychological difficulty after leaving sport, with a further 32% of participants categorising their experiences as "extremely difficult and traumatic" (p. 344). Moreover, Werthner and Orlick identified that these adaptive challenges were consistently attributed to disruptions to the former Olympians' senses of self-control and self-confidence.

Werthner and Orlick's (1986) findings have generally been supported by more recent studies regarding the retirement transitions of Olympians (Stephan, 2003; Torregrosa et al., 2004). In line with the majority of psychological interpretations, these studies have emphasised the importance of viewing retirement as a gradual process and preparing for the post-sport transition. In addition, a more recent study conducted by Torregrosa and colleagues (2015) injected a new perspective to this body of research. Their research used two separate sets of interviews with the same sample of retired Olympic athletes, situated ten years apart (only 15 of the original 18 participants

contributed to the second phase of the study). The longitudinal study design was devised to allow these authors “to assess athletes' accuracy in predicting the process and its outcomes in relation to the trajectory followed” (p. 50). In a similar light to Werthner and Orlick's (1986) findings, Torregrosa et al. (2015) reported that unidimensional athletic identities were a significant barrier for the development of positive retirement experiences. In addition, by adopting a longitudinal study design, these researchers were able to assess and re-emphasise the importance of athletes' efforts to prepare for their retirement transitions. Specifically, Torregrosa and colleagues advocated that athletes should undertake dual-career roles. The scholars argued that this can increase sportspeople's likelihood to cognitively accept the inevitability of the retirement moment.

The data reported by most studies covering the topic of Olympic retirement has largely supported the dominant findings of psychological interpretations of the retirement phenomena (Fuller, 2014). This is because Olympic retirement researchers have also consistently focused on connecting Olympians' post-sport adjustment experiences to their psychological characteristics and personal circumstances (e.g., Werthner & Orlick, 1986). For the most part, this approach has come at the expense of considering how the broader socio-cultural contexts of the modern Olympic project might work to shape and influence Olympians' retirement adjustments, across both the short and longer term.

However, over the last decade, research by Cosh et al. (2015) and Silver (2021) have developed the field of Olympic retirement. These studies have presented some form of shift from the dominance of psychological interpretations. Silver (2021) conducted 24 in-depth interviews with retired Olympians, from a range of national contexts, to

examine how their perceptions of aging have influenced their adaptations to post-sport life. In doing so, the author identified that retirement is often a challenging experience for athletes as it marks their transitions into the realities of adulthood and signifies a major shift in life's purpose. In addition, Cosh and colleagues (2015) conducted a discursive analysis of 121 media articles that reported on the post-retirement experiences of two Australian Olympic swimmers. This is perhaps the most convincing socio-cultural examination, to date, of retirement from Olympic sport. This is because these authors identified that media coverage can contribute to the construction of those discourses that place the responsibility for managing transitional difficulties upon individual athletes. Whereas, historically, the influence of sport's wider socio-cultural forces for the construction of these discourses has largely been overlooked (Stier, 2007). Despite the welcome advances made by these studies, neither have directly looked to problematise how the punitive characteristics of modern Olympic sport cultures may influence Olympians' long-term adjustments to post-sport life, despite the aforementioned importance of doing so (see chapter 2.6).

With respect to the sample of study for this project, there has been very limited research conducted into the experiences of retired British Olympians. Cooper et al. (2021), reporting on the findings of a questionnaire completed by 650 participants who had competed across 36 summer and winter Olympic Games (from Berlin 1936 to Sochi 2014), attempted to shed some light on the post-sport lives of British Olympians. To do so, these authors examined the relationship between Olympians' in-career injuries, their joint health in post-sport life, and their reasons for retirement. Their findings revealed that 19.5% of the former British Olympians had retired from sport due to injury and that the lifetime prevalence of these Olympic career injuries was

56.6%. This study has provided a basic insight into how a career in the context of British Olympic sport may have lasting implications for the physical health of former athletes. However, in a similar light to the literature reviewed throughout this sub-chapter thus far, the bio-scientific framework adopted by Cooper and colleagues does little to problematise how an exposure to particular relations of power during an Olympic career may contribute to the long-term physical health of retired Olympians.

2.7.1 The Influence of Social Capital Upon the Retirement Experiences of Olympians

Although relatively modest, a small section of the literature surrounding Olympic retirement has attempted to account for how an Olympic career might impact upon Olympians' retirement adjustments. These studies have sought to acknowledge how the dominant cultural position of the modern Olympic project may stimulate certain conditions for the experiences of former Olympians (Guttman, 2002). Indeed, researchers have drawn upon social capital frameworks (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986) to consider how the prestige attached to the Olympic competition can influence the productive capacities of Olympians to adapt to post-sport life (Eisen & Turner, 1992).

Researchers working in this area of Olympic retirement scholarship have primarily situated their findings in the context of the nation-state. Thus, scholars have accounted for the disparities in the levels of social capital that former Olympians are able to accumulate, possess, and mobilise. Subsequently, researchers have investigated the social mobility statuses of former Olympians through the cultural lenses of several nation-states, including the United States of America (Eisen & Turner, 1992), Poland (Pawlak, 1984), Germany (Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003), China (Li & Wang, 2021), and Switzerland (Schmid et al., 2022). The data collected in these

research studies are contextually specific. However, there are thematic similarities throughout the findings of these studies. For example, Pawlak (1984, p. 177), applying a mixed-methods approach of documentary examination and quantitative surveys, reported:

The Olympians, as a population marked by a high social status as the result of sport achievements, remained in the upper regions of the hierarchy of social prestige. They also developed marked activity in social work, in social relations, and in the cultural sphere.

Pawlak determined that the post-sport successes of former Polish Olympians typically centred upon the possession of high aspirations - that were set free and consolidated through competitive sport - as well as the considerable educational qualifications that were typically held by Polish Olympians upon retiring from sport. These findings have recently been supported by Schmid et al. (2022), almost forty years after Pawlak's study was published. These authors concluded that "involvement in high-performance sport facilitates rather than hinders a successful vocational career" (p. 1253). Schmid and colleagues, reporting on the findings of a survey conducted with 341 former Swiss Olympians, connected this link with the increased rate of higher education degrees obtained by Olympic athletes, in comparison to the general population.

Research from an international context has strongly indicated that an Olympic career can help to stimulate an increase in vocational and educational opportunities for retirees. In doing so, scholars have suggested that this correlation is linked to the high levels of educational and psychological capital that can be accumulated through a career in Olympic sport (Li & Wang, 2021). However, there has been a limited breadth

of coverage with regard to how social and cultural capital may influence the retirement experiences of British Olympians. Despite this, we can look toward critical sociologies of British Olympic identities to understand the potential implications of theoretically analysing their retirement adjustments through these frameworks. As Smith et al. (2013) reported, 37% of British medal winners at Tokyo 2008 were privately educated; disproportionately, only around 7% of British children are enrolled into the private education system at any given time. Accounting for these statistics, I would suggest that drawing upon a social capital framework to examine the retirement experiences of British Olympians may be inadequate. The social identities of British Olympic athletes, although heterogenous, could facilitate the disproportionate accumulation of social and cultural capital. In this sense, one might argue that, under a Bourdieusian framework, the educational and vocational opportunities afforded to British Olympians may be disproportionately based upon typical socio-economic statuses, as opposed to sporting capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Schmid et al., 2022). In addition, presenting such a narrow focus on the role of social capital, and its formations and uses, would exclude the examination of how the intricate workings of anatomo-political relations of power may have implications for the long-term well-being of retired British Olympians, irrespective of their socio-economic identities and backgrounds (Jones & Denison, 2017; Markula & Silk, 2011).

Conclusion

Across the last four decades, a significant amount of empirical research has been conducted on the experiences of athletic retirees. Studies have represented a sizable proportion of the athlete population, with research covering a range of disciplinary,

gendered, racial, and national contexts. However, I have two primary concerns with extant research, upon which my study will build.

Firstly, athletic retirement scholarship has long been dominated by psychological interpretations of the phenomena. These dominant readings have largely come at the expense of considering how social, cultural, relational, and political factors influence athletes' adjustments to post-sport life (Stamp et al., 2021). In recent years, a growing number of scholars have set out to attend to this paucity in research (Brown, 2024; Jones & Denison, 2017; Jones et al., 2022; Stamp et al., 2023). However, sports retirement remains under-researched and somewhat poorly understood from a sociological perspective, with several athletic contexts being overlooked throughout existing research (Jones, 2020). Indeed, there has been no research, to date, examining the retirement experiences (either over the short or longer term) of British Olympians through a poststructuralist lens. My research will not only address this gap, but it will develop post-structural understandings of athletic retirement by conducting an in-depth examination of the relationship between sport coaching and athletic retirement in the British Olympic context. In turn, I will call into question "those who are ethically responsible for the development of [athletes] and who need to carefully consider how a [athlete] experiences his [*sic*] career" (Jones & Denison, 2017, p. 937), in an attempt to question and disrupt those problematic consequences that remain associated with retirement from sport.

Secondly, despite some notable exceptions (Barth et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2023; McMahon et al., 2012), most existing sports retirement research, inclusive of both psychological and sociological interpretations, has focused most intently upon examining athletes' experiences of their immediate retirement adjustments. This

research has been crucial in developing the field (Stambulova et al., 2021). However, there remains a dearth in research dedicated to examining the phenomena of sports retirement from a 'longitudinal' standpoint (Barth et al., 2021). That is, relatively little is known about how a career in sport might continue to impact upon the lived experiences of former athletes for the remainder of their lives after sport (Jones et al., 2022). As I have hoped to make clear at various points throughout this chapter, a small number of researchers have begun to shed some initial light on the importance of problematising the various 'legacies' that are associated with an immersion within the disciplinary cultures of high-performance sport. For example, McMahon & McGannon's (2023) research has illustrated how athletes' exposures to certain, problematic power-knowledge relations can shape and influence their relationships with nutrition and exercise well beyond the termination of their careers. My study will continue to develop this section of the literature by, again, introducing an under-represented sample (retired British Olympians) to these ongoing questions regarding the residual implications of a career in sport. Indeed, I envision this to be a logical and important step in developing a nuanced understanding of retirement from British Olympic sport. This is because, as recent reports in both the media and academia have shown (see chapter 1), a career in the context of British Olympic sport can have significant, and potentially damaging, effects for the well-being of Olympians. Therefore, it has become increasingly pertinent to question the potential permanence of these implications and to investigate how retired British Olympians may have (or may have not) negotiated these effects over a long-term basis.

Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline this study's theoretical framework. In light of the various merits and concessions associated with existing approaches to studying Olympic retirement (see chapter 2), this study's theoretical framework is based upon the work of Michel Foucault (1990; 1991a) and, specifically, his earlier work regarding the emergence of modern power. This framework is employed as a means of making sense of both the ongoing retirement experiences of British Olympians and Olympic coaches' perspectives of the Olympic retirement process.

Michel Foucault's work is highly valuable for sociologists seeking the in-depth examination and problematisation of complex phenomena, such as Olympic retirement. Therefore, in order to do justice to the breadth of his philosophy, I begin this chapter by introducing Michel Foucault as one of the most significant scholars of the 20th and 21st centuries. Secondly, I describe the advent of Foucault's (1991a) concept of 'disciplinary power' and use this discussion to chart the emergence and evolution of the modern Olympic Games. Following this, I dissect the anatomy of disciplinary power in more detail. To do so, I explore the various techniques and instruments of disciplinary power, as delineated by Foucault, by relating their mechanisms and effects to the lives of modern Olympians. In the final section of this chapter, I consider the various ways in which Olympic coaching practitioners are implicated in, and influenced by, the complex power-knowledge networks of modern British Olympic sport.

3.1 The Foucault Effect

“The Foucault effect has been phenomenal”

(Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 7)

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is one of the most influential theorists of modern times. His work has been incredibly influential across the social sciences and humanities (Cole et al., 2004). As a scholar, Foucault was uncomfortable with aligning himself with specific schools of theory and method (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Thus, he, rather elusively, labelled the majority of his work a ‘history of the present’ (Foucault, 1991a; Garland, 2014). This genealogical approach allowed Foucault to directly challenge and disrupt the dominant ontological and epistemological foundations that have historically legitimated the human sciences (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Andrews (1993) argued that Foucault’s work should be utilised by scholars of sport to develop innovative research agendas for sport sociology. From this call, Foucauldian concepts have made a significant contribution to the growth of the discipline (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Indeed, sociologists of sport have drawn upon Foucauldian theorisation to examine and problematise a number of sport and exercise contexts, these include: aerobics (Markula, 1995), rowing (Chapman, 1997), swimming (Jones et al., 2005; McMahon & Dinan-Thompson, 2011), gymnastics (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010), strength and conditioning (Gearity & Mills, 2012), endurance running (Mills & Denison, 2013), association football (Manley et al., 2016), ballet (Clark & Markula, 2017), and ice hockey (Andrijew & Jones, 2023). The influence of Foucauldian thought for the sociology of sport led Cole et al. (2004, p. 207) to suggest that “serious scholars of sport cannot avoid Foucault’s formulations”.

For Foucauldian sport scholarship, the most influential text from Michel Foucault's *oeuvre* has been the seminal ***Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*** (Foucault, 1991a). Inspired by his work with the Prisons Information Group in France, this text is a genealogical examination of the emergence of modern Western systems of penitentiary (Dean & Zamora, 2021). At this point in his thinking, Foucault was concerned with understanding *how* power functioned in the modern epoch. Foucault (1990, p. 94), demonstrated that power is not a possession to be held by a nation-state or an economic class, nor is it something that could be "acquired, seized or shared" by these groups. Rather, he illustrated that power is a relational force that manifests through multiple forms (Markula & Pringle, 2006). For Foucault (1990) power was not a noun but a verb – an omnipresent strategy that affects all aspects of life. In ***Discipline and Punish***, Foucault's (1991a) primary concern was to examine relations of power in their 'disciplinary' form. His analyses showed that disciplinary arrangements of power are intertwined with the production and use of knowledge and that these power-knowledge relations produce certain ways of knowing, thinking, and being amongst individuals. Thus, allowing for the prescription and maintenance of social order (Foucault, 1980a; Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Foucault (1991a, p. 104) understood that disciplinary power works to establish control through the "means of surveillance". Principally, disciplinary power operates through the combination of several technologies that focus upon the human body as the "object and target of power" (p. 136). Sociologists of sport have drawn upon this social and political focus on the human body to make connections between disciplinary power and the arrangements of sport and exercise cultures. Indeed, Foucauldian scholars of sport have demonstrated that the body is not only an essential component

for the art of movement, but also in the administration of power (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Rail & Harvey, 1995; Shogan, 1999). The relationship between disciplinary power and modern sport provoked Brohm (1989) to suggest that sporting cultures represent the finest exemplary contexts of the intricate workings of discipline.

3.2 The Emergence of Disciplinary Power

To conceptualise the emergence of modern penitentiary systems, Foucault (1991a; 1998) adopted a genealogical approach inspired by the legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche. This approach began with a diagnosis of the current situation: a point in which Foucault (1991a, p. 162) conceived the modern prison to represent an aspect of the “political technology of the body”. This prompted Foucault to examine the genealogy of this scenario by uncovering how this point had been reached as a result of shifts in power-knowledge relations over time (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Garland, 2014). Foucault (1991a) traced the emergence of disciplinary power to the struggles, displacements, and processes that have occurred throughout Western society since the pre-modern epoch.

In the pre-modern era, the principal sphere of power in society centred upon the sovereign. In an exercise derived from the ancient *partia potestas* – a conviction that granted the right to the father of a Roman family to dispose of the life of his children and his slaves (Foucault, 1990) – the monarchical power of the sovereign controlled subjects through the arts of punishment, such as public execution and torture (Foucault, 1991a). This was the central mode of governance in pre-modern times (Foucault, 2004).

However, Foucault (1991a) identified that the effects of this modality of power gradually became less effective during the modernisation of Western society. The

exercise of sovereign power became an inefficient mode of governance in this time as the monarchical 'super-power' began to produce conflicts and discontinuities for the essential punitive practices of modern society. The dysfunctionality of sovereign rule was incapable of effectively organising the distribution of power in the modern, industrial age – a period in which economic opportunities increased throughout the social body. In turn, during this period, there was a significant shift in how power was distributed throughout society; a new economy of power emerged that oversaw “its better distribution, so that it should be neither too concentrated at a certain privileged point, nor too divided between opposing authorities” (p. 80).

According to Foucault (1990), this modern economy of power is characterised by two poles. One of these poles is designed to supervise the population through a series of interventions and regulatory controls that form a bio-political strategy. The other pole, and the first to be formed, centres upon the “body as a machine” to produce an “anatomy-politics of the human body” (p. 139). This form of power is potent and omnipresent, diffuse as a constant throughout human interactions and relationships. Although this modality of power is never fixed or localised in a single entity, its effects are assured by ‘modern disciplines’ and institutions, such as the military, the school, the workshop, and the prison (Foucault, 1991a). Foucault referred to this form of power as disciplinary power.

For Foucault, the emergence of disciplinary power was an essential component in the modernisation of Western society. The more efficient operation of power was a necessary mechanism for the formation and distribution of a modern social body that was, and remains to this day, concerned with developing ideas of rationalism and humanism (Foucault, 1980a; 1991a). More detailed arrangements of power relations

have allowed for the cultivation, organisation, and optimisation of individuals; a characteristic of modern power that the sovereign was incapable of attaining (Foucault, 1980b). In the modern, disciplinary society this is accomplished through gaining access to the individual body. Disciplinary power operates through several technologies that are designed to attain and maintain control of individual bodies through subtle, quotidian arrangements that produce categorisations of truth regarding each body and its conduct (Foucault, 1980b; 1983a). These arrangements are organised through an intricate set of techniques and instruments that combine to establish compliant subjects: “Discipline is a political anatomy of detail” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 139). These mechanisms have normalising and “potent effects” for the behaviours, actions, feelings, and subjectivities of individuals (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 38).

Foucault (1991a) observed that an exposure to the normalising processes of discipline can render individual bodies ‘docile’. The notion of docility is central to Foucault’s work on modern power. Therefore, I return to this concept in more detail in chapter 3.4. However, in the next sub-chapter, in an attempt to remain loyal to the genealogical foundations of Foucault’s work, I turn my attention to the emergence of the modern Olympic Games, a project that also arose as a result of modernisation (Brown, 2012).

3.3 The Modern Olympic Games in Context

The Olympic festival can be dated back to Greek antiquity. However, the version of the Olympics that we are familiar with today was conceived in the late 19th century. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was founded in 1894, and the first ‘modern’ iteration of the games was held in Athens in 1896. The revival of the Olympic Games is largely attributed to the educational philosophy of Baron Pierre De Coubertin (1863–

1937). According to MacAloon (1981), any genealogical exploration of the modern Olympic project would be incomplete without first understanding the biography of Coubertin.

Pierre De Coubertin was born into an aristocratic family in 19th century France. The early years of his life were disturbed by the turbulent nature of French society following its military's defeat to Prussian forces in 1870 (Gruneau, 2017). During this period, Coubertin grew discontent with the social structures and value systems that characterised French society. He largely ascribed his dissatisfaction to the growing industrialisation of society. This is because he perceived an outcome of industrialisation to be the placement of greater value upon material achievement and wealth, as opposed to the moral codes that had previously been offered by religion (Brown, 2012). Coubertin believed that modernisation presented a threat to civilisation and morality.

As an education reformist, Coubertin travelled to England to study how the dangers of modernism and industrialism could be resisted. England was the nation of choice as Coubertin considered it, unlike many of his Anglophobic contemporaries amongst the French bourgeois, to be a state in which moral and patriotic values were fostered and upheld by its inhabitants. These visits, occurring in 1883 and 1886, enlightened Coubertin to the merits of physical education (MacAloon, 1981). Indeed, the baron believed that the English public school system used physical activity as a means of cultivating a moral and social education. The games that emerged during this period, such as the various codes of football, were deployed to stimulate a form of 'muscular Christianity' within schoolboys. This was designed to prepare these boys to live an ethical existence throughout their adult lives – an existence built upon values of virility,

patriotism, and courage (MacAloon, 1981). As these ideas advanced, additional considerations were taken to integrate newer bourgeois ideas regarding self-development and self-governance into the physical pedagogical system (Gruneau, 2017). Within this structure, sport and exercise were recognised as socially functional activities for modern English men and boys.

Coubertin's trips to England introduced him to the potential moral values of physical education. Following these trips, his original intention was to re-imagine the English codes of physical activity for the French curriculum; reflecting his aspirations to embed patriotic and moral codes into the education system as a means of inspiring resistance to those values of self-interest that were entrenched in industrialism. However, his proposals were largely rejected by the French bourgeois as they were not seen to align with the dominant cultural forms that were being celebrated during this period. As a result, Coubertin became aware that, to develop these desired moral values in France, he needed to expand his thinking internationally (MacAloon, 1981). Educational trips to North America and visits to the increasingly popular international expositions ensued. These visits alerted Coubertin to the common centrality of the 'spectacle' in attracting people *en masse* for a shared purpose. These spaces demonstrated to Coubertin that the creation of spectacular performances could appeal to humans on an international scale. Consequently, the baron was inspired to amalgamate the two great forces of unity that he understood to oppose the modernist erosion of society's moral codes: sport and international spectacles (Gruneau, 2017; Guttmann, 2002; MacAloon, 1981). This was the foundation of the modern Olympic Games.

Despite Pierre De Coubertin's noted distaste of the potentially immoral consequences of society's modernist shift, it has been argued that his conception of the Olympic

Games was a fundamentally modern and rational project (Brown, 2001; Brown, 2012; MacAloon, 1981). The philosophical underpinnings of Olympism and the IOC illustrate this. Gruneau (2017, p. 125) provides a useful insight into the key principles of the modern Olympic project, as per the IOC: “competitors should (ideally) be amateurs, not professionals; they should compete in a way that demonstrates the highest standards of ‘sportsmanship’; and the games should attempt to promote, as much as possible, the principles of international peace and fellowship”. The Olympian is at the very centre of the modern Olympic project. Certainly, Coubertin endeavoured to expand his internationalist ideology through competing athletes’ embodiment of sport’s moral and ethical codes (Beamish & Ritchie, 2006; Rahman & Lockwood, 2011). He believed that athletes from competing nations should be brought together for a common purpose and, in turn, ‘true’ knowledge regarding international beliefs could be shared to endorse renewed patriotisms that also privileged foreign cultures (MacAloon, 1981).

However, over time, Coubertin’s uncritical conception of the sport-unity alignment has proven problematic. The baron seemingly failed to acknowledge the potentiality of conflicts that could arise from creating an international arena of this kind (Boykoff, 2022; Brown, 2012; Gruneau, 2017; MacAloon, 1981). The challenges associated with these cultural differences were evident from the first modern Olympics as it instantly became clear that certain nations held little cultural understanding or regard for particular athletic disciplines (Guttmann, 2002). These tensions intensified throughout the 20th century and arrived at a climax during the Cold War era (Guttmann, 1988). The internationalist Olympic project created an arena for non-violent, ideological warfare. Furthermore, the growth of new media technologies and commercialism throughout

the 20th century allowed for the real-time dramatisation of these conflicts to be presented to a global audience. In turn, and in paradox to Coubertin's idea for a sport-unity project, these ideological tensions have formed a fundamental aspect of the growth of the Olympics into a mega cultural phenomenon (Gruneau, 2017; MacAloon, 1981; Rahman & Lockwood, 2011).

The meanings ascribed to the modern Olympic project have shifted over time as they have been (re)shaped by dominant cultural discourses and societal norms (Chatziefstathiou & Henry, 2012; Fernandes Da Silva et al., 2024). Intensifying levels of ideological conflict at the Olympic Games coincided with the rapidly increasing influence of bio-scientific (i.e., biomechanics, physiology, psychology) knowledge for informing the athlete development and performance processes (Andrews, 2008; Guttmann, 2000; Mills & Denison, 2016). Although Pierre De Coubertin considered himself to be a staunch anti-positivist because of the amoral effects that the growing influence of scientism had for French society, the modern Olympic project allowed for these domains of knowledge to be tactically mobilised (MacAloon, 1981). As ideological conflicts intensified, the objectives of competing nations shifted from Coubertin's idealised notion of unity toward projects of performance economy and optimisation. As the value of performance emerged as a dominant discourse throughout the Olympic project, it quickly became accepted amongst governments, sporting bodies (i.e., NGBs), coaching practitioners, and athletes that positivist, bio-scientific knowledge could be utilised to optimise performance (Andrews, 2008; Denison, 2010; Mills & Denison, 2016). This is because nation-states began to utilise athlete performances as a means of achieving ideological victories over their political rivals (Guttmann, 1988). The pervasion of these discourses has not stagnated since

their intensification during the Cold War period. Rather, the emergence of neoliberal discourses throughout Olympic sport settings has reinforced and strengthened the importance of those ideas that surround athlete performance economy and optimisation (Chatziefstathiou & Henry, 2012; Denison et al., 2019; Fernandes Da Silva et al., 2024).

The modern Olympic project has developed and transformed with respect to a multitude of international issues, such as pedagogy, commercialism, and nationalism. Although the Olympics of the present day may not identically replicate Pierre De Coubertin's original vision, an outstanding centrality has remained throughout its history: the Olympian. The modern Olympian has been used as a malleable device for the embodiment of Olympic values since 1896, throughout the 20th century, and into the present day (Beamish & Ritchie, 2006; Fernandes Da Silva et al., 2024; Rahman & Lockwood, 2011). In the following sub-chapter, I return to the work of Michel Foucault, and the concept of docility, to consider how Olympians' labour has been shaped to sustain and transform the modernist project of the Olympic Games.

3.4 The Production of the Docile Olympian

From a Foucauldian perspective, 'power' is not a singular, fixed entity. Instead, modern power exists as a multiplicity and is present throughout all avenues of our everyday lives (Foucault, 1980b; 1983a; 1990). According to Foucault (1991a, p. 136), disciplinary power relations pervade everyday social life through their diffusion within those spheres that individual bodies are present to be "manipulated, shaped, trained" in a manner "which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces". In these spaces, individual bodies are exposed to, and penetrated by, discipline. Subsequently, these bodies can be rendered docile. For Foucault (p. 136), docile bodies "may be

subjected, used, transformed and improved". Docile bodies are both politically obedient and economically efficient. Thus, individual bodies have become vital components in the functioning of a productive capitalist workforce (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Docility is the clearest example in Foucault's (1991a, p. 25) work of how the human body is "directly involved in a political field" as power relations "have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it; mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs".

The production of docile bodies is one of the most significant effects of "a 'new micro-physics' of power" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 139) in modern society. Discipline ensures that the management of individual bodies is "always meticulous, often minute" (p. 139). In turn, Foucault detailed how bodies could be rendered docile through the subtle and monitored control of time, space, and progression (Markula & Pringle, 2006). The mobilisation of disciplinary technologies is valuable for producing classification and organisational impulses that assist in the control of individual bodies within certain spheres. Furthermore, Foucault (1991a) theorised that the operation of disciplinary power is supported by the accumulation of personal knowledge about each individual and the surveillance that arises from ascertaining these details. Therefore, docile bodies are produced through a combination of disciplinary techniques and instruments that transform individuals into "objects of knowledge" (Heikkala, 1993, p. 401) through a "calculated, but permanent economy" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 170).

The modern Olympic project is a phenomenon that has been shaped by anatomic-political relations of power. Indeed, as Foucauldian scholars of sport have shown, discipline manifests intensely throughout Olympic-level sport settings and, in turn, these environments can be considered one of the 'modern disciplines' that form our

disciplinary society (Brohm, 1989; Gearity & Mills, 2012; Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Subsequently, the production of docile athletic bodies has become a recognised component for the manufacturing of efficient, economical, and optimal athletic performances and behaviours (Shogan, 1999).

The concept of docility has proven to be complex for sociologists of sport. On one hand, those examining coaching and athletic practices have acknowledged the productive capacities of discipline for performance. Indeed, Foucault (1991a) emphasised that the docile body is a productive and useful entity. Therefore, one's exposure to disciplinary practices (i.e., coaching practices that resemble the various technologies of discipline) is oftentimes considered conducive to the continual facilitation of high-performance pursuits (Heikkala, 1993; Jones & Denison, 2019; Shogan, 1999). As a result, the cultivation of docility amongst athletic bodies has been connected to the development of dominant methods of thinking about modern sporting practices. This is because those conditions that combine to produce docility are widely understood as natural and necessary occurrences for high-performance (Andrijijw & Jones, 2023; Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Gerdin et al., 2019; Johns & Johns, 2000). On the other hand, Foucauldian sport scholars have reported that the fabrication of docility can have problematic effects for athletes' lives. For example, Denison (2007) argued that the performance capacities of sportspeople may be limited as opportunities for progression are constrained by coaches' over-reliance on the imposition of temporal and spatial mechanisms of control. In addition, Jones and Denison (2017) reported that the cultivation of docility during an athletic career can have significant implications for how retired sportspeople understand and experience their adjustments to post-athletic life. Therefore, despite the productive basis that has

been used as a rationale for employing disciplinary techniques in sport for several decades, the concept of docility must be approached in a cautionary manner.

There remains a paucity in research surrounding the long-term effects of docility for the lives of retired British Olympians. For the remainder of this sub-chapter, I present a more detailed discussion of those techniques and instruments that Foucault (1991a) considered to be essential for the production of docile bodies. Specifically, I consider the penetrative effects of these technologies with respect to the lives of working Olympians.

3.4.1 Techniques of Discipline

In theorising the concept of docility, Foucault (1991a, p. 137) outlined four techniques of discipline that combine to take a hold upon the body's "movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity". These techniques are *the art of distributions*, *the control of activity*, *the organisation of geneses*, and *the composition of forces*. Over the following four sub-sections, I describe the components and effects of these techniques.

3.4.1.1 *The Art of Distributions*

The first technique, identified by Foucault (1991a), that allows for discipline to be inscribed upon the individual body is *the art of distributions*. This technique refers to the strategic ordering of space. There are several ways through which disciplinary spaces are constituted. First and foremost, an *enclosure* is required. Enclosed spaces ensure that individual bodies become immersed within a "disciplinary monotony" that permits the discreet, yet insidious, focus of disciplinary power upon the body (p. 141). However, the effects of the *enclosure* are not enough in isolation; enclosed spaces must be organised in flexible and detailed ways. This detail is implemented through *partitioning*. The process of partitioning ensures that disciplinary spaces "avoid

distributions in groups; break up collective dispositions; analyse confused, massive or transient pluralities” (p.143). In other words, *partitioning* organises disciplinary space in an analytical manner. This eliminates, to the greatest extent possible, the uncontrollable variables that can arise from the accumulation and movement of collectives of human bodies (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

The spaces occupied by British Olympic athletes are not homogenous. Certain sports require specific architectural dimensions that allow for athletes to train in accordance with the dynamics of their discipline. For example, swimmers require access to swimming pools and tennis players require access to tennis courts. However, the spaces occupied by Olympic athletes are all manipulated strategically for the application of technologies of control (Bale, 1994; Gearity & Mills, 2012; Shogan, 1999). Typically, the daily training and preparation activities of British Olympic athletes are undertaken at specially designed ‘training centres’, such as the National Badminton Centre in Milton Keynes or British Rowing’s national training centre in Caversham. These spaces are ‘enclosed’, as to “derive the maximum advantages and to neutralise the inconveniences” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 142). This allows Olympic athletes space to perform prescribed labour upon their bodies through acutely planned training drills and practices. In addition, the *partitioning* of these spaces assists in the elimination of “the effects of imprecise distributions” (p.143). This means that individual athletes are typically stationed within the precise space in which they are required and expected to perform a designated drill. When the distribution of bodies is calculated and precise, as Foucault suggested effective discipline must be, the conduct of each individual can be assessed more efficiently by their respective supervisor i.e., the Olympic coach.

Critically, disciplinary space must be *functional* (Foucault, 1991a). Spatial techniques of control create productive spaces that are architecturally coded with respect to the requirements of a discipline. For example, if a swimmer is training to compete in the 4x100m freestyle relay race, their training will typically be “partitioned...according to his or her function on the team” (Shogan, 1999, p. 22). Consequently, “there are limits on where a player may go and these limits are related to their function within the space” (p. 22). In this sense, the disciplinary aquatic training space, enclosed by the parameters of swimming lanes and the surrounding deck, presents a further subtle constraint to the movement of each individual body according to its designated function.

Finally, Foucault (1991a, p. 146) considered the importance of *rank* for the ordering of space: “Discipline is an art of rank”. The hierarchical positioning of individuals is a significant component in the organisation of disciplinary space. The spaces in which Olympians train and compete reflect these social hierarchies. For example, Olympic athletes are consistently categorised by disciplinary ‘experts’ (i.e., coaches, physiotherapists, sport scientists) with respect to skill acquisition, movement expertise, and physiological capacity (Johns & Johns, 2000; Shogan, 1999; Toner, 2024). For Foucault (1991a, p. 146), this process “individualises bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes and circulates them in a network of relation”. In this respect, individual bodies are not fixed within these spaces. Rather, bodies always hold the possibility of movement throughout the ranked space. For instance, to borrow Shogan’s (1999, p. 22) example: “in a weight-training room, the particular sites remain fixed and athletes move as they acquire skill or need remedial work on a skill”. The continual movement of bodies between ranks is an

important component for the production of docile Olympic bodies as it allows for sporting enclosures to “function like a learning machine, but also as a machine for supervising, hierarchising, rewarding” (Foucault, 1991, p. 147).

In this research, I consider how an exposure to spatial mechanisms of control during an Olympic career might have lasting implications for how former athletes negotiate the complex and nuanced realities of their post-sport lives. For example, I deliberate upon how the legacies of these spatial techniques continue to impact upon the meanings that retirees’ attach to their movement practices and subjectivities, from their immediate retirement adjustments through to the current moment.

3.4.1.2 The Control of Activity

Spatial control is the “first condition for the control of and use of an ensemble and distinct elements: the base for a micro-physics of what might be called a ‘celluar’ power” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 149). However, the regulation of space does not cultivate docility in isolation. Rather, it is supported by a combination of additional techniques; the first of these being *the control of activity*. Here, Foucault contended that, in order to ensure the correct use of the body within an enclosed space, individuals must also be subject to temporal control.

The first temporal disciplinary task is to *time-table* the activity of individual bodies.

Timetabling allows modern disciplines to “establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 149) upon bodies in an instrumental manner. The detailed partitioning of time ensures its quality usage.

This is because it works to eliminate potential disturbances and distractions within the disciplinary space. The *time-table* has important implications for modern athletic practices (Gearity & Mills, 2012; Mills & Denison, 2013). Indeed, Olympians’ training

sessions are meticulously planned to ensure that the time dedicated to specific movements and drills is managed in a detailed and efficient manner (Shogan, 1999). The intricate planning and execution of training sessions works to normalise particular conduct within Olympic standard settings. For example, arriving late to training sessions, and in turn threatening the economic utilisation of time, is considered to be a behaviour that falls short of the expected standards for most Olympic athletes (Mills & Denison, 2013).

The detailed control of time is an important component for the production of docile bodies. However, *the control of activity* is not solely cultivated by the *time-table*. Rather, temporal arrangements must be further divided into specific components that relate to each body's movement temporalities. The *temporal elaboration of the act* allows for "another degree of precision in the breakdown of gestures and movements, another way of adjusting the body to temporal imperatives" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 151). These precise movements permit temporal controls to penetrate the body through rhythm and repetition. Hence, this procedure facilitates the third temporal technique of control to occur: *the correlation of the body and the gesture*. According to Foucault, this disciplinary control "imposes the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body, which is its condition of efficiency and speed" (p. 152). To compliment this technique, Foucault outlined a fourth and final means for temporally controlling the body within disciplinary spaces: *the body-object articulation*. This technique refers to the "instrumental coding of the body" (p. 153), through which the individual body can coordinate the strategic use of its gestures to manipulate a non-bodily object in the prescribed, required manner.

The temporal techniques considered by Foucault (1991a) are intimately connected to the activities of Olympic athletes (Rail & Harvey, 1995). According to Shogan (1999, p. 26), “time must penetrate the body” to cultivate docility. Olympians are permanently subjected to temporal arrangements of discipline. A basketball player must learn to articulate and order their movements as they prepare to shoot. A handball player may restrict or develop their movement patterns as a means of influencing the tempo of play. A rower must manipulate their oar to gain advantages in race settings. Therefore, *the control of activity* ensures the persistent prescription of regimented styles of training and play as a means of producing well-trained and efficient Olympic bodies.

In this thesis, I consider how the legacies of temporal techniques of control impact upon how former British Olympians structure their lived experiences and movements throughout their post-sport lives, across both the short and longer term.

3.4.1.3 *The Organisation of Geneses*

The art of distributions and *the control of activity* are essential components in the production of docile bodies. After establishing these imperatives, Foucault (1991a) also demonstrated how the efficient organisation of skill acquisition and progression can contribute to the cultivation of productive and efficient individuals. This technique is referred to as *the organisation of geneses*.

Foucault (1991a) identified four ways through which the progression of individual bodies could be effectively organised. Each of these components is designed to capitalise upon the disciplinary use of space and time. Firstly, durations are divided into successive, parallel segments that must end at a designated time. Secondly, these threads are organised into an analytical plan that is arranged in accordance with the varying complexity of each skill. Thirdly, these temporal segments are finalised and

concluded through an examination. Finally, a *series of series* is drawn up: “lay down for each individual, according to his [*sic*] level, his seniority, his rank, the exercises that are suited to him; common exercises have a differing goal and each difference involves specific exercises” (p. 158 – 159). *The organisation of geneses* works to form a “logic of progression” in modern disciplines (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 78). This wisdom guarantees that temporal and spatial techniques of control are not misused or unproductive by formulating a continual growth of control over the body through a linear pedagogy (Foucault, 1991a; Markula & Pringle, 2006).

As Shogan (1999) suggested, the gradual acquisition of knowledge and skill, as well as the gradual progression of their use, is an essential component in the preparatory and competitive phases of Olympic standard practices. However, the modern Olympic context is composed of various subcultures and disciplines. Therefore, the training cycles of Olympians are not homogenous schema (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014; Joncheray et al., 2021). Indeed, plans of progression are contingent on several factors, such as the seniority of the individual in question or one’s need to learn or develop a particular skill; this is one complex aspect of discipline that Foucault (1991a) openly acknowledged. Therefore, specific programmes are established for each athlete to progress through an organisation of activities and practices. This allows for skills to be acquired and developed in accordance with the timing of an upcoming examination (Shogan, 1999). For example, an Olympic rower may be under instruction to develop the strength and stability of their posterior chain. To do so, the rower will be prescribed a *series of series* style of programming that focuses upon the development of his or her foundational powerbase through resistance movements e.g., the

conventional deadlift. This training plan will be arranged to ensure that the rower's strength is optimised for Olympic competition (Denison, 2010; Gearity & Mills, 2012).

The organisation of geneses techniques are accepted mechanisms for the production of Olympic standard athletic performances (Shogan, 1999). This technique supports the examination of each individual body in terms of the normalised standards of physiological and psychological capacity that are accepted as necessary for competing at the Olympic level. Therefore, any failure to comply with these expected standards of progression can result in the respective individual being categorised as 'abnormal' because their body is identified as incapable of continually performing its designated function in the disciplinary space (Jones & Denison, 2017; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Shogan, 1999).

In short, the techniques associated with *the organisation of geneses* combine to structure Olympians' lived experiences via a logic of progression (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Therefore, in this thesis, I consider how an exposure to this progressive wisdom may have residual implications for former Olympians' modes of being, thinking, and moving.

3.4.1.4 *The Composition of Forces*

The final disciplinary technique identified by Foucault (1991a) was *the composition of forces*. This technique adjoins the forces of temporal, spatial, and progressive controls to produce an efficient and effective mechanism for achieving a dedicated target. For Foucault, *the composition of forces* emerged as a technique of necessity because modern disciplines no longer required bodies *en masse* to attain the maximum level of efficiency. Rather, more detailed articulations of groups of bodies were being created to produce economical processes and outcomes. These groups "became a sort of

machine with many parts, moving in relation to one another, in order to arrive at a configuration and to obtain a specific result” (p. 162). In other words, the skills and movements of each individual must be combined into an effective and cohesive grouping “whose effect had to be superior to the sum of the elementary forces that composed it” (p. 162).

The composition of forces is regarded as an important mechanism for the productive functioning of Olympic sport settings. Regardless of whether one competes in an individual or team discipline, Olympians form part of a wider ‘team’ or ‘unit’ (Shogan, 1999). Within the *enclosures* of their sport, Olympic athletes are disciplined in a manner that brands them “useful, and the training...profitable; to give each [athlete], a precious unit, maximum efficiency” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 162-163). Therefore, the operation of this technique works to cultivate athlete docility, as a means of ensuring that one can perform their required function as an individual (i.e., a particular skill or movement) in a manner that is optimal within a greater arrangement of bodies. The composition of individual forces is understood to be an important factor in the constitution of successful Olympic teams as the embodied skillset of each body operates efficiently and in synchronisation to “obtain an efficient machine” (p. 164). Shogan (1999) identified that once these skills and combinations are inscribed upon the athletic body, individuals become responsive to the verbal cues that are used by sport’s hierarchy of leaders to subtly instruct each component of their role within a designated segment of a training drill or competitive scenario.

My research considers how an exposure to the logic of *the composition of forces* during an Olympic career might carry legacies for how retired athletes experience their lives after sport, across both the short and longer term. For example, I deliberate upon

how these ways of thinking might be related to retired Olympians' ongoing experiences of post-sport work.

3.4.2 Instruments of Discipline

The combination of these four techniques of discipline performs a significant role in the production of docile bodies. However, these technologies do not operate in isolation. The detailed art of discipline resides in its individualising processes. Indeed, as Foucault (1991a, p. 170) declared: "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise". Disciplinary techniques are supported and made more effective by instruments of discipline that contribute to the 'knowing' and surveillance of individual bodies.

3.4.2.1 *Hierarchical Observation*

The first instrument of discipline introduced by Foucault (1991a) was *hierarchical observation*. For Foucault, the effects of disciplinary techniques must be visible to be effective. Therefore, this instrument refers to the development of the architectural and social configurations that work to ensure that the surveillance of individual bodies is functional, discreet, and constant. In this sense, *hierarchical observation* emanates from a "network of gazes" that distribute power in a manner that is "all the more discreet, all the more effective and on the alert" (p. 171).

Foucault accounted for the impossibility of observation deriving from a single gaze by contending that supervision is a diffuse, omnipresent force. In this sense, throughout modern disciplines, surveillance does not occur from a fixed location. Rather, surveillance is distributed through spatial innovation and *rank*. This apparatus functions to cultivate and maintain docile bodies as a "perfect eye that nothing would

escape” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 173) is formed through a calculable mechanism that ensures no individual escapes supervision. For example, in the context of the enclosed space of the training centre, Olympians are the subjects of permanent visibility through both architectural (i.e., the positioning of coaches throughout the training space – rendering all athletes visible to the ‘expert’ gaze) and social (i.e., athletes permanently observe the conduct of their teammates in training and competitive spaces) structures. In turn, observation functions through a network of relations that render all bodies known and alterable. Individuals are perpetually supervised (Shogan, 1999).

My research examines numerous legacies of *hierarchical observation*. For example, I consider how an exposure to this instrument during an Olympic career might have implications for retirees’ ongoing relationships with various members of the social body, including their former athletic peers and their current work colleagues.

3.4.2.2 *Normalising Judgement*

The second instrument of discipline outlined by Foucault (1991a) was *normalising judgement*. This instrument refers to a new arrangement of punishment that permeates modern disciplines: “a whole micro-penalty of time...of activity...of behaviour...of speech...of the body” (p. 178). Within each modern discipline, a whole set of procedures are utilised to punish actions and behaviours of irregularity. The overarching purpose of these practices is to be corrective and to produce a “micro-economy of perpetual penalty” (p. 180) that coerces individual bodies into conforming with disciplinary standards. “In short, it normalises” (p. 183).

Normalising judgement is a powerful component in the assessment of modern Olympic athletes. Olympians are judged in relation to a series of exceptional, dominant truths

that are discursively constructed by sport's 'experts' and 'supervisors' (e.g., coaches). This new micro-climate of penalty permits conforming athletes to be rewarded for their obedience to normalised standards. However, 'under-performing' athletes can be punished for their failures to comply with normalised performance expectations (Shogan, 1999). According to Heikkala (1993, p. 400), the normalisation of certain athlete behaviours and activities has been accepted as an essential component for the economical organisation of Olympic standard settings: "Normalization also means conformity to the 'rationale' of both training and competing according to the plans made (by the coach) and conformity to the institutional forms, customs, and rules of sport". In this sense, *normalising judgement* can be considered a mechanism for both the 'knowing' of individual bodies by others, and the individual's awareness of their own disciplinary conduct. This has profound consequences for the cultivation of the dominant subjectivities of Olympic athletes (Mills & Denison, 2018; Shogan, 1999; Tsang, 2000).

In this thesis, I consider how an exposure to such normalising arrangements can be connected to a range of contradictory legacies regarding former Olympians' subjectivities, well beyond the cessation of their sporting careers.

3.4.2.3 *The Examination*

The third instrument of discipline outlined by Foucault (1991a) was *the examination*. This instrument combines the effects of *hierarchical observation* and *normalising judgement* to create a "normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish" (p. 184). *The examination* establishes a regular form of surveillance to assess, judge, and produce knowledge about individual subjects.

The examination forms a significant component of the development of Olympians. To borrow Foucault's (1991a, p. 184) words, *the examination* is a "highly ritualised" mechanism in the modern Olympic project. Indeed, Olympians are the subjects of a near-permanent examination of conduct and performance. Competitions are the most transparent examples of *the examination* in this context; British Olympians compete in a multitude of competitions throughout an Olympiad, these include: European Championships, World Championships, Olympic trials, and, of course, the Olympic Games. However, forms of examination also occur on a quotidian basis. Olympians are subject to regular performance testing, medical examinations, and are often mandated to use technologies (e.g., wearable GPS systems) that accumulate 'real-time' data regarding their physiological and psychological capacities. These all act as subtle instruments that contribute to the analysis and judgement of their bodies (Andrijw & Jones, 2023; Johns & Johns, 2000; Toner, 2024). Therefore, these procedures place Olympic athletes into a "permanent corpus of knowledge" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 190) which, in turn, classifies their bodies and produces certain 'truths' regarding their subjectivities (Mills & Denison, 2018).

In this research, I consider how former Olympians' internalisation of the effects of *the examination* can enact a series of implications for the ways in which they experience movement, relationships, and labour, across the ongoing durations of their post-sport lives.

3.4.2.4 *The Confession*

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1991a) outlined three instruments of discipline that composed the *means of correct training*. As I set out to make clear in the previous three sub-sections, the combination of these instruments contributes to the cultivation

of docility and the normalisation of individuals in modern society. However, there remains a fourth instrument, delineated by Foucault (1990) within his analysis of modern sexuality, that, in step with the *means of correct training*, operates to normalise individuals into certain modes of being. Foucault referred to this instrument as *the confession*.

Speaking on the emergence of modern power relations, Foucault (1990, p. 59) argued that “the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth”. A technology once located in ritualistic tradition, the emergence of modernism and the dominance of scientific thought in society instigated the spread and medicalisation of *the confession* throughout our society and relationships. Indeed, it “is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us” (p. 60). The modern individual is expected to confess. In turn, confessional practices have become diffuse within modern society, and they are deeply connected to those disciplinary instruments that normalise and regulate individual bodies (Foucault, 1991a).

Foucault (1990) elaborated on five central characteristics of *the confession*. Firstly, there is the *clinical codification of the inducement to speak*. This postulate refers to how the personal biographies of individuals intersect with scientific discourses through *the examination*. This technique inscribes an awareness upon the individual regarding the necessity of identifying and dissecting their own normalcy. Secondly, Foucault outlined *the postulate of a general and diffuse causality*. This refers to how any of an individual’s confessed abnormalities emerge as the causal explanation of their behaviours and activities. Thirdly, there is *the principle of latency*. This establishes how the act of confession works to produce a confessed substance i.e., that which needs to

be confessed and the truth. This involves the confessing subject seeking the 'truth' about their state of being. However, the subject is unable to circumscribe this truth independently. Therefore, they seek the assistance and intervention of an expert. Following this, we have *the method of interpretation*. This postulate indicates the necessity and act of the expert revealing and deciphering the 'truth' of the confessor. The final postulate is *the medicalisation of the effects of the confession*. This refers to the notion that, if one confesses to the 'correct' expert at the 'right' time, the truth that is identified will fix any of their potential abnormalities or deficits.

Although Foucault (1991a) may not have outlined the details and effects of the confessional technology within his original conceptualisation of disciplinary power, when considered in conjunction with the various technologies of discipline, it can be understood as another means of normalisation and docility-cultivation. In recent years, this has been recognised by Foucauldian scholars of sport. Certainly, confessional practices represent yet another component for the reinforcement of sport's dominant hierarchies and the coercion of athletes into certain modes of being that align with dominant discourses surrounding the 'correct' ways to become, and exist as, an Olympic athlete (Gearity et al., 2023; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Mills & Denison, 2018).

In this research, I draw upon Foucault's (1990) concept of *the confession* in the context of coach-athlete relationships. In doing so, I consider how confessional techniques are subtly intertwined within these power networks and, in turn, how this might work to impact upon the long-term retirement experiences of former Olympians, as well as coaches' approaches to managing athletes' retirement adjustments.

3.4.3 Panopticism

The concept of panopticism refers to the automatised and internalised of discipline (Foucault, 1991a). Panopticism ensures that all individual bodies operate as mechanisms of surveillance to guarantee the omnipresence of discipline throughout society. As a concept, panopticism is derived from the penitentiary reform work of Jeremy Bentham. Bentham designed an architectural configuration for the modern prison, known as the 'panopticon', that Foucault (p. 202) recognised as a "marvellous machine" for inducing the effects of disciplinary power. The underlying principles of Bentham's panopticon were to ensure that surveillance was both visible (the prisoner is always able to see the central guarding tower from which their supervisor oversees their conduct) and unverifiable (the prisoner can never verify whether their supervisor is watching them at a particular moment, but they are permanently aware that supervision could be occurring at any given point). Foucault conceived the panoptic mechanism as a metaphor for the continued functioning of disciplinary power. This is because, if one remains in a state of permanent awareness of the gaze and its effects, one is forced to take responsibility for monitoring their own conduct. In short, "Panopticism is a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises that power" (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 79).

Of course, it would be extremely unlikely to identify an Olympic sport space that identically replicates the architectural guidelines of Bentham's panopticon. Therefore, the panopticon must be thought of as a concept; panopticism is a mechanism of power that supports the continual production of docile bodies: "it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 205). As considered extensively by Foucauldian scholars of sport, the panoptic mechanism manifests throughout Olympic sport settings in a multiplicity of ways.

These include physiological examinations (Johns & Johns, 2000), athlete scouting and draft events (Andrijiw, & Jones, 2023), the use of video technologies for providing feedback (Lang, 2010; Taylor et al., 2017), and through wearable GPS technologies (Jones et al., 2016; Toner, 2024; Williams & Manley, 2016). These surveillance mechanisms all form part of the quotidian experiences of the modern Olympian. In addition, the concept of panopticism has been used to demonstrate and theorise the self-surveillance practices that are employed by athletes to monitor their personal conduct when spatially separated from the immediacy of the *enclosure*. For example, Olympic standard sportspeople consistently subject themselves to a range of disciplinary behaviours, such as the monitoring of food intake (Chapman, 1997; Johns & Johns, 2000; McMahon et al., 2012) and the adherence to prescribed, ‘professional’ attitudes throughout all avenues of their existence (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Manley & Williams, 2022; Manley et al., 2016). These behaviours have corrective and normalising implications for Olympians’ subjectivities and lived experiences.

The art of self-policing not only allows for one’s perpetual obedience to normalising standards to occur, but it permits very certain and narrow forms of subjectivation (Foucault, 1983a; Shogan, 1999; Tsang, 2000). In this respect, the panoptic mechanism demonstrates how disciplinary relations of power are distributed throughout an entire matrix of power-knowledge, within which each individual body remains intertwined. Thus, individuals are not only the subjects of the normalising gaze that is placed upon them by experts and wider society, but they become “the principle of his [*sic*] own subjection” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 203). My research considers the residual implications of these modes of being and thinking and, importantly, how an exposure to the

panoptic mechanism might permanently impact upon the post-sport lives of former Olympians.

3.5 Effective Olympic Sport Coaching as a Modernist Formation

In chapter 3.3, I considered how the Olympic Games, in their contemporary form, emerged as a result of a wider societal shift towards modernism. Since their conception in the late 19th century, the games have been shaped by shifting cultural discourses (Chatziefstathiou & Henry, 2012; Gruneau, 2017). Over time, performance enhancement and optimisation have become increasingly central to the modern Olympic project and those working within these settings have endeavoured to derive the maximum advantages from Olympians' bodies for the means of performance (Fernandes Da Silva et al., 2024; Joncheray et al., 2021). In a reflection of these discursive shifts, the role of the Olympic coach has altered and grown in significance (Denison, 2010; Phillips & Hicks, 2000). Indeed, the modern coach is now widely understood to be an effective agent for managing and maximising the athlete development and performance processes (Denison et al., 2013). But what is intended by this idea of effectiveness?

According to Côté and Gilbert (2009), sport coaching researchers have been concerned with examining effective coaching (i.e., its definition, characteristics, and development potential) for half a century. However, there remains some ambiguity surrounding what it actually means to be an 'effective' coach. As Denison and colleagues (2013, p. 389) stated, "this should not come as a surprise considering that coaching's complexities go well beyond the application of an autonomous body of facts". Despite this, examinations of effective coaching have persisted as scholars have sought to map

and explain those behaviours and practices that can have positive implications for the athlete development and performance processes.

It is important to look back through the history of Olympic and high-performance sport to conceptualise how dominant meanings regarding effective coaching have changed and developed over time (Denison et al., 2013). Indeed, as the shift towards modernism has seen the human body become the “object and target of power” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 136), it has become possible to witness how this has influenced developing understandings of effective coaching over the last century. Indeed, the modern Olympic coach is expected to act as a technician whose function centres upon the efficient organisation, development, and enhancement of athletic bodies (Denison, 2007; Denison et al., 2013; Shogan, 1999). In turn, dominant coaching practices have become highly technocratic by design. In modern Olympic cultures, coaches are expected to utilise space to organise and supervise athletes (Gearity & Mills, 2012), to meticulously plan each temporal segment of their training sessions (Shogan, 1999), and to implement training programmes that focus upon ‘objective’ measurements of ‘improvement’ (Denison, 2010). In turn, we have witnessed the emergence of many accepted and widely implemented coaching practices that closely resemble the details of Foucault’s (1991a) techniques of discipline.

The development of positivist, bio-scientific research, and the corresponding influence for the development of the sport and exercise sciences (i.e., biomechanics, physiology, motor learning, psychology), has assisted in the constitution of disciplinary coaching practices (Denison, 2007). Research emerging from these disciplines has largely indicated that the athlete development and performance processes can be controlled and rationalised through the application of scientifically informed principles (Andrews,

2008; Denison, 2010; Denison et al., 2013). For example, according to Denison and Avner (2011, p. 220), the science of 'periodisation' was developed to "help coaches break down a year into phases and cycles so that different kinds of work could be prioritized at specific periods to build and to prepare an athlete to perform his or her best at a designated competition". The modernist desire for certainty and predictability in the coaching process can be satisfied by 'scientific' rationale. This is because positivist and bio-scientific knowledges have been widely accepted and utilised as a legitimate set of discourses for driving and advancing coaching practice (Denison & Avner, 2011; Mills et al., 2022). In turn, rationalist scientific knowledge has heavily influenced coaching pedagogy since the societal shift towards modernism. The acceptance of these discourses as 'correct' by coaches, coach developers, and performance scientists has given rise to highly technocratic and mechanistic understandings of athletes' bodies and their performance capacities (Denison et al., 2013; Mills & Denison, 2013; Williams & Manley, 2016).

However, like all aspects of the modern Olympic project, discourses surrounding effective Olympic coaching have been influenced by societal norms and cultural shifts. As neoliberal discourses have begun to emerge and shape the Olympic project, it is no longer enough for coaches "to rely on knowledge from the traditional sport sciences alone or to assume a functional or mechanistic understanding of the body and human performance" (Denison et al., 2013, p. 390). Indeed, since the turn of the millennium, humanist discourses – largely informed by the research produced in the disciplines of sport psychology and social psychology - have gradually increased in momentum and influence with regard to shaping what it means to be an 'effective' coach. Humanist ideas regarding coaching have pointed towards the importance of Olympic coaches

adopting 'positive' practices, that are 'athlete-centred', and which have the empowerment and care of the athlete at their core (Denison & Avner, 2011; Gearity et al., 2023; Mills & Denison, 2018). These ideas are reflected in Côté and Gilbert's (2009, p. 316) definition of effective coaching, in which they argue a key characteristic of effectiveness to be the "consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes' competence, confidence, connection and character in specific coaching contexts". This definition suggests that the modern 'effective' coach should 'know' their athletes in rich, biographical detail and that they should utilise this information to develop them as performers. Yet, it is also possible to draw parallels between these practices and Foucault's (1990; 1991a) instruments of discipline. Certainly, positioning the coach as the 'expert' within the coach-athlete relationship – an expert who assumes the role of better 'knowing' and 'understanding' each of their athletes – can work to create a more constant form of surveillance upon Olympians' lives, in which the normalising effects of observation and judgement intensify (Gearity et al., 2023). In this sense, the rise of humanist discourses throughout Olympic coaching has not stagnated or disrupted the presence of disciplinary technologies. Rather, these ways of knowing about coaching operate as yet another potential means of control (Mills & Denison, 2018).

Discursive constructions of what it means to be an 'effective' coach have been critiqued by Foucauldian scholars of sport as modernist formations that work to produce docile athletic bodies (Denison, 2010; Denison & Avner, 2011; Denison et al., 2013; Mills & Denison, 2018). However, the Foucauldian notion that power is a relational force remains significant. Indeed, Olympic coaches do not hold a material or

totalising control over the athletes they coach. This point was explained clearly by Markula and Pringle (2006, p. 35):

A coach and an athlete...exist within a specific power relation, in that the coach typically attempts to guide the athlete's conduct or performance. Although the coach can develop strategies to direct the actions of the athlete, such as by keeping the athlete on the bench, the athlete is still relatively 'free' to decide his/her response and ultimately whether he/she will continue to be coached. The actions of the athlete can also reciprocally influence the actions of the coach. If the athlete, for example, were to tell the coach that he/she is thinking of quitting this might induce a change in the coach's future actions. Thus, although the coach and athlete's relationship of power may be unbalanced, they can still be thought of as existing within a specific power relation.

Although coach-athlete relationships are undeniably power-laden phenomena, they remain relational as opposed to dualistic (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Markula & Pringle, 2006). In this sense, imbalances in coach-athlete relations occur as a result of those dominant discursive constructions that position coaches that employ 'effective' practices as 'experts'. This is because their approaches have historically been legitimated by scientific rationale and, in turn, they have commonly been accepted as sound logic (Cushion et al., 2022; Johns & Johns, 2000; Konoval et al., 2019; Mills & Denison, 2018). These forms of expertise are incredibly difficult to subvert or disrupt. Therefore, although the resistance of dominant ways of thinking and being always remains a possibility within modern relations of power (Foucault, 1990), docile coaching and athletic bodies have largely and uncritically accepted that 'effective'

practices are rational and instrumental to the performance and development processes of Olympians (Konoval et al., 2021; Mills et al., 2020).

In this thesis, I consider how modernist discourses of effective coaching influence Olympic coaching practitioners' perspectives, feelings, and experiences of the Olympic retirement process.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical framework that will be used to inform my study of retirement from British Olympic sport. Fundamentally, Foucault's (1990; 1991a) understanding of anatomico-political relations of power demonstrates that subjects are formed, shaped, and produced by the socio-cultural contexts in which they are immersed, and the discourses to which they are exposed. Therefore, as I have shown in this chapter, Olympians' minds and bodies are inevitably influenced by the disciplinary cultures of Olympic sport. But what are the implications of these cultures for Olympians' long-term retirement experiences and Olympic coaches' perspectives of the athletic retirement process? In the following chapter, I outline the methods that I will use to address these questions.

Chapter 4 Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the methodological considerations and procedures that guided this research project. To do so, I chronologically chart the research process in its entirety. Firstly, I discuss the philosophical positioning of this study and describe how this guided the research process. Secondly, I outline the ethical measures that were taken to complete the project and explain how these proceeded to influence my approaches to sampling and recruitment. Following this, I present an in-depth discussion of the data collection process by justifying the use of the interviewing method and detailing how the project's theoretical framework (see chapter 3) influenced the interviewing process; this discussion informs a subsequent consideration of the procedures that were used to analyse the interview data. Finally, I outline the measures that can be used to determine the quality of the research project moving forward.

4.1 Research Philosophy

Prior to outlining the specific data collection and analytical processes that were undertaken to complete this study, it is necessary to describe and justify the paradigmatic approach that guided the project. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 107) defined a paradigm as:

A set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world', the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts.

Paradigms are a researcher's frame of reference to their ontological (the nature of being and reality), epistemological (the relationship between the inquirer and the known), and methodological (how one gains knowledge of the social world) beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Mallett et al., 2025). In turn, the researcher's paradigmatic assumptions influence the entire research process and should remain consistent from a project's initial conception through to its dissemination (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mallett et al, 2025; Markula & Silk, 2011).

Previous sports retirement studies have been underpinned by a number of paradigmatic approaches, including positivism (e.g., Schmid et al., 2023), interpretivism (e.g., Stamp et al., 2023), critical humanism (e.g., Campbell, 2020), and poststructuralism (e.g., Jones & Denison, 2017)⁴. My research project was underpinned by the paradigm of poststructuralism. The post-structural paradigm aligns closely with my own set of beliefs about the social world, as well as my outlined considerations regarding the merits of various existing approaches to examining the topic of athletic retirement (see chapter 2).

Primarily ascribed to the workings of theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Giles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault, poststructuralist thought has significantly influenced the social sciences since the late 1960s, owing to a growing rejection of the universalising nature of structuralism (Avner et al., 2025) – an approach that “attempts to dispense with both meaning and the subject by finding objective laws which govern all human activity” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983. p. xix). Therefore, there should be no doubt over

⁴ Markula and colleagues (2001) labelled the collective of interpretivist, critical, and poststructuralist paradigms as 'anti-positivist'.

the disruptive heritage of post-structural thinking (Consterdine, 2024; St. Pierre, 2000). Nevertheless, poststructuralist researchers remain guided by a set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions.

As a poststructuralist researcher, I understand knowledge to be contextual, and 'reality' and 'truth' to be multiple and subjective (Avner et al., 2025). In this sense, I do not believe that empirical research can be used to reveal a singular truth or reality about our social world (or, in this case, about retirement from Olympic sport), nor do I believe that researchers can remain neutral or 'objective' throughout the research process (Avner et al., 2025). After all, these claims about knowledge are intimately connected to the lines of thought that have historically informed natural scientific methods of inquiry (Markula et al., 2001). In contrast, I contend that social research can be used as a tool to aid the examination of the subjective nature of the social world, as well as a means of considering how the production of knowledge may be tied to socio-cultural arrangements and relations of power (Markula & Silk, 2011).

My affiliation with the paradigm of poststructuralism influenced the research project in numerous ways. Specifically, post-structural assumptions about knowledge, reality, and truth shaped my approach to addressing the research questions (see chapter 1.4). At no point during the research process was I concerned with uncovering an objective reality or singular truth about Olympic retirement, nor was I interested in prescribing coping strategies to assist Olympic athletes in self-managing the difficulties that may accompany their adjustments to post-sport life (Avner et al., 2025). Indeed, these approaches are more closely connected to positivist and psychological interpretations of the phenomena; readings that have typically given limited consideration to the various ways in which relations of power shape the subjective experiences of retired

sportspeople (Jones & Denison, 2017; Jones et al., 2023). As opposed to this, and in accordance with the Foucauldian informed post-structural framework, I was principally committed to examining how an exposure to anatomo-political relations of power has influenced the ways in which retired British Olympians and Olympic coaching practitioners understand and continue to experience the Olympic retirement process.

4.2 Qualitative Research Approach

Researchers conducting empirical studies of sport cultures will typically engage with either a qualitative or quantitative approach to collecting data on their respective topics (Jones, 2022). Alternatively, certain researchers may choose to adopt a mixed-methods approach, comprised of both qualitative and quantitative techniques; this is an approach most commonly used in research projects informed by the post-positivist paradigm (Markula et al., 2001; Stephens & Stodter, 2025). For this poststructuralist research study, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate for undertaking an in-depth examination of how former Olympians' and Olympic coaches' experiences and perspectives of Olympic retirement may be influenced by the complex workings of disciplinary power-knowledge relations. To accurately consider the reasons for adopting a qualitative research approach, it is first important to outline the key elements that compose this methodology.

The nature of qualitative research is difficult to capture. This is reflected in the lack of unanimity across the social sciences when it comes to defining this methodological approach. However, Sparkes and Smith (2014, p. 14) provide a useful introductory definition for thinking about the approach: "Qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live". At its most fundamental level, qualitative inquiry

generates data (through various modes of language) that is designed to illuminate the multiple, subjective meanings and experiences that surround a phenomenon of study (Evans et al., 2021; Patton, 2015). To do so, qualitative methods of investigation typically embrace the sensibilities that inform the philosophical positioning of the researcher as a means of producing rich insight (Evans et al., 2021). This approach differs significantly from the quantitative techniques that seek the identification of 'objective' data within artificially controlled settings that are designed to provide the researcher with a proposed position of neutrality (Markula et al., 2001; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

The constituting components of qualitative research approaches align with the post-structural philosophical positioning of this study. As a poststructuralist researcher, I recognise knowledge, truth, and reality to be socially constructed (Avner et al., 2025). In turn, it was crucial to adopt a methodological approach that can be considered equipped for acknowledging the contextual and subjective nature of our understandings of the social world and, more specifically, how these perspectives and experiences may be shaped by relations of power (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Markula & Silk, 2011). Furthermore, the poststructuralist rejection of the idea that researchers can assume a neutral or value-free epistemic, by approaching a subject matter from a position of neutrality, played a crucial role when considering an appropriate methodological approach to support the current investigation (Dillet, 2017; Markula et al., 2001). Yet again, qualitative logic encouraged me to consider my own position and philosophical sensibilities, with respect to how the complex and deeply subjective topic of Olympic retirement was studied (Markula & Silk, 2011). The implications of these considerations will be evidenced throughout this chapter.

As with the lack of unanimity regarding its definition, there is no singular method for 'doing' qualitative research (Evans et al., 2021). This is because identifying an appropriate method for collecting data in a particular project is contingent on various factors. These include: the study's research questions, the researcher's paradigmatic assumptions, and the characteristics and availability of research participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Therefore, a broad spectrum of data collection methods have developed from the qualitative methodology, such as: interviewing, observation, and auto-ethnography (Evans et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2025). Later in the chapter, I detail the specific data collection procedures that were used to conduct this study. However, in an effort to remain loyal to the chronology of the research project, I first turn my attention to the topic of ethics by outlining, firstly, its importance for conducting social scientific research and, secondly, the implications for the current study.

4.3 Ethics

Any social scientific research study involving 'human subjects' is required to address the matter of ethics (Jones, 2022; McFee, 2025; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Research ethics refer to the "guidelines that are developed to ensure that all research participants are treated with dignity and respect" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 12). Ethical procedures help to ensure that the research process remains an unharmed experience for both the researcher and their participants. As a result, a concern for the ethics of this project was a paramount concern throughout the research process.

Furthermore, as a poststructuralist researcher, I hold the belief that relations of power can influence all aspects of the research process. In turn, I was continually engaged with the task of considering how these relations might impact upon the ethical dimensions of this study. Specifically, I sought to conduct this research study with a

high degree of self-reflexivity throughout, ensuring that the possibility for the limiting subjection of any research participant was minimised by treating all with the utmost respect during every interaction – from my initial introductions with each participant to the analysis and representation of their interview responses (Jones, 2022; McFee, 2025; Smith & McGannon, 2018). To navigate the challenges posed by ethical considerations, a number of additional measures were applied throughout the study.

First and foremost, prior to contacting any potential research participants, ethical approval for the study was granted by the Faculty of Health Sciences ethics committee at the University of Hull (see appendix A). This was an important step in verifying the ethical foundations of this project as it ensured that I had recorded all of the relevant procedures to conduct the research in the intended manner. To apply for ethical approval, I was required to submit a series of documents that detailed the nature of the research, in addition to the documentation that would be shared with potential research participants; key documents, such as the participant information sheet, were shared with potential contributors prior to proceeding with the data collection. These documents provided each participant with information about the topic of study, the manner in which they would be required to contribute to the research, the ways in which their responses would be represented, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any point (McFee, 2025; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Prior to conducting an interview with any participant, their informed consent was ascertained in light of this information⁵.

⁵ To provide their informed consent, participants were asked to sign an ‘informed consent form’. Most participants returned this document as required ($n = 25$). However, one participant

An important component in ascertaining the informed consent of all participants was providing a thorough explanation of how their personal information, data, and interview responses would be handled (McFee, 2025). This was a paramount consideration for this study as I was conducting potentially sensitive research with participants whose information and identities could become the subject of public interest if mishandled (McFee, 2025; Schubring et al., 2019). This potential ethical dilemma was navigated in two primary ways and was monitored on a consistent basis. Firstly, I placed a significant emphasis on approaching all participants with respect throughout the research process and I allocated time to ensuring that all contributors felt comfortable when divulging any potentially sensitive information within the safety of the interview setting. Indeed, in the possible event that any participant may have been unwilling to expand on a certain topic, they were made aware of their rights to circumvent any point of discussion or to withdraw from the research study, whilst receiving no discrimination from the researcher (Jones, 2022; McFee, 2025; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Secondly, it was crucial to take the necessary precautions to ensure that the identities of the research participants were maintained and represented in a confidential manner. Given the national profiles held by several of the study's participants, this was especially important (McFee, 2025; Schubring et al., 2019; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To ensure anonymity throughout the research process, participants' identities were coded through the allocation of pseudonyms. In addition, any references to

was unable to sign this document due to limited technological access. In turn, this participant provided verbal consent at the beginning of the interview and written consent via email.

participants' identities throughout the thesis, i.e., within the tables of participants (see chapters 4.4.1 and 4.4.2), are presented in a manner that is purposely obscured. Of course, as Sparkes (1998) suggested, it can be challenging for researchers to completely disguise the identities of those working in high-performance sport settings. This is because many current athletes, retired athletes, and coaches hold such highly regarded profiles within and beyond their respective disciplines. However, these measures were still taken as a means of ensuring that the anonymity of participants was maintained to the greatest extent possible (Jones, 2022; McFee, 2025; Sparkes, 1998). Deciding what categories of contextual information to include and exclude about participants was an iterative process informed by feedback from my supervisory team and a wider network of 'critical friends' e.g. disciplinary colleagues (Ives et al., 2025; McFee, 2025; Schubring et al., 2019). Prior to collecting any qualitative data on the topic of Olympic retirement, it was necessary to recruit the research participants. In the following sub-chapter, I chart how the process of sampling unfolded.

4.4 Sampling

According to Sparkes and Smith (2014, p. 68), sampling is the process of "making informed and strategic choices about which people, places, settings, events, and times are best for gaining the data you need to address your research questions". In terms of qualitative studies, the selection of participants is a relatively flexible task (Jones, 2022). In turn, it can be difficult for researchers to establish a set of rules for engaging with this process. However, in line with most qualitative research projects, the sampling approach used in this study was 'purposeful' (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Patton (2015, p. 265) defined purposeful sampling as the task of "strategically selecting information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance will

illuminate the inquiry question being investigated". By using the technique of purposeful sampling, my intention was to identify specific groups, as well as a number of individuals within these groups, that I believed to possess the appropriate characteristics, experiences, and knowledge to partake in a detailed discussion about retirement from Olympic sport (Jones, 2022; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As suggested by Patton (2015), employing a purposeful sampling strategy increases the likelihood of a researcher gathering rich, in-depth data on their topic of study. Within the following two sub-sections, I specifically detail the criteria used to recruit retired British Olympians and current Olympic standard coaching practitioners to this research study.

4.4.1 Sampling Criteria: Retired British Olympians

18 retired British Olympians took part in this research project. All of these former Olympians have represented Team GB at either the summer or winter games. To reiterate, this study was not concerned with attempting to measure how individuals' psychological characteristics or personal circumstances have impacted upon their experiences of retirement from Olympic sport. Rather, I set out to examine how the workings of anatomo-political relations of power may have influenced a variety of aspects of the Olympians' long-term, ongoing adjustments to post-sport life (Avner et al., 2025). In turn, I did not discriminate participation on the grounds of pre-determined identification categories (e.g., race, social class, gender), nor did I specify the number of participants that must be recruited from specific Olympic disciplines. Instead, contributions were welcomed from a wide spectrum of social groups in the hope that a range of contextual perspectives would be included throughout the study. The most significant sampling criterion employed in this recruitment process centred upon the required number of years that must have passed since the participants'

retirements from Olympic standard sport. Indeed, it was deemed that any participant in this section of the study must have retired from Olympic sport five or more years prior to their interview taking place. Subsequently, it was determined that the Rio 2016 Olympics would act as a logical 'cut-off' point for recruitment as the data collection phase of this project commenced in September 2022. The rationale for this criterion resided in the overarching research aim to examine the long-term implications of an immersion within the cultures of British Olympic sport. During the conception of this research study, it was difficult to define the parameters for what may be classified as a 'long-term' retirement duration. Therefore, in a manner akin to the recruitment tactics that were employed in Barth and colleagues' (2022) research, the Rio 2016 Olympics were used as a pragmatic signpost for ensuring that a recognised number of participants could be recruited to produce a rich and detailed dataset, whilst simultaneously devoting attention to those Olympians that have moved beyond the initial 'retirement transition' (Jones et al., 2022).

The table below details the demographical information for this sample's research participants (pseudonyms used):

Table 1

Participant	Gender	Discipline	Final Olympics	Current Employment
Ryan	Male	Swimming	Barcelona 1992	Military
Andy	Male	Track and Field	London 2012	Electrical Technician
Rita	Female	Swimming	Seoul 1988	Sport Services
Julian	Male	Rowing	Atlanta 1996	Police
Sophie	Female	Modern Pentathlon	Rio 2016	Self-employed
Hannah	Female	Swimming	Seoul 1988	Higher Education Lecturer
Jacob	Male	Swimming	Barcelona 1992	Project Management
Barry	Male	Volleyball	London 2012	Sport Services
Connor	Male	Swimming	Beijing 2008	Business Owner; Mentor
Aaron	Male	Boxing	London 2012	Public Figure
Martin	Male	Skiing	Sarajevo 1984	Business Management
Diana	Female	Rowing	Sydney 2000	Sport Services (recently departed)
Nathan	Male	Badminton	Atlanta 1996	Business Owner
Jasper	Male	Bobsleigh	Sochi 2014	Military
Sally	Female	Diving	Rio 2016	Sport Services
Adele	Female	Track and Field	Rio 2016	Consultancy
Eric	Male	Canoe	London 2012	Volunteer
Kelly	Female	Rowing	Atlanta 1996	Medical Administration

4.4.2 Sampling Criteria: Olympic Coaching Practitioners

Eight current Olympic coaching practitioners participated in the second strand of this research study. Defining the sampling criteria for recruiting coaching practitioners to the research project was a complex task, particularly when placed in the context of the criteria outlined in the previous sub-section, as the experience of 'retirement' could not be used as a commonality to dictate participant eligibility (Patton, 2015). To navigate this, three primary points of criteria were devised to determine the parameters for participation in this section of the project, these were: (A) participants must have experience of coaching Olympic standard athletes, (B) participants must have experience of working with Olympic athletes that have announced their intentions to retire from sport during their time as a coach, (C) participants must have experience of working with athletes that have been de-selected from Olympic programming during their time as a coach. Any coaching practitioner that met criteria point 'A', as well as one (or both) of criteria points 'B' or 'C', was deemed eligible to participate. These criteria resulted in the recruitment of eight coaching practitioners that are currently working in a range of roles across the British Olympic context, from head Olympic coach to coach developer. However, all participants were deemed to possess the relevant expertise regarding the coaching context to contribute to a detailed discussion about retirement from Olympic sport.

The table below details the demographical information for this sample's research participants (pseudonyms used):

Table 2

Participant	Years of Coaching Experience	Retired High-performance Athlete?
Joe	14	
Sam	15	✓
Carl	40	
Jack	15	✓
Brian	24	✓
Rowan	5	✓
Roy	31	✓
Billy	22	✓

4.4.3 Recruitment Approach

In total, 26 participants contributed to the study. Although there are no finite rules regarding sample sizes in qualitative research, it remains important for the researcher to justify the underpinning rationale of the final number of research participants (Bloom et al., 2025; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The final number of 26 participants was deemed appropriate by myself and my supervisory team. This number was not determined to be adequate as a result of a proposed 'saturation' of the data, a sampling rationale that is regularly utilised by post-positivist researchers to signify that no new data will emerge from continuing data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Salzmann-Erikson, 2024). Rather, we employed a more reflexive approach for determining sample size (Bloom et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Upon considering the participant demographics, as well as the complexities involved in accessing the necessary recruitment resources (as detailed below), we concluded that there was sufficient diversity throughout the samples to account for the complex, subjective, and contextual nature of Olympic retirement experiences and perspectives. This approach

was appropriate as, in poststructuralist research, the quality of a dataset is not validated by sample size, but the depth and richness of the data elicited (Salzmann-Erikson, 2024).

A flexible strategy was employed to recruit research participants. First and foremost, potential participants were contacted through an organisational partnership, held at the host institution, between the University of Hull and Team GB. The Team GB organisation acted as a 'gatekeeper' to accessing research participants because they held the contact details of potential contributors (King & Horrocks, 2010). As a means of ensuring that participants could be recruited through this partnership, Team GB were briefed on the aims and purposes of the study, the potential outcomes and uses, as well as their own role in the recruitment process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Taking these steps was a productive activity as the organisation advertised the research project via their networks on several occasions across the prescribed period of study.

Secondly, as a means of complimenting the primary recruitment approach, I welcomed participants to share details about the study amongst any applicable groups within their social networks. This was an example of 'snowball sampling'. Owing to the precision of the initial 'purposeful' sampling strategy, this was seen as a logical extension to recruiting participants that possessed the appropriate knowledge and experience to engage in an in-depth discussion about the topic of Olympic retirement (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling proved a useful method for increasing the sample size of these rather precise populations of study. Indeed, three of the final research participants were recruited via this method.

Thus far in this chapter, I have chronologically detailed the background of this research project. At this juncture, it is important to turn my attention to outlining the specific

methodological procedures that were used to collect qualitative data with both samples of participants.

4.5 Data Collection: Interviews

For this poststructuralist research study, interviews were used to collect qualitative data regarding the retired British Olympians' and Olympic coaching practitioners' perspectives and experiences of Olympic retirement. According to Sparkes and Smith (2014, p. 83), an interview can be described as:

A craft and social activity where two or more persons actively engage in embodied talk, jointly constructing knowledge about themselves and the social world as they interact with each other over time, through a range of senses and in a certain context.

In light of my own post-structural sensibilities, I recognised that studying Olympic retirement would likely produce a dataset that was laced with complexity and that using a quantitative method for data collection, such as a questionnaire, would fail to capture the intricacies of the participants' perspectives. Owing to the inherently interactional nature of the interview, this method represented an appropriate avenue for navigating this complex field of study. This is because interviewing permits the examination of individual experiences, feelings, and thoughts in a highly detailed manner (Bloom et al., 2025; Kvale, 2007).

Interviews are a recognised tool that can be employed by qualitative researchers looking to gather data on complex topics, within which the individuals in question are likely to have experienced an array of subjective feelings and circumstances (Kvale, 2007). This is because interviewees are granted relative freedom to answer the

questions that are posed by interviewers in a way that they consider to be appropriate (Jones, 2022). As a result, the interviewing method is widely considered to be a technique for producing rich insight into a topic of study (Purdy, 2014). The recognised utility of this method is clear throughout the fields of sport coaching and athletic retirement, as interviews have long been a popular data collection method for researchers (Bloom et al., 2025). Specifically, a number of post-structural scholars of sport have utilised interview methods to elicit insightful data on a number of topics, including: the dietary routines of sportspeople (Johns & Johns, 2000), the dominant practices of endurance running coaches (Mills & Denison, 2013), the experiences of female coach-learners (Sawiuk et al., 2021), and the experiences of players and coaches that participated in problem-based learning approaches (Avner et al., 2021). Previous examples of interview-led poststructuralist sport research have demonstrated how the method can be utilised to examine the complexity of a particular subject matter, whilst actively rejecting the notion that the researcher's role in this process is to reveal the 'truth' about their participants' experiences or understandings (Avner et al., 2025; Bonham & Bacchi, 2017).

As Kvale (2007) noted, the process of conducting interviews is not tied to any rigid boundaries or formulaic guidelines. However, by association, there are several ways through which the undertaking of qualitative interviews is possible. Therefore, before engaging with the process of collecting interview data, it was essential to consider the format of the interviews, the interview questions, and the interview settings (Bloom et al., 2025; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Across the remainder of this sub-chapter, I discuss these components of the research process.

4.5.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Purdy (2014) identified three basic interview formats: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. As the author emphasised, each of these approaches can be associated with unique benefits and concessions and, therefore, the identified format should be appropriate for the respective research project. First of all, structured interviews consist of “predetermined questions which do not change throughout the study” (p. 161). This type of interview uses closed-style questions in an attempt to “identify adequate indicators for chosen variables” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 85). In turn, structured interviews are a tool most commonly used by post-positivist researchers aiming to maintain their close ties to the deductive, ‘objective’ logic of quantitative research (Markula et al., 2001). The structured interview format only provides researchers with a very limited scope to explore the subjective and contextual experiences of participants. Therefore, this would not have been an appropriate method for proceeding with interviews as a poststructuralist researcher because I had no concern with attempting to test a prescribed hypothesis about Olympic retirement (Avner et al., 2025).

Secondly, unstructured interviews involve the researcher entering a discussion with the interviewee with a “broad range of topics they would like to cover” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 85) in mind, but with limited pre-determined idea about the direction that the interview will take. In this sense, the unstructured interview format can encourage data to emerge spontaneously within the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee (Purdy, 2014). Unstructured interviews can be valuable for those researchers that are attempting to explore a topic in broad terms. However, this approach is inappropriate when looking to examine a well-defined and pre-determined aspect of a topic of study, for example: ‘How does a career in Olympic

sport impact upon former Olympians' ongoing relationships with their bodies and exercise?' or 'To what extent do Olympic coaching practitioners consider themselves to be involved in the retirement processes of the Olympians they coach?'. This is because unstructured interviews are likely to produce significant volumes of non-specific data with respect to the outlined subject matter (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

After considering the respective merits and concessions of the structured and unstructured interview formats, I concluded that this study would adopt a semi-structured approach. Semi-structured interviews are the most common technique for the qualitative study of sport-related phenomena (Bloom et al., 2025; Markula & Silk, 2011). It would be a fair assessment to argue that the popularity of this format is closely linked to how semi-structured interviews are designed to strike an appropriate balance between the controlled nature of the structured interview and the spontaneity of the unstructured interview (Bloom et al., 2025; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

When designing a semi-structured interview study, the researcher includes several pre-determined and open-ended questions (these form an interview guide; see chapter 4.5.2) that hold a degree of flexibility to allow for any additional topics of interest to be explored (Purdy, 2014). Therefore, the semi-structured interviewing technique is useful for allowing participants to express their feelings, ideas, and opinions surrounding the interview topic(s), without being tied to the standardised, closed questions of the structured interview (Bloom et al., 2025; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Indeed, semi-structured interviews are typically comprised of a series of open-ended, yet relatively focused, questions that centre upon the phenomena of study (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). I deemed these attributes of the semi-structured interviewing method to be important for allowing each participant sufficient opportunities to share

their subjective experiences and perspectives regarding Olympic retirement. Indeed, the value of semi-structured interviews for conducting in-depth, Foucauldian informed examinations of athletic retirement had previously been demonstrated by Jones and Denison (2017), in their study of the retirement experiences of British footballers. In the following sub-section, I detail the process of developing the interview guides that were used in this data collection process.

4.5.2 A Foucauldian Approach to Developing Interview Guides

Creating interview guides prior to conducting the interviews with research participants was an essential aspect of the data collection process. Developing interview guides helped to ensure that the main research themes were explored throughout the interview process, and that the questions posed to participants were carefully and accurately aligned to the Foucauldian theoretical framework that underpinned this study (Avner et al., 2025). During the preparation phase of this research project, I designed an adaptable set of questions and probes that helped to guide each interview and allowed me to “react to issues that emerge during the interview and not restrict the interview to a fixed agenda” (Purdy, 2014, p. 162).

Interview guides are principally designed in light of the relevant literature surrounding the topic of study, the study’s research questions, and the paradigmatic heritage of the researcher (Markula & Silk, 2011; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As a researcher committed to using Foucauldian theory to examine the complex socio-relational nature of the Olympic retirement process, I injected an additional element into this interplay. In a similar vein to the interview guide that informed Jones and Denison’s (2017) study on the retirement experiences of British footballers, the guides designed for my project were ‘Foucauldian informed’. As I outlined in chapter three, the suite of concepts that

inform Foucault's (1990; 1991a) articulation of disciplinary power acted as a theoretical lens for this study. In turn, it was vital that both interview guides reflected this. Both guides were developed in a fashion designed to generate a discussion regarding how certain power-knowledge relations may have penetrated the context of British Olympic sport in ways that have shaped both the former Olympians' ongoing experiences of post-sport life, and the coaching practitioners' perspectives of the Olympic retirement process (Avner et al., 2025; Jones & Denison, 2017).

According to Sparkes and Smith (2014), when constructing an interview guide, questions should be grouped around similar themes. As this research study collated interview data from two separate samples of study, the questions and themes explored, despite remaining loyal to the Foucauldian theoretical framework, differed in content. Within the following two sub-sections, I detail the development of each interview guide in a specific manner. Following this, I will discuss how the content of each interview guide was verified prior to being utilised in the research setting.

4.5.2.1 Developing an Interview Guide: Retired British Olympians

Whilst developing each interview guide, I regularly consulted the relevant previous literature surrounding the topic of Olympic retirement (see chapter 2) and the study's theoretical framework (see chapter 3). This process resulted in the development of two major thematic groupings of interview questions. These were: (A) Mapping the origins of an Olympic career and (B) The retirement experience (see appendix B).

The first theme, Mapping the origins of an Olympic career, centred upon an attempt to explore the participants' disciplinary experiences throughout their Olympic careers. Indeed, the former Olympians were asked to describe their journeys, from entering their respective disciplinary contexts to their experiences of competing at the Olympic

Games. The Foucauldian theoretical framework shaped the lines of questioning in this group. Specifically, each question was designed to generate a discussion about how the participants' minds and bodies had been exposed to discipline via the spatial, temporal, and relational arrangements that defined their Olympic careers (Avner et al., 2025). The theoretical framework was deployed tactically at this stage. During the preparation phase of the research process, I deemed that it would be inappropriate to overtly utilise Foucauldian terminology (e.g., *the control of activity*) when framing questions. This is because doing so may have been unproductive for eliciting detailed responses from those participants unfamiliar with Foucault's work. Rather, each question was laced with subtle references to the various arrangements of disciplinary power. For example, each participant was encouraged to describe the training environments that they occupied during their careers, as opposed to specifically detailing the ways in which their bodies were disciplined through temporal and spatial measures of control. As a result, I was able to isolate a number of instances within the Olympians' careers to "consider how, in these moments, power was enacted upon their bodies" (Avner et al., 2025, p. 100).

These questions proceeded to inform the second thematic grouping: The retirement experience. This group of questions was designed to consider the numerous legacies of the participants' careers in the disciplinary cultures of British Olympic sport. These questions centred upon various aspects of the participants' lives after sport, including their ongoing adjustments to post-Olympic career paths and their current relationships with exercise. In posing these enquiries, it was my intention to allow the participants a suitable space to reflect upon the ideas that were discussed earlier in the interview (Bloom et al., 2025); this would support the ongoing examination of how their in-

career experiences might have impacted upon, or continue to impact upon, their lives after Olympic sport (Avner et al., 2025). Specifically, the questions in this group were devised in a manner that paid significant attention to how the production of docility during an Olympic career may have influenced the participants' ongoing adjustments to post-sport life, from their immediate retirement transitions through to the present moment (Jones & Denison, 2017; Jones et al., 2022).

4.5.2.2 Developing an Interview Guide: Olympic Coaching Practitioners

This interview guide was developed to facilitate discussions with the sample of Olympic coaching practitioners regarding the topic of Olympic retirement. In turn, it was designed to address an alternative set of research questions to those that influenced the interview guide outlined in the previous sub-section (see chapter 1.4). However, whilst creating this guide, I endeavoured to remain loyal to the Foucauldian theoretical framework. Subsequently, three major thematic groupings of interview questions were developed. These were: (A) Background to coaching, (B) Coaching at the Olympic level, and (C) Approach to coaching transitioning athletes (see appendix C).

The first section of this interview guide, Background to coaching, was purposefully designed to stimulate a discussion with each participant regarding their introductions to the coaching context, their experiences of coach learning, and their initial thoughts about coaching in Olympic standard environments. The rationale underpinning this group of questions centred upon gathering insight into how each participant had developed their knowledge of the coaching process and, subsequently, how these experiences have informed their approaches to coaching in the Olympic context. Indeed, I considered this to be an important vehicle in beginning to address the

respective research questions with the coaching practitioners because, firstly, contextualising the cultural biographies and learning experiences of sport coaches is crucial to developing an insight into their understandings of the complexities of their respective athletic contexts (Jones et al., 2004) and, secondly, understanding the construction of particular coaching knowledges is an imperative first step in locating how disciplinary relations of power may likely be (re)produced by coaching practitioners in the field (Cushion et al., 2022; Denison, 2007).

The second theme – Coaching at the Olympic level - focused on examining how each participant has navigated the process of coaching Olympic standard athletes in a more detailed manner. Specifically, this group of questions was devised in a manner that could help examine how particular arrangements of disciplinary power may be present in the participants' coaching approaches. For example, the questions 'To what extent do you manage the athlete training approach?' and 'How do you monitor the progress of your athletes, as to ensure they are ready to compete at the Olympic Games?' were framed as a means of considering how each coaches' practices may be connected to the disciplinary ways of thinking that are embedded into techniques such as *the control of activity* and *normalising judgement* (Denison et al., 2013; Foucault, 1991a; Shogan, 1999). Furthermore, when devising this group of questions, I was not only concerned with understanding how the practices employed by these participants may have contributed to the production of docility in those Olympians they have trained. Rather, I was intent on generating a deeper understanding of how their own ways of thinking about coaching are intertwined in a complex matrix of anatomo-political power relations (Denison et al., 2017). Indeed, by raising discussion points surrounding the ways in which the participants' approaches may (or may not) be influenced and

monitored by alternative bodies within the Olympic sport context (i.e., at an organisational level by NGBs), I was concerned with providing each coach participant with the time and space to consider how their approaches might be shaped by certain processes of normalisation (Denison et al., 2019; Zehntner & McMahon, 2019).

With the third question group, Approach to coaching transitioning athletes, I was principally concerned with generating a discussion with each coaching practitioner, centring upon the topic of Olympic retirement. Owing to the distinct lack of extant research that has been conducted with coaching practitioners regarding this topic (Boardman et al., 2024; Brown, 2024), the aim of this section was to produce an introductory mapping of the role of the coach in the Olympic retirement process. In turn, these lines of questioning varied from the degree to which each participant considered themselves to be immersed in the retirement decisions of the Olympians they coach, to whether each practitioner considers making alterations to training regimen in light of Olympians' impending retirement transitions.

4.5.2.3 Verifying the Interview Guide Content

Prior to commencing the interview process, I verified the suitability of each interview guide via three means. Firstly, I referred to the writings of established qualitative sport scholars - including Avner and colleagues (2025) to understand how to frame an interview guide through a Foucauldian lens and Sparkes and Smith (2014) to understand the practicalities of designing and utilising interview guides - throughout the development phase. Secondly, I discussed the content of each interview guide with my supervisory team. Each member of the team provided constructive feedback regarding the phrasing of particular questions and the structure of each interview. Thirdly, I conducted a pilot interview with a retired athlete (turned qualitative

researcher) based on the interview guide that was developed for the retired Olympians' strand of the project.

Each of these activities influenced the research study. In adopting an iterative approach to preparing the data collection procedure, I made changes to the initial iterations of each interview guide based upon the advice, feedback, and recommendations provided by these resources (Ives et al., 2025; Purdy, 2014). For example, following the advice provided by the interviewee in the pilot interview, I recognised that in order to limit any possible misperception amongst participants, it was important to avoid using overly theoretical language when framing questions (see chapter 4.5.2.1 for a description of how this was navigated in practice). In the following sub-section, I document the procedural aspects of conducting the semi-structured interviews for this study.

4.5.3 Using Digital Technology to Conduct Interviews

For this study, a total of 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted. All interviews had a duration of 60 – 120 minutes and were conducted via an online video platform⁶ ($n = 25$) or telephone ($n = 1$)⁷. Although face-to-face interviewing is generally considered to be the 'conventional' method for conducting qualitative interviews, it is not an exclusive means (Bloom et al., 2025; Smith & Sparkes, 2016; O'Quinn et al., 2024; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Indeed, remote interviewing is associated with a specific set of benefits, particularly with respect to the current research project (O'Quinn et al., 2024). Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the ability to conduct

⁶ Microsoft Teams was used because this platform was supported by the host institution.

⁷ Telephone interview was conducted with one participant, owing to their inability to access the video platform at the time of interview.

synchronous interviews via digital technology ensured that the project was not limited geographically (Bloom et al., 2025; Markula et al., 2023; Salmons, 2014). Certainly, conducting online interviews meant that I was able to extend the recruitment process globally, without the constraints of high-cost travel (O’Quinn et al., 2024). This benefit of remote interviewing proved crucial as participants were recruited from a range of geographical regions⁸. Secondly, the use of an online video platform provided both myself, as the researcher, and each participant with the capacity to engage in a discussion via a user-friendly and accessible means at a time of convenience (Archibald et al., 2019; Bloom et al., 2025; O’Quinn et al., 2024).

The most prominent criticism regarding the use of remote interviewing in social scientific research lies in the assumption that the removal of face-to-face contact may negatively impact upon the researcher’s ability to build rapport with their participants and, in turn, critics have argued that this could decrease the likelihood of eliciting rich data from each interview (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Although qualitative researchers have previously suggested that this criticism is unjust (Bloom et al., 2025; O’Quinn et al., 2024; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004), in the following sub-section, I detail the manner in which this potential drawback was negotiated throughout the research process.

4.5.4 Considering the Role of the Researcher in the Interview Setting

In poststructuralist research, the researcher does not attempt to assume a position of neutrality (Avner et al., 2025; Bonham & Bacchi, 2017). In turn, the richness of the interview data elicited in post-structural projects is tied to the craftsmanship of the

⁸ In terms of their current countries of residence.

interviewer (Kvale, 2007). In this sense, it is important to discuss how I negotiated my role as the researcher throughout the interview process.

Prior to conducting any interviews, I identified that the notion of rapport was a key element in curating a productive piece of qualitative research. This is because establishing rapport with research participants is widely regarded as an important instrument for the elicitation of rich, in-depth interview data (Bloom et al., 2025; King & Horrocks, 2010). At its most fundamental level, the process of formulating rapport lies in ensuring that participants feel comfortable in sharing their insights and experiences regarding the relevant topic of study (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). One method through which previous poststructuralist retirement studies have established rapport with participants is through using the researcher's 'insider' position as an athletic retiree to provide an immediate point of access and reference with interviewees (e.g., Jones & Denison, 2017). Indeed, Jones and Denison considered that the first author's footballing career was significant in their attempt to generate rich, detailed discussions with participants surrounding the topic of retirement. However, I have never been actively immersed in the context of British Olympic sport as either an athlete or a coach. Therefore, I sought alternative means to construct rapport with each participant throughout the interview process.

Firstly, by conducting interviews via an online video platform, participants were able to engage with the research conversation from a comfortable environment (e.g., their own homes) and, thus, any potential anxieties associated with travelling or being immersed in an unfamiliar setting were lifted (Bloom et al., 2025; O'Quinn et al., 2024; Purdy, 2014). Secondly, each interview guide was developed in a manner consistent with previous recommendations regarding the establishment of rapport in the

interview setting (King & Horrocks, 2010; Purdy, 2014). Indeed, each guide followed a consistent and logical format that placed the gathering of participants' background information at the beginning of the discussion; this was followed by more straightforward points of discussion that gradually increased in complexity and potential sensitivity throughout the interview (Bloom et al., 2025). This approach was tactical. It acted to provide each participant with an opportunity to 'ease in' to the conversation, as well as an opportunity for myself, as the researcher, to build rapport and trust with each interviewee prior to posing more complex lines of questioning. Furthermore, throughout the data collection process, I endeavoured to treat all participants and their interview responses with the utmost respect and dignity (Markula & Silk, 2011; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Undoubtedly, establishing rapport with all research participants was instrumental in conducting a qualitative research study that produced rich, deep insight into the topic of Olympic retirement. What is more, it is important to reflect on the use of semi-structured interviews throughout this study with respect to the guiding poststructuralist orientation. By conducting semi-structured interviews with retired British Olympians and Olympic coaching practitioners, I was granted relative freedom to explore the subjective experiences and opinions held by each participant because there was no requirement to adhere to a fixed agenda during these conversations (Bloom et al., 2025; Purdy, 2014). To compliment this, I drew upon the fundamental interviewing techniques of active listening and probing. Active listening, a technique defined by Kvale (2007, p. 63) as "the interviewer's ability to listen actively to what the interviewee says", was used as a tool to inform the direction of the unfolding discussion with each interviewee as it allowed me, as the researcher, to add depth to

each response using the probes that followed (King & Horrocks, 2010). For example, by actively listening to the participants' various responses to the pre-determined questions located in the interview guides, I was able to encourage each participant to elaborate (by encouraging the interviewee to continue to discuss a relevant topic), to clarify (to seek further explanation when I was unsure of the nature of the response), or to complete (to ask the participant to finish an explanation when the response failed to arrive at a natural conclusion) their responses (Bloom et al., 2025; King & Horrocks, 2010). Employing these techniques within the interview setting ensured that all participants were granted the necessary space and time to discuss the deep, multiple, and complex meanings that they ascribe, or have previously ascribed, to the topic of Olympic retirement.

Thus far in this chapter, I have outlined the specific philosophical, ethical, sampling, and data collection procedures that were used to underpin and conduct this research study. However, if the collated dataset was to be viewed in isolation, the underlying meanings of its content would be limited (Ives et al., 2025; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Therefore, a series of analytical procedures were employed to make sense of the interview data. I detail these in the following sub-chapter.

4.6 Data Analysis

The process of conducting 26 interviews for this project produced a significant amount of empirical material. I transcribed all interviews personally. Contrary to the dominant approach to qualitative transcription, the interviews were not transcribed verbatim (Purdy, 2014). Rather, I followed the advice provided by Markula and Silk (2011, p. 96) by producing a "cleaned" version of each interview transcript. Transcribing the data in such a manner allowed for the key points of all discussions to be included in the final

transcripts. However, particular ‘utterances’ that failed to provide any form of conceptual interest to the final dataset, and could subsequently cause confusion in forthcoming data extracts, were excluded. Prior to publication, each transcript was shared with the respective participant. This step was taken to provide each participant with an opportunity to confirm that they were satisfied that the content of their transcript was an accurate representation of their interview responses (Purdy, 2014). With the exception of a small number of grammatical errors that participants kindly brought to my attention, no major content alterations ensued as a result of this process.

There are a range of analytical techniques available to qualitative researchers to aid the process of making sense of interview data; these techniques include – but are not limited to – content analysis, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis (Ives et al., 2025). However, the approach adopted in a particular project will always be contingent on the paradigmatic heritage of the researcher (Taylor, 2014). Poststructuralist researchers are not tied to the formulaic analytical procedures that underpin those studies that seek the uncovering of objective ‘truths’ within their dataset (Avner et al., 2025). Rather post-structural scholars tend to be concerned with analysing empirical material with reference to an identified theoretical framework (Markula & Silk, 2011; Taylor, 2014). Subsequently, it is important to consider that the process of analysing the interview data for this project was by no means a neutral task. In contrast, I assumed a pivotal role throughout the analytical process. Indeed, the empirical material deemed relevant to the study and, thus, meaningful for analysis was influenced by my own philosophical assumptions, as well as the theoretical framework.

This research project was built upon a Foucauldian informed theoretical framework. Foucault's (1990; 1991a) suite of concepts regarding modern power relations were significant in formulating this post-structural examination of the phenomena of Olympic retirement. However, Foucault did not provide future researchers with a specific analytical framework for the examination of interview data. Therefore, I closely followed the recommendations for post-structural analyses posited by Markula and Silk (2011). There were three stages to this process, these were: identification of themes; analysis of themes; connection with power relations, theory, and previous literature. As previously explained, I collected interview data with two samples of study during the data collection process and, in turn, I addressed an alternative series of research questions with both sets of participants. However, the overarching examination of the relationship between anatomo-political relations of power and Olympic retirement remained a commonality throughout both sections of the study. As a result, these recommendations were applicable for both sets of analysis.

Firstly, I engaged with the "identification of themes" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 109). As per the authors' recommendations, the development of the themed interview guides assisted this analytical step. As established earlier in this chapter (see chapters 4.5.2.1 and 4.5.2.2), each interview guide was organised to examine how disciplinary relations of power have shaped both the former Olympians' long-term retirement adjustments and the Olympic coaching practitioners' perspectives of the Olympic retirement process, respectively. In doing so, I was immediately able to examine how each participants' responses were influenced by disciplinary modes of thinking. By engaging with this analytical procedure throughout the research process – i.e., through the consistent re-examination of empirical material and the maintenance of analytical

memos (Ives et al., 2025; Saldaña, 2013) – I was able to identify initial themes throughout the dataset with respect to the outlined interview guides and research questions (Ives et al., 2025; Taylor, 2014). For example, the first theme of the interview guide designed for use with Olympic coaching practitioners (see appendix C; see chapter 4.5.2.2) was intended to locate the presence of disciplinary power-knowledge relations in the participants' backgrounds. Following this, the ensuing interview analysis was guided by "cautionary prescriptions" (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 106) about these discourses and how they may (or may not) have influenced the participants' perspectives about working with Olympic athletes.

Following this, I engaged with the "analysis of the themes" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 109). Specifically, I analysed the initial themes that emerged from the themed interview guides by looking for relevant intersections (i.e., connections between discourses) and discrepancies (i.e., contradictory discourses) throughout the dataset. Also, at this stage, I looked for 'new' themes that did not emerge directly from the interview guides. By engaging with this task, I was able to consider the dataset in a more detailed and accurate manner by accounting for the various complexities and contradictions that pertained to the interview responses. For example, at this stage, despite the absence of a specific thematic question centring upon the idea of 'care' in the coach-athlete relationship, I identified that this was a notable theme amongst several of the coach participants' perspectives regarding Olympic retirement (see chapter 7). Given my poststructuralist sensibilities, this was a productive task as the subjective, contextual experiences and opinions of each participant were analysed in a way that exposed the unstable, complex state of power-knowledge relations within the context of British Olympic sport (Foucault, 1990). In turn, this analytical stage

helped to demonstrate how these networks have combined to influence every participant differently (Avner et al., 2025).

The final stage of data analysis was to identify connections throughout the dataset with “power relations, theory and previous literature” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 109). This stage of the process required me to remain permanently mindful of how each theme may be connected to the various arrangements of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991a), as well as how each theme may support or contradict the dominant narratives that have saturated previous athletic retirement studies. To ensure that I engaged with this analytical process in a meaningful way, I continually referred to the study’s theoretical framework (see chapter 3) to consider how the experiences and perspectives of all participants may be connected to disciplinary modes of thought and being (Mills & Denison, 2013). In addition, during this stage, I partook in a continual and critical dialogue with my supervisory team (both qualitative sport scholars), who acted as ‘critical friends’ with respect to how certain theoretical concepts pertained to the dataset. These conversations were productive as they helped to substantiate my logical engagement with the Foucauldian theoretical framework (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Engaging with Markula and Silk’s (2011) recommendations was a productive process. I have analysed how the complex subject matter of Olympic retirement was addressed throughout each section of the study. This was achieved in two primary ways. Firstly, with respect to the sample of retired British Olympians, this analytical process helped to illuminate how an exposure to disciplinary technologies during an Olympic career can have myriad, prolonged implications for how athletes adjust to their lives beyond sport. Secondly, with respect to the sample of Olympic coaching practitioners, Markula

and Silk's analytical framework allowed me to map and consider the multiple ways in which these participants framed and considered the problematic of Olympic retirement throughout their interviews. Specifically, by adopting a post-structural approach to data analysis, I was able to consider how the variety of responses present throughout each sample could be intimately connected to disciplinary power-knowledge relations (Foucault, 1991a).

4.7 Ensuring Quality in a Poststructuralist Research Project

It is important that any social scientific research project is held to the highest standards (Smith et al., 2014; Toner, 2025). Therefore, it is essential that all researchers clearly explain the parameters to which their research projects should be held accountable. There is no singular, unified method for judging the quality of qualitative research (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Rather, there are a range of mechanisms that can be used to determine research quality. The specific methods of judgement that are established for a particular research project will be contingent on the paradigmatic heritage of the study (Markula & Silk, 2011; Toner, 2025).

For poststructuralist researchers, defining the judgement criteria for a study can be a complex task. This is because the ontological and epistemological tenets of poststructuralism reject the notions of 'reliability' and 'validity' that have historically been used to measure the quality of academic research (Avner et al., 2025). Measures of reliability and validity are closely related to the paradigms of positivism and post-positivism because, within these frameworks, the quality of research is determined by the objectivity and generalisability of the results (Markula et al., 2001; Toner, 2025). As I have made clear throughout this chapter, this project was not devised as a means of uncovering an objective, singular reality or truth about retirement from Olympic sport

(Avner et al., 2025). In contrast, it was my intention to examine how relations of power have impacted upon both the long-term retirement experiences of British Olympians and Olympic coaching practitioners' perspectives of Olympic retirement. Therefore, it is important to describe the ways in which the quality of this study should be judged in a manner that is consistent with these intentions.

According to Markula and Silk (2011, p. 220), to determine the quality of scholarship, poststructuralist researchers should look to emphasise:

The theoretical contribution in addition to the process and the impact on the community. This departs from interpretive or critical research to place less significance on detailed, 'procedural' judgement criteria and call for a more in- depth, theoretically driven, yet practically applicable, socially situated knowledge production process.

In this instance, Markula and Silk provide useful criteria for assessing the quality of post-structural research, despite the absence of a consistent and universal reality to which the aim of a study could be to appropriately 'reveal'. The remainder of this sub-chapter will be dedicated to outlining how these determinants were arranged for this project.

Firstly, to ensure the quality of a post-structural research project, the researcher should engage with their theoretical framework in a manner that is coherent and consistent with the logical application of the guiding theorists' intended workings. At its core, this study can be classified as 'Foucauldian'. Therefore, it is important that the application of theory throughout this study accurately reflects Foucauldian logic. Throughout the thesis, an engagement with Foucauldian philosophies is most evident

through my persistent reference to the study's theoretical framework, in addition to several of the most important Foucauldian informed texts that have influenced the fields of athletic retirement (e.g., Jones & Denison, 2017) and sport coaching (e.g., Denison, 2007).

Secondly, it is essential that the poststructuralist researcher places an emphasis on the research process itself. This study adopted the semi-structured interview method to collect qualitative data. By examining the manner in which all participants engaged with this aspect of the process, the quality of the research framework can be evaluated, in part, with regard to its practical applicability to understanding the phenomena of Olympic retirement. There are several means through which the quality of the project may be assessed in relation to the research process, including the final number of research participants that were recruited and the richness of the interview data (Smith et al., 2014).

The final primary means through which the quality of this post-structural research study might be determined relates to the "impact on the community" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 220). As I have previously established, this is not the first athletic retirement study to utilise a poststructuralist framework (see chapter 2). Indeed, several sporting contexts have been examined via this paradigmatic lens, these include Australian Rules football (Hickey & Kelly, 2008), association football (Jones & Denison, 2017), and tennis (Gerdin, 2023). Therefore, during the conceptualisation of this research project, it was never my intention to suggest that I would be presenting an original theoretical approach for studying the topic of athletic retirement. Rather, I have been intent on extending this disruptive way of thinking about sports retirement to a previously under-researched sample of study – retired British Olympians (Jones et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is important that any judgement criteria should consider whether the retirement experiences of British Olympians (across both the short and longer term) have been accurately depicted throughout the thesis.

Furthermore, in relation to the sample of Olympic coaching practitioners, alternative criteria could be used to determine the quality of 'community impact' (Markula & Silk, 2011). As the 21st century has proceeded, it has become increasingly accepted amongst Foucauldian informed coaching scholars that disciplinary modes of thinking can limit the formation of new, more ethical coaching knowledges and practices (Denison & Avner, 2011). Therefore, it was not my intention to simply reproduce these, albeit important, understandings of coaching Olympic standard athletes. Rather, I was focused on considering how disciplinary relations of power have penetrated the Olympic coaching context in ways that have influenced coaches' perspectives of the Olympic retirement process. As a result, the manner in which this research problem is addressed throughout the thesis should be a vital element in determining the quality of this project. Should the experiences of all participants be represented accurately throughout the thesis, I believe that this piece of research will provide an important contribution to the ongoing problematisation and re-imagination of the complex, multi-dimensional phenomena of sports retirement (Brown, 2024; Jones et al., 2022; 2023).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the methodological procedures that were undertaken to complete this study. Specifically, I have elaborated on the poststructuralist philosophical positioning that underpinned this study and how these sensibilities

informed the entire research process. For the remainder of the thesis, I present and discuss the findings of this study.

Chapter 5 Post-sport Subjectivities: The Legacies of an Olympic Career for Relationships, Careers, and Lived Experiences

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine how a career in Olympic sport has impacted upon the retired British Olympians' long-term, ongoing adjustments to post-sport life. Specifically, I consider how an exposure to technologies of discipline during an Olympic career can work to cultivate certain modes of being that subjectively influence the capacities of retirees to adjust to post-sport career paths, to negotiate their relationships with various members of the social body, and to posture their lived experiences. In doing so, this chapter develops existing understandings of the relationship between identity and sports retirement (Cosh, 2022). In doing so, I step away from the term 'identity' in my analysis. This is because, within many existing psychological interpretations of athletes' retirement experiences, this term has been used to denote a natural composition of the 'person' and to represent an essential truth about their human nature (e.g., Brewer et al., 1993). However, in light of my own post-structural sensibilities, I refute this notion of the self (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Indeed, Foucault disputed the humanist idea that the 'self' was a substance that could be 'discovered' or 'found'. Rather, he contended that individuals, and their characteristics, are the products of relations of power (Foucault, 1983a; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Therefore, in this chapter, I draw upon the Foucauldian informed term 'subjectivities' to consider the possibilities of athletes' lived experiences within the historical and political contexts of a career in British Olympic sport (Heyes, 2014). In doing so, I account for how the disciplinary cultures of British Olympic sport influence the ways in which certain subjects come into being and what the implications of these conditions might be for Olympians' long-term adjustments to post-sport life.

5.1 The Disciplinary Subjectivities of British Olympians

“Discipline ‘makes’ individuals”

(Foucault, 1991a, p. 170)

Modern disciplines, including Olympic sport, produce docile bodies that think, act, and move in regulated ways. In Foucault’s (1988, p. 18) words, individual bodies are conditioned into adopting “certain attitudes” that are considered productive within their discipline. Amongst the retired British Olympians interviewed for this study, the imposition of discipline was vital in how they were constituted as Olympic standard athletic subjects during their careers. Overwhelmingly, the participants deemed their Olympic subjectivities to be composed of characteristics such as determination, commitment, resilience, and compliance. For example, Aaron noted: “You’ve got to be determined to be successful.” Ryan expanded on this prerequisite notion of determination whilst discussing the characteristics that are required to compete at the Olympic standard:

You...need the dedication and the ability to work hard, grit teeth, get out of bed when you don’t want to...You gain more by working hard when you don’t want to, then by working hard when you want to.

Furthermore, as Kelly explained, the adoption of these characteristics was supported by sacrificial engagements that demonstrated her total compliance with the essential Olympic mentality:

It was very much all in. Literally all you did was training and sleeping – that was pretty much it. You didn’t go to friends’ parties, weddings, holidays...you’re totally invested in it, like that is your life, it is your job, it is

what you do, it is what you're proud about and it is your identity. At the time, you're happy to do it and you have to commit 110% or you're never going to make it, and you'll never get the most out of yourself.

Supported by self-discipline techniques (Heikkala, 1993), the arrangements of disciplinary power work to ensure that the geographical and temporal distributions of individuals are controlled in ways that limit external disruptions (Foucault, 1991a; Shogan, 1999). Subsequently, individuals' knowledge regarding the self becomes intensely concentrated upon their function within these spaces (Markula & Pringle, 2006). In other words, disciplinary mechanisms operate to normalise and homogenise Olympians towards subjectivities that centre upon their athleticism and work ethics (Crocket, 2014; Shogan, 1999; Tsang, 2000). This was evident within Kelly's words and throughout the wider sample.

Furthermore, the dominant subjectivities illustrated throughout the interviews were often tied to a disciplinary logic of progression that was designed to culminate in Olympic 'success' (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Several participants discussed how their lived experiences were entrenched in an achievement-centred way of thinking from an early age. For example, Connor remarked:

The thing that really got me involved in swimming as a sport was watching the Olympics and the Olympians on TV – seeing a British Olympian winning a gold medal and thinking 'that looks cool, I would love to do that'...I really started to think 'wait, is this what humans can really do?'

Eric shared a similar sentiment:

Probably around the time of the Barcelona Olympics...I somehow got the idea that I wanted to be a world champion and Olympic champion or a multiple champion in both of those things...it was something that, fairly early on, was driving me.

A commitment to this competitive logic was a vital component in how most interviewees characterised their Olympic careers. As Andy explained, the 'will to win' was an important element in how he understood himself as an Olympian:

I just always had a passion to be the best and that's where it all started...As soon as I got involved, I wanted to know who was the best in the country and who did I need to beat...I think that I was just hungry to be chasing that top guy down.

The illustrated elements of the Olympians' disciplinary subjectivities are oriented directly towards the pursuit of material success in spaces of competition. Across the sample, it was widely accepted that an adherence to this logic permitted the development, and harnessing, of characteristics – such as determination and commitment – in relation to their labour (Manley et al., 2016). Foucault's (1991a) concept of *the organisation of geneses* exemplifies how disciplinary mechanisms work to uphold Olympians' compliance with this wisdom. Indeed, the daily activities of Olympic standard athletes are intentionally organised in ways that are designed to facilitate continuous improvement (Shogan, 1999). In this sense, it becomes possible to understand how disciplinary modes of being are not only normalised within these cultures, but they are capitalised upon efficiently to guarantee that the mentalities of Olympians are compounded by the logic of progression and competition (Markula &

Pringle, 2006). This was evident in the participants' consistent reports about their commitment to these ways of thinking throughout their Olympic careers.

Primarily, the retired British Olympians discussed their subjectivities in terms that pointed towards their natural composition. For example, Martin noted that "I am naturally competitive." However, from an anti-essentialist and Foucauldian perspective, I recognise that these illustrated characteristics are not innate (Heyes, 2014). Rather, these particular ways of being represent the effects of power-knowledge relations (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Therefore, it is important to consider the various ways in which the retirees described their objectification and subjectivation during their Olympic careers (Foucault, 1983a).

Throughout the interviews, participants described numerous instances in which the cultivation of their subjectivities could be tied to the disciplinary arrangements of Olympic sport. For example, Sally discussed how her experiences as a young gymnast worked to fabricate a compliant mindset that was aligned with a productive career in Olympic standard diving:

The good thing about moving from gymnastics to any sport is that you have got the agility, but you have also got the grit, the determination, and the confidence that gymnastics gives you. The resilience, the ability to adapt and to listen to your coach – all those traits are built into you in gymnastics from very early on.

In addition, Jacob noted that the manner in which his coach organised training sessions was key to manufacturing a disciplined mentality in these times:

I mean coaches take the flak – they are the devil! They are either your best mate or the worst person in the world because they put a set in you just hate and they see you on your knees...But that gave me the mentality where I wanted to show them, prove myself, and show that I had the right to be here.

Jacob's story exemplifies one way in which Olympic sport spaces operate in subtle, yet purposeful, ways to produce modes of being that are consistent with the economy of the discipline (Foucault, 1991a; Lee Sinden, 2013). Indeed, the former swimmer's words suggest that the inculcation of his disciplinary mindset was a coercive, but not repressive, process. This is an important example of how modern power functions, insofar that discipline "shapes and makes individuals and produces specific forms of normative pleasures which further 'bind' people to their own identities" (Avner et al., 2019, p. 56). However, as Diana's example makes clear, it is important to remain aware of the more authoritative mechanisms of control that may be deployed by coaches when seeking the legitimation of Olympians' subjectivities:

We had a lead coach who was old school. So, he trained us the way he had always trained people, and very successfully too...So, with things like nutrition, he would just tell people they were fat. I was always quite lean, but some of the girls there were a bit more covered than I was, and even though they were better rowers, he didn't seem to notice...we were highly educated and articulate women, yet we used to sit in almost complete silence during the breaks between sessions because everybody was afraid that they would say something that could be held against them...He could

make or break your career. I mean, he could deselect you for no reason and he was just an all-round nasty person.

Diana's comments demonstrate that characteristics of compliance were normalised within her discipline of rowing through her coach's exploitation of their superior position within the disciplinary machine of "hierarchised surveillance" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 177). This represents another example of how particular modes of being were cultivated and normalised during the participants' careers in Olympic sport.

The evidence presented in this sub-chapter points to the ways in which the participants may have been considered disciplinary subjects during their Olympic careers. The delineation of characteristics – such as determination, focus, compliance, and the ability to regulate emotion – reflects how the former Olympians' subjectivities were fabricated in relation to the dominant discourses of truth that seek to define the essential components for professional, competent, and, above all, successful sportspeople (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Lee Sinden, 2013; Manley et al., 2016). According to Foucault (1991a, p. 139), discipline must be understood "in the coherence of the tactic". In these instances, it is possible to see how these settings, once occupied by the former Olympians interviewed for this study, were tactically calculated in ways that bound them to disciplinary modes of being and, in turn, regulated and limited alternative lived experiences that may have 'compromised' the economies of their Olympic journeys (Andrijew, 2020). In other words, the interplay of power, knowledge, and truth percolated to fabricate the subjectivities of these individuals whilst they were immersed in their respective Olympic cultures. These conditions are considered crucial for the production of docile Olympic bodies and, as suggested by Toner (2024), the cultivation of subjectivities that are congruent with the values of our modern

neoliberal society. Indeed, one of the crucial aspects of Pierre De Coubertin's vision for the modern Olympic project lay in the constitution of individuals' subjectivities – ways of being designed to stimulate excellency throughout society (Fernandes Da Silva et al., 2024; Grix et al., 2020; Gruneau, 2017). Therefore, it is now important to examine the implications of these modes of being for how the participants have adapted to their lives beyond Olympic sport.

5.2 The Disciplinary Origins of Olympic Retirement

There was no singular factor underpinning the participants' decisions to retire from Olympic sport. The former Olympians outlined several relational factors that contributed to their withdrawals from Olympic standard settings, from issues relating to the persistent regulation of bodily shape and function (see chapter 6.4.1) to their de-selection from funded programming – a contributing factor that was discussed by Adele:

A lot of my funding was determined by performance so, even though I made the world championship team, I then got taken off funding...I needed to decide whether I was going to continue or not, just because I was no longer performing well enough to be considered close to my usual standard.

What is more, as this comment from Andy suggests, the participants' retirement 'moments' were not always clearly defined: "I had no official retirement, it petered off." This point was also emphasised by Ryan:

My whole retirement was a bit strange because I did it twice. The second time I retired it didn't feel like retirement because I felt like I had already

retired. I just popped back in to show that I could still do it, and then popped back out again.

These experiences support the arguments made by Greendorfer and Blinde (1985), that retirement from sport should not be viewed as a singular, isolated incident, but as a complex and gradual process. Subsequently, any attempt to map a linear trajectory towards retirement, with respect to the former Olympians interviewed for this project, would likely be over-reductive. Therefore, in this sub-chapter, I focus on considering how the participants' retirement decisions can be connected to the various arrangements of disciplinary power.

According to Foucault (1991a, p. 146), "discipline is an art of rank". In the context of Olympic sport, this disciplinary technique is rendered most visible through athletes' attempts to improve their *rank* and, therefore, the function they perform in their organisation. The permanent pursuit of continuous progression results in Olympic sport spaces functioning "like a learning machine, but also as a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, and rewarding" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 147). However, as bodies shift down the hierarchies of a space, the possibility of their eviction intensifies because their capacities for sustained improvement are perceived to decline (Jones & Denison, 2017). Jacob provided an example of how the ranking system of his swimming team contributed to his exit from the Olympic standard environment:

There was a thing with the county men's team that Freddie set out where there was an A team and then a double A [AA] team. Freddie⁹ always said

⁹ 'Freddie' is a pseudonym for one of the highest performing swimmers in the team.

that you never wanted to swim with AA, and if you are swimming with them then you might as well just forget it. I got dropped to AA and that was that for me.

Jacob's story exemplifies how the art of *rank* created "the network of gazes that supervised one another" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 171) and monitored athlete conduct according to disciplinary norms. In this instance, indications of abnormality resulted in the penalty of eviction from the aquatic space. The context of Jacob's exclusion from the social hierarchy is significant:

I flogged myself. I trained in excess but that was mentally what I had to do because it was all about being the toughest and the hardest trainer. I was doing about 6 hours a day and it paid dividends but there was a cost in there...After the games, my body kept on breaking down...I wasn't able to go. In the end, they sent me for testing at the Olympic medical centre, who told me that I had M.E. because of the way that my body was breaking down. I then had to strip back the training to 5 minutes a day! By then, I was dropped from the team and I just got taken out of the bubble without being able to get back in again.

Jacob described his concerted efforts to comply with a normalised ethic that emphasised the importance of mental toughness and work rate (Crocket, 2014). Despite these efforts, he was evicted from the disciplinary 'bubble' of swimming because of a perceived incapacity to continue to perform his required function. Jacob's experience illustrates that although the disciplinary arrangements of Olympic sport can prescribe certain modes of being, it remains equally important for athletes to

demonstrate a self-regulated understanding of their bodies, their limits, and their function (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Heikkala, 1993; Mills et al., 2020). In this case, his conduct was no longer considered to be aligned with the disciplinary logic of Olympic sport (Markula & Pringle, 2006). As a result, Jacob's presence was rendered unrequired.

Jacob was not the only participant to suggest that his retirement from Olympic sport was connected to arrangements of disciplinary power. Hannah's story also demonstrates that her decision to retire from Olympic sport was compounded by discipline. Once more, the context of the former swimmer's experience is significant as she admitted to suffering from severe levels of anxiety and self-doubt throughout her career:

I always used to worry that I wasn't good enough, or that I wouldn't do well, or that I wasn't going to win...I think that was one of the reasons I stopped swimming because, although I am motivated and driven, there was always this worry that I wasn't good enough so I think there was an element of doubt.

Foucault's (1991a) concept of *the organisation of geneses* is useful for understanding Hannah's concerns. This disciplinary technique illustrates how athlete development can be controlled and managed with respect to the persistent reinforcement of a performance-based logic (Denison, 2010; Jones & Denison, 2017). The intention of these techniques is to produce efficient and effective Olympic bodies. However, the fortification of this mode of being appeared to adversely induce a state of anxiety for Hannah as she was forced to confront the concentrated performance pressures that

are associated with an Olympic career. Furthermore, as the retired swimmer later conceded, competing at the Olympic Games intensified her feelings surrounding performance scrutiny:

This is something I have never ever talked about but, when I was at the Olympics, I came home and we had all the videos of the games and, on these, one of the commentators made a comment because I hadn't swum very well. I can't remember the exact wording of it, but it was along the lines of, you know, 'should she be here? She hasn't swum very well!'...that just made me feel absolutely sick because all it did was reiterate that I wasn't good enough. It was absolutely heartbreaking. After that...I had a good excuse to stop...I have never watched it since, and I never want to watch it again. It just reiterated that I wasn't good enough and that I shouldn't have been there.

Within the context of Olympic sport, athletes become the subjects of a network of gazes that operate as a "microscope of conduct" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 173) by monitoring their performances, behaviours, and activities to ensure that they become "docile and knowable" (p. 172). Throughout this network, all forms of "specialised personnel" (p. 174) are permitted to pass judgement on athlete conduct. This process affects Olympians' ways of being and thinking. Hannah became the subject of the commentator's intense surveillance. The scrutiny of this supervisor further compounded her feelings of anxiety surrounding the Olympic context. In turn, the decision to retire from swimming was one that she considered necessary with respect to the ways in which her problematic emotional state had been shaped by the disciplinary arrangements of Olympic sport.

The experiences shared by Jacob and Hannah exemplify how disciplinary power relations may be implicated in instigating the retirement processes of Olympic athletes. Indeed, as Markula and Pringle (2006, p. 102) identified, the disciplinary composition of sport creates a range of subject positions, from normalised athletes and champions to “losers, benchwarmers...unfit, unskilled...and, of course, ill-disciplined”. As the participants’ stories suggest, these conditions of categorisation can be connected to their retirement decisions. This is an element of a disciplinary sporting career that has received limited attention in previous Foucauldian retirement studies. Indeed, although extant research has shown that an exposure to discipline can impact upon the experiences of athletic retirees (e.g., Jones & Denison, 2017), these findings demonstrate that disciplinary arrangements of power may also be complicit in initiating the withdrawal process itself. In the following sub-chapter, I develop these findings by considering the various ways in which an exposure to disciplinary technologies influenced the participants’ immediate adjustments to post-sport life.

5.3 Immediate Reactions to Retirement From Olympic Sport

A range of complex and contradictory feelings characterised the participants’ immediate experiences of retiring from Olympic sport. In a similar vein to the experiences that were documented in Jones and Denison’s (2017) study on retirement from association football, my participants suggested that their initial withdrawals from Olympic sport environments were typified by both ‘challenging’ and ‘relieving’ feelings. Indeed, several participants described how, during this period, these feelings occurred simultaneously. Below, I explore these feelings in greater detail.

5.3.1 Initial Challenges Associated With Olympic Retirement

Most participants reported experiencing at least some degree of difficulty in their initial transitions away from Olympic sport. Indeed, several retirees described this experience as incredibly painful. For example, Martin recalled that “it was horrendous...I was not sure what I really wanted to do...it was a very miserable time, and it was very tough.” Similarly, Connor admitted that the transition away from swimming was one of the most difficult periods of his life:

There was some really horrible, dark moments and, I will be honest, I think in those three years, I found my rock bottom...Don't get me wrong, I was not planning on doing anything silly but I did reach a point of thinking, what is the point in this? What is my purpose?

Clearly, the initial retirement adjustment was incredibly difficult for these former Olympians. Their experiences are congruent with many existing interpretations of athletic retirement that have emphasised the emotional difficulties that are often associated with leaving sport (Aston et al., 2020; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Van Ramele et al., 2017). For these participants, the difficulties surrounding their withdrawals were grounded in a perceived lack of purpose and structure. Andy noted that these associations also led to a sense of confusion in his immediate transition into post-sport life:

You were building up to something for so long, then the next day it's over. You have been heading in one direction for so long then, all of a sudden, you're like – where now?

Barry made a similar point:

I think coming out of it, because I had been in it so long and from a young age, I didn't know any other context. This is what I had always known...Looking back, it was very turbulent.

Sports retirement scholars have consistently suggested that feelings of confusion during this period can be navigated by adequate retirement planning (Schmid et al., 2023; Torregrosa et al., 2015). However, Foucauldian logic dictates that these adaptation difficulties can be, perhaps more accurately, linked to the disciplinary arrangements of Olympic sport (Jones & Denison, 2017). Over the course of their Olympic careers, the retired athletes' subjectivities were deeply linked to a progressive logic that was designed to culminate in optimal performances in spaces of competition (Markula & Pringle, 2006). This mode of thinking was compounded by training programmes that utilise, and capitalise upon, temporal techniques of control to fabricate regimented lived experiences that centre upon skill acquisition and controlled progression (Shogan, 1999). Therefore, the disciplinary organisation of Olympic sport assists in the fabrication of intensely focused subjectivities that provide Olympians with a clear understanding of the purposes of their labour (Jones & Denison, 2017). For these participants, the immediate loss of a defined purpose within the retirement transition was tied to difficulties in how they understood their new subject positions as retired Olympians. Adele described this neatly:

I was in a sport and competing at the highest level for almost 20 years, so to go from that routine where you pretty much know where you are at any given time, at any time of the year, to walking into a place of uncertainty – yeah, it was hard.

Whereas the contours of an Olympic career supported these participants by providing them with a clear sense of purpose that was grounded in the technologies of disciplinary power, moving away from the defined *enclosures* and *time-tables* of sport exposed the retirees to a tempestuous path in which these anecdotal facets of their subjectivities were no longer accessible in a post-sport context characterised by turbulence and individuality (Bauman, 2001; Foucault, 1991a; Jones & Denison, 2017). As Jacob explained, the de-regimented composition of this period had detrimental effects for his physical and mental well-being:

I mean you just come out of a bubble and have nothing to do...I was trying to fill a massive void...You know, if you're riding high then there is all of the release of chemicals within the body from that – you are buzzing. So, I had to look for stuff that would help to re-achieve all of that, whether that be through alcohol or drugs or whatever!

Jacob's story illustrates that adjusting to life outside of Olympic sport's disciplinary 'bubble' can be incredibly difficult (Costa et al., 2024). As I have repeatedly suggested, a career in Olympic sport provides athletes with a clear purpose, and their conduct inside (and outside) disciplinary sporting spaces is continuously monitored in relation to this designated function. However, leaving athletic spaces can present a sharp discontinuity with respect to how the panoptic mechanism compounds Olympians to their defined function (Jones & Denison, 2017; Markula & Pringle, 2006). In response, Jacob appeared to enter a state of disorientation, in which his mind gravitated towards potentially damaging behaviours.

5.3.2 Initial Relief Associated With Olympic Retirement

For many of the participants, the immediate retirement adjustment was replete with difficulties. However, several former Olympians, although in their minority, suggested that these initial challenges were also accompanied by feelings of relief. Hannah, who had previously discussed her experiences of anxiety surrounding the pressures of Olympic sport (see chapter 5.2), described the sense of relief that she associated with her retirement:

I felt that relief because I'd never said that before – I had never said that I didn't want to do this and I was so relieved...I think once I stopped swimming, I never really looked back on it – I never thought twice about it.

As Jones and Denison (2017) observed, the cessation of an athletic career may be linked to feelings of relief. One reason for this is that retirement from sport can be linked with the relinquishment of the scrutiny that athletes face from their hierarchy of observers. If one considers Hannah's emotional state during her swimming career, the relief she felt upon the lifting of these normalising pressures is understandable.

The participants' framing of these relieving feelings can be connected to the disciplinary arrangements of Olympic sport. For example, Sophie remarked that "in a way it was nice because I had been in that training centre for so long." These words suggest that Sophie experienced an immediate sense of relief during the initial retirement adjustment as her body was no longer confined to the *enclosures* of her discipline (Foucault, 1991a).

Furthermore, for the retiring Olympian, leaving sport may provide an increased opportunity to experience choice and autonomy within daily life because the coercive

limits imposed by discipline are lifted (Jones & Denison, 2017). Adele highlighted this neatly:

I actually really enjoyed the fact that I didn't have to wake up in pain anymore! I enjoyed that everything I now did was by choice.

The rigid and monotonous nature of a career in Olympic sport can constrain athletes through limiting their capacities to explore the potential of life outside their discipline (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Through considering the post-sport transition as one characterised by an increased degree of choice, Adele's words point to how the retirement transition may represent a form of 'social re-birth' (Coakley, 1983). The former Olympian expands on this point in the response below:

Sport took a lot from me. I wanted to make up for lost time. I wanted to see my family more, I wanted to spend time with my partner, I wanted to go on holidays. I wanted to see what life looked like outside of training 5 and 6 days a week between the hours of 9am and 4pm. I wanted to experience life outside sport. I could now do anything I wanted to do. I didn't have to do the things that people expected me to do.

This comment suggests that an exposure to disciplinary technologies throughout an Olympic career imposed limitations on Adele's subjectivities with regard to how she understood herself beyond the constraints of her discipline (Shogan, 1999). Indeed, it is clear that Adele understood her transition out of sport as a process that marked her opportunity to engage with new ways of being that broadened her horizons regarding the possibilities of lived experience.

The evidence presented throughout this sub-chapter demonstrates that the retired British Olympians' initial experiences of leaving sport were intertwined with contradictions. Although these findings are important in contextualising the ongoing investigation, I recognise that the complex nature of post-sport transitional responses has been examined from a socio-cultural perspective in previous research studies (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Jones & Denison, 2017; Stamp et al., 2023). With this in mind, for the remainder of this chapter, I focus most intently on how the participants' Olympic careers have continued to shape and influence their lived experiences throughout their lives after sport.

5.4 The Productive Legacies of an Olympic Career

“Ultimately, boxing is the hardest sport in the world, and if you can handle it then it means you are a cut from a certain cloth and people can obviously see this.” (Aaron)

“Sport has taught me so much. I look back on my life and wonder where I'd be if I didn't have sport...I think it is important to acknowledge that sport gave me so much whilst I was competing and that I have been able to use all of that to the best of my ability in my post-sport career.” (Adele)

“When you meet people and they find out you're an Olympian...they think ‘fucking hell, that's great!’” (Julian)

The docile body is not a totally repressed entity, but a productive being. Indeed, the overarching effect of disciplinary power is the cultivation of “docility-utility” (Foucault, 1991a. p. 137). With this in mind, it is important to examine how the proposed ‘utility’ of discipline has extended into the post-sport lives of the retired British Olympians. Throughout the sample, the overwhelming consensus was that an Olympic career has

contributed to the enrichment of post-sport life in at least some form. Indeed, several participants suggested that their immersion in the cultures of Olympic sport has assisted in the acquisition of valuable life skills (De Subijana et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2022). For example, Andy commented:

The main thing that I took away was learning how to do an acquired skill under pressure. Say hammer throw, something that you practice to do, that is transferred in that I am less affected by pressure...I am not immune to pressure but, as I say, an acquired skill helps – under pressure, I have learnt how to cope, how not to panic.

In this example, Andy suggests that the intense pressures of Olympic competition combined to devise a form of apprenticeship with respect to how he approaches similar challenges within his post-sport life. The constitutive effects of disciplinary technologies have remained respected and valued by several participants. For instance, Kelly noted:

I think rowing is an amazing sport for teaching you discipline...how to push yourself...persistence, and attention to detail - which are fantastic skills to have in life.

Martin supported the idea that the inscription of discipline upon the mind and body can have productive implications for life after sport. Indeed, the former winter Olympian suggested that his disciplinary subjectivities have transferred materially to his post-Olympic life:

It is very true that what you learn in your sport does transfer into business life...especially in sales where I spent a lot of time - getting up at 5am, dealing with objections, dealing with setbacks. With selling, you have to be able to handle rejection and if you can't do that as an athlete, then you'll never be a successful athlete either. Every athlete you ever speak to has lost. They don't win every night. Athletes know how it is to lose, but they also know how it is to get back out there and do it again.

Adele shared a similar sentiment:

People in the corporate world tend to employ athletes because they come with a different set of skills that the average person does not have. You know how to collaborate, you know how to bring your best every day when delivering work, you know how to perform because you've competed at the highest level.

These statements point to the long-term significance of an immersion in the disciplinary cultures of British Olympic sport. For Adele and Martin, their Olympic careers assisted in the fabrication of characteristics that have been highly valued in the corporate world. Their words speak to how an absorption of disciplinary technologies, such as *the composition of forces* and *the examination*, equipped the teamworking and negotiation skills necessary to stand them apart from non-athlete candidates and counterparts (Foucault, 1991a). Given the varied lengths of time that Adele and Martin have spent in retirement, their interpretations suggest that the internalisation of disciplinary modes of being can stimulate recognised benefits throughout the remainder of one's life after sport, across both the short and longer term. Expanding

on this idea, Nathan outlined how his career in Olympic sport assisted in the acquisition of a set of skills and characteristics that have been essential to succeeding as a business owner:

It gave me a lot of confidence. The big account that grew our business in the early days was a top-class British retailer. Going in there and talking to the hierarchy – my business partner could not do it, and he was from business. I had no issue, you know, having met people from high up like royalty and prime ministers. I could talk to anyone about anything...in several meetings my business partner would reference my career and then you have something to talk about. People want to talk about it if you have been to an Olympics...So, yeah it was a door opener because it impresses people – you can use it as an advantage if it comes up...it definitely helped on the confidence side.

As the former Olympian proceeded to explain, the constitution of a competitive logic during his Olympic career has supported his navigation of the contemporary corporate sphere:

All athletes want to win and as soon as I retired, it was about winning the next thing. When I was playing badminton, it was all I thought about - how to win the next tournament...Now, I want to win in business.

Nathan's words suggest that the imposition of a disciplinary, competitive mode of being – a key component of the modern Olympic project (Gruneau, 2017) - has been crucial for his productive grasp of the post-sport context. Indeed, Nathan continues to embody and utilise this logic well beyond his retirement from Olympic sport.

The evidence presented in this sub-chapter points to how the former athletes' immersions in the cultures of Olympic sport have equipped them with subjectivities that have supported their ongoing adjustments to the neoliberal, post-sport world. For Foucault (2008), the shift towards a neoliberal art of government has worked to re-shape the human subject from a homogenous creature of exchange to one of competition. This re-configuration has permitted the individual to become "an entrepreneur of himself [*sic*]" (p. 226), insofar that the active human subject may acquire and exercise 'human capital' to increase their capacity and competitiveness for income. As the stories above suggest, these former Olympians' post-sport subjectivities are built upon characteristics such as rationality, entrepreneurship, and self-confidence (Fernandes Da Silva et al., 2024). Not only did their Olympic careers work to cultivate these ways of thinking and being but, as identified by Türken and colleagues (2016), these subjectivities are considered optimal for subjects' productive navigation of the neoliberal landscape; this appears to have benefited these former Olympians on a long-term basis, over the course of their retired lives.

Despite the potential utility that is associated with a career in Olympic sport, it is important to remain cautious when considering the participant responses presented above. Indeed, where docility-utility resides, it is important to consider the adverse and problematic implications of these modes of being (Foucault, 1980; 1991a).

Therefore, in the following sub-chapter I examine how an immersion in the Olympic sport context may be connected to a number of limiting legacies.

5.5 The Contradictory Legacies of an Olympic Career

A career in the disciplinary cultures of Olympic sport can have productive long-term implications for British Olympians' lives after sport. Nevertheless, owing to the highly

subjective and socially contingent nature of Olympic retirement, identifying any form of singular narrative regarding Olympians' post-sport experiences would be a near impossibility (Jones & Denison, 2017; Stier, 2007). Of course, I have previously outlined evidence to suggest that retirement from Olympic sport may be associated with adjustment difficulties (see chapter 5.3.1). However, for several participants, these challenges have not been confined to the immediate retirement adjustment. Indeed, Aaron suggested that, despite retiring from Olympic standard sport over ten years ago, he is still negotiating these difficulties:

It was heartbreaking...One of the hardest things I've gone through in my entire life. I'm still kind of getting over it, you know?

Throughout the following three sub-sections, I present interview data relating to this component of the research findings.

5.5.1 Former Olympians' Ongoing Experiences of Adjusting to Post-sport Work

As previously illustrated, a career in Olympic sport can assist athletes in acquiring the appropriate subjectivities for navigating the turbulent path into the post-sport, neoliberal world. However, the material benefits linked to an immersion in this context have not been experienced homogeneously throughout the sample. Indeed, Sally noted that her Olympic diving career did little to assist her efforts to seamlessly adjust to new career paths after sport: "I mean I definitely went for jobs and got knocked back every time for needing more experience."

Olympians are expected to devote their lives to the pursuit of high-performance. In turn, their careers become intensely structured in ways that produce hyper-focused mentalities. As Hickey and Kelly (2008) identified, the inculcation of these mindsets –

and the permanent expectation to consolidate these modes of being – can barricade athletes’ engagement with the retirement planning strategies that are consistently prescribed by researchers and practitioners working in high-performance settings (Torregrosa et al., 2015). Hickey and Kelly’s (2008) research showed that the disciplinary arrangements of sport can combine to constrain athletes’ capacities to actively and effectively investigate educational and occupational opportunities that reside outside of their disciplines. In essence, their argument is based upon the Foucauldian notion that the production of docile bodies is an insulated effort to ensure the malleability of individuals in relation to their discipline, but rarely beyond these discursive limits (Foucault, 1991a). For Sophie, these efforts shaped a deep connection between her subjectivities and her role as an Olympian that remains unmatched in the present day: “I miss the identity. When people ask me now what I do, it is so difficult to answer.” However, as previously outlined (see chapter 4.4.1), most participants were in employment at the time of interviewing. So, in what ways have their Olympic careers influenced their long-term, ongoing adjustments to new lines of work?

Numerous participant responses indicated that their docility has continued to operate in ways that have impeded upon their navigations of post-Olympic career paths. For instance, Barry suggested that the “certain attitude” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18) that was inscribed during his volleyball career limited his utility in his first non-athletic job role:

That first job I took, I left because I would’ve killed myself if I kept going...I resorted back to my athletic attitude which was just keeping going to get it done, but...bosses weren’t like coaches. If my coach saw I was doing too much, they would tell me to stop and stay fresh for the weekend...bosses don’t do that. They recognise that you are the dog with the bone – so there

is another bone, and another bone, and another bone...there was less concern about my health and wellbeing in the real world than there was when I was an athlete.

Barry's testament suggests that the ways in which modern society values and rewards the dominant subjectivities of former Olympians may be problematic. Unlike the hierarchy of knowledge present in Olympic sport, which imposes scientifically informed limits on athletes' capacities and workloads to regulate their subjectivities (Andrijew, 2020; Konoval et al., 2019; Shogan, 1999), alternative sections of the social body may not be equipped to manage the subjectivities of retired Olympians effectively. In Barry's case, this led to the exploitation of his character in ways that damaged his mental well-being.

Barry was not the only participant to discuss his difficulties in adapting to new career paths after sport. Rita explained that she has also faced difficulties in adjusting to post-sport work¹⁰, owing to the ongoing challenges that are associated with identifying a clear purpose after Olympic sport:

I got a job at the bank...I started working more hours there and I struggled with it a lot. The headspace of not having an end goal was hard...when you train there is always that end goal. It was either the summer nationals or a major event like the Olympics. Mentally, not having that was really difficult.

¹⁰ Rita is no longer in the role discussed in this extract (see chapter 4.4.1). However, she helpfully provided an example from a previous job.

The disciplinary arrangements of Olympic sport work to bind athletes to subjectivities based upon a logic of progression that is designed to culminate in optimal performances in spaces of competition (Markula & Pringle, 2006). This wisdom provides Olympians with a sense of clarity and purpose because their labour is acutely codified in terms of these performance-based objectives (Jones & Denison, 2017; Toner, 2024). On one hand, the imposition of this way of thinking can be connected to several accompanying benefits for Olympians' adjustments to post-sport career paths (see chapter 5.4). On the other hand, as suggested by Rita, it can be an ongoing challenge for retired Olympians to (re)consolidate this element of their subjectivities because alternative career paths may not offer the same sense of purpose once provided by Olympic sport's "highly ritualised" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 184) art of *examination*. As the following words from Jasper demonstrate, the removal of this prescribed function had damaging long-term implications for his mental well-being:

I had a real dip in about 2020...I had some real mental health issues. I think a lot of it is when I really started to struggle with purpose and finding my purpose.

Despite retiring from Olympic sport six years prior to 2020, Jasper described suffering some troubling emotional difficulties around this time, relating to the idea that his labour, and associated lived experiences, were no longer grounded in a disciplinary logic of progression (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Jasper's experiences demonstrate that the challenges associated with identifying a renewed purpose beyond Olympic sport may extend well beyond the immediate retirement adjustment (see chapter 5.3.1) and that their effects may not necessarily follow a linear trajectory (Stambulova et al., 2021; Wendling & Sagas, 2021).

Furthermore, Sally, who had previously expressed that she encountered difficulties in identifying appropriate avenues of work after sport, admitted that she has also experienced challenges in adjusting to new working relationships in non-sport settings:

I got picked up to do a paid internship in media...I did six-week blocks in different sections of the company...There was girls at one of the magazines that were just awful, and I could not deal with that. I wasn't in my bubble anymore, I wasn't with people that were like-minded, I wasn't in something that I had a massive passion for...I found it very difficult, I found it quite lonely. I wasn't really myself, I tried to find somebody else. I'd gone from diving and now I was trying to be a journalist person – that wasn't really what I was. I felt that you couldn't really talk about what you did out of the bubble because nobody else really understood.

Foucault's (1991a) concept of *the composition of forces* is useful for making sense of this implication of an Olympic career. In the modern disciplines of Olympic sport, the multiple skills and characteristics of individual athletes are combined so that multiple bodies can function as an "efficient unit" (Shogan, 1999, p. 33). One of the principal effects of this disciplinary technique resides in the configuration of a variety of individuals via a shared purpose and logic. In this sense, Olympic sport settings bind individuals' subjectivities through the feeling of cohesion with teammates and members of their organisation. However, as Sally's story suggests, her working life outside of the disciplinary bubble of diving was laced with incoherence during this period. This is because she found difficulty in relating to her new colleagues as their interactions lacked the sense of 'like-mindedness' that had previously been fabricated by the cultures of Olympic sport.

Barry, Rita, and Sally all testified to the notion that their docility has remained implicated in their adaptations to non-athletic work. However, it is significant that, in the present moment, these participants' job roles reside in sporting organisations. Indeed, multiple responses throughout the sample indicated that seeking employment in the sport industry is an enticing proposition for former Olympians as it offers a form of salvation and relief to the discomfort that may be associated with adjusting to non-athletic roles. Sophie emphasised this:

The sport world definitely appealed to me. Whereas the reality of being in the same office every day just did not appeal to me. The corporate world of targets and spreadsheets, and the pace of it – I knew I just could not live like that.

As previous studies have shown, it is common for former athletes to seek employment in the context of sport (Blackett et al., 2022; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Curran, 2015). For several participants, the attraction of obtaining employment opportunities in the sport industry resides in their familiarity with the embedded logic of these organisations; a method of circumventing those challenges that are associated with the removal of disciplinary structures, routines, and functions (Jones & Denison, 2017). For instance, Sally, discussing her recent move back into the world of high-performance sport, noted that “everybody is of the same mindset...We are all working towards the same goals and we are all passionate.” In addition, the following words from Diana suggest that sports work offered some form of antidote to those feelings of disorientation that she associated with the removal of the temporal controls that once structured her life as a working Olympian:

The thing I missed the most was the lack of structure...one of the things that you get into is getting up every day, doing what you needed to do, then getting up the next day and doing what you needed to do...I really missed the structure... In sport, there is a certain circularity to the job you do if you work in sport services. So, you're always on a 4-year cycle of some description, whether it's the Olympics or commonwealth games.

As previous Foucauldian research has illustrated, docile athletes can remain somewhat dependent on the imposition of disciplinary controls to posture their lived experiences in retirement (Jones & Denison, 2017; 2019). However, Diana's words demonstrate that finding work in the sport industry offered her an opportunity to re-access the remnants of these disciplinary pleasures.

Rita made a similar point to the one shared by Diana in the extract above. The former swimmer, who had previously discussed the challenges of identifying a renewed purpose in her labour beyond sport, cited these difficulties as the reason behind her consistent engagement with sport coaching work throughout her post-Olympic life:

I...started to coach full time. That filled the drive for the performance-based goals...even though I jumped through a lot of different things, I often went back to coaching for that reason and I knew it was what I was good at...I moved more into coaching so that I could help others work to an end goal. That gave me a continuity away from the other work that was a real struggle.

Of course, it is not uncommon for retired sportspeople to seek and find employment in coaching roles. As Blackett and colleagues (2022, p. 129) suggested, this transition is

often regarded as the “next logical step” for many high-performance athletes. Certainly, Rita’s words indicate that she has regularly sought coaching positions throughout her retired life as a means of consolidating her disciplinary subjectivities. Indeed, it is evident that non-sport work has done little to satisfy her competitive edge and her desires to follow a progressive, performance-based logic (Markula & Pringle, 2006). However, coaching has provided Rita with opportunities to engage with these modes of thought and being in a manner that appears more intelligible. This idea is further compounded by the fact that Rita continues to work in the sport industry in the present moment, over thirty years beyond the cessation of her Olympic career.

The evidence presented in this sub-chapter again illustrates the complexity of Olympic retirement. Although retired Olympians may face ongoing challenges in their attempts to adjust to new career paths after sport, seeking employment in the sport industry can offer some form of salvation through the familiarity of disciplinary organisation (Jones & Denison, 2017). Certainly, for these participants, it appears that locating occupational opportunities in sport organisations has been productive in helping them to negotiate the difficulties that are associated with non-athletic work; with these former Olympians appearing to continually excel in these roles as a result of productively mobilising their disciplinary subjectivities (see Rita’s words above). These findings highlight relational tensions with those identity management strategies that have consistently been proposed by interpretivist scholars. Certainly, Carless and Douglas’ (2009) call for retiring athletes to ‘re-story’ their athletic identities may appear to adopt a sound logic in encouraging the re-imagination of the self beyond the limits of one’s athletic performance. However, these participants’ stories speak to how the insidious nature of disciplinary relations of power have near-permanently bound

them to those subjectivities that were prescribed during their Olympic careers. Indeed, despite the extensive periods of time that these former Olympians have spent in retired life, continuing to work in those settings that are typified by disciplinary logics can permanently limit the availability of alternative narrative resources - considered critical to the 're-storying' of the self (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017) - to those ways of thinking and being that are intimately connected to Olympic and high-performance sport. However, upon considering that the remnants of discipline appear to have persistently influenced these former Olympians' thoughts and lived experiences throughout their post-sport lives, I am inclined to question whether it is entirely effective to continue to encourage sportspeople to re-shape the contours of their identities in preparation for retirement.

5.5.2 "The world was treating me like an Olympian": Retired Olympians' Relationships With Others

"Once an Olympian, always an Olympian"

(Sutton, 2023, p. 6)

In the previous sub-section, I considered how the participants' careers in Olympic sport have influenced their capacities to create and sustain productive working relationships and environments in their post-sport lives. In what follows, I develop this idea by examining how the former Olympians' disciplinary subjectivities have remained implicated in the formulation of their relationships with other, non-athlete subjects in retirement. For example, Kelly described how the standards she adopted during her rowing career influenced her ability to effectively relate to patients whilst working as a physiotherapist:

I worked in a teaching hospital where we had a lot of patients referred from orthopaedics and GP practices and I didn't feel like it helped at all because I had to dampen down my expectations of patients. I was so used to working with everyone that was fully committed and always did their best, educating themselves about what they needed to do, and absorbing all that information. Treating normal patients, I learned that you had to reduce your expectations and keep them quite low. So, I think it was almost a hinderance. Coming from a high-performance background into a regular life with regular people...you had to dampen your expectations about what people can achieve. That can be quite frustrating.

Olympic athletes are the subjects of permanent assessment and judgement in relation to a series of exceptional standards surrounding their performances in training and competition (Heikkala, 1993). Kelly's story suggests that she internalised an ethic formulated around this judgement during her career. However, adapting to a new, post-Olympic context, in which these normalising standards do not exist in such a potent form, appeared disruptive to Kelly's capacity to effectively relate to her patients. The underpinning source of the former rower's frustration was grounded in the process of decreasing the standards that she used to observe and judge others (Foucault, 1991a).

The notion of 'expectation' has been entrenched in the ongoing retirement experiences of several participants. For example, Jasper admitted that his lived experiences in the present moment remain tied to a permanent awareness of the behavioural standards that were placed upon him as an Olympian:

It has certainly made me more aware of my behaviour in public...I am always conscious about how my behaviour could be portrayed in the media should that get out...I think that you have always got to be professional – that is the way I look at it. It's not about not enjoying life but you have always got to maintain that presence and awareness that you always want to be seen in a good light and as a model citizen.

Jasper's words speak to the insidious effects of the panoptic mechanism as it works to induce "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 201). It is clear that the former winter Olympian has internalised an understanding that his conduct is the subject of permanent monitoring and scrutiny. Indeed, Jasper remains in a state of heightened awareness about how his behaviour might be judged, almost a decade after his retirement from Olympic sport. Significantly, Jasper's words pay attention to how he understands the utility of this element of his docility. On one hand, it could be interpreted that his consciousness towards the continual monitoring of his behaviour may inhibit the possibility of freely navigating the post-sport context as he remains docile to the behavioural constraints that are imposed by the disciplinary gaze (Jones & Denison, 2017). On the other hand, Jasper appears to be appreciative of how his internalisation of the normalising gaze has moulded him into a model citizen that continues to uphold crucial values of professionalism in retirement. Of course, the inscription of this particular mode of being is one of the key objectives and idealised legacies of the modern Olympic project (Gruneau, 2017; MacAloon, 1981).

However, this state of permanent visibility was not considered homogeneously beneficial by the participants. As Adele admitted, the expectations that are placed upon former Olympians to lead 'productive' post-sport lives can be damaging:

A lot of people ask me what I am doing to give back to the sport...because I was an athlete that was public facing, and I won countless medals at the highest level, people always expect you to do so much and to give back to the sport...There is always an expectation or an assumption to do that, but no one ever tells you just to take some time away from the sport and to rest, and to go and figure life out.

Adele's words suggest that retired Olympians can be expected to permanently reside in their roles as docile bodies that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 136), with respect to their sport. Not only has this been an ongoing and ever-present source of frustration for the former track and field athlete but, from a Foucauldian perspective, it is important to consider that these permanent standards may continue to bind retirees to their Olympic subjectivities and, in turn, persistently subjugate their efforts to cultivate alternative meanings about their lives and experiences (Crockett, 2014). These expectations are imbued with the implication that former Olympians should continue to operate via these prescribed ways of thinking throughout their lives after sport. Rita spoke to this idea:

I had a complete knee replacement in March, and it is interesting because I still have that athlete mentality that my physio recognises. Even in the recovery, he is giving me things that keep me mentally rehabbing and not just physically. Some days I was going in thinking I wasn't getting

anywhere. So, he ended up doing the tests and told me I was making progress.

In the present moment, Rita's mentality remains grounded in a logic guided by discipline and progression. The former swimmer's observation here is especially profound given the number of years that have passed since the cessation of her Olympic career.

Rita was not the only participant to share a story surrounding the ways in which non-athlete members of the social body have continued to approach her in relation to the norms of Olympic sport. Connor shared a similar experience regarding his concerted efforts to move beyond his Olympic career. However, the former swimmer's testimony suggests that this type of treatment brought him less into the territory of familiarity, and deeper into the roots of frustration:

I will tell you where it came up – it was how other people treated me...I decided to go do this therapy session because I'd had enough, and I felt low all the time. I researched this guy, and he was an expert in therapy...This was the guy who was going to help me get over it with the cognitive-behavioural therapy or whatever it was...I went in and sat down, he asked lots of questions and stuff like that – all the usual stuff, like what do you want to get out of it? Where are you now?...Literally, within seconds, he started to treat me like a goal-setting machine. The therapy was all based around delving into the target setter in me. The goal setter. The person that needed to be somewhere. I left that session almost traumatised. I realised in that moment that, actually, the world was

treating me like an Olympian. They were treating me with a tag. And I just wasn't, I didn't need that anymore...People treated me like the athlete I was, not the person they had in front of them today.

Connor's decision to seek additional guidance in navigating the post-sport world emerged from the damaging mental health implications that accompanied his retirement from Olympic sport (see chapter 5.3.1). However, a range of problematic outcomes were associated with his efforts. Fundamentally, Connor made it clear that his work in Olympic sport created a defined subject position through which society understood, standardised, and judged him. Exposure to cognitive-behavioural therapy did little to assist Connor in re-imagining his subjectivities. Instead, these psychological techniques only further compounded the highly normalised, and limited, ways of framing his lived experiences that Connor felt able to access during this period (Foucault, 1983b). Subsequently, his story exposes that there are underlying limitations in those retirement management strategies (i.e., cognitive-behavioural strategies; Ferrara et al., 2023; Menke & Germany, 2019; Tonge, 2022) that focus on 'fixing' deficits in individuals' traits and characteristics (Denison & Winslade, 2006).

The stories presented in this sub-section have pointed to the potentially insidious effects of a career in Olympic sport, with respect to the capacities of former Olympians to effectively relate to non-athlete subjects. These findings illustrate the relational tensions that are associated with retirement from Olympic sport. As previously reported by Jones and Denison (2017, p. 935), retiring from sport may provide athletes with the chance to "develop new relationships and to interact with a broader spectrum of people". Certainly, I agree with these authors that new broader relationships may be an aspect of the relieving potential of retirement. However, as the experiences

presented in this sub-section suggest, the permanent visibility that is imposed by a career in Olympic sport can have long-lasting implications for retirees' capacities to effectively relate to non-athletes. This is because there appears to be limits to how modern society perceives the subjectivities of former Olympians beyond the restrictions of their athleticism and Olympic careers. Indeed, as several participants suggested, these discursive limits have extended well beyond the cessation of their careers, remaining an omnipresent element of their lived experiences in the present day.

5.5.3 The Internalisation of a Competitive and Progressive Logic: Residual Implications for the Emotional Well-being of Retired Olympians

According to Foucault (1991a), in his articulation of *the means of correct training*, a crucial component in the cultivation of docility resides in the insidious monitoring, recording, and assessment of disciplinary subjects. In Olympic sport, information, data, and knowledge surrounding the performance capacities of athletes is collected incessantly (Jones & Toner, 2016). These processes work to continually compound normalised subjectivities that are entrenched in 'objective' performance measurements (Heikkala, 1993; Jones & Denison, 2017; Toner, 2024). Olympians' subjection to regular and consistent monitoring is justified by the progressive logic of sport (Markula & Pringle, 2006). That is, Olympic athletes are expected to demonstrate continuous improvement in their pursuit of optimal performances in spaces of competition; this expectation has been further compounded by modern funding structures that allocate Olympians' funding based on their performance capacities and potential (Grix & Harris, 2016; Toner, 2024). Indeed, several participants suggested that a crucial element in the constitution of their disciplinary subjectivities was their quest for Olympic success (see chapter 5.1).

Determinants of performance 'success' may be contingent on the particulars of an athletic discipline. However, numerous interviewees pointed to the ways in which they had tied their senses of achievement to material success at major competitions during their careers (see chapter 5.1). As Kelly explained, when one's career is structured in accordance with producing Olympic medal-winning performances, a failure to achieve this target will inevitably be linked to feelings of disappointment:

Your goal when you go there is to perform to your very best, and your very best is a gold medal! That is what you train for, that is what you visualise, and you get totally set up for that. If you don't achieve that, it's disappointing...In retrospect, there is a lot of things about being at the Olympics which are great...but you have a job to do and if you don't perform that job as a crew then I think you'll be disappointed.

Kelly's words point to how a career in Olympic sport can prescribe a specific, and potentially limiting, way of thinking about performance outcomes. But how might this impact upon Olympians' long-term adjustments to post-sport life?

Several participants admitted that their unrequited efforts to achieve Olympic success have been a persistent source of difficulty throughout their lives after sport. For example, Jacob explained that his unsuccessful pursuit of an optimal Olympic performance has resulted in a significant, and ongoing, sense of failure:

You do feel really down on yourself when you set these aspirations and feel like you've failed, and you can't do it anymore. There is an element of failure...when you're an athlete you have the individual responsibility, so if you don't achieve those things then there is a massive failure.

Julian expanded on this by describing the ways in which his failure to attain an Olympic medal continues to govern his thoughts, over twenty years since his retirement:

I am always thinking about rowing. I am always thinking about what I've done. I always reminisce. I am always thinking about it, you know, how good I used to be...I am constantly thinking 'what if?'. What if he hadn't done his back? What would have happened? I might have had a different story. I am always thinking about my sport and keeping fit. Every single day of the week...I have rowed that race 20,000 times...Is that because I am passionate, always wanted to do well and get to my top goal? I don't know...I think about it every day and I miss it every day.

Julian's words speak to the sheer pervasiveness of Olympic sport's disciplinary logic (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Owing to the importance that is attached to performance standards in high-performance settings, several previous athletic retirement studies have considered the potentially damaging emotional implications that are associated with a failure to meet one's performance potential (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Stier, 2007). However, thinking with Foucault injects an additional element into this interplay. Indeed, Foucauldian logic dictates that *examination* apparatus (i.e., Olympic competition) produce truths about the performance capabilities of sportspeople (Foucault, 1991a). These truths are used to classify and rank individuals, which, in turn, contributes to the consolidation of their subjectivities (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Mills & Denison, 2018). This was damningly evident in Julian's account as his Olympic performance continues to pervade his thoughts, over twenty years beyond his retirement from Olympic rowing.

What is more, for Connor, the prestige attached to Olympic performance outcomes has presented a series of challenges throughout his post-sport life. This is because his limited material achievements in Olympic spaces have continued to encompass his thoughts throughout this period. This was evident in the extract below, within which Connor described a sense of unease with regard to his attempts to earn a living after swimming:

I left the sport feeling like I had failed. I was adamant that I had failed. I was leading a double life when I left swimming because I was doing all this self-promotion, but on the inside I was like 'I don't deserve this, I failed.' I was getting celebrated...but getting in the car thinking to myself that it would all be short lived because they are soon going to find out that I was a failure.

The examination establishes a visible point of differentiation through which each individual can be judged (Foucault, 1991a; Mills & Denison, 2018). For Connor, the ways in which these apparatus were used to classify and rank him as a swimmer continued to penetrate his thoughts in a manner that impacted upon his sense of self-worth. In other words, owing to his limited material Olympic 'success', Connor felt unable to continually validate his status as an Olympic standard athlete after sport. This experience illustrates yet another tension between the findings of the current study and those proposed in previous research. Indeed, researchers have argued that retired Olympians regularly benefit from holding significant levels of social capital throughout their adjustments to post-athletic life (Eisen & Turner, 1992; Pawlak, 1984; Schmid et al., 2022). However, Connor's story indicates that he, in this period, felt unable to exercise any accumulated capital, owing to the 'truths' that permanently

surround his Olympic performances. Therefore, I am again inclined to question the efficacy and applicability of these frameworks for examining the long-term retirement experiences of British Olympians (see chapter 2.7.1). This is because these perspectives fail to capture how the subtle movements of power over time might shape and influence retirees' subjectivities (Mills & Denison, 2018).

The evidence presented in this sub-section has pointed to the ways in which an exposure to Olympic sport's disciplinary, progressive logic may impact upon Olympians' long-term adjustments to post-sport life. Certainly, a subjection to this wisdom may be tied to feelings of dis-orientation during the immediate retirement transition as retirees can struggle to identify a renewed sense of purpose beyond the limits of athletic performance (see chapter 5.3.1; Jones & Denison, 2017). However, the associated effects of an absorption of these instruments may extend well beyond the immediate retirement adjustment as former Olympians can continue to face ongoing challenges in coming to terms with their unrequited pursuits of Olympic 'success'.

5.6 The Long-term Re-imaginative Potential of Olympic Retirement

In the previous sub-chapter, I considered how a career in Olympic sport has been complicit in shaping a series of limiting, contradictory effects for the participants' ongoing adjustments to post-Olympic life. However, it would be unjust to imply that the participants have been unanimously condemned to a constrained and prescribed mode of being throughout their lives after sport (Jones et al., 2022; Stier, 2007). In contrast, a number of the former Olympians alluded to the potentially (re)imaginative properties of their long-term retirement adjustments (Coakley, 1983).

In several cases, participants noted that retiring from Olympic sport has presented them with time to negotiate, and come to terms with, a number of the problematic legacies that were associated with their athletic careers. For example, Connor, who had discussed several challenges surrounding his initial retirement adjustment, mentioned that “it took me three years to realise that the thing I am most proud of was the person I became in the process.” In a similar vein, Hannah suggested that by treating her retirement from swimming as a longitudinal negotiation, she was able to re-define the parameters of what she considered to be a successful Olympic career:

I have realised that I was good at what I did. I have realised that I was talented, and I was successful, and that I deserved to be there. Whereas at the time, and in the time following the Olympics, I just thought that I didn't deserve to be there and that I wasn't good enough. That was really hard to come to terms with for a long, long time.

Of course, one should not discount the array of difficulties that are encountered by many athletes that fall short of the progressive logic to Olympic success (see chapter 5.5.3). However, Connor's and Hannah's words suggest that their ongoing retirement adjustments have presented opportunities to de-stabilise and re-think the dominant narratives of success that permeate Olympic sport (Crocket, 2014; Gerdin, 2023). One element of these stories, most notably in Connor's experience, that appears critical is the embracement of the liminal processes that construct the long-term adjustment to post-sport life (Wendling & Sagas, 2021). Indeed, despite the intensity, uncertainty, and turbulence that can accompany Olympians' initial retirement transitions (see chapter 5.3.1), the process of cultivating alternative meanings about retirement may not only be rewarding (as per Connor's case), but perhaps only becomes possible 'after

the dust has settled' upon one's Olympic career (Jones et al., 2022). These discussions suggest that former Olympians are not passive subjects to the residual governance that can be exercised through their docility. Indeed, as Foucault (1990, p. 95) stated, "where there is power, there is resistance". In this sense, although the retired British Olympians appeared, in several ways, subscribed to experiencing the insidious, and often problematic, implications of a disciplinary Olympic career, they also demonstrated their capacities to manipulate various points of resistance within these power networks. For example, as Adele commented, her current career has provided her with an opportunity to permanently relinquish the constraints that were imposed by a competitive, disciplinary logic:

I think one thing I have learned as a retired athlete is that I don't tend to get as stressed anymore. I think in the beginning, when I moved into this space, you already have high expectations of yourself...and you think you may have to try and match that. But, in reality, although you work hard and want to do well, it is no longer based off your physical capability, so I tend to get less stressed now! I focus and worry less on the things I can't do.

As made clear by participants in both this research and Jones and Denison's (2017) study, the relinquishment of disciplinary modes of surveillance can stimulate feelings of relief for retirees. Adele's words suggest that these feelings of relief have extended well beyond the immediate retirement transition and into her post-sport life. The residual relief of these constraints appears to have had a positive effect for the former Olympian's long-term emotional well-being.

Throughout this chapter, I have presented evidence that illustrates how a career in Olympic sport may assist in the fabrication of subjectivities that are deeply attached to the magnitude of the Olympic project. That is, it has become clear that the dominant ethics adopted by the participants during their careers were intimately connected to the key values of modern sport and Olympism (Crocket, 2014; Fernandes Da Silva et al., 2024; Gruneau, 2017). Indeed, several former Olympians demonstrated that they continue to uphold and mobilise these modes of being in the current moment, well beyond the conclusion of their Olympic careers (see chapter 5.4). In addition, several participants suggested that they remain somewhat docile to the political project of the Olympics in the present day. For example, Connor commented:

It was so much more than sport – it engulfs the country for a good 2 years before and a fair few years after. I do love the legacy of it all. I know we talk about the legacy of it a lot, and question if there is actually a legacy – there absolutely is. The amount of people who I speak to who just absolutely rave about 2012 in London is mad.

In addition, when asked about her thoughts on the Olympic Games in the current moment, Rita remarked:

I love it. As much as I did then, I still love it now...The Olympics was the absolute pinnacle of what we did every day. It is why we did what we did. When that alarm went off at 10 past 4, in the middle of winter with snow on the ground and it was freezing cold, it wasn't even a second thought...I got up, did what I did, and got on with it. You did that because of the Olympic end goal. That was the driving force behind what I did.

Connor's and Rita's perspectives remain very much aligned with the moral, normative, and functional values that have upheld the modern Olympic project since its conception, despite growing concerns about the ethics of Olympism throughout society (Brown, 2012; Gruneau, 2017). However, as illustrated by several participants, once the turbulence of the immediate retirement transition began to settle, their capacities to question the politics of the modern Olympic project manifested. For instance, Ryan admitted:

When the actual Olympics happened, I was gobsmacked because I had spent the last 15 years thinking that the Olympics were everything. And I realised that they weren't. For 99.9% of the population, they were an interesting little thing going on in the background – they would watch it if they had time...I thought that the world was all about the Olympics. But it actually definitely isn't.

In addition, Andy remarked that retirement has provided him with the opportunity to reflect upon, and critique, how Olympic athletes are expected to comply with a prescribed ethic, within which their lived experiences become devoted to their discipline:

All in all, going to the Olympics is great but getting there is hard work and not always pleasant. Maybe that's the reason that I wasn't too keen to go back there. You know, I was working full time after, so I guess I had like another life outside of athletics. If athletics was your life...you'd have nothing else going on, would you?

In a similar vein, Aaron discussed how his retirement from Olympic sport has enabled him to formulate renewed subjectivities that do not centre solely upon his boxing performances:

This is the thing, and it took me a while to get my head around it, but boxing was what I did, it wasn't who I was...I was more than just a boxer – I am a person that can turn my hand to many different things.

These extracts suggest that, over time, the meanings that these participants once attached to their Olympic careers have changed. Over the ongoing durations of their retirement adjustments, these participants have distanced themselves from their disciplinary subjectivities and pursued renewed ways of being that appear to be less intensely tied to dominant sporting ethics (Crocket, 2014; Jones et al., 2022). Certainly, this evidence points to the re-imaginative potential of retirement from Olympic sport (Coakley, 1983). However, from a Foucauldian perspective, whilst optimistic, it is important to remain cautious in considering this potential. For Foucault (1985), efforts to re-cultivate one's dominant subjectivities beyond the constraints imposed by discipline originate in individuals' efforts to problematise this dominant logic. Although the evidence presented in this sub-chapter suggests that the problematisation of these ways of knowing and being is possible, the 'undoing' of discipline is far from a simple task (Jones et al., 2022). Indeed, as Eric emphasised, efforts to problematise what it means to be a docile athlete may only be possible once the turbulence of an Olympic career has begun to settle:

I feel like I have unplugged myself from the matrix...I see sport in a way that is not that comfortable...I do still find this a little bit challenging but, at the same time...I am focused elsewhere.

The matrix analogy used by Eric is profound. This quote compounds the idea that problematising the adverse effects of an Olympic career, as a means of facilitating less problematic long-term adaptations to post-sport life, remains extremely difficult whilst immersed in those disciplinary networks of power that saturate British Olympic cultures. Therefore, we must ask whether, in the current disciplinary conditions of Olympic sport, it is feasible to expect athletes to act with a sense of urgency, as suggested by Carless and Douglas (2009), to re-imagine their subjectivities in preparation for retirement? In this sense, it remains imperative that we continue to question how a life in Olympic sport may be re-imagined in ways that resist the procurement of docility.

The evidence presented in this sub-chapter, and throughout the chapter as a whole, illustrates the importance of examining Olympians' retirement experiences as long-term, ongoing negotiations. Undoubtedly, the immediate experience of leaving Olympic sport is regularly characterised by uncertainty (Jones & Denison, 2017). Certainly, as made evident throughout the chapter, these feelings can extend into post-sport life as the ways in which former Olympians continue to posture their experiences regularly remain imbued with disciplinary wisdom (Jones et al., 2022). However, these participants' experiences demonstrate that, over time, the concentration of discipline can weaken. This process of de-saturation can allow retirees to develop alternative meanings about both their Olympic and post-Olympic lives. Taking into account the number of years that these participants have spent

negotiating their post-sport lives, there has been no suggestion that this process unfolds over a definitive period of time. Instead, the formulation of these alternative understandings of an Olympic career have occurred subjectively, and over inconsistent periods, throughout the sample.

Conclusion

In summary, the disciplinary arrangements of British Olympic sport combine to produce docile bodies whose subjectivities carry a range of legacies that impact upon their ongoing, long-term adjustments to post-sport life. The subjective array of experiences detailed throughout this chapter demonstrate the inconsistent, complex, and fragmented nature of the modern Olympic subject (Fernandes Da Silva et al., 2024; Foucault, 1997; Gruneau, 2017). Indeed, there was no evidence to suggest that the retirement experiences of the British Olympians could be conceptualised by a singular narrative, nor that these experiences have followed any form of linear trajectory. This is because each participant described a range of feelings and circumstances relating to their ongoing adjustments to post-Olympic life thus far. These findings are generally congruent with Stier's (2007) argument that it would be a disservice to former athletes to 'silo' their retirement experiences into 'positive' and 'negative' taxonomies.

Despite the highly subjective nature of the participants' experiences, the interview responses illustrate that an exposure to disciplinary technologies during an Olympic career can carry a range of residual implications for how former Olympians navigate the post-sport world. Certainly, it is evident that the thoughts, actions, and behaviours of the Olympic retirees continue to remain, in at least some form, influenced by the disciplinary logic of modern Olympic sport. Within this, it becomes possible to see

further tensions between the findings presented in this chapter and the results of previous interpretivist sports retirement research. In response to those psychological frameworks that have reduced athletic identity to a singular, unidimensional concept (e.g., Brewer et al., 1993), interpretivist researchers have argued that the identities of sportspeople are multidimensional, and that retirement presents an opportunity to engage with the alternative dimensions of the self that reside away from sport (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Stamp et al., 2023). Whilst I agree with the notion that athletes should be encouraged to embrace the relational aspects of their subjectivities, the data presented throughout this chapter exemplifies the multiple ways in which disciplinary modes of thought remain a potent force in the (re)subjectivation capacities of former Olympians. Indeed, not only has sport's disciplinary logic been internalised by the majority of these participants for an extensive period of time, but the retired Olympians have regularly remained immersed within problematic post-sport spaces and relationships, in which they have continued to be monitored, judged, and regulated to similar standards. In turn, their disciplinary subjectivities have persistently been reinforced throughout their post-Olympic lives. As a result, alternative ways of imagining their subjectivities, and their potentialities, have remained, to a large extent, subjugated.

Chapter 6 The Bodily and Exercise Relations of Retired Olympians: Residual Implications and Long-term Negotiations

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the bodily and exercise relations of the retired British Olympians. Throughout the chapter, I consider how an exposure to the disciplinary arrangements of Olympic sport has impacted upon the retirees' capacities to become, and continue to be, healthy moving bodies throughout their lives after sport (Jones et al., 2023). To do so, I consider how the participants' Olympic careers have influenced their bodily and exercise relations throughout their post-sport lives – from their initial retirement adjustments through to the present moment. In doing so, this chapter builds upon recent developments in the study of athletic retirees' physical well-being by demonstrating that the former Olympians' negotiations of sport's bodily influences have been inconsistent, non-linear, and omnipresent (Gerdin, 2023; Jones et al., 2022; McMahon & McGannon, 2023).

6.1 The 'Disciplinary Monotony' of Physical Movement in Olympic Sport

The movement of the physical body is at the core of sport. Athletes move through time on the track, they traverse patterns in the gymnasium, and they intersect with one another on the court. Put simply, athletic bodies *have to* move. It is a prerequisite of participation. To borrow from Jones and Denison (2019, p. 833), the movement of the physical body in sport primarily constitutes "what common parlance refers to as '*exercise*'". For Foucault (1991a, p. 161), in the modern disciplines, exercise does not simply refer to the neutral, innocent, and unproblematic movement of the body, but a political technology that plays a significant role in the production of docile bodies:

Exercise is a technique by which one imposes on the body tasks that are both repetitive and different, but always graduated. By bending behaviour towards a terminal state, exercise makes possible perpetual characterisation of the individual.

In previous studies, Foucauldian scholars of sport have described how exercise practices compose a key element of high-performance athletes' labour and, in turn, combine to produce docile athletic bodies (Jones & Denison, 2019). Indeed, these scholars have demonstrated that the laboured movement of sportspeople is typically connected to punitive frameworks, such as detailed, progressive programming (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010), high-volume training regimen (Jones & Denison, 2019), and the careful, purposeful choreography of physical activity (Avner et al., 2019). The former Olympians interviewed for this study suggested that their experiences of laboured exercise throughout their careers were comparable to those delineated in previous studies. Indeed, the participants indicated that their in-career movement practices were primarily characterised by the composition of volume and standardisation. Rita, considering the time she spent in a high-performance centre in North America, illustrated the sheer volume of activity that was prescribed by her coach:

I mean that coach over there was just brutal. I had gone out there as a 17 year old...I went from maybe 45,000 metres a week to 100,000 metres! There were no allowances.

Julian also commented on the intensity of his training regimen as a rower:

I got up at 6, was on the boat by 7, and you'd be off for your session...we'd be back in the evenings - rowing session then back up into the gym. I used to get out of the gym about 9 o'clock, which was tough but I had to do it.

The voluminous nature of these regimens demonstrates that physical activities were a significant temporal investment in the careers of these participants; an important component in athletic training becoming an exclusive vocation for many of the former Olympians (Jones & Denison, 2019).

Furthermore, several participants discussed how training volume was arranged through structured programming. For example, Diana noted that her exercise schedule did not significantly alter throughout her extensive career as an Olympic rower:

The pattern didn't change a huge amount through my time. So, you would do 2 sessions on the water in the morning, and then either a heavy weights session or circuits in the afternoon...when we were on training camp, we would do 3 water sessions a day. So, it was a significant time commitment.

In addition, the following interview extract highlights the highly regimented nature of Sophie's exercise experiences during her Olympic career:

Sophie: I guess it was quite simple. It was all based in one place which takes out any need to travel – all at the national training centre. Swimming happened at 10:30, 4 times a week - Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday. We ran before that at 8:30 all of those days too. Run, swim, then a break for lunch. After lunch is when we would do shooting practice and have fencing lessons with our master who would help us through all of the

moves. I would do horse riding once a week because I was used to that sport from being a kid...Times for physio, nutrition and psychology were in the afternoons...Fencing practice was in the evenings – we would open that to the public so they could spar with us. Then we would also have a competition-focused fencing session on Thursdays too. Saturday morning was a big running session with some time over the weekend to recover. I also went to the gym for S&C on Wednesdays and Fridays. So, 5 runs, 4 swims, 3 shooting, 3 or 4 fencing and 1 riding session, gym twice.

Interviewer: How standardised was that across the year? Did it look different before the Olympics?

Sophie: No, but that was the brutality of it all. For the ten years I trained there, my schedule did not change.

Moreover, Hannah discussed how training volume and programme standardisation composed to produce exercise as a monotonous activity throughout her swimming career:

A lot of training sessions were quite monotonous, and you used to do a lot of long sets...I used to swim between 7 and 9 times a week, with around 6000 metres a session, so you do a lot of hours...it was hard because it is fairly incessant, but I never knew anything different.

As illustrated by the retirees' in-career experiences, exercise operated as an instrumental component in the fabrication of Olympic sport's "disciplinary monotony" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 141). The participants' descriptions expose how the efficient

capitalisation of spatial and temporal arrangements worked to constrain exercise to the *enclosures* and routines that structured their working lives as Olympians. In this sense, exercise could be regarded as a monotonous activity that championed predictability and standardisation over variety and spontaneity (Avner et al., 2019; Howe, 2023). This represents an element of what Foucault (1991a) warned us about in his problematisation of exercise as a political act. In disciplinary spaces, the monotony and regimentation of exercise provides physical movement with an exclusive objective: the production of docile bodies. As I will begin to explore in the following sub-section, the inscription of physical activity as a political technology of the body has myriad implications for the former Olympians' ongoing, long-term retirement adjustments.

6.1.1 Retired Olympians' Compulsive Relationships With Physical Activity

Several retired British Olympians suggested that experiencing movement as an intensely choreographed labour practice during their careers may be connected to their residual compulsive relationships with physical activity. For instance, Sophie discussed this as an implication of her Olympic career:

I was addicted to exercise. I retired and I was going out running, swimming and then getting to the gym. Like, I had to exercise. I remember thinking that I have spent my morning doing exactly what I used to do before. Then, I tried to do less but I just couldn't. My heart would be pounding and I needed to move – I could not sit still.

Sophie's words suggest that the political inscription of exercise upon her body had pervasive implications for her movement relations as she attempted to adjust to post-sport life. The physical sensations described by the former Olympian can be connected

to the imposition of physical activity as a form of discipline (Jones & Denison, 2019; Stamp, 2023). Certainly, the functions of Sophie's docile body appeared to be continually reliant upon the disciplinary imposition of movement during this period. In the extract above, Sophie reflects on her experiences of exercise compulsion in the period that closely followed the retirement moment. However, for several participants, the effects of movement 'addiction' have not been restricted to the immediate retirement transition (McMahon & McGannon, 2023). For instance, Ryan explained that, despite retiring from Olympic swimming 30 years prior to this study taking place, he still swims most days:

I enjoy the training now because I don't train as hard, I just do it to enjoy it...I'm not too dedicated, although my other half says I am because I go swimming 5 times a week!

Furthermore, as this response from Diana illustrates, the obligation to exercise has pervaded her lived experiences for 23 years following her retirement from Olympic rowing:

That need to exercise is something that never goes...right from the start there was a physical and, I guess, psychological need to do exercise...I have exercised pretty much dementedly for the last 23 years...I absolutely have to, otherwise I'm gonna go mad...I smashed up my knee over two months ago...I had three weeks where I could do absolutely nothing and it's really bad for my mental health - like really bad!

These words suggest that the pervasive nature of exercise compulsion can have problematic consequences for former Olympians' mental well-being. Diana's

comments are particularly striking given the timeframe of her retired life. Indeed, these sentiments indicate that the disordered prioritisation of physical activity is an ongoing negotiation that continues to govern her thoughts well beyond the cessation of her Olympic career.

Moreover, a small number of participants remarked that the compulsion to exercise, at numerous points throughout their post-Olympic lives, has penetrated their thoughts and experiences in ways that have limited their capacities to explore life after sport effectively. Connor demonstrated this neatly:

All of a sudden, I knew that I had to fit exercise into the day, but it was almost distracting me from getting on with life. I was supposed to be getting my career sorted but being in the gym is not getting your career sorted. I was in there doing bench press, thinking I should be out there looking for a job.

Similarly, Sophie discussed how the regimented nature of exercise in her Olympic career remains implicated in the difficulties that she faces in organising the temporalities of her post-sport life:

My life was built around exercise, so I now struggle with having another life and trying to fit exercise around it...But now, I am always like 'when can I exercise today?'. So, one bad thing about having a full-time job is that I would not be able to exercise.

In a similar vein to Diana's experiences, these words illustrate that Sophie's compulsive relationship with exercise may have an element of permanence. Certainly, for the

former pentathlete, the disordered prioritisation of physical activity continues to inhibit her perceptions of the post-sport context, several years after her retirement from Olympic sport. These findings highlight possible tensions within some of the more well-recognised strategies for the management of athletes' retirement challenges. Previously, social psychology researchers have advocated for the criticality of athletes' efforts to 'branch out' and 're-story' their identities as a means of effectively preparing for retirement (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Lally, 2007). However, Sophie's testament suggests that the inscription of disciplinary exercise practices during an Olympic career can work to preclude such re-imagination attempts. Indeed, the former Olympian's current compulsive relationship with exercise illustrates that her subjectivities remain very much congruent with the movement arrangements that were present during her career (Jones & Denison, 2019), to the extent that these relations continue to impede her thoughts regarding post-sport work. Undoubtedly, the possibility of compulsive exercise relations is a profound implication of an Olympic career.

6.1.2 Disengagement With Exercise in Post-Olympic Life

Despite several participants reporting that their post-sport exercise relations have been characterised by a compulsion to remain active, this is not a homogenous effect of an Olympic career. In contrast, a number of participants discussed how their lives after sport have been typified by a distinct lack of engagement with physical activity. For example, Barry remarked that his relationship with exercise has been limited, in an ongoing sense, since his retirement from sport:

The honest answer would be that my relationship with exercise was...in this ten-year period, the worst it has ever been and needs to improve.

In a more specific manner, Andy illustrated that his relationship with physical activity, both within and beyond the immediate retirement adjustment, has been directly related to experiencing exercise as a form of prescribed labour:

I kind of transitioned into nothing. I was training a lot but all of a sudden having kids and stuff takes over your life. You have to actually make time to train. So, I kind of went to not doing anything. I would sometimes go and do a bit of bench press and a few squats or something, but I went through a long period of almost stopping all together...You start something because you enjoy it, but I got to a point where I trained because I had to train. By the time I had finished, I'd had enough of training...Training wasn't pleasant, and I wasn't in a rush to get back in the muddy field. When you're doing training all the time that you don't really want to do, and then the option is there to not do it as much, that was probably part of it.

Andy's words suggest that the monotony of athletic training resulted in exercise becoming situated as an activity of labour, as opposed to one of 'leisure' or 'play' (Jones & Denison, 2019). As previously suggested by Howe (2023), the physical work of high-performance sport can reduce the manifestation of 'fun' that is so often associated with physical movement, prior to one's sport becoming their professional occupation. In turn, it can be challenging for retired sportspeople to re-imagine these perceptions of exercise during their post-sport lives. Certainly, Andy's words suggest that the significant investment required to train and compete in Olympic sport was complicit in diminishing any of the potentially playful elements that he once associated with physical movement. At this point, engagement with physical activity represented an actively unpleasant proposition for Andy, particularly when considered in the

context of the alternative social circumstances that remain present in his post-sport life (Ferrara et al., 2023; Jones & Denison, 2019).

The limited desire to engage with physical activity has manifested throughout the retired Olympians' lives in several ways. Contrary to Andy's experience, insofar that his post-athletic social circumstances have somewhat dictated that exercise is no longer a worthwhile temporal investment, Jasper suggested that he has actively sought out alternative patterns of daily life as a means of limiting his engagement with physical movement:

I would constantly make sure that my workload was enough to keep me busy – probably as a slight coping mechanism to give me the opportunity to not go into the gym...I was probably using that as an excuse, I think. I would have time to go to do some physical training but...I would go and look in my office to see if any emails had come in over lunchtime. If so, it would be like 'oh, I need to sit down now and reply to this email' or by the time I had replied to that, there wasn't enough time to train. I was definitely using that side of things to shy away from it as much as possible.

However, as the former winter Olympian went on to explain, this was by no means an unproblematic task. Indeed, Jasper considered that his relationship with exercise after sport – particularly within the time period described in these extracts – developed in an 'unhealthy' fashion:

I started to get an unhealthy relationship with physical activity. In fact, I didn't want to do it...I think I possibly withdrew in myself a little bit.

Not only do Jasper's words suggest that he, akin to Andy, perceived exercise as an unpleasant activity, but his disengagement with physical movement was actively considered in this period. Certainly, although Jasper's post-sport social circumstances did not dictate an incapacity to engage with physical activity, the logic of prescribed exercise appeared to rest heavily upon his mind and body. Indeed, Jasper described perceiving exercise as a practice to 'shy away' from; this implies that, during this period, the former Olympian found difficulty in imagining physical activity as a potentially leisurely or enjoyable experience (Howe, 2023; Jones & Denison, 2019). In turn, it appears that Jasper internalised the normalised athletic convention that exercise must be constrained to the limits of intensive and regimented labour (Jones & Denison, 2019).

What is more, Jasper suggested that his limited desire to engage with exercise during this phase of his post-sport life was connected to difficulties with his mental well-being. Aaron also described this as an effect of undergoing an extensive period in which his exercise engagement was very limited:

When I first retired, I struggled to work out...what I learned in those couple of years where I didn't do any training was that I was depressed...I lost my boxing career, and that was the main reason why because my life was a mess, but it was also because I stopped working out. I felt shit. I got lazy. I got a bit chubby. It wasn't cool and I was depressed.

In this case, the former Olympian explained that his retirement from sport was accompanied by challenging implications for his mental well-being. As previously reported by an extensive range of athletic retirement studies, retired athletes are

highly susceptible to the development of depressive symptomologies (Aston et al., 2020; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Van Ramele et al., 2017). Whereas the majority of this existing research has connected the unfortunate relationship between sports retirement and mental health challenges to the psychological characteristics of individual athletes, Aaron's story reveals that the development of these troubling emotions may also be related to the removal of prescribed exercise practices from Olympians' daily lives.

The evidence presented throughout this sub-chapter points to how experiencing exercise as a prescribed form of labour during an Olympic career can carry complex, and often paradoxical, short-term and long-term implications for how retired athletes relate to physical activity. The interview data has again emphasised the importance of Foucauldian theorisation for considering sport's problematic and subjective legacies (Jones et al., 2022). Indeed, where reverting to over-simplistic, cognitive-behavioural analyses may assist in diagnosing 'flaws' or 'abnormalities' in former Olympians' relationships with movement (Denison & Winslade, 2006), the Foucauldian lens demonstrates that the subjective meanings that retired Olympians attach to their post-sport movement practices remain closely connected to the inscription of exercise as a political technology of the body (Jones & Denison, 2019; Jones et al., 2022). The consideration that exercise can be understood as a political practice will remain an important thread throughout the remainder of this chapter. In the following sub-chapter, I consider the ways in which the prescriptive, positivist-centred reduction of the former Olympians' bodies has influenced their movement relations throughout post-athletic life.

6.2 The Disciplinary Reduction of the Moving Body: Implications for Retirement

Experiences of standardised, high-volume exercise work were reported by most participants. In addition, several former Olympians illustrated how their in-career training was highly calculated with respect to the movement dynamics of their disciplines. In other words, their laboured exercise was entrenched in the proposed relevancy and transferability of skill acquisition and improvement to the dominant movement patterns and practices of their sports. Jasper detailed the ways in which the physical movement of his body changed as he transitioned from recreational military-grade sport to a full-time commitment to Olympic standard bobsleigh:

I made quite big steps forward physically because all of my training prior to that point had predominantly been bodyweight circuits and stuff. There had been no sort of strength training. So, as soon as I started doing all the big strength work like the squats, the deadlifts and all the power stuff that targeted my training specific to the sport, that's when I started to realise I had some potential...a lot of strength work in there, a lot of sprint work in there, and there is a lot of, what we called, transition work where you would try and put that gym-based strength of the squat, deadlift and other pieces, into more of a linear trajectory where you're trying to turn that strength and speed you have been developing into one and push an object. Because sprinting is one thing, but pushing an object is a slightly different skill. That takes a little bit of time to work out how to do effectively and get the most out of yourself.

Jasper's training experiences neatly highlight the privileges afforded to those movement patterns that offered a level of transferability to the trajectories inherent to the sport of bobsleigh. Andy shared a similar sentiment regarding how his Olympic coach ensured that his training activities were transferable to hammer throwing *in situ*:

If I wasn't throwing a hammer, then I was throwing something. Like most sessions were throwing – I would do a throwing session, then go and do a lifting session straight afterwards. It was kind of split into two sessions. Through winter, I would...be on the track throwing a kettlebell around or a 20kg plate or something. That was all strength work but it was strength work that was very specific to the movements I was trying to achieve, unlike a power clean which is good but how does it compare to throwing a hammer?...Everything became a lot more specific. The gym sessions became all geared towards specific hammer throwing strength. It is a strange event because you don't really need a whole lot of upper body strength. A lot of it is legs and lower back.

These descriptions emphasise how exercise was used to grasp Jasper's and Andy's bodies in ways that sought to maximise their docility-utility (Foucault, 1991a). Jasper's and Andy's movement practices were codified in a manner that established their bodies as economical organisms. The intention of training in this transferable manner is to reduce any form of surplus expenditure that may compromise the physiological capacity of the athlete to precisely execute the task at hand. For a coach to choreograph an Olympians' laboured exercise through the movement dynamics of

their sport typifies how discipline can operate to modify the “body as a machine” (p. 139).

The scale to which the former Olympians’ bodies were arranged as ‘machines’ during their careers varied in relation to the particulars of their respective disciplines. Jacob, a former swimmer, described how his coach looked to maximise the advantages of each body part in articulating an appropriate technique for competing at the Olympic level:

I was just quick, really quick naturally and after that it became about developing the stroke, my strengths and my endurance. Keith, my coach...with him everything was broken down into minute detail – like hands, arms, legs – I was broken down and put back together again. Stuff like that didn’t happen until I got to that level. You know, after all that time I found out at that point I had been getting my stroke wrong, and with my coach taking it apart for me I ended up getting quicker!

Jacob’s description illustrates that his coach prescribed a technique that, in practice, ensured “a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 152). The former swimmer’s body was examined and divided in a manner that helped to derive the optimal efficiency in the execution of its ‘correct’ gestures.

The stories shared by these participants illustrate that their bodies were formed and manipulated in accordance with the normative movement dynamics of their disciplines. A commonality in the former Olympians’ experiences lies in how the reduction of their bodies was orchestrated through the influence of their coaches, or those who were positioned as ‘experts’ within sport’s hierarchy of knowledge (Johns &

Johns, 2000; Shogan, 1999). These experts prescribed a certain method of 'doing' exercise. These dominant movement patterns and practices are connected to the cyclical relationship between 'scientific' ways of knowing and disciplinary power (Konoval et al., 2019). Several participants suggested that they considered their coaches to possess a certain expertise with regard to the movement patterns that were required to achieve success within their discipline (Mills et al., 2020). As a result, their Olympic careers involved a level of compliance with these prescribed ways of moving through the absorption of disciplinary coaching knowledge. This was typified by Andy:

I didn't think for myself, I took instruction and used his knowledge, listened to him sort of thing...I wiped the slate clean with everything I thought I knew and I listened to this guy.

This unquestioning attitude towards coaching expertise is a classic example of how Andy's docility as an Olympic subject informed and shaped his understanding of his moving body (Clark & Markula, 2017; Jones & Denison, 2019; Mills et al., 2020).

The retired Olympians' stories illustrate that the power-knowledge nexus of Olympic sport worked to prescribe certain ways of knowing about bodily movement. A number of participants considered that their disciplinary understandings of movement have had problematic implications for their exercise relations throughout their post-sport lives. For example, Jasper commented:

What didn't help was that transition of training to be an out and out anaerobic animal for 6 second bursts of power, to then having to come back across to endurance training, my body did not like that at all and it

took a while to start to accept that I needed to start training this different component of fitness that you haven't done for so long.

Throughout his Olympic career, Jasper's athletic training was codified in a manner that was designed to stimulate a set of physiological attributes with specific relation to the sport of bobsleigh. For the former Olympian, this narrow exercise focus constrained his body as he attempted to adjust to alternative movement practices in retirement¹¹.

Several former Olympians expanded on this potentially problematic connection by admitting that they have faced ongoing challenges in adapting to alternative forms of exercise in their lives after sport, owing to a distinct lack of knowledge surrounding how to remain active without the purposeful arrangements of training regimen. For example, Aaron commented:

When I first retired, I struggled to work out because I'd only ever trained for boxing...But when boxing was taken away, I didn't want to train. I could not punch a bag, so I didn't wanna do anything.

Andy also conceded:

I think if I was in a conventional gym, I would end up on one of them gym fail videos – haha...if I try and plan some training for myself then I won't do it. But if someone else has written it down then I will follow it.

¹¹ Jasper returned to the military following his retirement from sport. In these settings, endurance training is central to the role.

Both Aaron and Andy described a sense of hesitancy regarding those physical activities that reside away from the conventional norms of their respective disciplines. Despite the tone of humour that is enmeshed in Andy's words, his comment suggests that his Olympic career did not equip him with the necessary skills to become, and sustain, an independent moving body after sport (Jones et al., 2023). Indeed, although Andy's comments surrounding his exercise relations were made over ten years after his retirement from Olympic sport, they demonstrate his perpetual dependence on the imposition of disciplinary, structured movement practices; a central element of an Olympic career. Certainly, as Hannah explained, the cultures of modern Olympic sport do little to inform athletes about how movement patterns can be manipulated beyond the restrictions of skill acquisition and performance enhancement:

You know how people say that swimming is something they do for pleasure and to relax – well it isn't for me! Swimming was hard. You were training for something. I don't really know how to go to a swimming pool and just have a relaxing swim!

As this response from Hannah suggests, for some, swimming may have certain relaxing properties. Of course, this potentiality of movement would be a distinct and creative re-ascription of the intense, predictable, and transferable characteristics of the disciplinary exercise practices that permeate Olympic sport (Atkinson, 2010; Crocket, 2015). However, it appears that Hannah remains somewhat docile to understanding aquatic movements through modernist, normative conventions (Jones & Denison, 2019; Mills, 2023). Indeed, her docility continues to inhibit her capacity to think about and access the unique movement dynamics of aquatics in a manner becoming of leisure. The preclusion of Hannah's thoughts is particularly significant when considered

in the temporal context of her retirement. Indeed, despite retiring from Olympic standard swimming 35 years prior to this study, the former Olympian remains challenged to conceive the movement of her physical body beyond this disciplinary logic (Jones et al., 2022; Mills, 2023).

Throughout the interview process, multiple retired British Olympians considered how their bodily movements were reduced and codified to the dynamics of their respective disciplines during their careers. This is a method for fabricating productive bodies in the pursuit of high-performance (Shogan, 1999). However, problematic lived implications have arisen from the prescription of sport-specific movement practices. Alternative ways of knowing about the 'doing' of exercise were subjugated during the participants' careers (Mills, 2023). In turn, several retirees described how, throughout their lives after sport, they have felt challenged by their perceived incapacities to relinquish the disciplinary movement patterns that they have long been trained to execute with precision (Jones et al., 2022). These challenges represent how a disciplinary logic of linearity can compound Olympians' lives both within and well beyond their careers (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

6.3 The Legacy of a Competitive Logic for Retired Olympians' Exercise Relations

Given that the regulation of standardised ideals and norms is understood as integral to the functioning of Olympic sport settings (Shogan, 1999), the physical movement of the body represents an additional site for the concentration of disciplinary technologies. In other words, the body is yet another location for the classification, measurement, differentiation, punishment, and qualification of Olympians to occur (Markula & Pringle, 2006). As a means of guaranteeing Olympians' compliance with

disciplinary norms, their movement capacities and physiological attributes are subject to near-permanent surveillance. In turn, previous post-structural studies have illustrated that modern monitoring apparatus - including, but not limited to, GPS systems (Jones et al., 2016), video analysis (Taylor et al., 2017), and medical screenings (Johns & Johns, 2000) – serve a disciplinary function (Toner, 2024).

With respect to the context at hand, these technocratic arrangements are used to track athletes' progression throughout an Olympic cycle and to verify that they are not 'at risk' of underperforming at the Olympic Games (Toner, 2024). In light of this, participants described a number of means through which their bodies were monitored and evaluated throughout their Olympic careers. The employment of surveillance mechanisms varied from bio-medical screenings to performance tests that led directly to squad selection¹². For example, Barry noted that, during his volleyball career, "we had a full medical screening, we had so much support." Whereas Julian mentioned that "through the BOA we were attached to a hospital where we went for regular testing." Regular medical testing appeared to be a taken-for-granted element of Barry's and Julian's Olympic careers. Yet, Foucauldian logic would dictate that these apparatus should be treated as potentially problematic. This is because they can serve as a means of rendering athletes observable to a medical gaze that intensifies their docility and places their bodies into a "permanent corpus of knowledge" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 190).

¹² Given the timeframe considered within this project, participants were exposed to an extensive, diverse range of technologies. This is because the rise of technocracy in sport has been most visible from the late 20th century through to the present day. The common factor throughout these arrangements is the intensification of sport's normalising gaze for the lived experiences of Olympic standard athletes (Toner, 2024).

One of the central objectives of the systematic testing of Olympians' bodies is the inscription of the disciplinary logic of progression (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Indeed, the idea that athletes can always improve their performance metrics is a key component of modern Olympic level sport (Toner, 2024). Monitoring apparatus compliment this discourse by providing athletes with 'objective' scores to continually develop throughout an Olympic cycle. Nathan discussed how this way of thinking was inscribed by testing:

It becomes another competitive cog in your brain. You get a reading and the next time you go, you want to be better...I liked that next time I had the chance to go and improve.

As suggested by Mills and colleagues (2020), the 'normal' modern athlete is always cognizant of their health, fitness, and performance metrics and, in turn, they remain permanently committed to improving their results. Nathan's comment is a clear example of this mode of being. The pervasive logic of continuous improvement is perhaps most striking upon considering that physical testing played a significant role in shaping many of the Olympians' careers. For example, Jasper detailed how a battery of tests was used to determine squad selection for competition:

The main selection, the testing for the team selection, would be the 60 metre sprint, which they would get your initial 30 and your flying 30 out of...then there would be a combination of 5 jumps...then there would be pushing indoors, on the race track, a lighter sled and a heavy sled to look at the attributes of the different weights...Then we would go and do some actual pushing on the track...to simulate how well you push an object down

a hill at speed, so they look at velocity and all the other bits and pieces of data that we got out of it...there would be testing every couple of months. So, they would do one at the beginning of the season to see where everybody was...another one at the end of June, and final selections would be September.

Kelly also noted that performance testing was used to justify squad selection for Olympic rowing:

You were selected based on your performances and your rowing machine test scores...testing gives you the stats to show you are performing well.

In these cases, the physical testing of the Olympic body was used to “establish over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 184). It acted as a clear and objective method for the judgement of these former Olympians’ abilities to perform in spaces of competition (Mills & Denison, 2018). Given the sheer significance that is attached to these instruments of assessment throughout Olympic sport cultures, it is understandable that Olympic athletes may be prone to experiencing emotional investments in these measurements (Jones et al., 2022; Magill et al., 2017). Eric recalled his emotive reaction to failing to meet the expected physiological levels during his training:

I remember...crying with frustration on the side of the river because I couldn't get my heart rate...to the right level. I was so frustrated, but I was very, very driven. It was intense man, very intense.

These mechanisms of quantification are designed to provoke reactions in their subjects. Certainly, these apparatus aim to stimulate responses that are both physiological (i.e., timebound progression in training) and psychological (i.e., the desire to continuously improve one's metrics) (Toner, 2024). However, Eric's testament suggests that the magnitude attached to these scores can also induce problematic emotional responses. Therefore, despite the omnipresent expectation that Olympic athletes should be aware of the standards that are placed upon their physical movement capacities (Mills et al., 2020), Eric's comment suggests that these technologies of examination are internalised by athletes with subjective implications.

The ubiquity of performance testing throughout high-performance cultures encouraged Toner (2024) to suggest that modern sport has embraced the 'cult of measurement' that permeates neoliberal society. Certainly, the former Olympians' comments testify to this notion. Their stories illustrate that their movements and physical attributes were in a state of constant quantification throughout their careers. In Foucault's (1991a, p. 186) words, the participants found themselves "in a situation of almost perpetual examination" throughout these times. With the stimulation of a progressive logic central to the 'cult of measurement', several former Olympians illustrated that the judgement of their movement was also reinforced through the tactics of training regimen. Indeed, these participants described how their in-career exercise programmes were orchestrated with specific regard to executing optimal performances in spaces of examination. For example, Kelly noted that "it was a programme that was set up by the coaching team and the physiologists with the aim of peaking at the right times." Additionally, Ryan explained that his body was conditioned precisely to perform in competitions:

When you do a full taper in the summer...it is the one time you are going to be absolutely fresh and quick. You only do it once, and that is at trials. And then if you make the team, you try do another cycle to do it again. So, you put another full cycle, with full rest cycle, in again for the actual Olympics...So, basically, you're knackered for seven months of the year. Fit and healthy for one month and then you take a couple of months holiday. That's how it was. So, when people say, 'you're meant to be fit!' ...well that's the point! You push your body beyond its limits for 7 months of the year, so that for 1 month you're buzzing because you're so awake and fresh. For the rest of the time, you're knackered!

The notion of 'peaking' is derived from sport's disciplinary logic. Indeed, as Foucault (1991a, p. 161) suggested, exercise is "always graduated". In turn, the former Olympians' training plans were always characterised by the science of periodisation. These progressive schemata were designed to guarantee the linear progression of the former athletes' physical capacities to ensure that their bodies were tailored to produce a peak performance at the Olympic Games (Denison, 2010; Denison & Avner, 2011; Mills et al., 2020). The omnipresence of monitoring throughout their Olympic careers acted as an instrument to reinforce these lines of progression and to evaluate each athletes' degree of 'risk' of falling short of the normalised expectations (Toner, 2024). Subsequently, the former Olympians were equipped with a very clearly defined purpose to which their exercise could orientate towards (Markula & Pringle, 2006). As a number of recent sociologically informed athletic retirement studies have begun to suggest, this form of disciplinary imposition can 'imprint' the body in ways that influence the post-sport exercise relations of former sportspeople (Jones & Denison,

2019; McMahon & McGannon, 2023; Mills, 2023). The participants in the current research project reported several contradictory residual implications that can be connected to these ways of thinking.

6.3.1 “What is the point in this?”: Identifying a Renewed Purpose in Movement Beyond Olympic Sport

The disciplinary logic of progression was a key component in the participants’ exercise practices during their Olympic careers. This mode of thinking gave physical activity a functional purpose (Markula & Pringle, 2006). However, the removal of these structures in retirement has proved somewhat disorientating for several ex-Olympians. In turn, these retirees discussed the ongoing challenges that have surrounded identifying a renewed purpose in movement after sport. For instance, Barry noted:

The biggest thing for me is that I can’t get over myself thinking, ‘what is the point in this?’, do you know what I mean? I always knew the purpose, I was in there, to do this, which gets me this.

Jasper also spoke to the difficulties that are associated with training without a defined structure and purpose:

I wanted to go back into the gym and have the programme and have the structure. Going into the gym and looking at the machine, thinking ‘I fancy doing some bicep curls today or I fancy doing some squats or fancy doing this’, then getting there I was thinking that I didn’t like this...it was the fact of having no structure and no goal. I sort of felt like I had lost a little bit of me and a little bit of my purpose...I felt like I lost part of me.

As the former Olympian went on to explain, this limited purpose can be directly linked to the removal of the prescribed examination of the Olympic Games:

Thinking about where I had just come from which was a sport where the Olympic Games was the pinnacle – you had the ultimate carrot dangled in front of you to keep you going when times are hard...I couldn't even go into a gym and say, 'what is the goal?' I didn't know the goal because I didn't know what the purpose was.

It appears that these former Olympians accepted and internalised an understanding that exercise was exclusively a disciplinary practice; a means of achieving a performance-based end (Jones & Denison, 2019). Ascribing exercise to such a logic has presented difficulties for both participants in their attempts to think beyond the limits that are imposed by discipline (Jones et al., 2022). Significantly, for Jasper, these challenges were accompanied by a disruption to his subjectivities. This can be connected to the normalising project of Olympic sport (Tsang, 2000). Certainly, in spaces that concentrate so intensely on the structured progression of physical movement, subjects can embody meanings of exercise that are grounded in this wisdom (Gerdin, 2023; Jones et al., 2022). The removal of these arrangements from Jasper's life in retirement appears to have represented an interruption to the key constituents of his Olympic subjectivities.

As suggested by Jones and colleagues (2022), it can be incredibly difficult for athletic retirees to 'unhook' themselves from the pull of disciplinary power and to, subsequently, think about exercise beyond the constraints of performance metrics and progression. For these authors, the undoing of this logic is an ongoing, ever-present

negotiation that unfolds throughout one's life after sport. Certainly, in the extract above, Barry, whose retirement from Olympic standard volleyball occurred over ten years prior to this study, indicated that his perceptions of exercise remain limited by this disciplinary logic in the present moment. The residuality of this mode of thinking was further reinforced by Hannah:

I have no interest in swimming...I haven't swum or trained or raced...I know that if I had to get into a pool and swim 4 lengths it would about kill me, and I know how long it would take me to get good again! I just don't want to do that. Again, it is this thinking that I can't see swimming as anything other than training.

Hannah's comments are profound, especially when considering the number of years that have passed since her retirement from swimming. Her words indicate that she remains somewhat docile to a logic that compounds exercise to a disciplinary practice. Indeed, this has persistently constrained Hannah's ability to enjoy the sport of swimming in alternative ways for over thirty years.

6.3.2 The Contradictory Effects of a Perpetual Compliance With Olympic Sport's Competitive Logic

The inscription of Olympic sport's competitive logic has influenced the participants' post-sport bodily and exercise relations in a series of subjective ways. Indeed, several retired Olympians discussed the sustained instrumentality of these ways of thinking for their current relationships with physical activity. For example, Ryan noted that he remains involved with military-standard competition, approximately thirty years after his retirement from Olympic level swimming:

I am still swimming and winning in the army championships – I came 2nd at the inter corps last week. It isn't an age group thing but just everyone in the military. So, I came second...there's only one person faster than me in the whole military at 1500m which is not my natural talent.

Additionally, when asked about the reasons behind his continued engagement with competition after his retirement from rowing¹³, Julian explained that “it's probably the training aspect more than anything. Training all through the week to get yourself better for the Saturday, I love that.” Kelly also spoke about her prolonged involvement with the sport of rowing:

I came back to flat water rowing and, just like back then, I was just trying to be the best I could be for an older rower. A couple of years ago, I got a...record on the rowing machine and I was so pleased that I could still do that. So, I committed pretty much all of that year to getting to that goal...exercise is still quite important, and it is still very much part of my identity to be strong and fit.

It is apparent that these former Olympians, all of which retired from Olympic sport well before contributing to this study, remain influenced by the pull of disciplinary pleasures (Jones et al., 2022). After all, discipline is not designed to simply punish individuals, but to reward their obedience and their achievements in spaces of examination (Foucault, 1991a). For docile bodies, these pleasures become normative.

¹³ Julian had previously reported that, post-rowing, he went on to play rugby union at a reasonably competitive level.

Therefore, with respect to the social arrangements of modern Olympic cultures, the pleasures of Olympians can often derive from the execution of skills and exceptional standards in competition and training (Jones et al., 2022; Pringle, 2010). The participants' comments here are closely linked to the subjectivities that were cultivated during their Olympic careers (see chapter 5.1) and they demonstrate a notable connection to neoliberal discourses. Olympic sport's *means of correct training* work to fabricate athletes' subjectivities in accordance with a disciplinary, progressive logic (Foucault, 1991a; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Mills & Denison, 2018). Certainly, the notion that individuals should always focus on their continuous improvement and the overcoming of their competitors pervades both Olympic sport and neoliberal governance (Foucault, 2008; Toner, 2024; Türken et al., 2016). The comments above reflect the retirees' internalisation of these ways of thinking and, in turn, indicate that their perpetual commitments to this performance-based wisdom is a key element in the continual (re)constitution of their disciplinary subjectivities; this was particularly evident in Kelly's words.

What is more, these findings point to how the cultivation of docility during an Olympic career may continually impact upon former Olympians' negotiations of the broader social contexts of post-sport life. On one hand, the ex-Olympians' perpetual commitment to a competitive mode of being typifies their roles as model citizens that take personal responsibility for 'improving' their health and fitness in the normalised, progression-based conditions that are articulated through neoliberal governance (Gruneau, 2017; Jones & Denison, 2019; Toner, 2024). On the other hand, this logic can be connected to a series of problematic implications for several participants' ongoing bodily and exercise relations. This was illustrated by Ryan:

I probably still enjoy competition. But, in reality, and prior to competition, I really hate them. I can't win because if I do then it was expected in my head. And I can't lose because I have lost. So, I don't like competition. It is not something that I want to do...I am not motivated enough to train unless I have a competition to aim at. So, two or three times a year I have to do a competition. If I don't, I won't do the training.

Within this extract, Ryan demonstrates that his current relationship with exercise is fragmented. Although swimming competition may no longer derive complete pleasure, the former Olympian perceives it as a necessity in his ongoing efforts to remain an autonomous, self-responsible mover as his knowledge of training remains bound to disciplinary logic (Mills, 2023). In this case, Ryan's docility continues to preclude the (re)imagination of physical activity, over thirty years after his retirement from Olympic standard swimming. This has created tensions between his relationship with movement and desire.

Ryan was not the only participant to describe holding a fragmented relationship with the competitive logic of exercise in the current moment. Nathan also spoke about his continued involvement in badminton competitions following his retirement from the Olympic standard context:

I like the challenge of competing with the youngsters and the fact I can win some games is a bizarre scenario. I am 50% chuffed but 50% disappointed they can't beat an old fella.

However, he later remarked that the results of certain tournaments have forced him to question the implications of a sustained subjection to examination instruments for his long-term physical well-being:

It destroys me though – I drove home after the first county match last year and it took me 5 minutes to get out the car...I am not sure how long it can go on...but I suppose when you get to my age and you can still do it then you don't want to give it up until you have to.

These words speak to another potentially insidious implication of one's exposure to the disciplinary arrangements of modern Olympic sport. Indeed, Nathan's experiences illustrate his awareness of the potentially detrimental effects of competition for his aging body. However, it is apparent that his current relationship with exercise continues to be governed by a competitive logic. In other words, Nathan remains bound to an exclusively competitive relationship with physical activity, within which broader explorations of movement appear to have been precluded from his thoughts (Jones & Denison, 2019; Mills, 2023). Again, this observation is profound given the number of years that have passed since Nathan's retirement from Olympic standard badminton.

The majority of dominant neoliberal and functionalist narratives surrounding sport have reinforced the notion that competition is synonymous with the cultivation of healthy moving bodies (Coakley, 2015; Jones et al., 2023). However, throughout this sub-chapter, the stories provided by several participants have exposed that the inscription of a competitive logic during an Olympic career may have problematic implications for exercise relations beyond sport. Indeed, the mapping of exercise as a

linear, progressive, and logical activity – that can be monitored and assessed through highly standardised mechanisms of quantification (Mills, 2023; Toner, 2024) – represents another avenue through which the movement practices of Olympians may remain limited well after the cessation of their careers.

6.4 Disciplined Bodies: The Long-term Physical and Mental Well-being of Retired British Olympians

Thus far in this chapter, I have primarily focused on examining how the participants' experiences of physical movement in retirement remain deeply connected to their Olympic careers. As evidenced at several points, the former Olympians' ongoing relationships with exercise can be linked to their physical and emotional well-being. In this sub-chapter, I develop these threads by examining how the retired Olympians' exposures to intense levels of discipline throughout their careers can be connected to a wider range of bodily effects in their lives after sport.

6.4.1 The Long-term Physical Effects of an Olympic Career

The participants discussed a number of long-term physical effects associated with their careers in Olympic sport. For example, Rita, having previously remarked on the high-volume composition of her swimming training (see chapter 6.1), discussed the lasting bodily effects that may be connected to this:

The effects of overtraining over a long period of time has had an impact. I have had steroid injections in both achilles, elbows, soles of my feet! They are looking at the other knee replacement for next year. Like I say, I am not in the position to say if they are directly linked but I could speculate with the wear and tear, definitely.

Although Rita was – albeit fairly, given the absence of medical qualification – unable to definitively diagnose the link between training volume and her current physical condition, it is pertinent that she considers the existence of this relationship. Rita’s story illustrates that there is a likely connection between experiencing movement as a monotonous, disciplinary labour practice and her long-term physical health.

What is more, several participants suggested that their physical health challenges in retirement may have emerged as a result of their prolonged engagement with the dominant movement dynamics of their respective disciplines. For instance, Diana mentioned that “I have a bad back from rowing, I have a couple of bulging discs that come and go periodically and they cause me issues.” In addition, Jasper noted:

Doing a high-octane sport, like bobsleigh...you’re pushing yourself to the max constantly...you’re sprinting down a hill...you’re in a slightly bent over position so you’re putting more stress on your posterior chain, constantly under 3, 4, 5, 6 G going down a track, it does take its toll on things like your hamstring and your back.

These experiences indicate that moving the body through the intensely choreographed, instrumental, and rationalised patterns of modern sport can have harmful and limiting implications for the physical health and comfort of Olympic retirees (Mills, 2023; Mills et al., 2020). Considering the number of years that have passed since Rita’s, Jasper’s, and Diana’s retirements from Olympic sport, their observations are profound because they demonstrate that normalised modes of moving and conditioning the body can continue to pervade former athletes’ corporeal experiences and sensations well beyond the conclusion of their Olympic careers.

One of the most potent forms of disciplinary power present in the modern Olympic sport context is weight classification. In several sporting disciplines, such as lightweight rowing (Chapman, 1997) and boxing (Wacquant, 2022), athletes must conform with specified weight restrictions in order to compete. Julian, a former Olympic rower in the 'lightweight' category, detailed his experiences of weight restriction practices:

Personally, I found it very hard because I was initially a heavyweight when I first went to the club. Because that was more of a lightweight club, and I was kind of in-between weights, I was asked if I could cut down a wee bit. So, I went to the university there for about 3 months of intense testing and I was told I could do it, you know, cut the weight. And I did do it, I lost about 2 and a half stone.

For the former Olympian, weight control was a required technology for competing at this standard. However, as Julian later remarked, the practice of 'making weight' instigated his retirement process:

In the early days it was easy, I could handle the diet fine. But, yeah, as I got older it was harder to keep the weight off and that's, sort of, how I ended up retired. I just couldn't lose the weight...I remember, to this day, sitting in my room knowing that I had a weigh-in in two days with 6 kilos to lose. I had no idea how I was going to do it...I was trying so hard to lose the weight with crash dieting and sweating – it was so hard. But, that time, I managed to lose those kilos, but I went out and just didn't perform. Something in the back of my mind then told me that this wasn't doing me any good at all. After that, I decided I was finished...Within like a day or so,

I went from 71 kilos to 79! Just like that through eating normally. That spoke volumes to me.

This account is profound. Julian's words illustrate that weight restrictions manipulated him into engaging with damaging health behaviours. His experiences are consistent with the findings of previous Foucauldian studies of weight control practices in sport. Indeed, these studies have shown that disciplinary weight regulations can influence normalised engagements with problematic techniques, such as crash dieting and the excessive practice of exercise (Chapman, 1997; Johns & Johns, 2000; McMahon & Dinan-Thompson, 2011). The sheer pervasiveness of weight control practices is most evident in the fact that Julian cited these restrictions as a factor in his decision to retire from rowing.

What is more, for Julian, a subjection to weight control practices did not only influence the retirement moment, but their legacies have been carried throughout his post-sport life:

It was no good for me and I think I might suffer now from it. I have some kidney problems...it takes me a long time now to get my pee to come clear and stuff like that, so, yeah, it's had an effect on my life down the line for sure...a year ago I had a heart attack and went down on the rugby pitch. I went to hospital, and I died twice! Then, with the damage it has done to my heart, I probably have about half of it to use...It is the dehydration...the cardiac people told me that cardiac events can happen through dehydration...I still say to this day that some of the intense dehydration I did during those days definitely affected my kidneys.

The link made by Julian between the weight restriction practices of lightweight rowing and the current state of his physical health is damning. This evidence points to how an immersion within the normalising project of Olympic sport may have had damaging, and potentially life-altering, implications for his health and well-being. Certainly, Julian's experiences testify to the notion that a subjection to disciplinary practices during an Olympic career can inhibit retirees' capacities to become, and sustain, healthy moving bodies throughout their lives after sport (Jones et al., 2023). Indeed, the former Olympian concluded that these damaging physical impacts were now influencing his mental well-being as he has been forced to come to terms with the idea that remaining active, in terms of the standards that he had become accustomed to during and beyond his rowing career, is no longer possible:

The thing that's doing me the most with it is thinking about how I won't be active anymore. I can still walk, but what is walking to me? It's nothing – ha! Trying to get my head around the fact I love being active, and not being able to be active, is probably the thing that is hurting me the most.

The evidence presented in this sub-section has shown that a career in Olympic sport can have a series of limiting, residual implications for the physical health and well-being of retirees. The participants' testaments have demonstrated that their engagement with normalised and accepted methods of moving (i.e., through linear patterns) and controlling (i.e., weight restriction practices) the body in sport has had damaging implications for their health and well-being over the longitudinal courses of their post-sport lives (Jones et al., 2022). In turn, the participants' experiences have again illustrated the ongoing pertinence of problematising how taken-for-granted,

disciplinary elements of Olympic sport cultures can carry a range of problematic legacies for the bodies of retired athletes.

6.4.2 The Bodily Perceptions of Retired British Olympians

Expanding on the discussions presented in the previous sub-section, several participants demonstrated that the lived legacies of their subjection to the bodily objectification processes of Olympic sport have extended to their long-term emotional well-being. This was most clearly represented in the participants' comments regarding their ongoing cognizance towards bodily shape, and the subsequent 'need' to regulate their activity and diet to ensure its maintenance. For example, Rita discussed her attentiveness towards the bodies of her retired peers and cited this as a reason for remaining engaged with swimming as physical activity:

I continued to swim because I saw a lot of my friends stop. When you are training 4 to 7 hours a day, the calories you burn are enormous so you can eat almost what and how much you want...I had seen a lot of people pile on the weight when they retired but I was really conscious and didn't want to do that. I then ran and swam, picked up gym classes – just things to keep me moving and mobile because I was so aware of that.

As a docile Olympic body, Rita was immersed in "the network of gazes that supervised one another" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 171) and, as an effect, made knowable, judged, and attempted to normalise herself and other subjects in the discipline. Operating as a justification for Rita's training in her post-Olympic life, it appears that she internalised this disciplinary gaze to the degree that she remains permanently aware of the normalised bodily standards that were present in her discipline (Jones et al., 2005;

McMahon et al., 2012). Continuing on this topic, Nathan added that “I definitely wouldn’t want to be overweight, and I like feeling fit...I just can’t not be in reasonably good shape.”

Furthermore, Connor discussed how retiring from Olympic sport instigated a range of lifestyle changes that heightened his perceptions of bodily shape, particularly as he initially attempted to seek work in the context of swimming:

All of a sudden, I was there and didn’t have a six pack. I didn’t work for a six pack – all the training and swimming, it just made us trim and as athletic as I have been. I had a body fat percentage of like 3.9% which is ridiculous. But I did not have to worry...I still wanted to look the part. I still wanted to be the part. I was still turning up to swimming clubs which was even worse. If I didn’t stay trim then I couldn’t roll in the door 10 stone heavier, you know, with them going here’s the Olympian that is squeezing into his tracksuit and his trunks! It’s not a good look...you have got to look the part.

The former Olympians’ words suggest that their careers in Olympic sport can be linked to their increased degrees of consciousness regarding their bodies’ shapes, intakes, and movements. This evidence supports the arguments made by a number of existing studies that have emphasised the pervasive nature of bodily objectification (Johns & Johns, 2000; Jones et al., 2005; McMahon & Dinan-Thompson, 2011), as well as several sports retirement studies that have connected in-sport bodily regulation practices to the damaging physical and emotional well-being implications that are experienced by former athletes (McMahon & McGannon, 2023; McMahon et al., 2012). Moreover, these responses acutely expose the potency and potential permanence of sport’s

normalising gaze for the lived experiences of retired Olympians. Specifically, Rita's and Connor's stories suggest that their attentiveness towards bodily shape and management was entrenched in the internalised influence of disciplinary norms. As a result, the perpetual regulation of the body represents yet another way in which the retired Olympian may remain "the principle of his [*sic*] own subjection" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 203).

These findings highlight yet another tension between the experiences of the British Olympians and the strategies that are regularly prescribed to assist athletes in self-managing their post-sport transitions. Indeed, sport psychology researchers have consistently advocated that sportspeople actively engage with coping strategies, such as seeking counsel from 'experts' (Menke & Germany, 2019) and using cognitive-behavioural strategies to improve their relationships with physical activity after sport (Ferrera et al., 2023). The overarching proposition made by these suggestions is that the challenges that often accompany athletes' retirement adjustments can be 'managed' in a linear manner (Stambulova et al., 2021; Tonge, 2022), as long as sportspeople are prescribed the correct strategies for execution (Denison & Winslade, 2006). However, the experiences detailed in this sub-section, and throughout this chapter, have demonstrated that the participants' post-Olympic lives have unfolded in ways that are anything but linear. Certainly, it is clear that negotiating the long-term implications of an exposure to Olympic sport's punitive framework is an extremely complex endeavour that has continued to penetrate several of the former Olympians' lives well beyond their immediate retirement adjustments. Therefore, I am yet again inclined to question the efficacy of those intervention strategies that posit simplistic, linear strategies for managing Olympians' retirement processes.

6.5 Towards a Re-imagination of Exercise Relations in Post-sport Life

The implications of a career in British Olympic sport for the former Olympians' bodily and exercise relations have been complex and often problematic. However, several participants also took time to illustrate that their post-Olympic lives have presented opportunities to re-imagine their bodily and exercise relations beyond the constraints that were once imposed by disciplinary ways of thinking (Gerdin, 2023; Jones et al., 2022; Mills, 2023).

Drawing upon the work of Foucault (1985), a small number of scholars have argued that the first aspect to re-imagining one's dominant subjectivities, and one's relationship with physical movement, in retirement lies in the problematisation of modern sport's prevailing moral codes (Crocket, 2014; Gerdin, 2023; Kuklick, 2023).

The origins of these problematisation efforts are evident in Diana's description of how she has actively questioned and worked to resist some of the instrumental components of discipline during her post-Olympic life:

I took all the computers off my bike fairly soon after I stopped rowing because I was always thinking that I'd have to cycle to work quicker today than I did yesterday. That kind of obsessive recording of everything isn't good...If I don't have the numbers then I don't obsess about getting better numbers.

Diana's problematisation is tied to the pervasive effects of Olympic sport's 'cult of measurement' (Toner, 2024). Specifically, the former rower suggested that she has taken measures to avoid the classification, measurement, and differentiation systems that could be imposed by the recording technologies on her bicycle (Markula & Pringle,

2006). In this sense, Diana's words speak to her permanent attentiveness to the potentially harmful effects associated with a perpetual subjection to the logic of progression (see chapters 6.3.1 and 6.3.2).

Resistance is at the heart of Diana's story here. Indeed, as Foucault (1990, p. 95) argued, "where there is power, there is resistance". However, Diana's story remains somewhat of an outlier in terms of the participants' considered engagements with the active problematisation that Foucault (1985) considered to be essential for the re-cultivation of one's dominant subjectivities and, in turn, one's relations to physical activity in retirement (Gerdin, 2023; Markula & Pringle, 2006). This is not to say that additional examples of exercise re-imagination were non-existent. Indeed, several participants discussed the ways in which their retirement from Olympic sport has provided new possibilities to engage with movement in alternative, less disciplinary ways. For instance, Hannah suggested that she has found comfort in remaining active in ways that do not centre upon the disciplinary components of modern sport:

I don't do any organised exercise at all. I love walking and I love gardening which keeps me active. But nope, no sport at all and I have no desire to do sport.

Furthermore, Jasper spoke to the benefits of accessing the therapeutic potential of physical activity:

I would say just over the last year is when I have started to get back into it, getting more active...accepting that I can just be dad fit, it doesn't matter...I got into...a little bit of sea swimming...I wouldn't say I was a swimmer as such. It was just about going into the water for 40 minutes to an hour and

doing a little bit of swimming, or sometimes we would get into the water, just float about and chat. But, you know, it was doing something different and once I had found something that I found therapeutic, and that put me in a good place mentally, I just started to enjoy things and realise that it doesn't always have to be about lifting the world in a squat or deadlift, I could do other things that helped me.

In addition, Andy discussed how retirement has provided him with opportunities to engage with alternative methods of exercising to those that dominated his Olympic career:

I did a little bit of cycling. Road cycling, which I wasn't really built for...I enjoyed the challenge though. It was something else that was completely unrelated – I just enjoyed getting out and going for bike rides...it was nice because you just get out and if you want to push it hard, you push it hard but if you want to take it easy then you can.

At various points throughout the interviews conducted with Hannah, Jasper, and Andy, each of these participants discussed how their exposure to certain, disciplinary ways of thinking about movement during their Olympic careers worked to shape their problematic understandings of exercise within their lives after sport. However, the extracts outlined above exemplify that the constraints imposed by disciplinary logic may not be permanent in their penetrative effects. Indeed, for these participants, post-Olympic life – when conceived as a long-term and ongoing negotiation - has provided opportunities to (re)imagine exercise in more playful ways that have opened up their bodies to new physical sensations (Mills, 2023; Stamp, 2023). As noted by

Jasper, the renewed pleasure of physical movement has stimulated significant benefits for his physical and mental well-being.

Stories surrounding the re-imagination of exercise relations in life after sport were typically underpinned by the relief of disciplinary arrangements from the former Olympians' quotidian experiences. As Diana suggested, her engagement with alternative forms of physical activity was made possible by the relinquishment of Olympic sport's normalising instruments:

I had the opportunity to do lots of things that I hadn't been able to do when I was an athlete in case I injured myself...I could now go ski, I could go and be really rubbish at mountain biking and, you know, it was nice to do those things that you don't do when you have to be really precious about your body and keeping it in one piece. I did enjoy actually doing things badly for a while – it was a liberation.

The modern discipline of Olympic sport turns athletes into the subjects of insidious surveillance mechanisms that are designed to induce "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 201). Diana's words suggest that this gaze once constrained her capacity to engage with alternative forms of physical movement as she was placed under the permanent expectation to comply with Olympic sport's logic of progression (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Mills, 2023). Therefore, in her post-sport life, it appears that Diana has been relieved from the grasp of these surveillance technologies and, in turn, she has been able to trial new and alternative forms of movement without the intensity of

Olympic performance pressures governing her thoughts (Stamp, 2023). Eric shared a similar sentiment, with respect to his current movement relations:

Now, I certainly value and rejoice in every chance I get to do exercise. I do running now, which I never used to really do. I used to do running when I was an athlete but now running actually feels kind of good and it's a very cheap and cheerful exercise that I can do whilst enjoying being outdoors...Windsurfing is what I do now because of where I live. You know, that is a super fun thing to do...I am really relishing learning this new sport because I have not learned a new sport since I was about 12, you know, there is a joy of exploring that and having this reconnection with the grassroots.

Whereas the disciplinary arrangements of Olympic sport work to ensure that athletes conform with exceptional standards of performance and conditioning, as Eric's words suggest, post-Olympic life can provide athletes with greater opportunities to shift their focus towards, what many would consider, more pleasurable movements (Jones et al., 2022). Certainly, Eric's story indicates that he now, several years beyond his retirement from Olympic sport, takes great pleasure in acquiring and mastering new skills – an element of life that is so difficult to engage with during an Olympic career as athletes are expected to permanently dedicate themselves to performance-based progression within the remits of their discipline (Shogan, 1999).

Thus far, the evidence presented in this sub-chapter has indicated that the re-imagination of exercise relations in post-Olympic life is possible. For those participants that described the ongoing re-invention of their movement practices, it is apparent

that their docility has, at times, served as an obstacle to developing alternative meanings about exercise (see evidence throughout chapter 6; Jones & Denison, 2019). However, it is also evident that the concentrated effects of discipline on their bodies have somewhat weakened over time to allow renewed opportunities to conceive physical movement in a new, less disciplinary light (Jones et al., 2022). Despite this, the ‘undoing’ of discipline for the re-imagination of exercise relations is not a simple nor linear task (Gerdin, 2023). Indeed, several former Olympians conceded that their attempts to resist and re-think disciplinary ways of moving have continually been constrained by their docility. For example, Rita noted that trying to (re)imagine exercise as a practice that was no longer limited to strict temporal controls was challenging:

For years, it took me so long to be able to go into the pool and just swim for enjoyment. You know, not to keep looking at the clock and the time I was doing. I have had to really teach myself not to look at the clock. It is quite difficult.

In addition, as suggested by Adele, her attempts to reshape her relationship with exercise in retirement have been liable to imperfection because the remnants of discipline have remained influential in the reformation of her movement subjectivities:

I also enjoy playing other sports as well now. Tennis is one of my favourite sports...basketball, football. I love playing them and I love learning these new sports. I like taking part in team events. I like going to group fitness classes because I realise that, for me, it is tough to go out for a run, and just

run – but what I can do is go to the gym, set myself an hour, or an hour and a half, just to work out.

Although Adele’s words suggest that she has found some comfort in the opportunity to explore new ways of moving in her life after sport, her engagement with these new forms of exercise remain imbued with the subtle influences of disciplinary techniques i.e., *the control of activity* (Foucault, 1991a). Despite the potentially illuminating effects associated with (re)imagining exercise relations within post-Olympic life, it remains incredibly difficult, or perhaps even impossible (Foucault, 1990), to fully extricate oneself from the omnipresent penetrative ‘voice’ of discipline (Gerdin, 2023; Jones & Denison, 2019; Jones et al., 2022). It is imperative that we, as sports retirement researchers, remain attentive to this.

The evidence presented throughout this sub-chapter speaks to how the former Olympians have attempted to reshape their relationships with exercise in their lives after sport. These findings support the arguments made by Jones and colleagues (2022), insofar that athletes’ docility can act as a “significant obstacle to developing alternative meanings for exercise in retirement” (Jones & Denison, 2019, p. 841), particularly when they are exposed to those neoliberal discourses that encourage individuals to adopt bio-scientific and disciplinary knowledges as a means of taking ownership over their health and fitness, but these barriers are not insurmountable. Certainly, as made evident by several participants’ experiences, the permanent relief of sport’s normalising gaze from their everyday lives has presented renewed opportunities to engage with alternative, less disciplinary ways of moving that were largely precluded during their Olympic careers (Mills, 2023).

Conclusion

In summary, it is clear that a career in Olympic sport can impact upon retirees' bodily and exercise relations over the remainder of their lives after sport. Despite the amount of time that has passed since the cessation of many of the participants' careers, their relationships with movement appear to remain connected, in at least some form, to the disciplinary modes of thought that structured their bodily practices as Olympians. As made evident throughout this chapter, the inscription of these logics has influenced the former Olympians in ways that are subjective and, at times, problematic. Despite this, it remains possible for retired Olympians to develop new, alternative, and less disciplinary meanings regarding physical movement (Jones et al., 2022). However, throughout the participants' stories, the subtle traces of docility have continued to reside and influence their thoughts and movements. In turn, the evidence presented in this chapter leads me to conclude that a career in Olympic sport influences – but does not totally preclude – former athletes' capacities to become, and sustain, healthy moving bodies in retirement (Jones et al., 2023).

The significance of this chapter lies in the use of a Foucauldian lens to provide a nuanced understanding of former Olympians' relationships with their bodies and exercise (Jones et al., 2022). As I discussed in the literature review (see chapters 2.3.2 and 2.5.2.2), previous research surrounding retired athletes' relationships with movement has been limited by both a consistent neglect of the effects of power relations within analyses (e.g., Russell et al., 2018) and a focus on presenting narrative representations that may not accurately account for the wider retired athlete population (e.g., Jones et al., 2023). However, by examining qualitative evidence collected with a significant and under-represented sample of participants, this chapter

has developed the foundations laid by extant poststructuralist research by identifying that the ongoing bodily and exercise relations of retired British Olympians remain influenced by the legacies of their docility.

Chapter 7 Olympic Coaches' Knowledge, Experiences, and Perspectives of the Olympic Retirement Process

Introduction

In this chapter, I present an examination of the relationship between sport coaching and Olympic retirement. Despite the efforts made by poststructuralist scholars in recent years to posit that the interplay of these phenomena may be meaningful (Brown, 2024; Jones, 2020; Jones & Denison, 2017), empirical interpretations remain limited. Throughout this chapter, I attend to this paucity in research by considering a range of elements that relate to this connection, including: coaching practitioners' concerns regarding the problems faced by Olympians in the post-sport context, the extent to which Olympic coaches consider themselves to be 'immersed' in the retirement decisions of the athletes they coach, and the barriers that Olympic coaches may face to re-choreographing their approaches in light of Olympians' retirement intentions. Prior to considering the relationship between sport coaching and Olympic retirement in a more detailed manner, I first turn my attention to mapping several of the key contextual elements that underpin current Olympic coaches' approaches and working environments. This is a logical first step in exploring this relationship in a more meaningful way because, as indicated extensively throughout Foucauldian coaching scholarship (Cushion et al., 2022; Denison, 2007; Denison et al., 2019), examining and understanding the socio-cultural contexts that coaches occupy is critical for exploring their understandings, opinions, and feelings regarding coaching phenomena.

7.1 Coaching in the Context of British Olympic sport

How do coaches know how to coach? How are these understandings shaped? These questions have dominated conversations and debates in the field of sport coaching for a number of years (Cushion & Nelson, 2013; Lyle, 2002). This is because the

development of coaches' knowledge is intimately connected to their behaviours, approaches, practices, and beliefs about working with athletes (Cushion et al., 2003; Denison, 2010; Denison et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2004). In this sub-chapter, I consider the ways in which this study's coach participants described the development of their understandings about coaching in the modern British Olympic context. The participants ascribed their perspectives to two primary means: their own coach learning experiences and the normalising pressures that surround the Olympic coaching occupation. I explore the underlying meanings of these themes for the remainder of this sub-chapter.

7.1.1 The Influence of Learning Experiences Upon Olympic Coaches' Approaches

In discussing their coach learning experiences, participants considered a variety of ways through which their understandings of the Olympic coaching context have developed throughout their careers. For example, the following extract taken from the interview with Jack exemplifies the significance of the experiential learning that occurred during his career as a high-performance athlete for his current approaches and thinking:

Jack: Most of the ex-athletes that make good coaches are the ones that have had to solve loads of problems along the way. You build up a library of ways of doing things.

Interviewer: So, would you say that your experiences as an athlete have had more influence over your coaching than those coach education programmes that you have been on to attain your qualifications?

Jack: I think so, yeah.

Jack's words suggest that there is significant value in those informal learning experiences that occurred during his athletic career, with respect to accumulating relevant coaching knowledge (Blackett et al., 2019). Sam made a similar point regarding how his experiences as a high-performance athlete have informed the ways in which he thinks about coaching in the present moment:

The way you are is manifested from your experiences and influences along the way...I think the strengths that I had as an athlete are the same strengths that I have as a coach as well...Just from experience, the longer you are an athlete, you get to understand yourself more. You get to understand your strengths, weaknesses, how to deal with pressure. I think, as a coach, that is relevant to how you coach.

Echoing these points, Brian asserted that it is through the practice of 'reflection' that he has been able to understand the importance of his lived experiences for shaping his current practice:

Interviewer: Your experiences as an athlete, have they directly informed your practice as a coach?

Brian: The answer is yes but it took me a long time to find those. To be really honest, I didn't really qualify and quantify how much of an impact it had on my practice till...I decided to spend a bit of time reflecting...Obviously, coaching accreditation levels are really important but what really accelerated me was being able to learn through my own lived experiences and using the right people and frameworks to explore what I have learned and what I can take forward from that.

These comments demonstrate that the participants' coach learning experiences have occurred in ways that are inherently social in nature. Indeed, their words succinctly connect their contemporary coaching philosophies to the experiential learning that occurred during their athletic careers (Blackett et al., 2019; Cushion & Partington, 2016). The participants' experiences are consistent with the findings of most sociologically informed literature regarding coach learning. Indeed, although formal coach education courses (i.e., those offered by NGBs) are "regularly positioned as the traditional method to prepare sport coaches for their occupation" (Leeder, 2024, p. 293), coach learning does not occur solely within these rational, linear, and deliberate spaces. Rather, as Cushion and Nelson (2013, p. 359) argued, coaches' learning is shaped by their lived experiences, their reflections, their studies, their instruction, and "can embrace all of the mechanisms through which coaches acquire the knowledge that informs their practice".

A Foucauldian reading of these interview responses points to the significance of these learning experiences, as well as their potential implications for practice. The learning experiences described by these participants, from those that formed part of certified educational provision to those that ensued experientially, have occurred almost exclusively within the discursive field of high-performance sport. In this sense, the knowledge that has been made available to these practitioners corresponds to a very specific way of thinking about, and practicing, the coaching occupation (Avner et al., 2017). As Foucauldian coaching scholars have suggested, modern coaching knowledge (and what it means to be an 'effective' coach) has primarily been informed by bio-scientific and humanist discourses that are intimately connected to disciplinary relations of power (Denison et al., 2013; Konoval et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2022). These

discourses have largely been accepted as 'regimes of truth' for coaches to implement in practice (Cushion et al., 2022; Denison, 2010). Hence, experiential learning, in addition to formal learning, has contributed to the discursive construction of coaching knowledge and, in turn, the pervasion of disciplinary ways of thinking throughout the Olympic coaching context (Blackett et al., 2019). This was evident in Roy's words as he discussed the development of his coaching philosophy:

It was based around getting better – how can we get better? How can we win? How can I get better at something? A little bit of mastery and trying to do things as well as possible was the drive...It was just an extension of trying to be successful when I was an athlete – how do we win this match?...I was highly competitive as an athlete and that transferred itself into coaching. It wasn't really through an education piece, but it was mainly learned through experience.

The influence of the disciplinary logic of progression is present in Roy's comments (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Indeed, his words suggest that he internalised (i.e., learned) this mode of thinking during his athletic career and continues to (re)produce this accepted, disciplinary wisdom through his current practice (Blackett et al., 2019).

As Foucauldian coaching scholars have previously demonstrated, it is important to remain attuned to the potentially problematic implications of learning experiences for the construction and application of Olympic coaches' knowledge (Avner et al., 2017; Cushion et al., 2022). Indeed, these scholars have suggested that limits are placed upon coaches' knowledge as the majority of their learning experiences occur within the discursive parameters of high-performance sport. Indeed, Olympic standard

coaching practitioners are exposed, almost exclusively, to frameworks of knowledge that encourage them to 'do' and 'think about' coaching in normative and disciplinary ways (Cushion et al., 2022; Denison, 2010; 2019; Downham & Cushion, 2020). These learning conditions combine to produce docile coaching practitioners that are, on one hand, incredibly adept at reinforcing dominant truths regarding the 'correct' disciplinary ways to coach, yet, on the other hand, often lack the critical mindedness to see and think beyond the disciplinary logic that permeates modern Olympic cultures (Cushion et al., 2022; Denison, 2019; Denison et al., 2017).

7.1.2 The Normalising Pressures of Coaching in British Olympic Sport

Several participants spoke to the intense pressures that accompany the coaching occupation in the modern context of British Olympic sport. The intricacies of these pressures varied throughout the sample. However, each participant made it clear that the pressures that infuse their roles are closely linked to an omnipresent expectation to comply with prescribed performance standards. Indeed, several participants commented that these measurements of performance most commonly manifest in the form of Olympic medals. Carl clarified this idea:

Interviewer: How are you judged on the success of your training programmes by stakeholders such as the NGB and UK sport?

Carl: Medals. You have to win. Gold medals. The more, the better. We get a lot of funding and support in this country and we have to deliver. It is tough but we have to win the medals.

Sam made a similar remark whilst discussing this matter:

To be honest...it's about results. We have to produce results to get funding.

If we don't get funding, then we can't produce the environment that we want to create to produce results.

These coaching practitioners are cognizant of the pressures that surround the coaching occupation in the context of British Olympic sport, particularly in relation to supporting current funding structures and the expectation to produce Olympic medals (Feddersen et al., 2020). These conditions are typical of the modern, neoliberal Olympic landscape (Fernandes Da Silva et al., 2024; Gruneau, 2017).

From a Foucauldian perspective, these pressures are significant as they are associated with a series of normalising effects for coaches' knowledge and practice. As Denison et al. (2019, p. 3) argued, it is within these circumstances that a "preferred and expected way of coaching is produced". That is, a way of coaching that is commensurate with disciplinary arrangements, within which practitioners draw upon mechanisms of control that are designed to minimise the 'risks' of under-performance by managing athletes' lives and creating consistency and predictability in the performance process (Mills & Denison, 2013; Mills et al., 2024; Toner, 2024). This can be problematic on two fronts. First of all, as Foucault (1991a) showed, the application of these technologies can combine to produce docility amongst disciplinary subjects (i.e., Olympians). Secondly, these discourses can have docility-cultivating effects for Olympic coaches. Indeed, the exercise of a normalising gaze upon coaches' approaches leads to the intensification of an expectation to comply with modernist formations of 'effective' practice (Denison et al., 2019). In other words, in these conditions, coaching practitioners can also be considered subjects of a panoptic mechanism that works to normalise and scrutinise their conduct (Zehntner & McMahon, 2019). This can have

implications for Olympic coaches' approaches, as the following response from Brian demonstrates:

This is one of the challenges that faces the UK sport system....if you believe that your livelihood and the ability to sustain a programme is only based on the result and an objective number, you will start to disregard some of the areas that are more complex because if you aren't validated on them then why do they matter?...if you have seen examples of coaches losing their job because they did not get the result, you are going to try and narrow it down to the things you can control.

Brian's words suggest that the expectations placed upon coaches in the context of British Olympic sport constrains their imaginations because they are expected to work in normalised and accepted ways (Denison et al., 2019); a way of coaching that has discipline at its core. Indeed, Olympic level coaches are encouraged to apply those disciplinary technologies that work to provide an omnipresent sense of control over the athlete development and performance processes (Denison, 2007; 2010).

Subsequently, Brian's statement proposes that those elements of the coaching process that cannot be precisely 'controlled', or that do not directly contribute to the attainment of performance targets, are viewed as ambiguous by Olympic coaches and are not treated as a priority (Brown, 2024; Mills et al., 2024). Therefore, the outstanding question remains as to how the coach participants responded to the ethical questions that surround the topic of Olympic retirement – an aspect of Olympians' lives that resides outside of the conventional, disciplinary coaching toolbox (Denison, 2019; Denison et al., 2017; Jones & Denison, 2017). Throughout the

remainder of this chapter, I examine this problem and consider how the coaches' perspectives may be considered symptomatic of their docility.

7.2 Retiring From Olympic Sport as a Complex and Problematic Process: Olympic Coaches' Concerns

There was an overwhelming consensus across the coaching sample that retiring from sport could be a difficult experience for Olympians. Significantly, several coach participants acknowledged that retirees are likely to feel challenged by withdrawing from Olympic sport spaces as, within these settings, coaches and support staff provide so much attention and support to their lives. For example, Roy noted:

One of the main problems we have is that we wrap so much support around them on a day-to-day basis because they are key and so skilled at what they do. So, we ask them how they feel every day, they are filling in apps, they have got nutritional support, they have got a doc on call, they have got a physio on call, they've got good coaches around. They have got so much support around them and when they go back into the job market...that is the biggest challenge...you're coming out of somewhere that you have great support around you, which is there for very good reasons and the right reasons, but you have to be aware that life changes and you're in a very different world coming out of that.

Additionally, Joe commented:

They're so used to being told things like 'get on this plane, at this time'. The whole thing is set up so there aren't fuck ups. They then come out of the sport and realise they are on their own now.

Techniques of discipline, such as *the art of distributions*, work to focus power upon Olympians' bodies in ways that inculcate modes of being that are intensely regulated, obedient, and reliant upon the support provided by temporal and spatial mechanisms of control (Foucault, 1991a). As alluded to by Roy, Olympic coaches draw upon these techniques for what they believe to be the 'right', rational reasons i.e., to organise the athlete training process in a manner that is predictable, normative, and detailed (Denison, 2010; Mills & Denison, 2013). One of the profound effects of this element of athletes' docility is that they can become cosseted by the familiarity of these spaces and routines (Jones & Denison, 2017). However, upon withdrawing from these disciplinary spaces, these structures are revoked from their daily lives and athletes can face challenges in their attempts to re-access the normative pleasures that were once provided by discipline (see chapters 5 and 6; Jones & Denison, 2017; Jones et al., 2022). In the responses above, each coach participant demonstrates an awareness of the potentially disorientating effects that are associated with the cessation of an Olympic career, as well as how these problematic implications may be related to Olympians' exposures to disciplinary practices. However, they did not explicitly make a connection between how their own application of these techniques may influence Olympians' retirement adjustments, over either the short or longer term.

In a similar vein to the responses detailed above, Jack acknowledged that the removal of disciplinary structures from Olympians' daily lives could be a source of difficulty throughout their attempts to adjust to post-athletic life:

The more embedded someone is into the system, I think the more at risk they are. That is an awful thing to say isn't it because you think we are adding but, quite often, if you have left school to become a pro athlete,

everything is done for you. Planning is done for you, travel is done for you, if there is something you haven't done then someone will do it for you – whether it's getting a licence or a flight, someone will always catch you when you fall.

Joe expanded on this point:

I think that the structure of the day is a big change for them...We are very structured. Like we have every week mapped out. So, people have said that they struggle when they don't immediately go into a full-time job, you know, with knowing how to structure their day.

These coaches' words illustrate that they are acutely aware of the potentially turbulent nature of Olympians' retirement adjustments, particularly in the period that immediately follows the retirement moment. However, their comments also suggest that they perceive these challenges as a somewhat inevitable implication of an Olympic career. Indeed, although these participants acknowledged that there is a connection between the systematic control of Olympians' lives and their retirement adjustments, their words reflect an acceptance of these difficulties. This was reflected in the coach participants' limited willingness to problematise those elements of their own approaches that may be considered contributing factors (Brown, 2024). This position is somewhat symptomatic of the coaches' docility. This is because docile Olympic coaches apply taken-for-granted disciplinary practices as these methods are largely accepted as economically sound in creating order and efficiency throughout the performance and development processes (Denison, 2007; 2010; Mills & Denison, 2013). In turn, Foucauldian scholars have suggested that coaching practitioners

typically internalise and utilise modernist and binary logics for thinking about the phenomena that surround their roles (Denison et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2024).

Binary modes of thinking about the relationship between sport coaching and the Olympic retirement process were evident in a number of the participants' responses. Indeed, this perspective underpins how several coaches believe that sportspeople can best navigate the challenges that accompany the retirement transition. For example, Roy remarked that he and his coaching team recognise the importance of athletes planning for their lives after sport:

In our area, we have always tried to highlight the importance of preparing yourself for life after sport. We know that has challenges, and those transitions are often difficult for people.

Jack also emphasised the importance of athletes' retirement planning efforts. He framed this position in the context of maintaining performance standards for the Olympic competition:

If the athlete has a plan of what retirement is going to look like, then they perform a lot better in the here and now. I have had athletes that think they are going to retire after the games, but if they don't have a plan then it is the most distracting thing, it is like hanging of a cliff edge...that reality of having a plan and being excited about where you're going means you concentrate on the here and now. Whereas if you are wondering about where the next job is going to be, it is very hard to go all in on your performance because you are petrified of what is going to happen when you get home.

An extensive amount of sports retirement research has emphasised the criticality of athletes' efforts to prepare for their retirement transitions as a means of easing those difficulties that regularly accompany post-sport adjustments (Lally, 2007; Schmid et al., 2023; Torregrosa et al., 2015). These coaching practitioners appear aware of these dominant discourses that surround athletes' self-management of their retirement adjustments (Brown, 2024). However, as Hickey and Kelly (2008) suggested, athletes' engagement with retirement planning strategies is a more complex endeavour than these participants' responses suggest. This is because sportspeople face a range of tensions in their efforts to prepare for retirement, including those expectations that are placed upon them by coaches and organisations to permanently (re)consolidate their disciplinary subjectivities. These implications are present in Jack's testament as the language he uses to discuss Olympians' retirement planning is imbued with a desire for performance progression and optimisation (Avner et al., 2019; Markula & Pringle, 2006). In the British Olympic context, a setting in which these discourses circulate and dominate, is it realistic to expect Olympians to be able to effectively commit to preparing for their lives after sport?

These coach participants did not demonstrate any intention to problematise how their own roles in cultivating docility could work to barricade Olympians' engagement with those retirement management strategies that have consistently been prescribed throughout sport psychology research (Tonge, 2022). Rather, these participants appear to have passively accepted that these strategies are 'correct' and that they can be employed by Olympic athletes as a means of mitigating their concerns regarding the retirement transition. From a Foucauldian perspective, this position can be understood as a discursive strategy that places all responsibility on the individual to address how

their own social and psychological circumstances may affect the retirement transition, as opposed to the coach questioning how their own application of disciplinary practices may influence these adjustments (Denison, 2007; Denison & Winslade, 2006). An acceptance of this way of thinking implicitly distances coaching practitioners, such as Jack, from the retirement processes of the Olympians they coach and demonstrates how attempts to develop Olympians more holistically are likely to come secondary to obtaining results (Avner et al., 2017).

7.3 The Coaching Role in the Olympic Retirement Process

In this sub-chapter, I examine the various ways in which the participants considered the Olympic coaching role to be implicated in the retirement processes of Olympians. Two themes were present in the practitioners' responses. Firstly, several coaches described their efforts and intentions to distance themselves from the Olympic retirement process entirely. Secondly, certain coaches indicated that they choose to take a more considered and active involvement in Olympians' retirement decisions.

7.3.1 "It is totally down to them": Olympians' Retirement Decisions and 'Taking a Step Back' From Their Lives

Several coach participants suggested that they have never intervened in the retirement decisions of the Olympians they have coached. For example, Joe noted that "I have never advised someone on whether or not they should retire." Additionally, Carl commented that "so far in my involvement it has been from the athlete. I have not had any influence on those kinds of things." These participants made it clear that they believe that athletes' decisions to retire from Olympic sport should be made autonomously. Brian commented on this idea in a more specific manner: "I have a personal belief that you want the athlete to realise that it is time to move on." As did

Jack: "It is totally down to them, it is their life and their performance." These points were also emphasised by Sam:

Interviewer: Is the decision to retire ever influenced through your consultation or advice?

Sam: No, I think that has got to be the choice of the athlete. Yeah, the athlete has to openly walk into the sporting environment that they are trying to perform in. It has to be their choice that: a) they are there, b) they are doing the training that is required, and c) it is their choice when they call stumps on that.

These coach participants were clear in their stance that Olympians' retirement decisions should be made freely and autonomously. However, this may be a naïve position to adopt because it discounts the complex realities that surround the retirement decisions and processes of many British Olympians. Indeed, sportspeople are often rendered unable to retire voluntarily, owing to issues such as injury and de-selection (Agnew et al., 2018; Demetriou et al., 2020; Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021). Previous studies suggest that coaching practitioners can assume an active position in the de-selection processes that cause athletes' retirement moments to occur abruptly (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Butt & Molnar, 2009; Demetriou et al., 2020). In addition, previous research has argued that the behaviours of coaches can positively and negatively influence the emotions of sportspeople throughout their retirement transitions (Harry & Weight, 2021; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Therefore, it is important to ask, why do these coaches appear to be consciously distancing themselves from the Olympic retirement process?

Foucault (1991a) argued that, in modern disciplines, the function of each individual body is well-defined. Indeed, coaching practitioners assume a distinct function in Olympic sport spaces (Markula & Pringle, 2006). That is, Olympic coaches are hierarchically positioned as 'experts' in the field of high-performance sport and, in turn, they act as authoritative enunciators of those regimes of truth that emerge from its dominant discourses (Cushion et al., 2022; Denison & Avner, 2011; Mills & Denison, 2018). In turn, the role of coaching practitioners within the Olympic sport context has emerged to centre, almost exclusively, upon the function to improve athlete performance and to extract the optimal efficiency from athletes' bodies (Denison, 2010). As a result, coaches tend to perceive athletes' problems that reside outside of this defined function as a potential challenge to their expertise and authority over these processes (Johns & Johns, 2000).

This primary function of the Olympic coaching occupation was recognised by most participants, insofar that most coaches appeared to accept that considerations of their athletes' retirement adjustments did not align with their purpose within these spaces. For instance, Billy noted that "I will never have a conversation with an athlete to tell them to retire, that is not my call." This point was also emphasised by Sam, who suggested that influencing the retirement processes of athletes is not understood to be a dominant characteristic of the modern Olympic coach: "I don't think that any of us would...say, 'look, fella, it's time to go'. That's not in our psyche." This position was shared by Joe, who, significantly, indicated that his understanding of this matter has been adopted as a result of the informal knowledge that he has accumulated throughout his time working in the context of Olympic sport:

I have been lucky enough to work with two chief coaches and a performance director who have been doing it for years, and every piece of advice they ever gave around it was to let them decide because they'll know when they are done.

In a similar manner, Jack, who previously suggested that athletes should be granted autonomy when it comes to their retirement decisions, noted that his perspective has been shaped by his own experiences as an athletic retiree:

I think that, maybe shaped through my own experiences, I really enjoyed my time as an athlete and I was really lucky in the sense that I decided to knock it on the head, rather than get the tap on the shoulder.

It is again evident that the discursive construction of coaching knowledge, through both the absorption of senior coaches' expertise and the mobilisation of personal lived experiences, has produced a certain way of approaching the coaching role (Blackett et al., 2019; Denison, 2010). Indeed, the responses documented in this sub-chapter have demonstrated that a number of the coach participants have internalised a somewhat rationalised and instrumental view of the coaching process that focuses, for the most part, upon the economical production of Olympians' bodies for the purposes of competition; a discursive strategy that Foucauldian scholars of sport have repeatedly shown can have problematic implications for athletes' lives (Johns & Johns, 2000; Jones & Denison, 2019; Mills & Denison, 2013). Significantly, as the following response from Joe suggests, this position has not only been internalised by coaches working in the British Olympic context, but it is equally recognised and respected by the athletes

they coach: “For us as coaches, we are so linked to performance and medals that we are not the first people they will talk to.”

The data presented in this sub-chapter demonstrates that the discursive construction of the coaching occupation within the context of British Olympic sport, and these coaches’ docility in accepting their designated function, has, for these coaches, worked to formulate a somewhat narrow perception of their role in the Olympic retirement process. That docile athletes have also appeared to passively accept this way of thinking only works to reinforce this somewhat simplistic logic. Certainly, it appears that the dominance of these performance-centred discourses has dislocated these coaches’ ethical responsibilities to consider the Olympic retirement process in more detail, despite the importance of doing so (Boardman et al., 2024; Jones & Denison, 2017).

7.3.2 Influencing the Retirement Moment: An Act of Care?

In contrast to the interview responses examined in the previous sub-section, a smaller number of participants suggested that, during their time working as Olympic coaches, they have sought to establish and maintain a greater degree of influence over the retirement decisions and processes of their athletes. For example, Brian, a participant with experience of coaching across several Olympic disciplines, noted that, at several moments throughout his career, he has found himself actively immersed in Olympians’ retirement decisions:

There have been athletes who have come to me because they are not sure about it, you know, they just ask about where they fit into the future and stuff. There have been a couple of athletes who I have had conversations

with, who I have pre-empted that it might be time to think about transitioning off programming – they might then go on to retire.

In a similar vein, Roy commented:

They would sometimes come and ask for advice on it...Sometimes, effectively, you did retire them by dropping them from international [sport]. And then, only on a couple of occasions would I have suggested they retired.

In the responses above, Brian and Roy both acknowledge that, as coaching practitioners, they have assumed an active role in the athlete de-selection process and that this can be influential in instigating the retirement moment (Demetriou et al., 2020). These words present an immediate point of contrast to those participants that seemed intent on distancing their influence from Olympians' retirement decisions. In addition, Rowan recalled an instance in which one of the athletes working in his discipline retired as a result of their de-selection from funded programming:

We had another athlete who essentially decided to retire after not being selected for a major championship, but, again, they hadn't done the performances to show they should be selected.

Despite Rowan's acknowledgement that the actions of coaches can be influential in shaping Olympians' retirement decisions, he still legitimated the process of de-selection through the lens of performance truths. This perspective is emblematic of the performance-based discourses that permeate modern British Olympic cultures, and it also reinforces the notion that the origins of Olympians' retirement adjustments can

be built upon performance metrics and monitoring. Indeed, as my earlier findings suggest (see chapter 5.2), when docile Olympians are no longer perceived as capable of fulfilling or improving their performance function, their *rank* in the organisation can diminish and the possibility of their eviction from the Olympic sport space intensifies.

Roy adopts a slightly different position to that of Rowan. This was evident in his suggestion that any decision to take a more considered involvement in the Olympic retirement process can only be justified through a calculated assessment of the strength of a respective coach-athlete relationship:

That was due to the fact that we had the relationship where I felt like I could say that...I wouldn't have done it if I didn't feel as though it would have been taken in the right way, which can be a challenge. I have had meetings with players who, you know, I thought should retire so I would be de-selecting them. Sometimes, they wanna keep fighting for their place, which is fine, but it wouldn't have been appropriate to start to talk to them about pushing them into retirement because I just didn't think they were in the headspace for that at that stage.

Similarly, Billy noted that his decision to become more involved in Olympians' retirement processes would be based upon the nature of the relationship between himself and the individual in question:

Depending on the athlete, and the relationship I have with them, it might evolve into asking how they came to this decision, or how they are feeling about it, what they are going to do next.

Both Roy and Billy appear aware that coaching practitioners can be actively involved in the retirement processes of the Olympians they coach. Indeed, their own delineated experiences reflect this position. Again, this perspective directly contests the positions that were described by a number of the coach participants (see chapter 7.3.1). Billy and Roy both proceeded to explain that it is through their assessments of the nature of coach-athlete relationships, and therefore the extent to which they consider themselves to 'know' and 'understand' each of their athletes, that the justification of their involvement in Olympians' retirement decisions could be modelled through the lens of 'care' (Gearity et al., 2023). For example, Roy stated:

It was something that centred very much around care. You know, someone who I didn't perceive it to be the best for them to continue to try and stay at this level. So, yeah, it was very much built around the care for the athlete – that was the driver.

In addition, Billy commented:

We do take athletes off programme...in our review at the end of the year. That is always difficult if they don't want to be taken off...that will have a big impact on their life, and it is hard. I justify it by...looking at all the data and performances and telling them that it just isn't happening for them. In the past, we have kept athletes on the programme for longer than we probably should have and that, long term, does them no favours. At some point, you have to get on with life and it is almost like putting off what...you have to deal with.

Billy expanded on this idea by suggesting that assuming a greater degree of interest in Olympians' retirement processes is indicative of a more humanist approach to coaching:

Someone that you have a relationship with tells you that they are going to make a life changing decision, if you have a duty of care to them, you aren't just going to say 'oh, that's great' – you know, for me, that is just being a human being...This is where it gets a little tricky as there is always the excuse of it being elite sport and performance sport...where you're either in or you're out and if you're not in then I don't care about you! No, that is just an excuse to be a shit human being.

It is evident that the idea of 'care' forms the basis of these participants' perspectives regarding coach involvement in Olympians' retirement processes. This position closely aligns with the perspectives that have been shared by social psychology researchers regarding this topic (Agnew & Pill, 2023; Harry & Weight, 2021; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Indeed, as Harry and Weight (2021) argued, those athletes that have been immersed in positive, caring coach-athlete relationships are more likely to experience smooth and productive retirement transitions. Therefore, at surface-level, the stance assumed by these coach participants appears sound. However, a Foucauldian reading of these responses encourages scepticism (Denison & Avner, 2011; Gearity et al., 2023). This is because such perspectives fail to account for the nuanced ways in which subtle movements of power influence coach-athlete relationships over time (Mills & Denison, 2018). Two important points emerge from this scepticism.

Firstly, it is important to question whether it is a genuinely realistic position to assume that adopting a greater degree of involvement in Olympians' retirement decisions can be considered a genuine act of 'care', in light of the complex realities that regularly accompany the de-selection process. Indeed, previous research has consistently illustrated that the de-selection of sportspeople from senior squads and funded high-performance programmes can have detrimental effects for their attempts to productively adjust to post-sport life, owing to the often limited retirement planning that can be undertaken by those athletes whose retirement is enforced (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Torregrosa et al., 2015). Certainly, it appears that, particularly in those experiences shared by Billy, these coaches' perspectives of care remain obscured by a continued reliance upon the disciplinary logic of progression and the application of normative technologies of judgement (Gearity et al., 2023; Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Secondly, the positions assumed by these coach participants again appear to be somewhat symptomatic of their docility. The responses above suggest that these coaches have uncritically adopted 'caring' and humanist stances as correct practice, without problematising the politics of these approaches. In each of these cases, both Roy and Billy point to the ways in which the assembly and application of personal knowledge regarding athletes' lives – a key determinant in the evaluation of modern effective coaching (Mills & Denison, 2018) – has informed their involvement in the retirement processes of the Olympians they have coached. For instance, Billy suggested that he 'looks at all the data' before making an informed decision regarding athletes' positions in the organisation. Whereas Roy indicated that he must possess a certain level of personal knowledge about the individual in question prior to taking an

active role in their retirement decisions. However, as Foucauldian scholars have previously suggested, coaches' efforts to 'know' and 'understand' their athletes in rich, biographical detail represents yet another way through which docility can be cultivated (Gearity et al., 2023; Mills & Denison, 2018); a state of being that can have problematic implications for Olympians' long-term adjustments to post-sport life (see chapters 5 and 6).

7.4 Towards a Disruption and Re-imagination of Disciplinary Coaching Practices

Foucauldian retirement scholars have suggested that to support athletes' ongoing adjustments to post-sport life more effectively, researchers and practitioners must work to disrupt and re-imagine those disciplinary arrangements of the coaching process that have the procurement of docile bodies at their heart (Boardman et al., 2024; Jones, 2020; Jones & Denison, 2017). In this study, I posed questions to the coach participants regarding these possibilities. In response, a small number of coaches discussed how they might be open to re-thinking the diffusion of discipline throughout their practices. Whereas several coach participants described their reservations surrounding the disruption of disciplinary coaching practices. In this sub-chapter, I discuss and consider these themes in detail.

7.4.1 Coaches' Openness to the Re-imagination of Disciplinary Practices

A central component in the disruption of disciplinary coaching practices lies in the problematisation of particular 'truths' that surround the coaching profession (Avner et al., 2017; Jones & Denison, 2017). In my interview with Jack, he took time to consider how the coaching role can be critical in assisting Olympians with managing the difficult retirement adjustment:

The coach is really important because if the coach sees the value in it, the athletes will tend to do it more. If the coach doesn't see the value in it and is all in...because it is not important to them, it generally it won't happen as much...we need to make sure that the athlete is not getting held back by the coach's philosophy, in terms of your post-athletic career. We could definitely do that better. We tend to do a lot of stuff post-sport, so they retire and then we ask, how do you prep for interviews? How do you do this? It is box ticking then, isn't it?

Jack's words here are significant because they illustrate one of the genuine attempts that were made by the coach participants to actively problematise the potential of the coaching role with respect to the Olympic retirement process. This statement demonstrates Jack's openness to thinking more critically about the in-career experiences of Olympians and the current provision that is offered by sport organisations, as opposed to simply placing the burden upon individual athletes to self-manage their challenges following the retirement moment. This position is consistent with the recommendations that have been made by sociologically informed sports retirement researchers (Andrijiw, 2020; Jones & Denison, 2017; Jones et al., 2023) and it markedly contrasts the stances taken by several coach participants (see chapter 7.3.1). This is because Jack's words suggest that the coaching role *does* extend beyond the performance optimisation processes that underpin most conceptualisations of modern effective coaching (Denison et al., 2013).

Furthermore, Jack's statement speaks to the absolute criticality of continuing to question the coaching role for the Olympic retirement process. Indeed, the coach's words suggest that he is somewhat cognizant of the Olympic coach's influential

position in sport's "uninterrupted play of calculated gazes" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 177) and, in turn, he is aware that coaching practitioners can shape and coerce Olympians into certain modes of thinking about their lives after sport (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Therefore, Jack's point compounds the overarching importance of continuing to problematise the relationship between sport coaching and athletic retirement as coaching practitioners' influence over the lives and careers of sportspeople must not be understated (Boardman et al., 2024; Gerdin et al., 2019).

One of the primary ways through which Olympic coaches may be encouraged to interrupt the influence of disciplinary logic for their practices resides in the problematisation of those technologies that pertain to the temporal and spatial control of athletes (Denison & Mills, 2014; Kuklick & Gearity, 2019). The re-imagination of these techniques can work to disrupt the docility-cultivating arrangements of Olympic sport's "disciplinary monotony" (Foucault, 1991a, p. 141) and permit Olympians the increased space, time, and autonomy necessary to prepare for their lives beyond sport (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). After all, this is an element of modern, disciplinary Olympic cultures that my research has shown to have myriad implications for Olympians' ongoing adjustments to post-sport life (see chapters 5 and 6). Across the sample, there were only limited instances in which the coach participants indicated that they would be willing to think more reflexively when choreographing Olympians' training activities, in order to support their engagement with non-sport opportunities. One example of this line of thought was present in the interview conducted with Brian. As the coach explained, resisting the controlling nature of the *time-table* (Foucault, 1991a) is possible:

I know we don't have to always have set training times and finding life balance is important. For example, someone might only train once a day on their two-week block so they can fit in their work experience, but on their next two-week block they might flip it. It is really important for the programme to adjust.

Rowan echoed the importance of applying a greater degree of reflexivity to programming:

Interviewer: Do your coaches build time into training schedules for athletes to go out and accumulate different forms of experience, such as educational qualifications?

Rowan: Definitely...we try and support them as much as possible to help them do both because you don't wanna put them in a position where they have to sacrifice one for the other. If we are saying that they have to train at these certain times, if that's impacting something they really wanna do, like a course, that's more stress for them and it's gonna end up leaking into their training at the end of the day.

It is significant that these participants demonstrated an openness to adapting their normal approaches to organising programming, in an effort to potentially benefit the post-athletic futures of the Olympians they coach. After all, the calculated, consistent, and economical arrangement of training regimen is considered to be a critical element of modern effective coaching practice (Denison, 2010).

In presenting these findings, it is not my intention to suggest that these coaching practitioners are offering perfect solutions for disrupting the diffusion of discipline within their practices. Indeed, the participants' responses to these matters remain imbued with a disciplinary logic, insofar that they each implied that athlete activity could still be planned in an economical and predictable manner, despite their well-meaning intentions to provide Olympians with the increased time and space to explore their post-athletic futures (Konoval et al., 2019; Mills & Denison, 2013). Rather, their points represent a logical starting point to which coaches may be encouraged to think differently about their practices and to coach in less disciplinary ways in the future (Denison et al., 2019). Despite the positive signs that were exhibited by these coaches, levels of openness to disrupting dominant, disciplinary practices were limited across the sample. Indeed, several coach participants were incredibly hesitant when posed with questions surrounding these ideas. I examine these responses throughout the remainder of this sub-chapter.

7.4.2 Techniques of Discipline

Sports retirement scholars have long emphasised the importance of athletes' efforts to carefully plan and prepare for their retirement adjustments (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Schmid et al., 2023; Torregrosa et al., 2015). However, Hickey and Kelly (2008) problematised this prescriptive logic by suggesting that the disciplinary structures imposed by coaches and sport organisations mean that time and access are recurring issues for those sportspeople seeking to prepare for their adjustments to post-athletic life. When questioned about their openness to re-imagining dominant planning practices to allow Olympians a greater amount of time and space to explore their post-sport options, and to potentially produce athletic bodies that are less reliant upon the imposition of discipline to posture their lived experiences (see chapters 5 and 6; Jones

& Denison, 2017), several coach participants were hesitant. For instance, Carl conceded that standardised programming assists coaches in the maintenance of discipline throughout the training environment, and that this should not be disrupted to meet the needs of individuals:

I do have to say we are a team, you know, there are 13 men training at the moment so not everyone can do what they like because, you know, there would be chaos.

In this instance, the Olympic coach indicates that he perceives alterations to individual programming as a potential threat to the order of the training space. In a similar vein, Roy expressed concern surrounding the malleability of individual training regimen, with respect to the remaining bodies in the unit:

I mean they have an impact on the whole team. So, if we're doing team preparation and we have got players who keep missing training, that would have an impact on everyone. So, I think with decisions like that, it's what's best for your team and the group.

These responses are imbued with the disciplinary wisdom of *the composition of forces* (Foucault, 1991a). In Olympic standard settings, coaching practitioners work to orchestrate a disciplinary environment that effectively organises “a machine with many parts, moving in relation to one another, in order to arrive at a configuration and to obtain a specific result” (p. 162). In other words, their aim is to choreograph an efficient and cohesive unit of Olympic athletes (Shogan, 1999). Carl's and Roy's words suggest that they feel challenged by the idea of moving beyond this disciplinary way of thinking and that they perhaps perceive Olympians' efforts to prepare for their lives

after sport as a threat to the productive economy of their practices (Denison et al., 2017; Hickey & Kelly, 2008).

When propositioning each of the coach participants about the ‘undoing’ of discipline from their practices, I was careful not to suggest that wholesale changes must be made to resist the cultivation of docility amongst Olympians. Indeed, I respect that planning and preparing a training environment that is suitable for all athletes working in an Olympic standard organisation is an important technology for coaches. However, discussions surrounding minor, tactical changes to programming, in ways that may combine to disrupt the procurement of docile athletes, were met with resistance from several participants, such as Carl and Roy (see responses above). This can be understood as symptomatic of these coaches’ docility, insofar that there appears to be a reliance upon the use of disciplinary techniques to appease a discursive desire to optimise predictability and efficiency throughout their practices (Denison, 2010).

What is more, when posed with similar lines of questioning surrounding the retirement adjustments of the Olympians they coach, several participants suggested that athletes’ attempts to prepare for their lives after sport, particularly during the build-up to Olympic competition, could result in an increased vulnerability to performance deficits – something that was widely perceived as unaffordable during this period. For instance, Joe remarked:

It is really hard. We are working in really distinct cycles, so the peak performance target is about 2 minutes before they usually retire. So, at the point where you would want to tee them up for retirement, you can’t tee them up for retirement because we have to go out and win some gold

medals as we have to make sure that the whole programme stays afloat for the next four years and so on.

Joe holds a cautionary viewpoint regarding how the disciplinary organisation of the Olympic coaching process may be disrupted by athletes' efforts to prepare for their lives beyond sport. Carl shared a similar stance:

There is no reason for a person to change anything before you retire if you are successful. People retire, say, after the Olympics but up until the Olympics you will not change anything because you need the consistency.

These responses are grounded in the disciplinary logic of progression (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Olympic coaches seek to organise and capitalise upon time in an economical manner with the aim of inducing a state of continuous improvement: "a linearity where all progress is oriented to a fixed, stable point" (Gearity & Mills, 2012, p. 130), such as the Olympic Games. In turn, coaches draw upon scientifically informed disciplinary techniques (i.e., periodisation) to create and reinforce order, consistency, and predictability in the athlete development and performance processes (Denison, 2010; Denison & Avner, 2011; Denison & Mills, 2014; Mills et al., 2020). It is evident that both of these coaching practitioners feel that Olympians' retirement planning efforts may disrupt the sense of consistency that is cultivated through the application of these accepted, normalised, and 'effective' progressive techniques. Specifically, Joe's words illustrate how this belief may be emblematic of his docility. Indeed, the coach explicitly framed his hesitancy regarding the re-imagination of dominant organisation practices in terms of the normalising pressures that accompany the coaching occupation in the modern British Olympic context (Denison et al., 2019); a

desire for 'control', and the accompanying ambiguity regarding the retirement moment, can be considered related implications of such discourses (Brown, 2024).

Moreover, these responses reflect another relatively simplistic interpretation of the phenomena of Olympic retirement. Indeed, Carl's suggestion that there is no need to make any form of alteration to Olympians' plans, to permit extra time and space to consider and prepare for their lives after sport, illustrates an absence of thought regarding the complex realities of Olympic retirement and the proposed importance of preparing for this adjustment (Torregrosa et al., 2015). This serves as further evidence to support Hickey and Kelly's (2008) suggestion that the allocation of time and space for retirement planning is a significant obstruction for transitioning athletes, and that the dominant discourses that permeate high-performance settings – which thereby shape the practices, beliefs, and actions of coaches - may be complicit in barricading these factors (Cushion et al., 2022; Denison, 2010).

However, the adoption of this fairly naïve position was not ubiquitous throughout the coaching sample. Certainly, several coach participants suggested that the re-choreography of their approaches to planning athlete training and development *could* have a positive impact upon Olympians' capacities to prepare for their retirement adjustments. However, these coaches indicated that their openness to actively re-thinking their own practices, with respect to these impacts, would be contingent on a series of performance-based variables. For example, several participants made it clear that any disruption to their current planning techniques would only be considered under the condition that individual bodies continue to comply with expected performance levels throughout an Olympic cycle. For instance, Roy commented:

It was never discouraged to do stuff outside of sport. It was just a challenge to make sure it didn't have such a negative impact...we really had conversations with them about that to ask if it was the right time to do it...only if it doesn't have such a negative impact on the training schedule. What I mean by that is, you know, what is the moment? Is it the week before the Olympic qualifier? Is it in the final run? Is it in the coming weeks before selection? So, I wouldn't always say to them they can go and do whatever they need to do. But, I was definitely trying to be flexible with them...particularly if they were thinking about retirement and setting themselves up for the next stage.

Furthermore, Brian added that permitting Olympic athletes to explore their options beyond sport should be a calculated decision that is informed by a performance-based equation:

I think if they have a true desire to explore something else, well I would have the conversation with them about what the cost is of doing that, in relation to their performance.

Billy shared a similar statement:

It is a challenge. If they are training 30 hours a week with a major competition coming up and then doing a course on how to become a barista which means they are standing on their feet for many hours...you absolutely want to encourage stuff like that but you need to encourage it at the right time so it has a minimal impact on performance...In an ideal world, they would say they are thinking about doing this course, but then

we can ask if it can be done immediately after the season has ended...and it is not going to be as critical. It does have a big impact, stuff like when they are training and they are constantly going out meeting friends at cafes or going for long walks with their friends, you know, this stuff actually has an impact.

These coaches appear hesitant about relinquishing the grasp of those training regimen that combine to produce “a continual growth of control over the body” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 78). In an effort to arrest their concerns surrounding the potential loosening of disciplinary controls, these coaches indicated that they would look to question the timing of their Olympians’ retirement planning efforts (see chapter 7.3.2). From a Foucauldian perspective, this should be treated as potentially problematic. This is because such approaches, although perhaps not intentional, have the potential to further bind Olympic athletes to their disciplinary subjectivities, to compound their states of docility, and to reinforce hierarchical coach-athlete relationships (Gearity et al., 2023; Mills & Denison, 2018). Again, this position is symptomatic of the coaches’ docility. Indeed, most coach participants consistently neglected any attempt to problematise how the intricate workings of power in coach-athlete relationships can work to limit the subjectivities of Olympians (Foucault, 1983a); this was particularly evident in Billy’s testament as he appears to perceive the leisure activities of working Olympians as a potential threat to the economic performance of their bodies.

The evidence presented in this sub-section has shown that, often despite their best intentions to assist Olympians’ post-athletic futures, coaches’ compliance with the disciplinary logic of modern sport pervades their thoughts when challenged about the disruption of disciplinary organisation (Denison et al., 2017). Certainly, the

participants' persistent attempts to locate rationality and predictability in the coaching process have perhaps distorted their perceptions of Olympic retirement. This is because these coaches primarily described perceiving the prospect of Olympic retirement as a potential threat to the dominant way of doing things in Olympic sport, as opposed to a potentially unique opportunity to learn or to change their practices (Denison, 2007; Denison & Avner, 2011; Johns & Johns, 2000). I expand on this in the following sub-section.

7.4.3 Instruments of Discipline

Foucault (1990; 1991a) demonstrated that modern power operates to produce certain types of being that are congruent with the function of the disciplinary society. The context of British Olympic sport operates as a normalising project that produces disciplinary subjects whose bodily and mental subjectivities are concentrated most intensely upon their performances (Crocket, 2014; Shogan, 1999; Toner, 2024; Tsang, 2000); a mode of being that can carry complex and contradictory legacies for former Olympians' ongoing adjustments to post-sport life (see chapters 5 and 6). Olympic coaches can be complicit in shaping these problematic subjectivities, owing to their normalised engagement with those practices that resemble Foucault's (1990; 1991a) instruments of discipline (Mills & Denison, 2018).

At several points, coach participants described how they look to manipulate training environments in ways that are designed to inculcate disciplinary subjectivities, centring upon the development of Olympians' strong work ethics and characteristics of discipline, commitment, and focus. For example, Joe noted:

There is a toughening element to training...Olympics finals are tough, the Olympic cauldron is tough and a lot of the training we do is around the

ability to maintain a very high...speed under a lot of lactate and a lot of fatigue and maintaining that technique whilst you're doing that. As a sport, it is a bit horrible! You know, you're at your VO2 max, a load of lactate is pumping through your body, and you have got to maintain cohesion with the other people...So, the training is a lot about the psychology of consistency, the psychology of that cohesive approach...whilst you're totally under the pump.

Furthermore, Sam commented:

In training, you need to create objective pressure to be able to challenge the production of a deliverable when you have to. That doesn't have to be an all-out performance – it might be something skills based, it might be something mental. But you are still practicing the ability to be able to do something when you're required to do it.

The similarities between the conditions of subjectivity fabrication described by the former Olympians (see chapter 5.1) and those described in the extracts above are transparent. The coach participants made it clear that the application of these docility-cultivating practices is an accepted and highly favoured element of the modern Olympic coaching context. This is because the internalisation of these modes of being is widely considered to be an efficient means of preparing athletes for the rigours of Olympic competition (Crocket, 2014; Mills & Denison, 2018; Shogan, 1999). This discursive understanding of athlete performance remains persistent throughout these cultures. However, Foucauldian retirement scholars have consistently shown that the imposition of such arrangements can have unintended, yet potentially problematic

implications for high-performance sportspeople's long-term adjustments to post-sport life (see chapter 5; Gerdin, 2023; Jones & Denison, 2017). Indeed, the perpetual reinforcement of these questions of character, through acutely designed regimen that resemble Foucault's (1991a) concept of *the means of correct training*, can fix individuals to problematic subjectivities as they become intensely aware of the truths that surround the 'correct' ways to become a successful Olympian (Mills & Denison, 2018). So, how might these discursive understandings of the modern Olympian impact upon Olympic coaches' perspectives of the retirement process?

Referring back to the evidence presented in the previous sub-section, it appears that the coach participants are cognizant, and often cautious, of how Olympians' considerations of post-sport life may interrupt the progressive logic that is tied to the pursuit of high-performance (Markula & Pringle, 2006). In light of the significance attached to the development of disciplinary subjectivities in Olympic sport, several coaches displayed a sense of hesitation with respect to how Olympians' attentiveness to their post-athletic futures may disrupt those highly calculated mentalities that they and their organisations have long focused on inscribing (Andrijiw, 2020; Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Specifically, these participants expressed concerns regarding the ways in which the prospects and challenges of retirement may deviate Olympians' foci during the latter stages of an Olympiad. For instance, Joe conceded:

In terms of discussing life beyond sport, they tend not to go there with it and I wouldn't push it either because they are focused on what they're doing...I think there is relevance in making sure they are teed up for retirement...My hesitance around it is that if we show all the goodies you can have in retirement, does it draw their focus?

In addition, Sam noted:

The danger is that they would make a decision like that and then think now they can just relax because the decision has been made...It is not an avenue to start cutting corners...you would want to make sure that anyone, whether they were retiring or not, made the most of whatever opportunity they have.

Roy also commented on this matter:

We are preparing for the Olympics and you have to be pretty focused for that. You have to be driven to try and be better than other people around the world, and you can't move away from that – that's the tough reality of it.

These concerns are classic examples of an idea that Denison (2007) warned coaching scholars and practitioners about, insofar that, when faced with potential issues relating to athlete performance and development, coaches have a tendency to try and locate the 'problem' within the psychological characteristics of the individual athlete, as opposed to actively problematising how their own practices may remain genuinely effective in the respective context. This is another element of the coach participants' perspectives of Olympic retirement that is reflective of their docility. Indeed, these participants encountered great difficulty in thinking beyond the disciplinary wisdom that Olympians can only perform effectively should they remain docile, determined, and focused on a singular objective (Denison et al., 2017; Mills et al., 2020; Shogan, 1999). It is these very modes of thought that place Olympic athletes under a permanent gaze to consolidate their disciplinary subjectivities in ways that may

impede upon their capacities to effectively engage with retirement preparation (Hickey & Kelly, 2008).

In an attempt to arrest their concerns surrounding the deviation of Olympians' mindsets during the build-up to their post-sport adjustments, several coach participants suggested that they would engage in conversations with their athletes to access a deeper understanding of their modes of being and thought during this period. For example, Sam mentioned:

The main thing I would be talking to the athlete about in that scenario is, you know, that I understand that this decision has been made but you need to understand that you need to be fully in. It can't be that you are biding time until you go off and do the rest of your life. You have to be 100% committed to making the most of this opportunity.

In a similar vein, Rowan noted:

I think I'd be having a conversation with them first and foremost...I think having that conversation is the biggest thing for me and making sure that they're not too long in place of indecision. I think that is where things start to go wrong – when people are a bit unsure. If they're going into an intense competition whilst they are feeling unsure about if that's what they even wanna do or not, then that's not good because at the end of the day...you need to be prepared to a good level.

Also, Billy commented:

You would be aware that they were going to retire after that point and you would be a bit more aware of finding out that their motivation was still there...you might have different conversations with them...if they are on programme and they told me they were stopping after the Olympics but they didn't plan to go there and were just actually running out their contract, then that would be a problem. But, if they are saying they are going to the Olympics and they are going to try and win a medal, then there is no change. It makes no difference that they are going to retire afterwards.

These responses demonstrate that each of these coaches rely upon the foundations of coach-athlete relationships to know and understand the subjectivities of Olympians on a rich, detailed, and individualised basis (Gearity et al., 2023). Indeed, these coach participants suggested that the trusting relationships they hold with individual athletes might act as an avenue for formulating more informed understandings of Olympians' modes of being, with respect to their impending post-sport adjustments. Parallels can be drawn here between the coaches' outlined perspectives and Foucault's (1990) concept of *the confession*. In the scenarios described above, the *confessor* (i.e., the Olympian) is required to divulge their *personal history* (i.e., the state of their psychological focus on Olympic competition) to the *expert* (i.e., the coach), so that judgement can be passed on the conditions of their mentalities prior to retirement. This process would allow the coaching practitioners to detect any potential abnormalities in athletes' modes of being during the critical period that precedes the Olympic *examination* (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

As previous Foucauldian coaching research has shown, the mobilisation of confessional techniques can have unintended, yet problematic implications for sportspeople (Gearity et al., 2023; Mills & Denison, 2018). This is because, upon an athlete confessing their state of normalcy to a coach, a discursive hierarchy is reinforced through which the coach is granted the authority to discipline, punish, or attempt to 'fix' the psychological 'deficits' of the individual in question (Denison, 2007; Gearity et al., 2023; Mills & Denison, 2018). In the responses above, Sam, Rowan, and Billy all indicated that should an Olympians' foci be diverted, in light of an impending retirement transition, this would be a 'problem' to address; as previous research has illustrated, 'problematic' and 'non-conforming' athletes become the subjects of sport's punitive framework and the possibility of their eviction from these disciplinary spaces intensifies (Denison, 2007; Jones & Denison, 2017). Therefore, what may appear to be a 'rational' or 'caring' approach to working with retiring Olympians may have a series of unintended and negative consequences for their lives and forthcoming retirement adjustments (Gearity et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The data presented in this chapter illustrates that Olympic standard coaching practitioners hold complex, and often contradictory, opinions, positions, and perspectives regarding the topic of Olympic retirement. In turn, the coaches interviewed for this study have experienced and engaged with the Olympic retirement process in a variety of ways throughout their careers working in the context of British Olympic sport. However, one evident commonality, throughout the participants' responses, resides in the presence of an underlying disciplinary logic (Denison et al., 2017). Indeed, the majority of the coaches' understandings of Olympic retirement are

informed by disciplinary ways of thinking. The ways in which the participants imagine matters surrounding the Olympic retirement process are perhaps somewhat constrained by their docility to this logic. This is because most of the coach participants appeared to experience great difficulty in thinking about this aspect of Olympians' careers beyond modernist discourses of coach effectiveness, in which the rationality, consistency, and predictability of performance is paramount (Avner et al., 2017; Denison et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2024). This was reflected most clearly in those instances that the coach participants suggested that they perceive Olympians' retirement considerations to be a potential threat to the order of things in their cultures. These findings build upon Hickey and Kelly's (2008) important study as they demonstrate that coaches' expectations for athletes to persistently (re)consolidate their disciplinary subjectivities presents a significant tension for retiring athletes.

In addition to being one of the first studies to develop a critical dialogue with Olympic coaches about the topic of Olympic retirement, the significance of this chapter resides in how the problematisation of modern sport's disciplinary logic has been extended to cover new ground with regard to how coaching practitioners consider and perceive the Olympic retirement process (Denison et al., 2017). Indeed, previous Foucauldian research has illustrated that disciplinary modes of thought, and conceptualisations of what it means to be an 'effective' coach, have limited practitioners' understandings of athlete performance (Denison, 2007; Denison & Avner, 2011), and their capacities to conceive athlete health and well-being (Avner et al., 2017; Harvey et al., 2021). In this study, the coach participants' experiences and perspectives demonstrate that disciplinary logic influences, and perhaps constraints, their capacities to think critically about Olympic retirement, owing to the dominance of discourses of performance and

control. In turn, my findings support the argument made by Denison and colleagues (2017, p. 780), insofar that, when working within those tightly organised and controlled coaching frameworks that permeate Olympic standard settings, “there is almost no space for a coach to generate alternative views, knowledge or practices”. Therefore, this chapter illustrates the ongoing necessity of problematising how dominant ways of thinking about coaching in Olympic sport can influence the practices and beliefs of coaches with respect to the phenomena of Olympic retirement. This is because, in the current moment, there is only a narrow potential for changes to dominant coaching methods to emerge (Denison et al., 2017); that is, changes that might help to resist the procurement of docility and, in turn, better support Olympians’ long-term, ongoing adjustments to post-sport life.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

Introduction

The overarching aim of this study was to understand how an immersion within the cultures of British Olympic sport may impact upon Olympians' long-term retirement experiences. The purpose of the study was to position the British Olympic sport context as a central point of problematisation for the examination of Olympic retirement. To address these objectives, a relational and multifaceted investigation was conducted with two distinct samples of research participants – retired British Olympians and current Olympic coaching practitioners. In this chapter, I draw a series of conclusions from the project. To do so, I firstly provide a summary of the key research findings that emerged from both samples of study. Following this, I present my reflections on conducting the research project. These reflections inform the proceeding discussion regarding the potential future directions of athletic retirement scholarship. Finally, I provide my concluding thoughts regarding the future of retirement from British Olympic sport.

8.1 Summary of Research Findings

This post-structural examination of Olympic retirement produced a range of complex findings. In this sub-chapter, I summarise the key findings that emerged from both sections of the study.

8.1.1 Retired British Olympians

My research has illustrated that an immersion within the context of British Olympic sport is likely to carry a series of complex legacies for Olympians' post-sport lives. Specifically, this study has demonstrated that the lives of former Olympians remain deeply connected to the disciplinary cultures that typified their careers. The lasting

legacies of the former Olympians' docility have been complex and subjective. On one hand, a number of participants discussed the ways in which the development of their disciplinary subjectivities has led them to excel in a variety of arenas beyond sport. Indeed, these retirees considered that their Olympic careers equipped them with the appropriate characteristics for productively navigating the complexities of the post-sport, neoliberal social landscape on a long-term basis. On the other hand, several participants suggested that their Olympic careers have carried a series of difficult, residual legacies for their lives beyond sport. These former Olympians indicated that their docility has continued to impact upon their minds and bodies in ways that have constrained several elements of their post-sport lives, including their ongoing adjustments to new lines of work, their orientations to non-athlete subjects, and their capacities to become healthy moving bodies. Despite the range of experiences and perspectives that were documented by the former British Olympians, there was no evidence to suggest that their negotiations of docility's various legacies have occurred in ways that might be considered linear or consistent. Indeed, these legacies have influenced the lived experiences of the retired Olympians subjectively over the ongoing durations of their post-sport lives; transpiring, at times, in unison and, oftentimes, as subtle residue within their quotidian interactions, thoughts, and movements.

The findings of the interviews conducted with retired British Olympians are generally congruent with the key themes of extant poststructuralist athletic retirement research. Certainly, my study has demonstrated that a career in Olympic sport can 'imprint' athletes' minds and bodies in ways that continue to shape and influence their subjectivities, relationships, movements, and bodies throughout their lives after sport;

thus, supporting the important findings of previous Foucauldian informed retirement studies (Gerdin, 2023; Jones & Denison, 2017; 2019; Jones et al., 2022; Kuklick, 2023; McMahon et al., 2012). However, my findings extend existing post-structural interpretations of the retirement phenomena in two primary ways. Firstly, in extending the Foucauldian examination of athletic retirement to a new, under-represented sample – retired British Olympians – I have shown that the deep, complex, and problematic implications of a modern athletic career can perpetually influence a wide range of bodies, across a spectrum of ages, genders, social classes, and disciplinary backgrounds. This evidence has highlighted that disciplinary power-knowledge relations are firmly rooted into the fabric of modern Olympic sport and, in turn, an exposure to these relations can be influential in shaping the retirement experiences of British Olympians, across both the short and longer term.

Secondly, the significance of my research resides in the focus on legacy. Throughout the two discussion chapters that centred upon the experiences of the former British Olympians, it became evident that their adjustments to post-sport life remain ongoing and, in turn, may never be considered ‘finite’ or ‘complete’. Indeed, via several means, the former Olympians’ docility continues to shape their modes of thinking and being in the present day. In turn, this study has helped to expose the potent and residual implications associated with an immersion in the disciplinary cultures of British Olympic sport, as well as how these effects might subjectively impact upon the lived experiences of retirees for the remainder of their lives. In doing so, this research has answered the call made by Jones and colleagues (2022) to consider how the ‘legacies of docility’ may have a bearing upon former athletes’ lived experiences in the current moment. In light of these findings, I believe that it is important to challenge those

conceptual models that frame athletic retirement as another neat transition within the course of an athletic career (Stambulova, 1994). This is because these frameworks carry connotations of linearity (Stambulova et al., 2021). Instead, I would argue that we may be better placed to conceptualise retirement from Olympic sport as a non-linear process, in which the remnants of an athletic career can reside upon former sportspeople's minds and bodies in complex and unstable ways for the remainder of their lives.

Furthermore, the experiences shared by the retired British Olympians presented a series of sharp tensions, with respect to many of the psychological interpretations of athletic retirement that have long dominated the scholarly field. Indeed, sport psychology and social psychology researchers have consistently emphasised that the difficulties associated with retiring from sport can be mitigated by athletes' engagement with self-management techniques, such as retirement planning (Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021; Schmid et al., 2023), the positive acceptance of the retirement moment (Grove et al., 1997; Rich et al., 2022), and the development of renewed narratives of the self (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017). These dominant understandings have also been (re)emphasised throughout the – albeit limited – previous literature surrounding Olympic retirement (e.g., Torregrosa et al., 2015). Whilst I do not deny that the employment of these strategies could be somewhat useful for assisting Olympians in negotiating the retirement transition, and I would not discourage Olympians from engaging with techniques that *may* help to facilitate less problematic retirement adjustments, these strategies remain, for the most part, overly simplistic. This is because, in prescribing these strategies, researchers have consistently failed to capture the complexities and nuances of the retirement process

(Jones et al., 2023). Certainly, the former Olympians interviewed for this study consistently indicated that their past exposure to disciplinary technologies has persistently impacted upon their minds and bodies throughout their lives after sport. This has influenced their lived experiences in complex, inconsistent, and residual ways. In turn, I do not believe that continuing to prescribe these coping strategies, which by design assume that retirement adjustments can be managed in a linear fashion (Denison & Winslade, 2006), is the most effective means for supporting Olympic retirees in the future.

8.1.2 Olympic Coaching Practitioners

My research has illustrated that coaching practitioners working within Olympic performance settings hold complex, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives regarding Olympic retirement and, in turn, the coach participants interviewed for this study have experienced and engaged with Olympians' retirement processes via a range of subjective means throughout their careers. On one hand, several coaches illustrated that they do not believe that Olympians' retirement matters align with their function as workers in Olympic sport spaces. As a result, these participants described how they have endeavoured to distance themselves from these issues where possible; a misalignment of interests that I would argue to be symbolic of these coaches' docility to modernist discourses of 'effective' coaching (Denison, 2010; Denison et al., 2013). On the other hand, a number of coach participants claimed that they have, at times, adopted more 'active' positions within the retirement decisions and processes of the Olympians they have coached. This stance was assumed by these participants, in part, due to their more open acknowledgement of how coaches may affect the athlete de-selection process (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Demetriou et al., 2020). These coaches

largely framed the assumption of a more active position in Olympians' retirement processes as emblematic of a more 'caring' approach to coaching.

The coach participants' thoughts regarding the topic of Olympic retirement were complex. However, one consistent thread throughout their perspectives was the presence of disciplinary logic and reasoning (Denison et al., 2017). Certainly, throughout the coaches' perspectives, a desire for certainty, rationality, and predictability throughout the athlete performance and development processes was clear (Andrews, 2008; Mills et al., 2022). Indeed, for those coaches that outlined their ongoing intentions to distance themselves from the Olympic retirement process, their stances were grounded in a desire to remain consistent in their roles as mediators of athlete performance (Denison, 2010; Harvey et al., 2021). Moreover, for those participants that described taking more active involvements in their athletes' retirement decisions, it appeared that, despite the guise of humanism, their intentions were, even if inadvertent, also imbued with those disciplinary principles that have the optimisation of performance at their core (Gearity et al., 2023).

The rationale behind the lines of questioning posed to the coach participants centred upon the notion that disrupting disciplinary coaching practices might help to resist the procurement of docile Olympic bodies and, in turn, support less problematic adjustments to post-sport life in the future (Boardman et al., 2024; Jones & Denison, 2017). However, most of the coach participants appeared challenged by these ideas of 'coaching differently' (Denison et al., 2017). Indeed, several coaches cited potential interruptions to order, discipline, and athlete focus as the foundations of their scepticism regarding moving away from dominant, disciplinary practices. Were these findings surprising? Perhaps not. Indeed, as existing Foucauldian informed coaching

scholarship has demonstrated, coaches of this calibre often feel challenged by these disruptive ways of thinking (Denison et al., 2017; Konoval et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2024). Despite several coach participants positively identifying that an exposure to disciplinary practices may be influential in shaping Olympians' retirement adjustments, these problems were most commonly perceived as inevitable. Subsequently, the proposed disruption of these practices was viewed with uncertainty, with respect to the performance economies of Olympic athletes (Brown, 2024; Denison, 2007; Johns & Johns, 2000).

It has not been my intention in this thesis to frame any of the coach participants as purposefully acting unethically to produce docile Olympians (Denison et al., 2017). Rather, my analysis has shown that the perspectives shared by the coaching practitioners are symptomatic of their docility to the disciplinary, performance-centred discourses that permeate the modern cultures of British Olympic sport (Denison et al., 2019). As the coach participants' responses suggested, these normalising pressures are significant for shaping their practices and perspectives; with this research being the first of its kind to illustrate how coaches' understandings of Olympic retirement can be connected to their related docility. It is imperative that the potential impacts of these discourses are considered and appreciated by Foucauldian retirement scholars. Indeed, under the punitive frameworks that currently define modern Olympic cultures, coaches are often rendered docile to these performance-centred discourses and, in turn, are oftentimes left unable or unwilling to problematise the normalised consequences of disciplinary practices (Andrijiw & Jones, 2023; Denison et al., 2019). Despite this, it is important to remain attentive to the implications that accompany these findings. As Hickey and Kelly (2008) illustrated, disciplinary power-knowledge

relations combine to barricade athletes' engagements with those activities of self (re)formation that are widely considered essential for productively adjusting to post-sport life. However, should those (i.e., coaches) who hold ethical responsibilities to the lives of Olympians continue to be resistant to re-imagining the diffusion of discipline throughout these settings, how can we arrive at a point in which modern Olympic cultures produce athletes that are less docile and, in turn, feel more adequately equipped for negotiating the complex realities of retired life? This is, of course, a complex question. However, my study has pointed towards the necessity of including a balance of perspectives and viewpoints within the conversations that ensue regarding this predicament.

8.2 Conducting the Research Study: My Reflections

At no point during this research study was it my intention to reveal a singular truth or reality about retirement from Olympic sport (Avner et al., 2025). Throughout the three discussion chapters, I endeavoured to account for the range of subjective opinions, feelings, and experiences that were shared by each participant and, in turn, I sought to give voice to a range of perspectives in an attempt to consider the effects of the workings of anatomo-political power relations for the lives of retired Olympians. In chapter 4.7, I outlined a series of judgement criteria for the project, based upon the recommendations made by Markula and Silk (2011). In this sub-chapter, I reflect on the process of conducting this study with respect to these criteria.

Firstly, throughout this thesis, I have endeavoured to engage with the theoretical framework in a manner that is coherent with the intended workings of Michel Foucault. Specifically, I have sought to logically apply the suite of concepts that Foucault (1990; 1991a) introduced through his work on modern power relations.

Throughout my analysis, dissection, and discussion of the interview responses, I was concerned with locating those instances in which the various technologies of disciplinary power have been enacted upon the minds and bodies of each participant and, subsequently, how their exposures to these arrangements have influenced their understandings, experiences, and feelings about Olympic retirement (Avner et al., 2025). This theoretical approach has been vital in further exposing how individuals' immersions within disciplinary Olympic cultures can have residual implications for their perspectives and lived experiences (Denison et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2022; McMahon et al., 2012).

I believe that the Foucauldian theoretical framework has been significant for highlighting the problematic legacies that can accompany athletes' and coaches' careers in the cultures of British Olympic sport. Sports retirement scholarship has long been dominated by stagnant methodological procedures and paradigmatic assumptions; most of which have fundamentally failed to challenge how the disciplinary arrangements of high-performance and Olympic sport cultures might be complicit in shaping athletes' long-term retirement adjustments (Jones et al., 2023). However, the Foucauldian theoretical framework has offered a useful heuristic device for deciphering how the experiences and perspectives of each participant can be connected to those relations of power that typify modern British Olympic cultures (Jones et al., 2022); thus, opening up an alternative understanding of British Olympians' post-sport lives to those that have been presented through the, albeit limited, existing research on the topic (e.g., Cooper et al., 2021).

Despite the evident strengths of the Foucauldian lens, I acknowledge that my analysis of the interview data might be understood differently by other readers, subject to their

paradigmatic assumptions and theoretical understandings (Ives et al., 2025; Markula & Silk, 2011). My analysis very much centred upon the mobilisation of those theoretical concepts that I consider to best align with connecting the cultures of British Olympic sport to Olympians' retirement experiences; hence, my focus on Foucault's (1990; 1991a) earlier theoretical work regarding modern power relations. However, I appreciate that one might question whether this commitment could have resulted in the under-examination of data that may not accurately align with the chosen theoretical lens. For example, did my theoretical leanings result in data points that are more closely associated with Foucault's (1983b; 1985; 1988; 2008) later work on bio-politics, ethics, or *technologies of the self* (e.g., with relation to athletes' resistance and meaning-making practices) being overlooked? These are important questions. However, I do not necessarily recognise them as 'limitations' of the research. Indeed, I have previously acknowledged that the data deemed relevant for analysis was based upon my poststructuralist and Foucauldian sensibilities (see chapter 4.6.). That said, in chapter 8.3.1, I consider how we might look to encourage further alternative understandings of athletic retirement in the future by embracing a broader range of social theories and perspectives. It is my belief that taking such a step forward represents the most suitable means for mitigating any concerns regarding the adoption of a theoretical framework.

Secondly, following the recommendations made by Markula and Silk (2011), I aimed to remain consistent throughout the data collection process. Like any qualitative researcher, I faced a series of challenges and negotiations throughout the research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These included: negotiating recruitment tactics with a sample 'gatekeeper', establishing rapport with participants, managing and analysing

a significant amount of empirical material, and remaining logical in my application of theory (Evans et al., 2021; Ives et al., 2025; King & Horrocks, 2010; Markula & Silk, 2011; Taylor, 2014). These challenges were navigated in several ways. For example, I dedicated time and thought to building trust with the study's participants, I followed the University of Hull's ethical guidelines regarding data management, and I made every effort to ensure that participants' responses were represented accurately (see chapter 4; Bloom et al., 2025; McFee, 2025).

Perhaps most importantly, I remained true and consistent to the foundations of poststructuralism throughout the research process. Although I, as a poststructuralist researcher, was perhaps afforded more flexibility with respect to how I conducted this study, as I was not tied to the formulaic or rigid boundaries associated with positivism and post-positivism, I was consistently confronted with a range of pressures to conform with normative research conventions. For example, throughout the research process, I was required to communicate and work alongside several internal and external stakeholders that were evidently more familiar with the normative language of positivism and humanism. These stakeholders appeared, at times, to be concerned that the underlying rationale of this study *was not* to reveal an objective, singular reality or truth about Olympic retirement. However, prior to conducting this research study, I was cognizant that these tensions would likely represent one of the complex and difficult realities of undertaking post-structural scholarship in the modern neoliberal setting of academia (Dillet, 2017; Markula, 2019; Mills et al., 2024). Therefore, I considered it crucial to embrace my post-structural sensibilities throughout the research process. To do so, I never attempted to claim neutrality with respect to the data collection and analysis processes. Rather, I was always intent on

understanding and problematising how both the Olympians' ongoing experiences and coaches' perspectives of Olympic retirement could be connected to the disciplinary power-knowledge relations that permeate the modern cultures of British Olympic sport (Avner et al., 2025; Markula & Silk, 2011).

I believe that the poststructuralist research paradigm benefited this study by providing a panoramic, yet analytical, lens for examining the phenomena of Olympic retirement. Therefore, I firmly trust that post-structural and Foucauldian theorisation should continue to be utilised by sports retirement scholars in the future, acting as a means of pushing the exploration of this complex and ever-changing subject matter further into new, fertile spaces (Jones et al., 2022; 2023). This reflection leads me to the final judgement criterion that was outlined by Markula and Silk (2011). This point relates to 'community impact' and, despite the firm stance taken regarding my post-structural sensibilities, the modernist, neoliberal discourses that saturate British Olympic cultures will undoubtedly carry implications for the wider mobilisation of my research. At the point of writing, prior to dissemination, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of this study. However, I sincerely hope that my research will be used to inform the future directions of athletic retirement scholarship. I discuss these possible directions further in the following sub-chapter.

8.3 Implications of the Study for Future Athletic Retirement Scholarship

Foucault (1991b) was firm that analysis should not be used as a vehicle for prescribing new schema or instruction. Rather, he contended that research should seek to perpetually unsettle and challenge taken-for-granted elements of society. In this thesis, I have aimed to make visible to researchers, educators, and policymakers a

problematized reading of retirement from British Olympic sport. This approach contrasts previous scholarship that has posited practical implementation discourses for athletic retirees and sport coaches yet has failed to acknowledge the effects of power relations for their mobilisation (Avner et al., 2017; Cushion et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2022). Therefore, rather than now outlining a series of proposed intervention strategies, designed to help athletes in self-managing their retirement adjustments, I consider how this research study can be mobilised to challenge and unsettle overly accepted ways of thinking about coaching and competing in modern Olympic sport.

The most logical location to pursue the questions that have been presented in this thesis resides in conducting further examinations of the connection between sport coaching and athletic retirement. My study has illustrated that the relationship between these two phenomena is transparent, yet it remains complex. Indeed, the findings of this study have indicated that there is a strong link between Olympic sport's culture of coach control, athlete conformity, and Olympians' and coaches' experiences and perspectives of the retirement process (Jones, 2020; Jones & Denison, 2017; 2019). In light of these findings, I believe that it would be logical to extend the further examination of this relationship in two primary ways.

Firstly, I strongly advocate for further empirical, sociologically informed research to be conducted on the relationship between sport coaching and athletic retirement.

Although my study, in addition to Brown's (2024) recent paper, has begun to attend to the overarching paucity in research surrounding this connection, I believe that I have only scratched the surface with regard to addressing and understanding its complexities and intricacies. Specifically, one element of this relationship that may require additional focus relates to the ways in which 'positive' and 'caring' coaching

approaches influence the athletic retirement process. Indeed, extant social psychology research has suggested that the application of caring coaching approaches, as opposed to those which may be considered 'autocratic', can work to ease and benefit athletes' retirement transitions (Harry & Weight, 2021). The acceptance of this perspective was evident in several of this study's coach participants' responses. However, my analysis has illustrated that alternative agendas may underly Olympic coaches' deployment of 'caring' practices, and, in turn, these programmes of thought may not always have athletes' best interests at heart. After all, such humanist-oriented approaches "with their strong neo-liberal underpinning, are unlikely to have any real or lasting impact without the full consideration of the effects of coaching's disciplinary legacy on coaches' practices and athletes' bodies" (Denison et al., 2017, p. 781). Therefore, I echo the call made by Gearity and colleagues (2023, p. 24), in that "we must cease once and for all in describing the effects of caring in uncritical, positive terms". Rather, we should challenge these ways of thinking by problematising how their application may lead to the subordination of sportspeople, the intensification of their states of docility, and the complication of their long-term adjustments to post-sport life (Jones & Denison, 2017; Mills & Denison, 2018).

Secondly, the findings of my study have evidenced the criticality of extending our lenses of problematisation deeper into Olympic sport's hierarchy of leaders. It is clear that Olympic standard coaches are subject to a series of normalising pressures to conform with expected and preferred ways of coaching (Denison et al., 2019). These modes of coaching largely centre upon the cultivation of predictability and consistency throughout the performance and development processes, and, in turn, Olympic standard coaching practitioners often view challenges to these processes with

ambiguity (Johns & Johns, 2000; Konoval et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2024). When these normalising pressures are considered in unison with the possibility that the majority of Olympic coaches' learning and practical experiences occur within the discursive field of high-performance sport – where discipline has a potent presence – it becomes increasingly clear that, in order to resist the production of docile athletic bodies, we must continue to problematise modern sport's disciplinary logic and the ways in which these pervasive ways of thinking infiltrate the experiences, perspectives, and decisions of sport's hierarchy of leaders (Andrijiv & Jones, 2023; Denison et al., 2017; Jones & Denison, 2017). One avenue by which we could extend our problematisation of sport's disciplinary logic would be through inviting a wider network of those who hold ethical responsibilities to the lives of Olympians (i.e., coach developers, performance analysts, performance lifestyle practitioners) into this theoretical and empirical dialogue that has been created regarding sports retirement. I believe that this would allow for the deeper consideration of how dominant modes of thinking in Olympic and high-performance cultures can influence both athletes' experiences and coaches' perspectives of the retirement process.

Thirdly, my final empirical recommendation. I believe that sociological understandings of athletic retirement could be further enhanced through the exploration of new, innovative methodological procedures. If we are to continue to work towards improving understandings of the long-term impacts of sporting careers, retirement scholars might look to develop alternative and novel methods for doing so; methodological practices that, to a greater extent, allow for specialised and focused examinations of retirees' ongoing experiences. For example, sports retirement scholars might wish to develop longitudinal study designs, in which former athletes are

interviewed at multiple points over the course of several years to question how their experiences, in those moments (e.g., 2, 5, 10, 15 years post-retirement), can be connected to the power arrangements that typified their careers (Avner et al., 2025). This would allow scholars opportunities to more accurately 'track' changes and patterns in meanings, bodies, and experiences over time and, from a Foucauldian perspective, to consider those points throughout athletes' retired lives where the legacies of their docility are felt both more and less impactfully (Jones et al., 2022). Indeed, although my research has shed further light on the complex and subjective trajectories of the Olympic retirement process, adopting such a research design represents another logical step in better understanding the (non-)linear and residual implications of athletic careers.

8.3.1 Mobilising Social Theory

Throughout this thesis, Foucauldian theory has provided me with an important heuristic device for examining and understanding the complex phenomena of Olympic retirement. In turn, I believe that my study has covered important ground in answering the calls made by Jones, Avner, and Denison (2022; 2023) to further deploy social theory as a tool for problematising and de-constructing the complex, subjective meanings that former sportspeople (and, in this case, Olympic coaches) ascribe to athletic retirement. Certainly, drawing upon the Foucauldian theoretical framework has allowed me to present compelling evidence to demonstrate that Olympians' post-sport lives (across both the short and longer term) are shaped, influenced, and remain deeply connected to the modernist formations of Olympic sport. In doing so, I believe that my research has further illustrated the affordances of social theory for examining this subject matter (Jones et al., 2023). Therefore, it is pivotal that we continue to

embrace these alternative, socio-cultural lenses for thinking about retirement from sport in the future.

There are a variety of ways through which social theory can be further mobilised for the study of Olympic retirement, as well as for the wider field of sports retirement. For example, I would encourage scholars to embrace the workings of a wider range of post-modern and post-structural theorists in their analyses. Undoubtedly, the work of Michel Foucault has been crucial for my, and a number of additional researchers' (Gerdin, 2023; Jones, 2020; Jones & Denison, 2017; 2019; Jones et al., 2022; Kuklick, 2023; McMahon et al., 2012), attempts to examine and understand this complex subject matter. However, I firmly believe that the scholarly field of sports retirement would only benefit from embracing the work of a wider range of social theorists. This would act as a means for providing new, alternative means for questioning and de-constructing how the modernist arrangements of high-performance sport combine to influence the lived experiences and perspectives of retirees. I believe that this would assist in pushing the boundaries and imaginations of current understandings. Indeed, the mobilisation of novel theoretical ideas has already proven influential in expanding the imaginations of sport coaching scholars. Researchers have started to utilise and develop the work of several post-modern, post-structural, and new materialist theorists to examine and challenge how relations of power influence knowledge and practice throughout sport coaching contexts. These theorists include Robin Usher (Jones et al., 2016), Zygmunt Bauman (Ives et al., 2021; Potrac et al., 2012), Bruno Latour (Kerr, 2014; Kerr et al., 2022), and Giles Deleuze (Leeder, 2024; Williams & Manley, 2016). Therefore, I suggest that retirement scholars follow the initiative that has been taken by these sport coaching researchers to assist in their future

conceptualisations of the phenomena of athletic retirement (Jones et al., 2023). For instance, by embracing the Latourian concept of *the oligopticon*, sports retirement scholars might be able to formulate a more nuanced appreciation of the wide-ranging legacies of a surveillance that is more rhizomatic - i.e., involving both human and non-human (e.g., data networks) forces - for how former athletes posture their lived experiences (Latour, 2007; Manley et al., 2012; Markula, 2019). Indeed, as poststructuralist sport scholars have previously argued, adopting a Latourian lens to conceptualise surveillance mechanisms can help to overcome the architectural and material limitations of Foucault's (1991a) concept of *the panopticon* (Manley et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017). Such an approach could help scholars to think about the residual implications of high-performance sport careers in bio-political, as well as anatomo-political, terms.

Perhaps most significantly, I believe that social theory should be further developed as a means of infiltrating the education provision that is offered by sport organisations and NGBs regarding athletic retirement. In the present moment, the policies and procedures surrounding athletes' retirement processes in the United Kingdom are relatively limited. The strategies currently adopted by organisations, such as UK Sport and the British Elite Athletes Association, are largely informed by those practical implementations that have long been posited by sport psychology researchers. Indeed, high-performance sportspeople are advised to plan for their retirement transitions, to pursue dual-career support, and to seek counselling if required; much of this provision is offered to Olympic retirees in the months immediately following their retirement decisions through the support of performance lifestyle practitioners (UK Sport, n.d.). Furthermore, it was made evident by the coach participants in this study that coaches

receive little formal education regarding how to best approach Olympians' retirement processes and, in turn, they most commonly rely upon their own experiential learning to inform their reasoning regarding these matters. Therefore, I envision two potential avenues through which social theory can be mobilised as a means of influencing future pedagogy regarding Olympic retirement.

First of all, it is important that post-structural coaching scholars continue to engage with their efforts to mobilise Foucauldian theory for coach education. In recent years, Foucauldian coaching scholars have developed a series of programmes and interventions that have provided unique development opportunities to educate coaches on what it means to coach in less disciplinary ways, and to support practitioners in implementing the associated practices (Avner et al., 2023; Denison & Mills, 2014; Konoval et al., 2019; Kuklick & Gearity, 2019). In doing so, these researchers have not necessarily attempted to generate more knowledge about the coaching process, but to question the very foundations of how coaches think about their approaches (Mills et al., 2024). The success of these initiatives has been varied. Indeed, both coaches and athletes have explained that the omnipresence of disciplinary and modernist ways of thinking throughout high-performance settings has influenced and, at times, inhibited their capacities to 'think' and 'coach' in less disciplinary ways (Konoval et al., 2019; 2021). Whilst imperfect, these developments have begun to forge important incursions in disrupting those problematic power-knowledge relations that permeate modern coaching cultures and contribute to the cultivation of docile athletic bodies (Avner et al., 2023; Konoval et al., 2019).

I believe that extending these problematisations of disciplinary coaching practices, with respect to their potential impacts upon Olympians' long-term retirement

adjustments, represents a logical and sequential point for advancing the post-structural education of Olympic standard coaching practitioners. By further educating coaches on the potentially harmful long-term implications of disciplinary coaching practices, and proposing alternative ways of thinking about coaching that might work to disrupt and resist these effects, I would hope that practitioners would be encouraged to stop, to pause, and to critically think about the residual implications of their approaches. Subsequently, we may see space for increasingly ethical coaching knowledges and practices to emerge; these ethical approaches could act as a positive force for enhancing Olympic athletes' lived experiences both within and beyond their careers (Denison & Avner, 2011; Denison et al., 2015; Gerdin et al., 2019). Of course, there are challenges associated with mobilising such pedagogical intentions; not least, those normalising pressures that Olympic coaches face to 'deliver' results and to operate in ways that are consistent with sport's modernist logic (Denison et al., 2019). However, the evidence presented in this thesis has illustrated the criticality of destabilising many of the dominant truths surrounding how Olympians should be coached, with respect to the procurement and legacies of their docility.

Secondly, I believe that social theory can be mobilised as a novel device to assist retired Olympic and non-Olympic athletes in making sense of their athletic experiences and, specifically, how these experiences might be influential in shaping their post-sport lives (Jones et al., 2023). Indeed, sports retirement scholars, such as myself and Jones and Denison (2017), and athletes-turned-scholars, such as Gerdin (2023) and Kuklick (2023), have demonstrated the affordances of social theory for examining athletes' retirement experiences and considering how these remain deeply connected to the normalising arrangements of power that typified their careers. Drawing upon social

theory has allowed us to challenge “sport’s norms, truth games, and established traditions and practices” (Jones et al., 2023, p. 126), with respect to their long-term implications for former athletes’ lives.

It is imperative that these ideas are not confined to academia. Therefore, we should do our utmost to advocate for the utility of these theoretical perspectives in practice.

Specifically, rather than continuing to prescribe retired athletes with coping strategies that are designed to ‘fix’ their proposed individual shortcomings (Denison & Winslade, 2006), it would be more productive and ethical to infiltrate future education and provision with socio-cultural theorisation. For example, as sociologically informed retirement scholars, we should attempt to work cohesively with sport organisations and NGBs (i.e., through developing co-production or participatory action research initiatives) to develop educational tools designed for both current and retired sportspeople. In turn, we can present athletes with a broadened means for analysing and examining their careers and, subsequently, for conceptualising how their in-career experiences may be influential in shaping their lives after sport (Jones et al., 2023).

Certainly, previous sociological studies have shown that engagements with these sense-making efforts can have positive effects for retirees’ subjectivities and, in turn, how they relate to others, their bodies, and their movements (Gerdin, 2023; Jones et al., 2022; Kuklick, 2023). Again, I do not envision this to be a simple endeavour. After all, in the neoliberal context of modern Olympic sport, dominant practices at both an interpersonal (i.e., coach-athlete relationships) and organisational (i.e., athlete management) level are typically anything but conducive to producing athletes that think critically about their lived experiences (Andrijiv & Jones, 2023; Avner et al., 2019; Denison, 2007). Rather, it is an ambitious suggestion that is designed to

challenge and unsettle some of modern sport's dominant, yet uncomfortable, truths (Gerdin, 2023; Gerdin, et al., 2019; Harvey et al., 2021). Despite this, I firmly believe that the more effective mobilisation of social theoretical perspectives can be an important step in challenging the problematic foundations of modern sport and working towards less problematic retirement adjustments over time.

Concluding Thoughts

Foucault (1990; 1991a; 1997) did not believe that it was possible to find some form of utopia in which we are entirely free from the coercive effects of power. Therefore, I am not advocating for the possibility of a new British Olympic context that has been set free from anatomo-political relations of power. However, I do believe that if we continue to problematise the diffusion of dominant and problematic power-knowledge relations, we can make important steps in minimising the associated effects of discipline (Foucault, 1990; 1997). The impetus to shape these more ethical sporting spaces is to cultivate a set of conditions that support the active problematisation of the modernist arrangements of Olympic sport and, in turn, resist the procurement of docility and its normalised long-term consequences for both athletes and coaches (Denison & Avner, 2011; Gerdin, 2023; Hickey & Kelly, 2008).

Disrupting the dominant games of truth that permeate modern Olympic cultures is by no means a simple task. Indeed, the pervasion of modernist, capitalist, and neoliberal discourses throughout British Olympic sport settings – which place rationality, science, and performance economy above all else for Olympians and coaches – presents a significant obstacle to the re-ascription of dominant logic (Guttmann, 2002; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Segrave, 2000). However, if we are to continue to follow the important precedent that has been set by Foucauldian scholars of sport, it is clear that in order to

“disentangle knowledge and discourse” (Denison, 2010, p. 473) we must continue to accentuate those elements of Olympic sport that are problematic, work to combine our problematisation efforts, and to employ them logically to force incremental, yet powerful, disruptions to those modes of thought that operate to produce docile athletic bodies (Denison & Mills, 2014). It is my hope that this research has demonstrated the necessity of continuing to advocate for new ways of thinking about working with Olympians, with respect to the residual implications that are associated with an immersion in the cultures of British Olympic sport.

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Appendix A



University of Hull
Hull, HU6 7RX
United Kingdom
T: +44 (0)1482 463336 | E: e.walker@hull.ac.uk
w: www.hull.ac.uk

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Neil Boardman
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Hull
Via email

25th May 2022

Dear Neil

REF FHS445 - Life beyond sport: Sustaining Team GB athletes post elite sport - Skills, careers, and mental health considerations

Thank you for submitting your ethics application to the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Given the information you have provided I confirm approval by Chair's action.

Please refer to the [Research Ethics Committee](#) web page for reporting requirements in the event of any amendments to your study.

Should an Adverse Event need to be reported, please complete the [Adverse Event Form](#) and send it to the Research Ethics Committee FHS-ethicssubmissions@hull.ac.uk within 15 days of the Chief Investigator becoming aware of the event.

I wish you every success with your study.

Yours sincerely

Professor Liz Walker
Chair, FHS Research Ethics Committee



Liz Walker | Professor of Health and Social Work Research |
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Hull
Hull, HU6 7RX, UK
www.hull.ac.uk
e.walker@hull.ac.uk | 01482 463336

Appendix B

Section A: Mapping the origins of an Olympic career

1. Can you help me to understand the reasons that you first got involved with
[insert relevant sporting discipline]?
2. Was it always your ambition to become an Olympian?
3. Were you aware of the realities of being an Olympian before entering the high-performance environment?
4. How did you feel when you first found out you had made the Olympic team?
Did you feel ready to compete at the Olympic games?
5. Can you describe your day-to-day experience of preparing to compete at the Olympic Games? Exercises? Training drills? Where was training based? Who was present at training sessions? How was your progress monitored?
6. The Olympics is the largest sporting event of its kind, did you feel any particular pressure to perform at the Olympics?

Section B: The retirement experience

1. At what point did you know it was the right time to retire? Was there a particular moment or was this a long-term decision?
2. How did you find the initial transition into retirement? Were there any notable challenges that you experienced during this period?
3. Can you describe how you found the process of moving beyond the initial transition e.g., how did you identify new job roles?

4. How would you describe your relationship with exercise in the present moment? Do you think that your Olympic career has influenced this?
5. Have your relationships with others altered at all in retirement? Do you still keep in touch with former teammates?
6. How do you think that your Olympic career continues to influence your behaviours in the current moment? Do you continue to embody the key tenets of Olympism in your daily life?
7. Retirement will have given you time to reflect on your experiences in the Olympic sport environment, has your attitude changed towards the time that you spent as an Olympic athlete? Do you miss being an Olympic athlete?

Appendix C

Section A: Background to coaching

1. Can you describe how you got into [insert relevant sporting discipline] coaching? Is there a particular moment/coaching experience that stands out as being important in your decision?
2. Would you say that there is a particular philosophy that underpins your coaching practice? If so, how would you say that his philosophy developed e.g., notable coach learning experiences
3. How would you describe your experiences of coaching Olympic level athletes?

Section B: Coaching at the Olympic level

1. To what extent do you manage the athlete training approach? Is there any influence from the athlete themselves? Are there any other contributing influences from stakeholders?
2. Do you make any specific considerations when training an athlete for the Olympic Games? If so, can you provide an example of how your approach may alter?
3. How do you monitor the progress of the athlete, as to ensure they are ready to compete at the Olympic games?
4. When, or if, athletes are failing to meet their required progress levels, do you consider making alterations to their training plans?
5. How do you measure the success of your coaching approaches/programmes?

Section C: Approach to coaching transitioning athletes

1. How do you feel when one of your athletes makes the decision to retire from sport?

Is this decision ever influenced through your consultation?

2. What are the key points that you might look for to understand that it could be the right time for an athlete to retire from the Olympic sport environment?

3. Should an athlete announce their intention to retire in advance of an upcoming competition (i.e., the next Olympics), does your approach to managing their training regimen change? If so, how does this change? If not, what are your reasons for maintaining the training approach?

4. Once an athlete has retired from the sport, do you typically keep in touch?